

## LEARNING DIVERSITY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE NARRATIVES™

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### Abstract

This article discusses how the emerging trend of using literary arts and dialogue, along with reflective and creative writing, referred to by the author as *transformative narratives*, can be used to help unpack and re-script assumptions, attitudes, values, and biases of leaders as they operate in systems of privilege. When leaders read, write, and dialogue about their own and others' cultural and social group identities, they increase self-awareness and improve interaction with others. These skills prove effective in building emotional intelligence that is linked to competencies of high performing leaders who create strong financial performance in their organizations. Specific applications are provided throughout the article.

**Keywords:** Narrative methods, Emotional intelligence, Creativity, Literary arts in business, Storytelling, Reflective writing, Transformative narratives, Diversity, Transformative language arts, Leadership narratives, Diversity narratives, Executive coaching

*I walked into a room facing a circle of chairs. I didn't notice any tables with name tents. Missing were white binders loaded with colorful handouts or even a pad of paper and pen on the chairs. An elaborate feast of coffee, teas, Danish, muffins, and fresh fruit filled a table in the back of the room. I had already decided to fully participate in the diversity three-day workshop. Since I had missed the first two-day*

*workshop a few months ago because of being on maternity leave, I needed to be there. Word got back that at the first session, participants stood up and spoke boldly about how things really were at the bank for people of color and women. This second round of learning is promising to take us deeper. Since I had received a promotion to deputy director of diversity management at the bank, as one of the highest-*

*ranking African American women, I felt bound by duty to be at this diversity session. Because of having a reputation of courageous speak, Frances, [VP of Diversity], gave me the heads up that they wanted to put me in a session with the CEO Terry Larsen, along with four of his white male direct reports. I'm not afraid of being with the CEO, but I have to be careful that anything I say or do can result in career limiting moves. Oh well...*

These words and thoughts were captured in a 1992 journal entry at the launch of a three-day diversity awareness workshop session at CoreStates Financial Corp. It was the beginning of a six-year culture change journey. As a workshop participant and a leader in this organization change process, our consultants from Elsie Y. Cross and Associates asked us to write reflectively about our experiences during the training. Hesitating at first, not trusting if my notes would be shared or handed into someone, I reluctantly jotted down what was at the top of my head, nothing deeper. The real truth of my experience remained in my gut.

Advancing social and personal transformation through the power of the written and spoken word is the heart of my work today as an executive coach,

consultant, and writer. I believe that when leaders read, write, and dialogue about their own and others' cultural and social group identities, they increase self-awareness and improve their interaction with others. These skills prove effective in building emotional intelligence linked to outstanding leadership performance in organizations (Goleman, 2004).

As a Black woman executive, I spent years masking and avoiding looking at my deepest emotions. I carried my deep wounded race and gender stories everywhere. No one noticed or cared. In fact, I regularly received compliments from my white male peers and superiors of my dispassionate way of handling people. The mask I wore was affirmed and validated by the dominant white, heterosexual, and male business culture. In reality, I left the better part of my intelligence in a bedroom closet.

A year after that three-day workshop, the business group I led partnered with Elsie Y. Cross and Associates to create a ten-month diversity training and consulting program for developing internal consultants. As part of that training program, we held many dialogues and did a lot of journaling. I took my writing to a deeper level. For me, this marked the beginning of an intense reflective writing process where I learned to make meaning out of my experience through journaling, poem making, and visioning work. Through my self-directed

process, I moved beyond capturing the stories in my head and dove down into my gut that held my narrative. Telling my truth on the page resulted in a significant personal transformation that brought me closer to my authenticity and strengthened my leadership skills. I unpacked my stories of race, gender, and sexual orientation and discovered my identity groups, both subordinated and dominant roles. Writing about my struggles, feelings, and taking risks when relating across differences helped me build relationships across diversity, power, and authority. I was building my emotional intelligence muscles.

Daniel Goleman, who brought the term “emotional intelligence” into the business world, states “In a 1996 study of a global food and beverage company, where senior managers had a certain critical mass of emotional intelligence, their divisions outperformed yearly earnings goals by 20%. Division leaders without that critical mass underperformed by almost the same amount” (Goleman, 2004). Many business leaders welcomed the idea, and looked for ways to develop these skills with their top executives.

Goleman explains there are five determinants for emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation are considered self-management skills, while empathy and social skills are considered abilities to relate to others

(2004). These so-called intangible skills are now recognized as key differentiating competencies for effective leaders and their ability to drive organizational performance. So how does one begin to nurture these skills?

