

Perspective Taking: Opening the Doors to Civic Engagement

Jose Zapata Calderon

Professor in Sociology and Chicano Studies, Pitzer College

Entender el perspectiva de otra persona tiene que comensar en conocer las palabras que usamos unos con otros. El poder de la palabra es muy fuerte. Cuando hablamos de entender el perspectiva de otros – tenemos que hablar de la cuestion de quien tiene el poder. El poder se puede usar para oprimir las capacidades de otros. El poder se puede usar para que no pueda existir la capacidad por entender unos a otros. En este momento estoy usando el poder de la palabra para oprimir.

This presentation begins in Spanish, a language that was my only language when I came to the U. S. as an immigrant at the age of seven. Because no one took the time to try and see the world through my eyes or to get close enough to learn about me, my culture, and my family, the perception about me was that I was mute or that something was physically or psychologically wrong with me. It was only when a teacher, Mrs. Elder, took the leap to get to know me that the realization was made that nothing was wrong with me and that I just didn't know English. When Mrs. Elder realized this, I remember, she took one more step in learning about my world by visiting me and my grandparents in our home. She saw that we lived in a one-room house (a gas station that had been turned into our home) that had no indoor bathroom, no appliances, and a wood stove. I know that this created a level of empathy in Mrs. Elder that led her to sacrifice to stay with me after school to teach me English. Further, in seeking to create a similarity between us, Mrs. Elder began by asking me to teach her the Spanish language. In this

way, we both became teacher-student and student – teacher. I am sure that if Mrs. Elder had not created this environment of equality, if she had not sought to see the world through my eyes, I would not be here today.

Language acquisition, an important basis for understanding each other's perspective, involves power relations. In many countries, language has been used as a means of oppressing others. In this country, when the treaty to end the U. S. Mexican war, The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was signed, it included the protection of privileges that came from customs, languages, law, and culture. Property rights were also guaranteed. However, after 1848 the treaty was broken and the Mexican-origin people were faced with language discrimination – that resulted in a loss of land and democratic rights.

Hence, we cannot talk about perspective taking, the ability to stand in someone else's shoes or to see the world through their eyes, without considering power relations or the meaning of democracy. I liked how the American Association of Colleges and Universities in a previous publication brought together the meanings of democracy and power relations. In *The Drama of Diversity and Democracy*, the concept of democracy was defined as “the ideal that all human beings have equal value, deserve equal respect, and should be given equal opportunity to fully participate in the life and direction of the society (1995, 9).” At the same time, the publication also proposed that when diversity is “characterized by patterned inequity and the marginalization of specific groups, it can signify unequal access to political, economic, social, and cultural power.”

It was the issue of “inequity,” for example, in our social system that Barack Obama began to question when he was pondering what to do after graduating from

college. It was by placing himself in the image of the “other” through his readings, the image of the SNCC workers “convincing a family of sharecroppers to register to vote” or the images of everyday people organizing the Montgomery bus boycott that led to his commitment beyond the individual to listen to the perspectives of others (Obama, 2004: 134, 135). It was by placing himself in the world of the organizer and the unorganized that deepened his commitment that empowered him to empower others. In carrying out interviews in the poor communities of Chicago, he reflected “The more interviews I did, the more I began to hear recurring themes. The people I talked to had some fond memories of that self-contained world, but they also remembered the absence of heat and light and space to breathe – that, and the sight of their parents grinding out life in physical labor (Obama, 2004: 155.” As Obama listened to these stories – they reminded him of his family – stories of hardships and migration, the drive for something better.

When the community organizers he was working with got tired, he looked out the window and asked the organizers to look with him – “What do you suppose is going to happen to those boys out there?”... “You say you’re tired, the same way most folks out here are tired. So I’m just trying to figure out what’s going to happen to those boys. Who’s going to make sure they get a fair shot (Obama, 2004: 171, 172)?” In asking these questions and challenging those around him, he was asking the organizers to place themselves in those worlds. In the process, he took the time to listen to others and, in his book *Dreams from My Father*, provided examples of how he came to move “toward the center of people’s lives” in his community.

And it was this realization, I think, that finally allowed me to share more of myself with the people I was working with, to break out of the larger isolation that I had carried with me to Chicago. .. As time passed, I found that these stories, taken together, had helped me bind my world together, that they gave me the sense of

place and purpose I'd been looking for. There was always a community there if you dug deep enough. There was poetry as well – a luminous world always present beneath the surface, a world that people might offer up as a gift to me, if I only remembered to ask (Obama, 2004: 190)."

It was no accident then that the strategy of “story-telling” and listening to the stories of others on a one-to-one basis became a cornerstone of the campaign. More than the successful use of new technologies, this strategy worked in recruiting thousands of new leaders through door-to-door contact in neighborhoods and training them in using their life histories, and those of the communities they worked with, as a basis to reach out to the voting public.

These segments are also examples of Barack Obama learning to understand the perspective of others, the language of others, and the culture of others. In this way, he was able to understand himself better, the history of his family better, and to understand the language, culture, and perspective of the organized and unorganized in the communities that he worked with. For us it is the lesson of ensuring that we understand the language and culture of those around us in order to be able to reach higher levels of understanding and meaning, to understand each other's differences, and appreciating each other's differences in order to find where we have commonalities.

