

**Creating an Environment for
Civil Discourse in the Classroom**

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss how we attempt to build classroom environments that are conducive to positive civil discourse. Utilizing the framework of cultural proficiency (Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell, 2009), we argue for an inside-out approach through self-exploration to help deconstruct worldviews we develop through the years. In coupling this approach with the benefits of a liberal arts education, we are then able to provide preservice teachers with a deeper sense of how to move critical conversations forward within their work.

In the history of U.S. public schooling there has been a long and healthy tension between those who advocate for self-regarding, utilitarian, and economic purposes of schooling versus those who argue for more other-regarding, humanitarian aims focused on democratic citizenship. As the nation's political pendulum has swung every decade or two, so too has thinking about whether schools should first and foremost help people improve their economic prospects or maintain a vibrant democracy. In the recent past, as evidenced by even a cursory analysis of the Obama administration's education speeches (Byrnes, 2012), the pendulum appears stuck in the former, where students are viewed mostly as future employees and consumers.

We stubbornly hold onto the belief that K–12 educators should think more about their students as future citizens in a pluralist democracy. We know today's students will inherit many complex, seemingly intractable challenges from our generation—escalating school violence, environmental degradation, terrorism, and economic inequities—that require significant thoughtfulness to combat. If they are not taught the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to converse across ever-increasing political and identity lines, even modest progress on these issues is unlikely (Lauka, McCoy, and Firat, 2018).

In a recent TED talk, Julia Galef (2016) framed part of this issue as the difference between a soldier versus a scout mindset. A soldier mindset, she argues, is ultimately concerned with winning and being right. A person with this mindset seeks information to confirm their position, rather than striving to find information that may provide a more complete view of reality. Someone with a scout mindset, on the other hand, tries to remain curious about whatever issue is under debate. As a result, a person with a scout mindset will pursue additional information no matter where it may lead.

Of course, an important question is how do individuals arrive at either a soldier or scout mindset? For even as Galef acknowledges, most of us adopt the soldier mindset because it does not require us to challenge our previously held positions. And if adopting a scout mindset is difficult for us, then how are we to

help others do the same?

The argument that we will make in the subsequent pages of this essay is that the process can begin through education and be further developed in our work with preservice teachers. Utilizing the lens of cultural proficiency (Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell, 2009), we will argue for an inside-out approach and suggest that a liberal arts education can be an instrumental first step in preparing new teachers. We will conclude with examples of how we work specifically with preservice teachers to foster K–12 classroom environments that are conducive to civil discourse.

An Inside-Out Approach

“Central to what you see in someone is what you are looking for.”
Herbert Kohl, 1994, p. 44

The field of cultural proficiency offers a hopeful approach to deepening our understanding of one another and creating more open environments. Rather than trying to first learn about each other, cultural proficiency advocates for an inside-out approach (Lindsey, et al., 2009). The basic premise of the field, which “acknowledges and validates the current values and feelings of people, encouraging change without threatening people's feeling of worth” (p. 23), is that as people engage in self-exploration, more meaningful dialogue can be facilitated.

The Development of Schemas

The focus of cultural proficiency is placed on exploring the multiple, and often competing, values, ethics, and positions one develops through the years. For example, as privileged white males, the authors acknowledge that we have been formed by positions of power, economic stability, and an existence rooted in a patriarchal, primarily Anglo-Saxon society. The result is that we, personally, have developed worldviews that originate from this upbringing and are informed by predominantly white male power structures within U.S. society.

As children, we are constantly absorbing the environment around us in our attempts to make sense of the world. Ideally, our evolving worldviews would be rational and information-based; however, the reality is that they emerge from a complex set of experiences, fragmentary knowledge, and self-determined conclusions. Consequently, idiosyncratic schemas emerge to help create subjective perceptions of reality (Arbib, 1995; Green, 2010).

For example, a young man grows up in an economically privileged home with a mother, father, and two siblings. The mother, who happens to be a corporate lawyer, and the father, an entrepreneur in the technology field, raise their children according to the old maxim, “God helps those who help themselves.” Now as parents ourselves, this adage may be a laudable framework in which to raise children who, as a result, will understand the value of hard work and the opportunity for growth and advancement (although, granted, this outcome is never guaranteed). This type of an upbringing would help to codify certain behaviors and norms within a child to create what they come to believe as “normal,” “expected,” or “common sense.”

However, we must also recognize that others raised in different circumstances would in all likelihood arrive at a different set of conclusions. Suppose, for example, that our young man grows up as a child in the foster care system. Abandoned at birth, the child’s upbringing could be one of instability and scarcity—both emotionally and physically. As the child navigates the school system, he might be unable to receive the needed support at school or home and experience frustration and failure as a result. The schema that he develops might be mistrustful of anyone who says to him, “Just pull yourself up by the bootstraps.” Unable to see the opportunities before him, he would understandably be more focused on survival than some tenuous future.

