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Staying Open to Transformation

Paula Myers

All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.

-bell hooks (U.S. educator and writer, 1952-)

The privilege of being in an environment where you can put both similar and opposing ideas on the table, consider them, discuss them, write about them, analyze them, and search for meaning in them is a wonderful, exciting opportunity. The richness of my life during my time in HESA and working with *TVC* provided this privilege and helped me to connect the acquisition of knowledge and synthesis of ideas with what I felt and believed about the world. As *TVC* Editor, I learned a great deal from my classmates who wrote for the journal. They had such a wide variety of interests and fresh perspective, and the dialogue about our writing helped us to explore difference and expression more deeply. When I look through the articles in that journal, the information and insight is clear, but I also feel the presence of those who wrote, and fondly remember their commitment and passion. Ten years later, *TVC* is still a reference point for me. Since that time, I have been working to understand under what circumstances the connection between seemingly disparate ideas is best made. I think we should simply ask our students to let go of the threat they feel when their identity, values, or ideas are challenged and encourage them to sit still with opposing ideas more often. This is not easy, as students are struggling with their identities and trying to explain who they are to themselves and each other. However, learning to be open to transformation through education is essential to our students' learning and growth. We must find ways to let them know that they can approach this process in a safe but challenging environment, both inside and outside the classroom.

To create a safe environment, we must be willing to shift our own perspectives from time to time and consider ideas that are new, opinions that push us, and thoughts that are not our own. For me, these opportunities come from my interaction with colleagues, reading, and attending professional conferences, but most

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effectively through working with international students. Every year a new group of students from around the world arrives on campus, each individual carrying his own reality with him, wrapped in his mind, eager to share. My students show remarkable courage and resolve and I marvel at their ability to transition to life in college while moving through a new set of cultural expectations and often functioning in their second, sometimes third, language.

What I've learned from them is that communication across difference is a process that takes patience and practice, openness and courage, and most importantly, willingness to engage. If we are to think globally, we must know how to get beyond our surface selves, to consider that other ways of relating and functioning may be equally as valid as our own, and that the existence of such ways does not diminish ours. Each fall, I run a seminar for some of our international student scholars on U.S. culture and intercultural communication. The group is always a mix of cultures, and very often each student is from a different country. We talk about their values as individuals and where those values come from: country, culture, family, friends, experiences, etc. We compare their personal discoveries of their own assumptions and norms and talk through blogs and in class about how our cultural assumptions are tested by living in another country. I am often challenged by our discussions, and they do lead to changing my mind, adding to my understanding, or explaining something I have had trouble focusing on. I feel very lucky to work with students in this way, learning from them and pushing them to share their differing explanations for the ways of the world so that they can continue to identify and question them outside the seminar.

In HESA, we were asked to start with ourselves and to shake our own foundations while holding on to our cores. This is central to what I strive to pass on to students. Finding strength in asking questions of our long-held opinions and beliefs, adding new knowledge to our understanding, and being flexible enough to integrate both into our worldview, is what keeps us transforming. Furthermore, it keeps us aware of the joy and educational privilege we are so lucky to have. We can learn facts about many ways of living, thinking, and doing, and these will be interesting and useful, but we must learn how to traverse difference to really dig deep and release our fears. If we continue to consider this work a lifelong process of discovery for ourselves, we will be modeling invaluable skills to our students, colleagues, and friends.