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Sentipensante Pedagogy

James Rhem, Executive Editor

John Dewey once wrote that education wasn't preparation for life, but that education was life itself. Most nod in agreement with Dewey. At the same time, most recognize that many vital aspects of what it is to learn, to be alive to learning through mind as well as heart and spirit, are absent from much college teaching. After years of success climbing the academic ladder, Laura Rendón realized addressing this absence posed perhaps the challenge her whole career had been leading toward. Could a solid and persuasive case be made for ending the segregation of heart and spirit from traditional college teaching? Could a pedagogical model be found that would not dilute intellect with sentimentality on the one hand nor admit affect and spirit only as poor relations on the other, a model that would, in fact, embrace educating for wholeness? Rendón's long journey to find and articulate such a model finally led her to write *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice, and Liberation* (Stylus, 2009). Along the way in her research, Rendón met a wide range of

faculty who have been quietly, almost secretly, teaching for wholeness for a long time. "There are so many people who have been doing this work under the radar screen without having a language to talk about it, and they are ready to embrace it openly, and it's going to take just a little bit more for them to break out in the open with what they are doing," said Rendón, speaking by telephone from Iowa State University where she serves as chair of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Human Sciences. "There is a much wider appeal to this than we give credit for," she continued.

With support from the Fetzer Institute, Rendón located and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 of these fugitive faculty already teaching for wholeness. Her "core question" for her interviewees, most of them award-winning faculty on their campuses, was: "What is the experience of creating a teaching and learning dream (pedagogical vision) based on wholeness and consonance, respecting the harmonious rhythm between the outer experience of intellectualism and rational analysis and the inner dimension of insight, emotion and awareness?"



Guidance from the Past

For Rendón her past, her origins, both colored and animated the question. “Sometimes people talk about spirituality like it’s a new thing, but that’s not true. The things I’m saying in this book about insight, emotion, and awareness were being said hundreds of years ago. So, because I’m Mexican-American, I thought I should look at the Maya and the Aztecs. I wanted to learn more about my roots and religious traditions and indigenous ways of knowing in the Latino

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community,” she recalled. That decision to look to her own past while systematically looking at an imagined future and a fugitive present in the lives of the faculty she found to interview, led her to an ocean of scholarship at once unfamiliar and yet much of it old and well-established. Along the way, she came to scholarship on Aztec thought, especially Miguel León-Portilla’s *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* and to Don Miguel Ruiz’s *The Four Agreements*, a book on Toltec wisdom.

The notion of “agreements” proved especially useful in outlining problems with current or

traditional teaching and learning. “Essentially what Ruiz is talking about is what Peter McLaren [a leading theorist of ‘critical pedagogy’] and others call ‘hegemonic structures,’ that is to say, the tacit underlying rules of operation in academe,” Rendón explains. In her research (which Rendón more often describes as her “learning inquiry”) she identified seven agreements underlying current practice, each of which works against the wholeness at the center of the “new pedagogical dreamfield” her book describes. She describes the agreements as:

1. the agreement to privilege intellectual/rational knowing
2. the agreement of separation
3. the agreement of competition
4. the agreement of perfection
5. the agreement of monoculturalism
6. the agreement to privilege outer work
7. the agreement to avoid self-examination

Of the traditional approaches to teaching and learning governed by these agreements, Rendón says “God bless them because they needed to be there so we could learn from there, but these old models need to be taken to a higher level, and we need new understandings, new ways of knowing, new ways of approaching what we’ve done in the past.”

