

# Talking about Social Issues in the English Classroom

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## RESUMEN

Esta investigación describe las experiencias de aprendizaje transformador de un grupo de maestros de inglés que asistieron a una conferencia de desarrollo profesional dirigida a desarrollar diálogos en sus clases sobre problemas sociales. Un análisis cualitativo de las reflexiones sugiere que los participantes experimentaron un aprendizaje que transformó su modo de ver las conversaciones con sus estudiantes sobre problemas sociales, tales como desarrollar una perspectiva más profunda, un nuevo entendimiento y darse cuenta del apoyo que se necesita para integrar estas conversaciones. La cultura de la actividad de desarrollo profesional transformó el conocimiento previo con el adquirido y comenzaron a ver las conversaciones como un modo de guiar al estudiante a participar en una democracia. Esta investigación también marca

un esfuerzo para darles voz a los maestros sobre sus experiencias de aprendizaje transformador, lo cual podría generar cambios al currículo.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje transformador, pedagogía como un proceso de transformación, desarrollo profesional

## ABSTRACT

This research describes the transformative learning experiences of a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who attended a professional development conference aimed at fostering classroom discussions in the context of social issues. The purpose of this research was to explore teachers' learning experiences, which in turn would provoke ideas to enhance classroom educational practices. A qualitative analysis of the reflections suggests that ESL teachers experienced transformative learning, such as deepened perspectives, a new understanding, and awareness of ongoing support for integrating classroom talk on social issues. The culture of the professional development conference transformed previous knowledge with the one acquired and the participants became aware that classroom discussions of social issues are a way to guide students to participate in a democracy. This research also marks an effort to offer ESL teachers the opportunity to voice their transformative learning experiences with potential consequences for curriculum improvement.

**Keywords:** transformative learning, transformative pedagogy, professional development

## ■ Introduction

In today's education, English language teachers in Puerto Rico are faced with great challenges. In addition to the increasing standardization and accountability, they also take moments to include as part of their teaching practices, classroom discussions about social issues. Holding discussions of what is actually happening in society means transforming teaching practices, deepening perspectives, and increasing understandings of pedagogical practices and the complex world of L2 teaching and learning.

This research describes transformative learning as experienced by ESL teachers who attended a professional development conference at the University of Puerto Rico at Bayamón (UPRB) aimed at fostering classroom discussions in the context of social issues. The purpose of this research was to explore teachers' learn-

ing experiences, which in turn would provoke ideas to enhance classroom educational practices.

A qualitative analysis of the reflections suggests that ESL teachers experienced transformative learning, such as deepened perspectives, a new understanding, and awareness of ongoing support for integrating classroom talk on social issues. The culture of the professional development conference transformed previous knowledge with the one acquired, and the participants became aware that classroom discussions of social issues are a way to guide students to play a part in a democracy. Thus, the more they critically analyzed their teaching practices, the more transformed their learning experiences.

### ■ Method

This research is qualitative in nature in the form of an action-research. It involves a process of transforming practices and understanding situations as well as discovering connections and non-connections between understandings and practices (Lucca & Berríos, 2003). Zuber-Skerrit (1996) asserts that the methodological paradigm of action research follows from the early studies of Kurt Lewin in 1946 who was concerned that research into teaching should have a practical effect on classroom practices. Lewin, as observed in Zuber-Skerrit, proposed cycles of problem definition, fact finding, goal setting, action, and evaluation to simultaneously solve problems and generate new knowledge. He goes on to say that one important characteristic of action research is to organize the research into different phases, with findings informing action throughout the process. Reflecting on the qualitative-action research approach from a pedagogical point of view, one can assume that while integrating this research approach, the improvement of educational practices requires building knowledge of situations perceived and obtaining a deeper understanding of experiences.

The interest to conduct this study aroused from the usual practice of discussing with fellow presenters the notes taken while the participants share how they would implement the topic and technique presented and the evaluations made of the workshop. Because these documents did not contain the participants' names

or any other data that would identify them, we spoke of what actually happened during the event. As we reflect on these documents, we observe that teachers revealed a new meaning for using social issues as part of classroom discussions. Besides reflecting on the strategy presented, the teachers had developed a deeper, more critical understanding of social issues conversations in their classrooms. As the participants expressed, “this workshop helped me for helping my students; discussions of social issues means more than talking.”

Additional comments that sparked our attention is the participants expressed having learned that “Talking about social issues in their ESL classrooms will make their students become better human beings; discussing social issues is more than talking about top-story news, we can do something different and then use it in our classrooms.”

