CHAPTER 6

Critical Autobiography for Transformative Learning
Gaining a Perspective on Perspective

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There Are Over 140,000 Species of Butterflies Living Around the World

Edmund O’Sullivan (2004) has taught us that transformative learning often requires a “structural shift” in the way thoughts, feelings, and actions are conceptualized. This shift is at once conscious, dramatic, and lasting; and it holds an opportunity to change the way we are in the world. In order for any kind of shift to occur, there must be movement and often struggle. In a world where racist and sexist comments still exist to injure and commit violence (Berlak, 2004; Boler, 2004; Houston, 2004), such movement or change is certainly desirable, though unfortunately still not without struggle. However, before any change can occur, O’Sullivan advises that we first understand our self-locations as well as our relationships with others. This form of critical-dialectical discourse, necessary to a transformative educational process, requires that we must develop the capacity for critical self-reflection and reflective judgment (Mezirow, 2003). In other words, we must first gain a perspective on perspective because it informs “the source, structure, and history of a frame of reference, as well as judging [sic] its relevance, appropriateness, and consequences” (p. 61).

This chapter will endeavor to examine one such structural shift and its ensuing struggle on a journey of transformative learning as it relates to an event that occurred several years ago in my classroom through a conflict among students around issues of race and gender. First, it will explore notions of how autobiographical writing, within a poststructuralist and critical constructivist frame, might present an opportunity to investigate the constitutive nature of my own assumptions in attempt to address my own self-location. Next, it will explore what is possible when a series of autobiographical writings attempts to position students within such a frame in order to allow them to trouble the social construction of self.
within a quest for different perspectives. This will allow for questions such as, How might autobiography provide a means to understand the constructed nature of the sources, structures, and frames of reference that shape our students’ understanding of them and others, and in so doing serves as a transformative tool in the classroom? And how might new and ethical ways of seeing the world be made possible? Finally, by focusing on how and where assumptions are made about others, it will examine transformative pedagogies that educators might use to promote more ethical actions in the classroom and beyond. I will attempt to ask how engaging in this form of writing exercise not only shapes our teaching experience but also engages us in transformative educational experiences with those who are in our charge. More specifically, this chapter will explore what might be accomplished when three versions of autobiography, personal, and critical writing suggested by Martusewicz (1997), Johnson (2003), and Gaughan (1999) are combined.

Returning to O’Sullivan’s (2004) vision for transformative learning for a moment requires a closer examination of events and beliefs that might precipitate the kind of structural shift necessary for change. With this in mind, this chapter will look back on the events that precipitated what I would call a seismic “shift” in understanding, which ultimately provided an opportunity for transformative learning for me, as an educator, in a way that might not have occurred through more traditional methods. Boler (1999) acknowledges that encounters with race and sexuality are among the most contentious and “discomforting” situations that teachers deal with; and unfortunately, they occur with far too much regularity. Even the best attempts to address issues of oppression, at times, fall short (Glass, 2004). However, Berlak (2004) suggests that such transformative learning often calls for a negotiation between “confrontation and reflection” that results from such discomforts. And it is here—in the space between confrontation and reflection—that I believe holds great promise for change.

The focus of this chapter will not be on the event itself (though it will require some attention up front in order to frame the critical inquiry). But instead it will involve a reflection of how well intended philosophical beliefs might have mobilized pedagogies (Kelly, 1997) and unintentionally aided and abetted this event. It will also examine how conflict brought about a change in my own fundamental understanding about addressing issues of race, sexuality, identity, fairness, and belonging in the classroom. It will examine not only how this event was handled, but also what can be gleaned from it and inquire how autobiographical writing as a pedagogical practice might bear a promise for its contribution to transformative education. This attempt at seeing (Scott, 1991) or making the scene of that fateful class visible (through autobiography) requires that I first take a brief look at autobiography in order to position my understanding and use of autobiography within pedagogical practice.

As a response to criticisms of education’s modernist Cartesian project (Willinsky, 1998; Kincheloe, 2005), “experience” was reintroduced as a foundational concept in historical writing. Rather than “brute fact” or “simple reality” (Scott, 1991), writing from experience brought varied and elusive connotations to history—a vision through which knowledge and the world of transparent objects could be apprehended. Kelly (1997) reminds us that along with the emerging prevalence of autobiography in education, there has been a “more radical practice, which questions the discursive production of memory, history, representation, desire and knowledge” (p. 48). She explains that within models of