I discovered that writing reflectively and imaginatively helped me deal with emotional distress, doubts, and ideas for personal change. Working with my narratives became a tool that transformed my life and career. I replicated my success with my writing approach when coaching executives. I call this work, *transformative narratives*. Transformative narratives 1) emerge from real and imagined visual, written, and spoken *stories*, that 2) become material to use for self-awareness, insight, and visioning, and 3) crystallize into deliberate actions for change (Hyater-Adams, 2009). The transformative narrative process can be used in many ways to facilitate growth and development. It offers a practical method that builds emotional intelligence capabilities and facilitates diversity awareness.

The transformative narrative process is interdisciplinary, and connected to fields of study from creative writing methods (Goldberg, 1996), (Schneider, 1993), (Perl and Schwartz, 2006); humanistic and narrative psychology (Rogers, 1961), (White & Epston, 1990); visual and written forms of the creative expressive arts (Rogers, 1993),

(McNiff, 1981), (Adams, 1990); adult learning (Kolb, 2001); scenario planning (Wack, 1985); group development (Tuckman, 2001) (Braford, Gibb, Benne, 1964); Buddhist and Mindfulness philosophy, (Nhat Hanh, 1998, ), (Kramer, 2007) and theories of systems change (Schein, 2004), (Senge, 1990). Transformative narratives offer a unique blend of creative expression, reflection, and reasoning, making it versatile for business applications.

The transformative narrative process begins with reading a piece of thought-provoking literature where we explore what resonates with us from the reading. The process can be one-on-one with a coach, or with a group. We react, reflect, and reveal our own experiences through truthful writing. Next, we read aloud what we wrote (if we choose) with another individual or small group of people (if working in a team or coaching circle). We listen deeply to what each person wrote. Listeners then respond by giving back words or phrases of what they remembered or what lingered with them, without paraphrasing or interpreting meaning. The next step is in moving to facilitated dialogue where heartfelt speaking and deep listening is practiced. We conclude with a period of writing where we can reflect and capture key questions and learnings from our experience. When trust emerges among

colleagues, sharing questions and learnings is encouraged. This approach has proven to open hearts, expand points of views, and provide a container for social justice conversations.

Organizations are microcosms of society. Injustices and the need for fairness exist in business communities--and issues of social justice have taken on many shapes. From union organizing, fair trade, and issues facing migrant works, companies, for profit and nonprofit organizations, all have had to deal with social change work within their businesses. Engaging diversity, specifically racism, sexism, and heterosexism, are areas of social justice where I've worked to facilitate change in for profit, nonprofit, and educational institutions.

How I define social justice is as *valuing human rights and systems working together in an evenhanded way for all people*. As it relates to diversity, in my mind the ultimate goal is to live in a pluralistic society, where anyone can honor their unique cultural, racial, and other social identities that matter, while being welcomed and accepted into the larger community. Our differences are explored publicly, and together we engage in the grappling with and making meaning out of our differing experiences, increasing our understanding while staying in relationship. It's not a perfect utopia where we all "drink the juice"

and are happy minded. We are allowed to be individuals, to move freely within our social identity groups, and to be in community across social identities in peaceful and loving ways.

Another view of social justice is to the ability of all people having access to the “common good.” This is to examine “who is and who is not allowed to enjoy society’s benefits,” particularly by social identity group membership, i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, etc. (Buhl, 2008). In the United States, whites, men, and heterosexual people have historically been included and rewarded by having greater access to what is the common good; people of color, women, lesbians/gays/bisexual and transgendered people have not (Buhl, 2008).

If leaders of organizations want to truly create a diverse and inclusive internal society, they must first look at organizational social power and economic structures, that is, the fundamental philosophy, practices, and policies of how the business operates day to day, who’s running and leading the day to day operation by social identity groups, who is being promoted, developed, and recruited, and who is not, by social identity group. The internal social just work is to eradicate injustices and disparities affecting people and processes. This is a tall order for most leaders. It doesn’t have to be. Change starts with each individual.

Because the work of transformative narratives facilitates awareness, insight, and healing, it is ideal for individuals desiring to take charge of their own diversity learning. One way to start this learning is in sharing stories among and between people. It is not uncommon to see story sharing components in diversity training programs (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2007). According Lee Anne Bell’s research and work with the *Storytelling Project Model*, she writes, “While talk in and of itself can’t dismantle racism, a critical analysis of how we talk about racism as a society and as members of differently positioned racial groups, provides a way for us to see ourselves and others more clearly, understand the racial system we have inherited, recognize the different roles played by Blacks, Whites and other racial groups in this history and come to grips with the urgent work still to be done to dismantle racism and live up to the promises of equality in our national rhetoric and governing documents (Bell, 2010).” Her work in helping K-12 teachers use narratives (storytelling) and art (collage) as a way to learn about racism, is an example of ways social justice work can be facilitated through creativity and dialogue.