Clearly, these teachers were construing a revised interpretation of how they see and can use conversations on social issues as a teaching resource. Thus, we investigated the meaning of their comments, particularly in a professional development context. Mezirow’s (1994) theoretical framework of adult learning refers to the progressive realization of an adult’s capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discriminating, permeable and integrative understanding of his or her experience as a guide to action as transformative learning. Through an interpretive analysis, we found answers to our assumption that teachers became aware of using conversations of social issues in a new way.

### Participants

The participants were eight ESL teachers who attended an Outreach professional development conference at UPRB. During this one-day conference, participants engaged in multifaceted workshops concerning recent and effective teaching techniques used to foster discussions in the context of social issues. Held concurrently, the individual presentations, offered by UPRB professors, showcased an array of relevant areas encompassing all of the components of communicative competence. Once concluded, the teachers completed an evaluation form, the purpose of which was to discover their perception of the professional development activity.

### Data collection

As part of the workshop we offered the teachers to define the concept of social issues and their experiences of using these topics in the classroom. This exchange of ideas led to our presentation of how we integrate discussions of social issues. For example, we discussed ways to create awareness of worldwide issues, learn more about the consequences, and how students can be part of the solution. An essential feature of the workshop was the opportunity for participants to work in small groups, determine topics, a procedure to discuss issues with their students, and then present the ideas to the rest of the group. In doing so, each of us would have an opportunity to further expand our ideas. As the teachers shared their views, we took notes of their comments, topics and techniques to later on recapitulate the ideas behind their efforts.

Once concluded the workshop, the participants completed an evaluation form. They were instructed not to write their names. They were also notified the information was used to improve educational practices. As we analyzed these anonymous documents and the literature on adult learning, the information implied that participants transformed their previous knowledge with the one acquired, and suggested a link between discussions of social issues and participation in a democracy.

### Analysis of data

The researchers organized the data using paper and pencil, categorized the emerging themes on a tabulation sheet, and analyzed the data implicit in the documents. After interpreting the facts, the data obtained from the notes and the evaluations were triangulated. Following Wolcott's (1994) ideas of description, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, the description phase included both the participants and the researchers' reflections. The data analysis phase meant identifying recurrent themes and categories, as well as their interrelationship. The interpretation phase addressed what it actually meant for teachers to implement dialogues about social issues in the ESL classroom and its relationship with the literature on adult learning.

Through an interpretive analysis, the researchers found answers to their inquiries that ESL teachers were constructing a new meaning for using social issues as part of classroom discussions.

## ■ Results

Participation in professional development activities will spark new ways of thinking (Fleisher, 2004; Kent, 2004). Throughout the workshop, the participants reflected on their ideas and the ones discussed in the meeting and moved their professional understandings a step further to deepening perspectives, developing new understandings and becoming aware of the ongoing support needed for integrating classroom talk on social issues. Thus, this narrative tells the story of the participants' transformative learning experiences and how their perspectives and understandings changed by what they learned at the conference.

### Deepened perspectives

Before presenting our strategy, all participants referred to the discussion of social issues as *talking about headline news* and *having conversations with students about top-story news around the world*. The topics are either introduced by the teachers or the students. The participants recall that:

The students bring up the latest news after the class has already started; the teacher introduces the topic before getting into the agenda for the day. When the topic is really important, they [students] do a class project. The projects consist of presentations telling the story of the headline news. These projects show that students did research, so they get points for presenting and creativity.

Once concluded our Power Point presentation, the participants worked in small groups to determine suitable topics and ways to talk about social issues with their students. We observed that each group worked differently. However, what is common to all was a sudden realization which resulted in merging ideas and developing something new. As captured in this reflection:

They compare their techniques with our presentation; each member bounces ideas off each other; each idea is valued; the topics and steps come from what each teacher willingly gives; they line up ideas on paper. One of the teachers said

it's just more than talking about the news; they put together all ideas and said they would do something different.

In the development of new ideas, the participants:

Reviewed our presentation; the video we presented, the lyrics to a song, and the handout we gave them containing a series of articles on examining social issues in the English classroom. Some of them asked us individual questions. They exchanged ideas with the members of the other groups.

New understandings

The culture of the professional development activity also provided the space to develop new understandings. The participants shared that:

[...] talking about social issues does not mean to have a conversation about ethical understandings; it means to know what students know, their opinions, and what they have to say about social issues; to learn about real-life problems that students might go through, could affect them directly, and learn about something that is bothering them; to discover how they feel about these issues, especially their fears.

