CHANGE AGENCY IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART: 4 STEPS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR RESOLVE

By Karen Terry and Barbara Radcliffe

Twentieth-century education theorist John Dewey noted the fundamental purpose of education should be an active process of learning through living, and those endeavors should be relevant and applicable in the life of the learner. As a pragmatist, he believed the art of teaching and learning is a social function as well as an intellectual one (Muraro, 2016).

As the COVID-19 pandemic forces massive global change in the area of public health, education classrooms from Pre-K to post-secondary have been transformed, with teachers and students immersed in the new reality of distance learning. The death of George Floyd has sparked global outrage against systemic racism and produced a worldwide coalition for social justice. The extent to which racism impacts social functioning is based on the recognition that those who are able to function adequately view the world and

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themselves with a sense of worth, independence, and self-determination; racism adversely impacts oppressed people (Edwards, 2006).

We are returning to classrooms unlike any we've ever experienced. Dewey's theories are just as applicable now, and a focus on social functioning must be paired with intellectual endeavors if we are to move forward. What better place to start than in our classrooms?

Embracing the Unknown

From our vantage point as professors of education, we observed novice to veteran teachers from elementary to high school accustomed to teaching face-to-face, as well as university faculty and pre-service student teachers. From Gen Z to Millennials to Boomers, the degree of discomfort was not tied to any single generation. Not all Boomers were old dogs who couldn't learn new tricks, and not all Gen Z'ers could adapt social media and app expertise to distance teaching and learning. And how might recent events concerning race relations additionally impact an already-disrupted educational phenomenon? What path might lead us through transformational change to higher ground? Is it too much to ask educators to tackle all of it at once?

We offer four strategies for setting a foundation to support change in our learning environments:

1. **Expand your comfort zone.** Stepping outside our comfort zones can be daunting, even debilitating. David Iny (2016) suggests aligning your approach to growing outside your comfort zone to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Learn more (bit.ly/WhatScience) as you begin to expand your own comfort zone of proximal development.

2. **Seek understanding.** When we're getting uncomfortable, it's the perfect time to stop talking and actively listen and work to understand others' perspectives. Allowing an opportunity for empathy to weave freely through open dialogue is a habit Stephen Covey (bit.ly/FirstSeek) deems essential.

3. **Be brave.** We may be familiar with the concept of safe spaces—spaces in which we feel protected and not exposed to danger or risk.

This is also a time to be brave, to demonstrate and activate courage rather than passive apathy (Ali, 2017).

4. **Fixate on fixed mindsets.** You may teach and model the elements of growth mindset to your students. It is also imperative to identify fixed mindset actions that cause harm to others. Review Carol Dweck's work (bit.ly/GrowFixed), but this time with a focus on fixed mindset attributes and their dangers.

Becoming Advocates for Change

After calculating a path outside our comfort zone, actively listening with empathy, creating brave space, and acknowledging the negative effects of a fixed mindset, we are poised to be advocates for change. Our message to students is that we, instructors included, are a community of learners working together toward two common goals:

1. The tangible, successful completion of the course.

2. The intangible benefits of our experiences, which contribute to our personal and professional growth as well as our impact on our communities.

With a focus on intellectual and social functioning, we are implored to actively learn and grow rather than passively participate. In this way, we can begin to find our voices and join in the chorus to establish positive sustainable change in our classrooms, schools, and communities.

References

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