

Editors' Introduction: Learning as a Wicked Problem

Laura Cruz, *Editor-in-Chief*

Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence
The Pennsylvania State University

[With the *Transformative Dialogues* editorial team: Chas Brua, Eileen Grodziak, and Jacob Kelley]

Welcome to the summer/early fall 2022 edition of *Transformative Dialogues*.

Editors' Notes:

We appreciate everyone's patience as we worked through the transition to our new OJS platform housed at Penn State. There were a few bumps in the road, but we seem to be fully operational and, as the saying goes, firing on all pistons, these days. Special thanks go to Ally Laird, who is our liaison to the open publishing platforms of the Penn State libraries.

This is the first issue of the journal that includes DOIs for each article. If you are not familiar with these, DOIs are unique identifiers for academic artifacts that make it easier for readers and scholars to find one another. We believe these will increase the visibility of work from all of our contributors. If you have published with us in the past, please know that we intend to go through our back catalog and apply these retroactively.

For those of you eagerly awaiting the publication of our special issue on arts-based educational research (ABER), we can assure you that issue has begun production, and we anticipate that it will be published later this fall. Prepare to be amazed not only by what these scholars do in their classrooms but also by how they express their scholarship.

Learning as a Wicked Problem

In his 2022 essay *What's the Problem Now?*, Georgetown Provost Randy Bass argued that “we need to think of the problem of learning—and by implication, the problem of higher education—as a complex, wicked problem” (Bass, 2022, p. 6). Indeed, as the articles in this issue of *Transformative Dialogues* attest, learning is becoming increasingly recognized as a multi-faceted

construct, one replete with layers, levels, formats, presentations, modalities, nuances, dimensions, and a host of other factors. For Bass, this recognition is liberating, enabling scholars and practitioners alike to stop searching for clear solutions (which are unlikely to exist) and instead deepen our insights, strengthen our empathy, and embrace a plurality of voices in ongoing scholarly dialogues about teaching and learning.

In her essay, Eileen Grodziak reflects on her experience with a [composite] student whose mixed experiences with first-year transition did not seem to fit neatly into any of the pre-existing factors identified as critical for student success. She concludes that some of Joe's experiences may remain mysterious, perhaps even ultimately unknowable, to her. While we may endeavor to find common ground with our students, her piece makes the case for also recognizing and respecting the myriad of differences that exist between us. In their piece, Thomas Dyer, John Steele, Rick Holbeck, and Scott Greenberger, too, recognize gaps in what we think we know about our students. Their piece utilizes a realistic vignette to gauge how instructors, across a multitude of ranks and disciplines, perceive student motivations to engage in behavior that could be perceived as violating academic integrity. Their findings suggest that it may be possible for empathy and understanding to be strengthened through experience and training.

Speaking of experience, Sara Bano, Melanie Fierstine, and Julie Ketterling, an instructor and two graduate students respectively, utilize the method of autoethnography to gain insight into how the extraordinary circumstances of remote learning under the global pandemic served to transform their teaching and learning, even their lives. They frame their experiences through Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which they apply to students in their classrooms as well as themselves, affirming his conception of transformation as one in which "individuals become more inclusive in their perception of the world, open to different or new points of view, and able to integrate different aspects of their new learning experiences into meaningful and holistic relationships" (Mezirow, 1991).

That same depth of learner transformation has been known to be especially evident in students who participate in study abroad, a high-impact practice that was sorely tested by the conditions of worldwide quarantine. Even before the pandemic, a group of faculty and doctoral students from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (including Michele Parker, Heidi Higgins, Meredith Jones, Cherie Chandler, Kayce Smith, and Jennifer Stalls) noted that students who participated in even short-term trips abroad not only gained intercultural competence but also cultural humility, which includes the recognition that you are never done learning about/from the perspectives of others. In their study of a similar study abroad program, but one that shifted to virtual delivery under COVID, Katie Butler, Aimée Josephine Utuza, and Elysée Nouvet, were able to discern the subtle, and at times not so subtle, influences of technology-mediation on interpersonal and cross-cultural communication. In particular, they noted how technology can impede the building of trust, which, in turn, serves as a critical foundation for intercultural learning.

As a dimension of learning, trust refers to a relationship between and among groups of people. Our next three articles also focus on aspects of social learning. Jennifer Morin and Sara Willox use computer simulations to gauge how students in their undergraduate business program perform in project management teams, with particular emphasis on the development of soft skills (i.e., how they interact with others). Ann-Louise Howard, Sarah Manolson, Colin Robertson,

Andrew Trull, and Rosemary Reilly reflect on the implementation of student cohorts within a leadership and management degree program. A cohort refers to groups of students who take a series of courses together, with the intention of expanding their zone of proximal development, (i.e., the space(s) where they (hopefully) learn from and support each other). Last but not least, Meghan Reister, Justin M. Greenly, and Rebecca Pohlmeier assess the impact of their Gizmo program, which invites students to not only engage with each other across disciplines (pre-service teachers and engineering students) but also across age ranges, as they work on pedagogical projects to be implemented with younger children and their teachers.

Across all of these contributions, we see a range of conceptualizations of learning, learning theories, and learning environments. Our final piece, however, takes learning to a different level—the meta. Scott E. Gaier, Jenna W. Kramer, and John M. Braxton assess the impact of an institution-wide program in which instructors incorporate strategies into their first-year courses that are intended to teach students not what, but how, to learn. Not only do their findings suggest that these strategies were successful, but their reflection on the process also further reinforces the idea that learning, is (to paraphrase their conclusion) fundamental, natural, changeable, and ever-changing. In other words, learning is indeed wicked.