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Addressing Hxstorical Amnesia: Proactively Combating Hxstorical Amnesia as a Means of Healing in Higher Education

Brie L. Hornig & Arnelle F. Sambile

In a political context characterized by the desire to “Make America Great Again,” the romanticization of the past and the erasure of narratives of marginalized communities affect how students experience and navigate higher education. Institutions of higher education were built on systems of colonization and imperialism and continue to benefit from the legacy of domination and subordination; this hxstory shapes student learning. The authors introduce hxstorical amnesia, its effects on student development, and methods of actively combating hxstorical amnesia in higher education. The authors explore ways to heal from hxstorical amnesia through community-care, cogenerative dialogues, and Sentipensante Pedagogy. By discussing the contemporary impacts of hxstorical amnesia on higher education and student learning, the authors hope to (re)write the narrative of higher education to underline the importance of the hxstories of marginalized communities.

Despite the fact that the United States was built on the exploitation of slave labor and the genocide of Native Americans, a resounding demand to “Make America Great Again” surfaced in the 21st century. This mantra has seeped its way into classrooms and conversations in colleges and universities across the country, reinforcing the revisionist hxstory of the United States. Revisionist hxstories fail to acknowledge the stories of marginalized communities and center the narratives of those in power. Although the demand to “Make America Great Again” increased in popularity, the sentiments to revisit a past that never existed are not new. Hxstorical¹ amnesia (Hertzberg, 1981) manifests through textbooks, institutional hxstories, and university traditions. Institutions of higher education were built on systems of colonization and imperialism and continue to benefit from the legacy of domination and subordination. The remnants of this violent and often unacknowledged hxstory affect how students navigate and understand

[1] In this article, we spell hxstory and hxstorical with an “x” to serve as a reminder of the violence created by colonization that still affects people today. In recognizing that U.S. society functions under a white cisheteropatriarchal system, we use the “x” to move away from centering these systems and to give acknowledgment to hxstories and communities who are often erased.

higher education. To create transformational and healing spaces in higher education, students, faculty, and staff must engage with the effects of hxstorical amnesia on student development and learning. By exploring the definition of hxstorical amnesia, its effects on student development, and different ways to combat hxstorical amnesia, we aim to set the context to discuss community-care, cogenerative dialogues, and Sentipensante Pedagogy as tools to heal from the effects of institutional trauma caused by hxstorical amnesia.

What is Hxstorical Amnesia?

Although the origins of the term “historical amnesia” are unclear, in this article we employ Hertzberg’s (1981) use of the term “historical amnesia” to describe how the social studies reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s were disconnected from the past, as scholars viewed past events through a modern lens. Similarly, through a framework focusing on race, Matias and Newlove (2017) examined American democracy as a tyranny with the tyrannized living in an illusion of freedom caused by hxstorical amnesia and disillusionment produced by whiteness². In an effort to advocate for a racially just U.S. education system, the authors urged educators to think critically about how standardized testing, popular teaching pedagogies, and even diversity doctrines are rooted in whiteness (Matias & Newlove, 2017). We synthesize the approaches of Hertzberg (1981) and Matias and Newlove (2017) to define hxstorical amnesia as the re-writing of hxstory through the lens of people in power, leading to the erasure of the hxstories of marginalized communities.

Effects of Hxstorical Amnesia on Student Development

The effects of hxstorical amnesia are abundant in the 21st century, especially in higher education. Faculty, staff, and students’ lack of engagement with the hxstory of higher education manifests in various ways inside and outside of the classroom. Racism and slavery are deeply embedded in institutions of higher education which were built on the exploitation of African Americans

[2] *We intentionally spell white and whiteness with a lowercase “w” to disrupt normalized language and grammar rules that uphold the racial power hierarchy.*

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and assimilation of Native Americans to Western norms (Wilder, 2013). The hxstory of colleges and universities as sites of profit and assimilation into society shapes institutional cultures, traditions, and expectations to this day. Specifically, hxstorical amnesia affects how students navigate and understand post-secondary institutions.

Scholars describe contemporary universities as businesses that generate revenue and produce employees for the workforce (Giroux, 2014). Many students enter universities to learn information and skills from their professors in order to enter the job market. Freire (1970) criticized this method of learning and condemned what he referred to as the *banking model of education* as a way of reinforcing oppression and discouraging critical thinking. This passive and one-sided method of learning shows up on college campuses in the way that students are required to absorb and accept information from textbooks, lectures, and university traditions. The danger of the banking model of education is that it reinforces white ways of knowing, thereby silencing marginalized voices and contributing to higher education's tradition of oppression, assimilation, and racism. A myriad of college students absorb and accept information from textbooks, lectures from professors, and university traditions, unknowingly contributing to the banking model of education. This lack of critical analysis contributes to the erasure of higher education's hxstory of racism because the information is written through the lens of those in power, erasing the hxstory of marginalized communities. When students do not critically engage with or challenge the hxstory of higher education, classrooms become places that are not centered in relationship building, lived experiences, or feelings; rather, they become places of productivity where it is difficult to reimagine the classroom outside of the normalized model of learning. Additionally, a neoliberalist mindset that supports market-driven education policies by focusing on production and performance affects higher education practices and overall student development and learning (Giroux, 2014).

The banking model of education and neoliberal policies further maintain the role of higher education institutions as places of profit and assimilation. When faculty, students, and staff do not know the hxstory of higher education, they continue the cycle of practices that contribute to hxstorical amnesia. To combat the ways that hxstorical amnesia affects the classroom, educators must explore other ways of engaging in the classroom.