While these are two dramatically different mindsets, the reality is that we are all in the process of creating unique identities based upon distinct life experiences. Politics, religion, gender identification, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, etc., impact all of us and frame conceptions of ourselves, each other, and the

world around us. Everyone constructs their worldview differently, which contributes to our many divides—divides that must first be addressed through a process of self-reflection.

Barriers of the Self

As Lindsey, et al. (2009) note in their work on cultural proficiency, the difficulty with self-reflection is that there are barriers that must be confronted to move us towards each other relationally. These barriers are persistent and reoccurring, which makes it a challenge to be open and aware of how others perceive the world. The following is a brief synopsis of these barriers and how an exposure to the liberal arts can ameliorate them.

A resistance to change: The authors argue that an initial barrier to confront is one’s resistance to change. As noted above, the emergence of schemas tends to normalize experiences and understanding. Furthermore, if these schemas have proven efficacious for an individual, especially in helping form positive relationships with other like-minded people, a logical question would be, “Why would I want to change?”

One of the benefits of working in a college/university setting is that many students come with an openness to change. Higher education is seen as an opportunity to gain new skills, expand one’s knowledge, and engage in new experiences. We often hear first-year students comment about “reinventing themselves” after high school. Within a liberal arts environment, this message of possibility is continually reinforced to students. At our respective institutions, both of the mission statements reflect this:

California Lutheran University: *The mission of the University is to educate leaders for a global society who are strong in character and judgment, confident in their identity and vocation, and committed to service and justice.*

Pacific Lutheran University: *The University seeks to educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care—for other people, for their communities and for the Earth.*

Other liberal arts institutions similarly identify future-oriented goals to direct the work of the organization.

Being unaware of a need to adapt: In addition to having a resistance to change, Lindsey, et al. (2009) suggest that people are often unaware of a need to adapt to a changing context. This lapse is further exacerbated by our tendency to associate with people of similar background, orientations, heritage, etc. (Garmston and Zoller, 2018). When our associations remain limited and our world views stay small, it can create a static view of one's self and those with whom we engage. However, with personal mobility being a significant factor in society, there is less chance that people will reside in their originating communities. As people move from place to place, it is likely that they will experience new sets of mores and differing degrees of cultural, ethnic, and political diversity.

One of the strengths of a liberal arts education is that it provides students with a deepened awareness of their own limitations (Taylor, 2010). Having typically only been exposed to fairly traditional high school content in English, history, civics, etc., in high school, a university will often present content that creates a more intellectually rigorous and challenging experience; content infused with gender perspectives, systemic oppression, epistemology, etc. can be both welcomed and jarring. As we will explore later in this article, teacher education needs to capitalize on this challenging content as a way to help preservice teachers gain empathy and more complete perspectives of others (Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer, and Floden, 2018).

A failure to acknowledge systemic oppression: Gaining knowledge and skills to be able to adapt to the changing world is an important step; however, Lindsey, et al. (2009) also argue that to become culturally proficient, it is imperative to acknowledge that U.S. society has systemically oppressed various groups of people throughout its history and that this continues today. Historical examples of this oppression are clear: indigenous groups who were decimated through disease and war; captured Africans brought to the U.S. and enslaved to work the fields; and women who were not allowed to vote and denied educational and employment opportunities for many years. Additionally, there continues to be striking

examples of systemic oppression in modern society as well: the plight of young black males who have alarmingly high rates of school expulsion (Howard, 2018); the ongoing fight for the recognition of transgendered people (Nicolazzo, 2017); and the continued sexual harassment and abuse of women as highlighted by the Me Too Movement.

As scholars have noted throughout the last 30 years (e.g., Loewen, 1995; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1980), the history and experiences of non-dominant groups in society have often been omitted from the curriculum. Consequently, it is not surprising that some people have a difficult time recognizing the systemic oppression that has and does exist in U.S. society. While simply teaching about historically marginalized people will not address all of the reasons why someone might deny the existence of oppressive practices in society, it is an area that needs attention; a liberal arts education is one place where this consciousness raising can begin.

One's own benefits arise from positions of power and entitlement: A final barrier articulated by Lindsey, et al. (2009) is that for many people, the benefits derived from their positions of relative power and entitlement inhibit their willingness to change. As we are all aware, power is not often willingly conceded and the result is that power structures are difficult to dislodge (see e.g., King, 1986). As individuals of the dominant culture, we are aware of this challenge and recognize that we have benefited greatly from our backgrounds and affiliations. For example, both of us come from families where a college education was expected as part of our maturation process. Consequently, even though there were challenges in this process for each of us, we were provided with a vision of this path and how to make it happen. Contrast this with first generation college students who may not have this expectation or a well-defined understanding of how best to achieve it (Adams, 2015).