After examining each of the present agreements carefully, she offers a new construction:

1. the agreement to work with diverse ways of knowing in the classroom
2. the agreement to embrace connectedness, collaboration, and transdisciplinarity
3. the agreement to engage diverse learning strategies (i.e., competitive and collaborative learning, and individual-based and community-based learning) in the classroom
4. the agreement to be open and flexible about being grounded in knowing and not knowing

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Editor's Note:

Let me begin by talking a bit about language, understanding, and the cultivation of wisdom. I'm provoked by two recent incidents in my own life and by the attention given in this issue to Laura Rendón's new book *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*. Actually, the issue of clarity in language has preoccupied me for a long time. I hate, loathe, and utterly despise deliberately obscure language, especially when it seems aimed as implying a greater degree of insight, understanding, or special knowledge than one actually finds when one decodes the inflated nonsense. (Are my feelings here clear enough?) The first incident involved an essay question given to a college freshman of my acquaintance in a course on gender. It read: "In her book, *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that there is no 'body' that irreducibly marks the body in terms of sexual differences. Rather she sees these differences as emerging through citational practices that are inseparable from regimes of power. What does she see as the work of citational practices and how do they relate to how the body becomes sexed? How is her concern with citational practices linked to her political project?"

I'm a native speaker of American English, but it took me quite a while to confidently decode the meaning here, and once decoded the ideas seemed over-dressed for the occasion, to say the least. As I ranted and raved about the offense done to civilization by such utterances, as I saw it, my calming and wise partner in life's journey brought a classic article by a giant in her field (translation) to my attention, Eugene Nida's "Sociolinguistic Implications of Academic Writing." Nida's "dynamic equivalence" theory of translation has had a huge influence on translation practice for many decades, and at its root, it reflects the same commitment to respecting other cultures that underlies Rendón's thinking about pedagogy. It also touches on the importance of what Rendón calls "transdisciplinarity" — i.e., the importance of faculty in different disciplines talking understandably to one another about their work: "talking *with* rather than *past* others," as Nida puts it. "Do we seek knowledge or wisdom?" he asks. "Are we willing to be beneficiaries of a society without being willing to reciprocate in making our findings as widely acceptable as possible?" Nida concludes by suggesting that scholars need to learn to write both for their specialist peers and for a semi-popular audience. If they do, he says, they will "significantly enhance their basic insights and clarify what they wish to communicate." "There is no better way to brush away the cobwebs of fuzzy thinking than to restate a complex proposition in simpler language," he concludes.

What does my screed have to do with Rendón's sentipensante pedagogy? Simply this: teaching the whole student begins in clarity of language, but to even glimpse the possibility of stepping beyond knowledge (facts, figures, theories) toward the cultivation of wisdom, it must honor means of communicating that lie beyond language and do so with the same commitment to clarity—that is to say, honesty—that Nida's essay calls for. Rendón's pedagogical model takes a courageous step in that direction; hence, the amount of attention given to it in this issue.

—James Rhem

5. the agreement of multi-culturalism and respect for diverse cultures
6. the agreement to balance our personal and professional lives with work, rest, and replenishment
7. the agreement to take time for self-reflexivity.

Animating the Agreements

Anyone who's paid any attention to conversations about teaching and learning in the last ten years has heard much of the language of these new agreements before, so often perhaps that it may have lost some of its impact, so that now it seems merely the new mores of the politically correct. In Rendón's encounters with the fugitive faculty teaching "under the radar," however, and in her contemplations on the relevance of ancient ways of knowing, the depth of meaning beneath the language comes alive again.

"What is the epistemological and ontological framework that becomes a substructure for a pedagogy based on consonance and connectedness?" Rendón asks. Determined to look for answers in a "non-Western, anti-colonial epistemological foundation based on indigenous knowledge," she quickly surveys the world views of peoples as diverse as American Indians, Zulus, and the Chinese, each of whom see duality somewhat more holistically than Westerners often do. When she comes to her Aztec ancestors, she finds a literary device called *difrasismo*, which proves a useful tool in shaping the new pedagogy she envisions. In *difrasismo* a pair of seeming opposites stand not in eternal conflict, but as points of triangulation toward a third concept, the gift of a deeper wisdom hidden in the opposition of the two like the power of a magnet, dependent on the combination of its positive and negative poles. The pairing of "I" and "you" in Aztec thought points to the notion "belong." "Night" and "wind" lead to an image of the transcendence of the divine.