Combatting Hxstorical Amnesia in Higher Education

Higher education is oppressive based on its hxstory, which is still relevant today. Higher education professionals often forget how problematic higher education is and do not change antiquated practices, particularly those that affect the way students learn. However, there are ways to combat the effects of higher

education's hxstory by stepping out of the amnesia and these practices. In this section, we explore different ways of actively combating the effects of hxistorical amnesia on student learning and development in higher education. Hxistorical amnesia affects students ontologically and epistemologically; it affects how students build relationships with others, how they understand the classroom space, and how they navigate academic spaces. We introduce community-care, cogenerative dialogues, and Sentipensante Pedagogy as three methods of combating hxistorical amnesia in higher education.

Community-Care

One of the ways to combat hxistorical amnesia is through community-care, a cyclical system of energy and effort through the shared responsibility of community members to attend to the needs of other community members (Sambile, 2018). One effect of market-driven education—a system upheld through hxistorical amnesia—is the emphasis on student productivity rather than holistic well-being, which leads to burnout. In discussing how to prevent burnout in higher education, the term self-care, which refers to the individual practice of taking care of oneself, has risen in popularity, especially in the field of student affairs. Although self-care is an important aspect of wellness, it is often tainted by the assumption that individuals have the time and resources to heal and “[prioritizes] the self over the collective” (Sambile, 2018, p. 35). In a society that focuses on individualism, community-care is a radical act of resistance because it de-centers Eurocentric ways of being that place emphasis on the individual. Community-care is not a new concept; communities of color have practiced community-care for centuries. However, little scholarly research exists surrounding the topic of community-care in communities outside of the U.S. (Sambile, 2018). This lack of knowledge is a result of hxistorical amnesia which causes the delegitimization and erasure of ways of being in communities of color, especially in institutions of higher education.

Transforming our idea of care from self-care to community-care is one way of actively combating hxistorical amnesia by reclaiming and re-learning dominant ways of being. Sambile (2018) noted three ways to actively practice community-care through radical listening, empathy, and vulnerability. Sambile intentionally added the word “radical” to these practices to emphasize her use of a critical consciousness lens, which acknowledges the ways that systems of oppression affect how marginalized communities engage in these practices. Radical listening involves being actively present in sharing space with others and listening to understand, not to respond or rebut. Radical empathy centers the support of others, and radical vulnerability is to recognize one's feelings and the connection between feelings and systems of oppression (Sambile, 2018). Hxistorical amnesia results in the normalization of individualism and productivity through the

erasure of the hystory of marginalized communities. Community-care offers an alternative by transforming educational spaces to center community and wellness.

Cogenerative Dialogue

Another effect of hystorical amnesia is that many students enter classroom spaces and uncritically consume knowledge given by the professor. In the classroom, there is no space for feelings and the hierarchies of power are magnified. Freire (1970) characterized this traditional education system with a metaphor of teachers depositing information into students, who are seen as containers. To resist the effects of hystorical amnesia, as reinforced by the banking model of education, students must see themselves as valuable contributors to the classroom. This consciousness can be accomplished through cogenerative dialogue. Bondi (2013) originated the term and practice cogenerative dialogue (cogen). In cogen, students take an active role in decision making and learning in the classroom. In a cogenerative space, students are not only responsible for their learning, but for the learning of other students, as well as the teacher. They become both teachers and learners. Bondi described cogen as beneficial to student learning, as students often feel more connected to the class material and are able to bring their lived experiences, as shaped by their social identities, into the classroom. Cogen provides students with opportunities to challenge and deconstruct power (Boss & Linder, 2016). The practice of cogenerative dialogue allows the classroom to become a space that counters power dynamics and gives space for stories. By combating the banking model of education, cogenerative learning gives spaces for everyone in the classroom to be both receivers and creators of knowledge.

Sentipensante Pedagogy

Sentipensante Pedagogy combats the prioritization of intellectualism over the holistic self, another effect of hystorical amnesia in higher education. Before colonization and western expansion ingrained the idea that intellectual consciousness was the only way of knowing, communities from around the world recognized the unity of rationality and intuition (Rendón, 2014). Rendón's model of Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) Pedagogy represents a teaching and learning approach based on wholeness, social justice, consonance, and liberation. The banking model of education frames faculty only as teachers, not learners, which hinders student learning and development. When faculty pass down information they know without purpose for students to absorb, students do not develop critical consciousness or understanding of their inner self.

By urging educators to create space for social, spiritual, and emotional development through the unity of teaching and learning, Sentipensante Pedagogy works to shatter systems that belittle the importance of feelings and inner work in higher education. Rendón (2014) discusses her own lived experiences as a woman of color

navigating higher education, explaining that her classes often felt meaningless and she observed disconnection between teachers and their students. She discusses how she wanted her educational journey to yield more meaningful relationships between teachers and students, rather than overemphasize intellectual knowledge and separate teaching and learning. Sentipensante Pedagogy cultivates a teaching and learning approach that centers wholeness and liberation, directly resisting the amnesia-produced focus on productivity in education.

Conclusion

The hxstory of higher education is rooted in systems of colonization and imperialism, a truth that often goes unacknowledged in educational spaces. Hxstorical amnesia manifests into systems that reinforce oppression and uphold white ways of knowing, such as the banking model of education. To actively combat the effects of hxstorical amnesia on student development and learning, student affairs and higher education professionals should integrate community-care, cogenerative learning, and Sentipensante Pedagogy into their educational praxis. In the cultivation of transformational spaces in higher education, we need a radical shift to center the healing and holistic well-being of students. The authors hope that addressing and combating hxstorical amnesia will allow for individuals to take action toward wholeness and healing.

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