So the question becomes, how do we help students who attend our universities acknowledge this same reality? For it is the case that many of the students we work with at private, liberal arts colleges will have also benefitted from the current system and how it

allocates power and privilege. However, the force of demographics is creating new constellations of student bodies. California Lutheran University, for example, is now a federally recognized Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and has a greater percentage of students who are Catholic than Lutheran. As a consequence, questions are emerging on the historically white campus that are impelling students, faculty, and staff to consider the intersection of power and privilege. Questions such as: Why do we seek people that “fit in” with the existing culture? How do we move from being a Hispanic enrolling institution to a Hispanic Serving Institution? Why doesn’t our faculty and administration have comparable demographics to the student population? While simply asking the questions will not produce change, at least it forces people to consider the perspectives that have given rise to the issues.

By reflecting on and moving through these barriers that keep us from greater cultural proficiency, we are hopeful that preservice teachers will be able to take critical steps toward more productive engagement with people who think differently than them. By doing so, we are then able to pivot to the challenging work of creating environments for civil discourse.

Developing Classroom Environments

Teaching preservice teachers to reflect on and move through these aforementioned barriers is critical to helping them thoughtfully resolve conflict with their increasingly diverse students, students’ families, and colleagues. Before turning to a few teacher education practices we find helpful in teaching about cultural proficiency, here are some key assumptions we adhere to in our work.

Working Assumptions

First, whether teaching cultural proficiency to prospective undergraduate teacher candidates in a “Multicultural Perspectives in the Classroom” course or graduate preservice teachers in “Sociocultural Foundations of Education,” we’re keenly aware of the limits of teacher-directed instruction, or what Freire (2008) described as a banking model of instruction. When teachers see

themselves as depositors of knowledge and view students as passive receptors, students lack the autonomy to rationalize and conceptualize knowledge at a personal level. Preservice teachers gain cultural proficiency through conversation; questioning; and the repeated, respectful sharing of competing interpretations. We are most successful in broadening our preservice teachers’ worldviews when we orchestrate classroom experiences that enable them to learn about the broader context of their differences through direct interaction. Important in this context is the work that admission teams do to recruit candidates with varied life experiences. From our perspective, the more culturally and economically diverse preservice teacher classes are, the greater the opportunity for the candidates to discover how their backgrounds and identities impact and frame their conceptions of themselves and others (see e.g., Arshavskaya, 2018).

Additionally, we emphasize the importance of cultural proficiency not only in working with K–12 students, but also in teaming effectively with colleagues and partnering positively with families (Terrell and Lindsey, 2009). We continually remind our preservice teachers that conflict resolution knowledge, skills, and dispositions, especially with questioning and active listening, are helpful tools not only in their classrooms, but in resolving challenging colleague and family related disagreements as well.

A third point we make when teaching cultural proficiency is to emphasize what Wong (2017) describes as “the inherent advantages of self-compassion as compared to the more popular notion of self-confidence.” Wong writes that self-compassion “...encourages you to acknowledge your flaws and limitations, allowing you to look at yourself from a more objective and realistic point of view.” Preservice teachers need continual reminders that becoming skilled at civic discourse is a long-term process. Since missteps are inevitable, perfection is an unrealistic and unhelpful goal.

Lastly, in our focus on cultural proficiency, we are conscious that we are modeling how to initiate and constructively engage in difficult conversations about controversial topics upon which reasonable people routinely disagree. Consequently, we seek to

normalize conflict and help students become more comfortable with it by addressing both students' hurt feelings directly and contemporary controversies (e.g., the National Football League players' protests of the national anthem) through open-ended questioning. We simultaneously encourage open and honest discussion through patient, active listening and share the missteps we have made in our journeys towards becoming more culturally proficient.

Approaching Preservice Teachers

With that context, the following types of educational activities have proven especially effective in deepening our preservice teachers' cultural proficiency through the years. First and foremost, we strongly encourage studying away from campus, especially in markedly different cultural contexts, whether in the United States or abroad. When studying away, students who are often overwhelmed with cultural differences, may learn how problematic it is to make rushed, negative judgments about the host culture. For example, one of us lead a study abroad program at Sichuan University in Chengdu, China, that involved an emergency trip to Hong Kong for a gamma globulin shot for a student who had been scratched on the nose by an aggressive monkey. Upon returning to Chengdu, our "single entry" visas needed renewing. What we imagined would be a simple errand ended up being a long, challenging series of obstacles, including finding the right building and needing new photos and more money. For the student, everything about the morning's frustrations was abnormal. His sense of "the normal way things are supposed to be done" was tested at every turn. The student was incensed and was frustrated by the entire incident.