The Integrative and *Difrasismo*

Rendón uses this habit of mind to illuminate the “integrative, consonant pedagogy” of her new “dreamfield,” an ancient heuristic reclaimed to refresh more modern language such as “integrative” or “transdisciplinary” teaching.

Difrasismo emerges almost as an emblem of the mode of expanded thinking underlying the whole of Rendón’s *sentipensante* pedagogy. The dualism it begins with occupies a familiar neighborhood in cognitive development, as does the step to a third, unexpected concept, but the intuitive, reflective, and contemplative processes used to arrive there seem to map territory unfamiliar in current classrooms.

And yet, as Rendón says, the territory has been there waiting to be acknowledged as vital to the deepest learning all along. Talk of “integrative” teaching and learning has a lot of currency, for example, but may not have followed its own implications far enough.

“I began to think about what happens when you really see the connections between the learner and what is being learned,” Rendón recalls. “Do we see subject and object or do we see a greater reality that Owen Barfield calls ‘participatory epistemology,’ not one where the learner is detached, but is deeply engaged with what’s being learned? And it’s the same thing with content and contemplation.”

Through the Looking Glass of Contemplation

As she readily admits, it’s this last step into “contemplation” that defines a threshold many faculty balk at crossing. “[Many faculty will say about] using music, perhaps even meditation, quiet time, doing something creative rather than just a standard test: ‘Yeah, those are nice once in a while, but they are not really what this class is about.’ So it’s that separation mentality again. In

the integrative stance, you combine the two together—the learner and the learned. (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society <http://www.contemplativemind.org/> has a beautiful website that I would refer you to on this.) But what happens, then, when you combine these? When you have a content matter and you add a way that the learner can approach what is being learned on a deeper level through the use of meditation or other contemplative practices such as poetry, art, community service work, etc., what is generated is not just knowledge, but wisdom. The ability for that student to think about the learning that is taking place beyond facts and figures and concepts, about the deeper meaning of what he or she is learning. ‘How is this affecting me? How am I affecting others?’ Those kinds of deeper questions that are normally



“You don’t have to do contemplative practice if that’s not your thing,” Rendón continues. “And if you’re going to do it poorly, it’s better you not even try it. No pedagogy is for everybody. I would like it if this were, but it’s not.

There are some folks who will never buy into this and that’s fine. I’m not particularly concerned about that. Lecture is not for everybody, collaborative learning is not for everybody. What I’m offering, I hope, is an expanded view of integrative learning that has some cultural overlays to it that honor indigenous wisdom and that is also attuned to the notion of social justice.”

In her book, amply quoted responses from Rendón’s interviews with faculty richly convey how to teach this way. Activities familiar as add-ons to other approaches to teaching take center stage and learning emerges as a creative activity as a result.

Sentipensante pedagogy has three goals, Rendón says. First, “to disrupt and transform the entrenched belief system” that acts “against wholeness and appreciation of truth in all forms.” Next, to cultivate what she calls

personas educadas, or well-rounded individuals who have both knowledge and wisdom about how and why to use it. Finally, “to instill in learners a commitment to sustain life, maintain the rights of all people, and preserve nature and the harmony of our world.”

No one can accuse Rendón of having small ambitions . . . or too little heart. ■■■

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not explored thoroughly in traditional teaching and learning.

“Others may see [teaching] differently, and that’s ok. Facts and figures and concepts are great to have, and I don’t discount that at all. Again, it’s about integration. It begins with what you believe about the nature of humanity. If you believe we are bits and pieces disconnected from the whole, this [approach] is going to be like trash to you. But if you believe that everything is connected, and that there’s a unity in everything, then you are going to be open to this kind of work.

For sample syllabi for a range of courses and more guidance on putting these approaches into practice see: <http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/syllabi.html>