It was in perceiving the similarity between the experience of one's self and that of others that led Rosa Park to sit at the front of a bus; that led Martin Luther King to take up the cause of sanitation workers in Memphis; that led Cesar Chavez to turn down a high-paid position in the government to live in the same conditions as the farm workers in the San Joaquin valley; that led writer Gloria Anzaldua to perceive the sexism and homophobia in the larger culture and its manifestations in her own “border” culture; that

led Black psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark to understand why Black children pointed to Black dolls as being ugly and white dolls as being beautiful.

It was in perceiving the similarity between the experience of one's self and that of others that transformed Mahatma Gandhi from a simple lawyer to the great leader that he became: His granddaughter, Arun Gandhi, in sharing her insight about her grandfather proposed "if it had not been for the experience of racism and prejudice, he may have been just another successful lawyer who had made a lot of money." Because of prejudice in Southern Africa, he was subjected to humiliation within a week of his arrival. He was thrown off a train because of the color of his skin. His first response was anger. His second response was to want to go back to India and live among his own people in dignity. And that's when the third response dawned on him – the response of nonviolent actions. From that point onwards, he developed the philosophy of nonviolence and practiced it in his life as well as in his search for justice in South Africa. He ended up staying in that country for twenty-two years – and then he went and led the movement in India (Covey, 2004: 187, 188.)

It was in perceiving the similarity between the experience of one's self and that of others that led Myles Horton, like John Dewey, to critique the mechanistic top-down traditional type of education in our institutions and to create an alternative school of empowerment called the Highlander Center in the hills of Tennessee.

It was in this process of implementing the alternative school among poor working class people that Horton truly came to perceive that they "were usually quiet around strangers, or people they considered "well-spoken," meaning educated. Only as the staff came to understand the people and their ways of life, did they learn how to hear what the

people wanted to learn or find within themselves enough security to move away from traditional academic methods. Once they stopped trying to teach the way they had been taught, mutual learning could begin (Adams, 1975:46).” Horton’s quote, from his book *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, best summarizes this example of perspective taking: “Insofar as I have learned to listen to people and to honor and respect them as individuals, I have been a good teacher ... When I have failed to do this my teaching has failed (Adams, 1975: 47).”

Perspective taking, in all these contexts is part of an empowering education that Ira Shor in his book *Empowering Education*, calls a “critical-democratic pedagogy ... a student-centred program for multicultural democracy in school and society ... that approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other (Shor, 1992: 15).”

Where perspective taking connects to empowering education is in the practice of creating a new society, one that is democratic and equitable.

Our classrooms are microcosms of the larger society. Shor proposes that the larger inequalities are not separated from the issue of power and that the development of a classroom culture with debate and critical study is part of the advancement of a more democratic society.

In this context, the way we run our classrooms and the way we connect those classrooms to our communities can have a lot to say about whether our teaching and learning practices are advancing a more diverse, socially just, and democratic culture. Perspective taking, having time for the students to learn about the life of the professor and the professor learning about the lives of the students, is essential for perspective

taking in any class. An environment needs to be created where the students are comfortable in questioning the perspectives of the readings, the professor, and other students.

In my classrooms, for example, the assigned readings are directly related to the lives of the students and to the local/global communities that they are part of. Rather than lecturing, the readings are used as a medium for enhancing critical dialogue. At the same time, the readings help to prepare the students for working alongside immigrant workers in a local day labor center or with the farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley. The readings and our class discussions become “real” when I take the students to meetings with the day laborers or farm workers. It is in these meetings that dialogue occurs and where the issues that the workers are concerned about come to the forefront. It is here where action research is used in finding solutions to these problems. It is here where the practice of democracy, just like in the classroom, advances to the level of civic engagement. It is here where the immigrant and student participants join together in common actions to raise their voices and to ensure that their voices are heard.

It is out of listening to the worker’s perspectives on their “needs” that the students organize themselves to work alongside the day laborers on various collaborative projects, some which move to the level of “social change.” Hence, in addition to working alongside the workers in implementing English classes, health workshops, and immigration rights research projects, the students have also been participants in organizing petition drives, marches to protest immigration raids, and campaigns at city hall to ensure the continued funding of a day labor center. In truly accepting the day laborers as teachers, we have organized weekly “Encuentro” lunches at the college where

the day laborers share their life stories in Spanish. To combat the negative portrayal of new immigrants that appears so readily in the media, the students and day laborers have organized community-wide art and pictorial life history presentations.

Through these projects, and through the connecting of the readings to participatory action and research, the students are more equipped to understand the contemporary debates over immigration, free trade, globalization, and the many myths that have been created regarding the immigrant's taking of jobs, importing of disease and crime, and the stealing of social services. Through this common respect for each other's perspectives, a foundation of genuine "trust" has developed over the years between the day laborers and the students.

With this framework, the practice of perspective taking has proven to be a useful tool in developing a foundation of genuine "trust" between the academic worlds of the students and faculty and the worlds of the immigrant day laborers.

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