Expectations about what's normal also impacted all the group's academic experiences. Specifically, last-minute schedule changes were a source of frustration throughout the semester. In the students' thinking, all universities should publish the schedule of classes weeks and months in advance; consequently, they wanted to know the logistical details of their class schedule shortly after arriving on the Sichuan University campus. However, Chinese

institutions do not organize classes in the same manner; as a result, the students struggled to adapt right up until the semester began. Instead of viewing more spontaneous decision-making as a flaw in the Chinese character, gradually, some students learned to accept it as not better or worse than what they were most accustomed to, but just another cultural difference.

When preservice teachers realize people organize their lives in culturally distinct ways that work perfectly well for them, they become more sensitive to the myriad ways their students' families organize their daily lives and the differing degrees of importance they place on formal academic achievement. Consequently, they may be less likely to generalize from their own experience and thereby earn the respect of culturally diverse students and families.

A second, relatively simple educational activity that has proven helpful in advancing our preservice teachers' cultural proficiency is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDGlobal Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). In the talk, the Nigerian novelist poignantly describes how our lives and cultures are composed of many overlapping stories and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk critical misunderstandings. Upon watching it, preservice teachers often reflect on how they have been "single storied" at times, thus creating a new determination to avoid that common cross-cultural pitfall.

Another short video, a peek inside Mary Stewart's New Haven, Connecticut, kindergarten classroom, is a third educational activity that helps preservice teachers better understand cultural proficiency—watching an accomplished teacher skillfully implement it in her classroom (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008). While Stewart helps the class build a wheel chair accessible ramp for a future wheel-chair-bound guest, she gracefully engages her 25 culturally diverse kindergarteners in matter-of-fact discussions about disabilities. Through a series of hands-on activities, including learning sign language and using wheel chairs, Stewart helps the students become more familiar with, and comfortable around, disabled people. While starting construction on the ramp, a student abruptly tells Ms. Stewart she can't use a hammer "because she's

a mom.” Ms. Stewart reveals that not only can she use a hammer, but she was in the Army too; a “single story” error that can be highlighted for preservice teachers as they develop their cultural proficiency.

Stewart is also asked in the video why she didn’t pre-drill the holes in the wood so that students could hammer the nails into place more easily. Reiterating the importance of active learning, she explains, “I didn’t want it to be easy.” Preservice teachers are also typically struck by Stewart’s default teaching strategy whenever her students express misconceptions of differently abled people—questioning, or more specifically, asking why they believe, for example, someone in a wheel chair is going to die. Socrates-like, Stewart convincingly models how to use questions to deepen classroom conversations about cultural differences and build an environment of openness.

Lastly, teacher-student case studies are imminently helpful in teaching cultural proficiency, cases like one by Jen Stivers (1991) titled “Leigh Scott.” The case is about a high school social studies teacher who gives a higher-than-earned grade to a mainstreamed student on the basis of the boy’s effort and is confronted by another student who received a lower report card grade. This activity is set up by first pairing preservice teachers to role-play the teacher and the student and then followed by the disgruntled parent of the student and the teacher. Almost like attorneys, when playing the role of Leigh Scott, most approach the simulated conferences far too much as an all-or-nothing argument to be decisively won.

Afterwards, students were asked what percentage of the total talking was done by each person playing the various roles. Many beginning teachers are chagrined to realize they tended to dominate the discussion when role-playing the teacher. This creates a perfect segue to teaching explicit active listening prompts designed to open up the discussion. One particularly valuable question for parents is, “What would you like me to know about your son/daughter that I most likely don’t?” When debriefing this case, preservice teachers often reflect on their tendency to get defensive and listen impatiently for a break in the action so that they can continue

to press their points. This approach being in contrast to an openness for change and listening patiently for genuine understanding of the other. Through this and similar cases, beginning teachers begin to see the value in flipping the conversation balance, thus increasing the likelihood of students and families feeling heard and understood, which is often what they most want.

A Move to Wholeheartedness

Sibbet (2016) has argued that in order to improve the democratic discourse in our classrooms, there must be an emphasis on what she terms “wholeheartedness.” As she writes, “Wholeheartedness arises from humans’ essential impulse to care... (W)holeheartedness engages thoughtfully, deliberately, and in good faith with the available evidence, listening generously to those perspectives that contradict our own views” (p. 8). As we work with preservice teachers to develop deeper levels of cultural proficiency, we seek a result that would reflect this concept—an approach to building a classroom environment focused on curiosity, compassion, and acceptance of others. Through this approach, we are hopeful that we can help future teachers re-imagine their work to help break down the divides that continue to drive us apart—divisions that may have their beginning in K–12 classrooms.

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Learning With and From Our Students: The Need for Humility in Race and Equity Work

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Abstract

This point of view paper explores the power of words to build respect and understanding around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. As instructors in our courses who work to build self-awareness and unpack systems of power and privilege for ourselves and for our students, there are many lessons we can learn to make teaching and learning more powerful and inclusive for our learning communities.