The participants also understand that:

Instead of talking about headline news, news around the world, the right topics are those happening in the classroom; obesity, unemployment, teenage parents, racism, discrimination, child abuse, teenage suicide, divorce, domestic violence, teen street gangs, and unethical use of technology.

Because they want to retain these discussions within the English curriculum, they believe:

These discussions are the right moment to start the writing process because students reflect, organize thoughts, and practice English orally; discussing issues before putting those ideas in writing makes students think, and develop a better understanding of everyday problems.

Integrating classroom talk on social issues that the students might be experiencing requires guidance and the analysis skills needed to understand life situations (Mezirow, 1994). Their comments capture that when discussing social issues, especially situa-

tions their students might be experiencing, a guided procedure is necessary. They suggest:

Before students start mentioning topics, create the right moment through whole-group discussions; use top-story news and guide students to reflect on what is actually happening in their communities. The topics can be found in the local newspapers, radio stations, television, on the internet, and perhaps students' experiences.

The next step suggested is to:

Form small groups and guide them to discuss how they feel and how these issues have affected them. Help them become aware of the conflicting life threatening realities that many students go through; have them create mind maps with the feelings and experiences discussed. Then, have them report back to the rest of the class.

Another step in the procedure is to:

[Guide] students to analyze the consequences of issues. Some students can draw what they think can happen. Assign to each group a different means to learn about the consequences of issues, for example, a movie, a picture, and a *youtube* video, all based on true stories. Then, invite someone outside the school to talk to students about the consequences of the issues.

At this point, the participants believe the students:

[...] think deep about the issue; see the pros and cons, apply what's good to their own lives, brainstorm ideas to help others, pass the word on to others, come up with a possible contribution and idea to help solve an issue, create a possible solution, and contribute to society.

In addition, when students actively participate in a discussion of social issues they:

[...] change the way of seeing life, view life in a better way; learn to confront real issues like the ones they have; talk with others to agree on something, have a discussion, solve problems without fighting, become better human beings; a better person.



### Awareness of ongoing support

Bomer (2004) and Johannessen (2003) document that when teachers undertake a project that requires a change in the school curriculum, they must feel supported. In this research, although the participants showed enthusiasm about their new understandings, they also became aware that a change in teaching practices is not enough. Other factors need to be in place. Those factors include ongoing support from the Department of Education to act on this new way of integrating classroom discussions on social issues. Their comments describe their needs:

I need more training, to learn other strategies, acquire more knowledge on how to address social issue, more help to talk with my students about issues that affect them. It's necessary to have materials; internet access; and equipment so students can read before writing about issues.

As seen, transformative learning included presenting their definition of a social issue and the procedure for talking with their students about such topics, thinking about teaching practices, suddenly realizing what is best for their students, interpreting meanings, and devising a new way of integrating classroom talk on social issues where students create a possible solution. The more they critically analyzed the teaching practices, the more transformed their learning experiences. Our observations of their group work confirms this point:

The ideas each one contributed were valuable; they became partners; the sense of pulling ideas together helped them determine specific topics and a particular procedure for discussing issues with their students. They moved from seeing social issues as world-wide breaking news to focusing on specific issues presumably experienced by students in their classrooms. Internalizing these learning experiences broadened their perspectives and came to see the conversations differently.

A look at our observations also revealed that we utilized transformative pedagogy to deliver our workshop. In other words, the participants are empowered through their interactions such that each is more knowledgeable and skilled to integrate classroom discussions of social issues in their course curriculum. Mezirow

(1994), as observed in Ukpokodu (2007), discusses that transformative pedagogy is defined as an activist pedagogy that combines the elements of constructivist, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism and practices that promote dialogical relations, engage and empower students as critical inquirers, participatory, active, and self-reflective learners who confront their prior beliefs, perspectives, frames of reference and attitudes in order to foster the development of critical consciousness, visions of possibilities, and action. Cummins (2000) confirms the interactive nature as he states that transformative pedagogy is

[...] realized in interactions between educators and students that attempt to foster collaborative relations of power. Empowerment results from classroom interactions that enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience and to analyze broader issues relevant to their lives. This process affirms and extends students' abilities and at the same time develops the linguistic and intellectual tools necessary for collaborative critical inquiry (p. 246).

In this research, lived experiences prompted by the participants' reflections constituted the base to assume that participation in the workshop went beyond acquiring knowledge and techniques to becoming changed by what they learned. This transformed experience led the participants to generate a lesson plan for guiding students to participate actively in a democracy.

