Elements for CHANGE

Elizabeth: Why did you choose the topic of "change"?

Marni: Once past the first year of teaching, I have always seen myself as a change agent in education. It was my role in every school to be a thorn in some principals’ lives, and a tool for change in others. In bell hooks’ teaching to transgress, specifically in chapter three, Embracing Change, she discusses the difficulty in bringing social justice issues and cultural awareness to the University. Her struggles to bring change to a static system spoke to me. Hooks speaks of the difficulty in even creating a general awareness among the faculty and steps she took to begin. While hooks was focused on “embracing change” in chapter three, she discusses mainly the need for “practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that learning experience is inclusive” and bringing in cultural awareness.

Elizabeth: What key elements of change stood out to you in her book?

Marni: It came to me as I was reading that change is always difficult, regardless of the reasons, and, while I have had years of methodology, practice, and theory in change, hooks’ elements for change tied a number of neat ideas together.

Among educators there has to be an acknowledgement that any effort to transform institutions so that they reflect a multicultural standpoint must take into consideration the fears teachers have when asked to shift their paradigms. There must be training sites where teachers have the opportunity to express those concerns while also learning to create ways to approach the multicultural classroom and curriculum (p. 36).
This just made sense to me. Anytime you ask a teacher to change, there is a certain amount of "push-back" where they resist change. It is hard to break out of the practices that you have mastered to try something new. In my experience, teachers have no safe place to learn and practice, and many, many teachers are afraid that they will lose control of their classes if they try something new. I also liked the reminder that "it is difficult for individuals to shift paradigms and that there must be a setting for folks to voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why" (p. 38).

Elizabeth: Were any of hooks' ideas for shepherding change unsuccessful or lacking a potential for success?

Marni: Actually, most of the chapter were of things that were tried and many met with limited success due to the fact that "no education is politically neutral" (p. 37). The idea of a series of seminars made me think of teacher in-services that often meet with mixed results of the poorer type: those who embrace change anyway embrace what is offered, while those who do not walk away mumbling about why their teaching methods work better.

Elizabeth: What other issues caught your attention?

Marni: Well, to take you back to the idea of fear of lack of control, hooks states, "The unwillingness to approach teaching

My biggest fear is that I have become what I despise: the teacher who avoids change and argues against it.

Surely, to the new teachers trained under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) who drill their students, lecture as their main method of conveying information, and utilize state standards as the holy grail and standardized test scores as the bible are horrified by my backward ways.

I had a parent question whether I was delivering curriculum. Curriculum? I deliver learning! My teaching methods were called whole language for a while, then balanced literacy, then differentiation, and now archaic as the drill patterns of the 70's are inflicted on children who are drowning under standardized facts.

Funny, though... my students perform better, work harder, learn more for intrinsic reasons, and become more responsible and more involved in their education. Oh, and they usually test well...
from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained” (p. 39). She goes on to look at ways in which the classroom is not a safe place, and that “it is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement” (p. 39). How do we change this? How do we transform our classrooms into safe places for everyone? “Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy” (p. 39).

Today I met with a parent who was concerned because her son, who has a physical deformity only partially correctable and corrected by surgery, likes to be in control and does not like to ask questions or ask for help for fear that he might appear insecure or out of control or weak in some way. She emphasized over and over that she was afraid that he would not ask for help, that he does not ask for help, and that he will not ask for help. First I reassured her that I move around the room a lot, and keep an eye on her son in particular because he is ahead of the rest of the class. Then I said that her son did not seem to be having any trouble coming to me for help as soon as he ran into a new concept—which was not usually a case of raise your hand to be called on, rather being a case of hunt for the teacher because I move around the room a lot.

Elizabeth: You focus on change.

Does this mean that you do not advocate cultural awareness?

Marni: I do advocate cultural awareness. Given the cultural proficiency spectrum that ranges from cultural blindness to cultural proficiency (Lindsay, et al., 2005), I tend to fall closer to proficient than not. I have been exposed to too many other cultures and belief systems to think mine is superior (if, indeed, it is not merely common). While I certainly appear to be a member of the dominant culture, I do not think like them, I do not learn like them, and I have spent much of my life feeling voiceless. This has colored my approaches to teaching in that I take the individual child as a whole: culture, race, personality, background, socio-economic status, and learning styles are all a part of the whole picture. I have often wondered if this truly made me culturally blind or culturally proficient.

Here is a child. She is who she is. She is not growing up in a vacuum: she is a product of her family, her friends, and her culture. How can I find the best way
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to meet her learning needs? How can help her to grow, to stretch, to take ownership of her learning and become a lifelong learner?

Elizabeth: You chose a girl for your example. Are you then a feminist?

Marni: You know, it's funny: at different times in my life, I have considered myself one. When I was younger, I was busy proving that I was just as strong as any male—perhaps that was merely the 80's influencing me. My first real introduction to what feminism is came from a feminist criticism class in the 90's where I was introduced to A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf as well as to the understanding that women have centuries of voicelessness, and that men and women think differently (Augustine, 1994). While I often have suspected that women are truly the stronger sex, I can also name dozens of ways in which women and men are not equal, rather being different with differing strengths. Indeed, as hooks says,

> Of what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could easily be standing in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or is going to, who also subjects them to a process of interaction that humiliates, that strips them of their sense of value? (p. 65)

Elizabeth: Do you have any concluding remarks?

Marni: I would conclude that there are many ways to address change. I would conclude that a classroom that is both democratic and safe works as a setting for both students as well as for teachers who are learning new elements, exploring new concepts, and practicing to change paradigms.
References

