

Reflective Dialogue and Transformative Education

Annotated Resources List

by David J. Voelker

The Center for Civic Reflection (CCR) has played an important role in articulating and promoting the practice of reflective discussion. For the CCR description, see this webpage: <http://civicreflection.org/about/what-is-civic-reflection/>.

Reflective Dialogue:

The rationale for using specifically reflective dialogue (as opposed to various kinds of teleological or guided discussions) emerges from a particular way of understanding the learning of students in a higher education or adult education context: namely, that serious learning involves the whole self. Learning can be transformative if it becomes richly developmental, harnessing not only cognitive but affective components and perhaps even shaping the identity of the learner as an active agent in the world. Perhaps most important, transformative learning involves changes not simply in *what* the person knows but in *how* the person knows. In other words, there is epistemological change. For a thought-provoking and challenging exploration of the personal and social benefits of authentic group dialogue, see David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, edited by Lee Nichol (Routledge, 1996). Although Bohm's "dialogue" does not focus specifically on a higher education context, the "vision of dialogue" that he articulates in this book speaks to both individual and social transformation through learning.

Parker J. Palmer has promoted a form of reflective dialogue in several books, including *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998); *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2009); and *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2014).

Transformative Education:

The literature on "transformative education" is vast. Although it was Jack Mezirow who coined this phrase, the concept is informed by a broader scholarship on human cognitive development as an ongoing process that continues into adult life (indeed, unto death) and is inextricable from emotional, moral, social, and other aspects of development. A manageable place to start delving into recent developments in this field is the *Journal of Transformative Education*, which was founded in 2003. See, for example, Andrew Kitchenham, "The Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory," in Vol. 6, No. 2 (2008): 104–123. The first two essays in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (Jossey-Bass, 2000), by Mezirow and Robert Kegan, are also very good starting places. *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton (Jossey-Bass, 2012), brings together a plethora of resources and perspectives into a single volume.

Two fairly recent books that apply the insights of transformative education (and the need for reflection) to higher education are: Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, with Megan Scribner, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal: Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations* (Jossey-Bass, 2010); and Charity Johansson and Peter Felten, *Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

Reflection and Cognitive Development:

Stepping back from "transformative education," specifically, you may find it helpful to consult some of the aforementioned scholarship on human cognitive development. See, for example, Patricia M. King and Karen Strohm Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (Jossey-Bass, 1994) and Craig E. Nelson, "On the Persistence of Unicorns: The Trade-Off between Content and Critical Thinking Revisited," pp. 168-184, in B. Pescosolido & R. Amizade, editors, *The Social Worlds of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching in a New Century* (SAGE, 1999).

Discussion and Conversation:

There are scores of books and articles on classroom discussion. A great place to start is Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (Jossey-Bass, 1999). Sherry Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Berkley Publishing, 2015) makes the case that we urgently need to recover the skills of face-to-face conversation, which include listening and empathy.

Reflection:

For a rigorous and thoughtful approach to reflection in an academic context, see Tony Ghaye, *Teaching and Learning through Reflective Practice: A Practical Guide for Positive Action*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2011). For a concise overview of how to use reflective practices, see Mary Ryan, "The Pedagogical Balancing Act: Teaching Reflection in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 18:2 (2013): 144-155.

Resources for Natural Sciences and Mathematics:

While instructors in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and professions will likely have little trouble finding relevant, compelling "objects" to use for reflective dialogues, instructors in the natural sciences, mathematics, and related fields may find this task more challenging. Fortunately, there is a rich literary tradition of scientists and mathematicians reflecting on the meaning of their work. Think, for example, of Charles Darwin's description of "a tangled bank" near the conclusion of *On the Origin of Species*. Turn to the many popular expositions of scientific knowledge by esteemed scientists, such as Carlo Rovelli's *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (Riverhead Books, 2016). For more ideas, search at <http://www.onbeing.org/> for the many conversations that Krista Tippett has documented with natural scientists and mathematicians.

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<http://davidjvoelker.com/reflective-dialogue/>

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