## ■ Discussion

Critically reflecting on teaching practices opened an envelope of cognitive possibilities where changes in teaching practices transformed the way of seeing and teaching classroom talk on social issues. As the participants said, "this really opened my eyes about topics the students would like to talk about; it helped me for helping students; we provided ideas and then we learned."

The transformative learning experiences moved participants a step further and generated a lesson plan grounded on transformative pedagogy, in which the goal is to practice speaking skills. The teaching technique includes addressing issues that students inside their classrooms might be experiencing, and then using

these discussions as a prewriting phase. The approach suggested is to emotionally involve students to express their feelings about the issues, guide them to see the consequences, and critically think about a possible contribution to help solve the problem.

For years, research has suggested that professional development has profound effects on classroom practice and student success (Fleischer, 2004; Kent, 2004; Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000; Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 1999). Professional development is the process of improving staff skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for students (Hassel, 1999) and has an almost magical power to revitalize and transform teaching practices (Fleischer, 2004). The transformative learning theory by Jack Mezirow (1994) provides a theoretical foundation for the learning that occurs in a professional development context. He defines learning as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action (p. 222). This theory of adult learning postulates that learners experience personal and intellectual growth when they grapple with disorienting dilemmas, examine their assumptions related to the contradictory information, seek out additional perspectives, and ultimately acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills in light of these reflections (p. 224).

Cummins (2000) further explains that transformative pedagogy uses collaborative critical inquiry to enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience and analyze broader social issues relevant to their lives. It also encourages students to discuss ways in which social realities might be transformed through various forms of democratic participation and social action (p. 90).

One of the most recent investigations on transformative pedagogy and learning is the work of Ukpokodu (2007). Using a qualitative research design, Ukpokodu examined the impact of a course that utilized transformative pedagogy to foster preservice teachers' transformative learning in a social studies methods course. Drawing on multiple sources, the data revealed that participants evidenced transformative learning such as follows: (a) deepened perspectives and new understanding of social studies; (b) shift-

ing dispositions and awareness of a new sense of responsibility; (c) evolving self-examination and redefinition of teaching role, and (d) emerging sense of social critique and *conscientization*. A pertinent segment of the study is the discussion of key elements of transformative pedagogy that foster transformative learning, such as a community-based learning context, experiential learning activities and project, reflective journaling, modeling, and scaffolding.

Postmodern education strives for the inclusion of new ways of enabling teachers to cope with still more difficult situations of our nowadays educational systems. Teachers are in need of sharing their thoughts, their experiences. They are also willing to acquire other forms of dealing with a changing world. According to Villegas–Reimers (2003),

This double role of teachers in educational reforms —being both subjects and objects of change— makes the field of teacher professional development a growing and challenging area, and one that has received major attention during the past few years (p. 7).

Through an extensive review of literature, Kent (2004) sustains that professional development is crucial to the future of education, especially if the challenges of the student population are to be successfully met. Kent also observes that as high-quality staff development is provided, it becomes the teacher's responsibility to become part of the initiative and commit to translating theory into practice for the betterment of instructional practice.

When teachers explore a particular course; they revitalize and transform their teaching practices. Birman, et al. (2000) theorize that professional development should focus on structuring the form that is responsive to how teachers learn; on deepening teachers' content knowledge on a subject-specific teaching method; on providing opportunities for active learning in meaningful discussions, planning and practice; encouraging coherence that build on standards and assessment, and using activities that have greater duration and that involve collective participation which allows opportunities for analysis of teaching and learning.

Prominent among the idea of high-quality professional development is striving to refine what happens in the classroom. Various

investigations have contended that one important way to generate classroom talk that is purposeful and engaging is for teachers to create the “right context” (Angell & Avery, 1992; Johannessen, 2003) and integrate authentic discussions that address social issues (Bomer, 2004; Hurlbert & Totten, 1992; Totten, 1992).

Holding a classroom genuine dialogue or inquiry into an issue has been defined as a reflective dialogue among students, or between students and teachers about a controversial and complicated issue on which there is disagreement (Harwood & Hahn, 2000; Johannessen, 2003). Angell and Avery (1992) assert that students have the cognitive ability to deal with complex global issues in surprisingly sophisticated ways because issues are already a part of their daily experiences, both in and outside of school. Bomer (2004) understands that classroom discussions on social issues are a way to teach students to participate actively in a democracy by talking about real-life situations happening around them. Bomer also contends that students need to be guided toward more sustained, mature involvement with issues that matter to them. The aforementioned descriptions of social issues imply that as part of their daily experiences, students confront and make judgment about thorny issues. It is almost as if conflict has become a reality that many students go through.

The English classroom has been seen as a good place for students and teachers to explore the conditions affecting this time, since its curriculum is primarily concerned with enabling students to become competent in the areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening (Hurlbert & Totten, 1992; Totten, 1992). Furthermore, handling controversy in English classrooms that is related to the academic content of the course can not only deepen student involvement with the English content, but can expand student understandings of the perspectives and the complexities of ideas (Johnson, et al., 1992). Bomer (2004) has observed that a classroom atmosphere that gives students plenty of opportunities to speak on social issues will also provide opportunities for students to speak out and “make their voices heard in the great human conversation” (p. 34).

Exploring social issues brings with itself analyzing what teachers can do to engage students in effective classroom discussions.

Harwood and Hahn (2000) believe that classroom interactions will be fruitful when teachers prepare students for discussions, provide adequate information sources, establish an open discussion climate, maintain focus and direction, ensure intellectual balance, encourage equal participation, and allow students to challenge the teachers stand on the issue. Johannessen (2003) has seen that when teachers hold discussions based on a real problem that does not offer an easy solution, students engage in high levels of critical thinking and become emotionally involved in arguing their viewpoints about the right thing to do. For this purpose, he suggests initiating authentic discussion that create controversy through activities that involve challenging problems, pose questions that do not have easy solutions, connect the problems to students' lives, connect students' knowledge to the literature they study, make sure that the questions asked or problems posed require critical thinking on the part of students, and give students adequate time to respond to complex questions. Clarke (2000) understands these discussions must require students to make sense of the complex and confusing world. He proposes teachers to lead students to identify the nature of the issue, consider the arguments, analyze the assumptions behind the arguments, and understand argument manipulation. For Bomer (2004) speaking out on issues entails writing for social change and an understanding of curricular content. He suggests that the writer's notebook, coalitions and action plan, keeping the focus on writing, and the conditions that support writing for social action are some of the procedures that a teacher will have to employ in order to help students to write for social action.

As seen, professional development experiences spark new ways of teaching to meet the needs of students (Fleisher, 2004; Kent, 2000). This research reveals that when teachers use classroom discussions on social issues as a pedagogical technique, students are provided opportunities to acquire knowledge necessary for an educational discussion of issues, critically think, and actively participate in dialogues that concern them. However, one important aspect we should keep in mind is that a change in the school curriculum requires ongoing support and guidance toward more sustained, mature involvement with issues that matter to

both teachers and students (Bomer, 2004; Johannessen, 2003; Ukopodu, 2007).

## ■ Conclusion

Conflicting life issues have become a reality that many students go through. This reality is changing the way teachers think of classroom discussions, and more importantly, it is changing how they see and use conversations of social issues in the school curriculum. This research demonstrates that when English language teachers come together in a professional development activity, the synergy created enhances their abilities to revitalize and transform their teaching practices.

The culture of the professional development conference provided the space to transform previous knowledge with the one acquired and came to see classroom conversations of social issues as a way for students to participate in a democracy. The teachers deepened perspectives of holding conversations of social issues as they reflected, actively participated in the workshop, referred to the resources available, and developed a new meaning of social issues discussions. As they became cognizant of the new meaning, they also acquired new understandings and elaborated a unit of study. While retaining a place in the English language curriculum, the unit is focused on the social issues that in one way or the other students might be experiencing. Therefore, these teachers have seen the English classroom as more than a place where students learn the rhetorical skills of the grade level. What these English language teachers are saying is that classrooms should be seen as a context to empower students so they are enthused to seek deeper into life realities, voice their stories, and view social issues from the perspective of actively doing something to help solve the issues which they might also be going through.

As we conclude this study, we observe this research marks an effort to offer ESL teachers the opportunity to voice their transformative learning experiences with potential consequences for curriculum improvement. Thus, we wonder about several questions: What is the significance of implementing transformative pedagogy, Will ESL teachers be able to integrate the unit of study on social issues and students' democratic participation in their

course curriculum?, What do teachers achieve as they integrate discussions of social issues in the English course?, What changes are made to this unit of study and why? We intend to conduct more action research to continue learning about transformative pedagogy/learning and to investigate some of these questions in the near future. This research area could probably provide further insights concerning teaching practices for ESL learners in Puerto Rico. A planning procedure could be done in which ESL teacher-researchers might explore their learners' transformative learning processes.

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