At the individual level, stories bring meaning to our experience and harmony to our thoughts and feelings. Stories also bring to life what is hard to speak aloud. I use literature, specifically poems, to

introduce a story where listeners can react. For example, a thought-provoking piece of literature might be responding to Lucille Clifton's poem, "Won't You Celebrate with Me." When using this poem coaching a group of Black women executives, it raised conflicting emotions of experiences in corporate America. Clifton (1993) begins the poem:

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
(p. 25)

The Black and African American women executives talked about the challenge in trying to "be something other than themselves." Stories were written and shared about ways these black women were encouraged to assimilate into the behaviors and actions of their white male counterparts. They felt as though not doing so was career limiting.

I remember participating in a creative writing group mixed by race and gender, where I wrote about the agony of racist and sexist practices endured at the early stages in own career and how I still faced some of these practices as an executive. I wrote about how well-meaning whites and men advised me on ways I "should" act to fit in,

and like the black women executives expressed, the advice given did not resemble who I was. Whites and men in my writing group found my experience difficult to understand, making statements like, "everybody has to learn to fit in an organization." While some assimilation is expected joining in any established culture is true, what happens when one is expected to behave in ways that takes her or him out of their fundamental identity?

Outside of my writing group, I privately applied my emerging transformative narrative method to my situation. I used Clifton's "Won't You Celebrate with Me," poem by reading it aloud, writing about my own experience in connection to the poem, and then reading aloud my own work. The process was both healing and transforming. I shared my writing with a few trusted friends. Their sharing what they heard and how my words touched them gave me the courage to go deeper in my writing. I found my voice. Over a short period of time, I gained the courage to go natural with my hair, wore brighter tailored clothing on my tall and large frame, and shared more of myself with others as a way to build authentic relationships. My career soared as an African American executive. Finding a way to "break my silence" proved to be beneficial to me and my career aspirations.

James W. Pennebaker, Professor and Chair Department of Psychology The

University of Texas in Austin, Texas, has spent more than 25 years researching ways writing heals and transforms people. He speaks to inhibition, the act of consciously restraining true feelings and thoughts as particularly stressful on the body and mind, increasing the probability of immune related illnesses (Pennebaker 1990; 1997). Silenced populations or subordinated social identity group members<sup>31</sup> hold back and suppress true feelings in order to navigate in dominant “mainstream” culture values, norms, and mores. It is by no accident that African American, Latinos, and Asian people have the highest rate of immune related illnesses (Office of Minority Health, May 2010). For communities of color, holding back stories, experiences, and racial realities prove more harm than good.

When learning about diversity and inclusion, I notice how subordinated and silenced populations respond well to a piece of literature that ignites memories and feelings that speak truth to their subgroup’s experience. The literature does the necessary “naming.” When one’s truth is “named”, the sense of being seen and heard is invigorating. There is a space that opens up for individuals to begin his or her

work of self-exploration. Unexamined regions of the mind can be explored through writing for new understanding and meaning.

In diversity learning, many people yearn to connect around where we are similar and avoid going to where we are different. Ignoring where we are different doesn’t stretch our perspective, nor do we see the complexity in our diverse multistoried society. Avoiding “seeing” differences, robs us of our ability to understand and share in another person’s feelings. Use of empathy is one of those critical emotional intelligence skills needed to become an effective leader, especially when bridging across differences (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, Rowe, 2008). The transformative narrative process offers an opportunity to dive into what is different about our lives and through the story sharing process, we can develop empathy for one another’s experiences.

This article will walk through *how* to use the transformative narrative approach with leaders in organizations with a particular emphasis on diversity learning. Along the way, I’ll share specific tools, applications, and weave in theories, along with my personal stories.

### **Narrative and Stories**

I’m often asked what’s the difference between narratives and stories. There are many thoughts and definitions from

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<sup>31</sup> Social identity group members that are not fully included in terms of equal access to power and privilege have less economical, political, social power where dominant group social identity group members inherit unearned advantages that benefit them economically, politically, and socially (Johnson, 2001, 06; Daniel Tatum, 1997; Baker Miller, 1987).

narratologists, narrative psychologists, and social scientists. The definition we'll work with that resonates with me is from Marsha Rossiter, where her writing and research centers on narrative application in adult education. She asserts, "...narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making. The events and actions of one's life are understood and experienced as fitting into narrative episodes or stories" (Rossiter, 2002, para 2). Given this perspective, narrative is the "house" or structure to how we make sense out of things, while the "rooms" in the house are stories that live in the narrative.

When stories involving ethnic, race, gender, and sexual orientation that are told from both the subordinated and dominant social identity group lens, narrative takes on a greater context and complexity. Writing and sharing these stories becomes a process of social interaction and a shared experience between people across race, gender, sexual orientation, and other diversities. It is a process where we become aware of our interconnectedness with others and begin to see the universality of humanity. When an individual shares a personal life story, it becomes part of a larger cultural story. Remembering and writing a narrative is to "re-story" because we re-live it through memory altered over time that has shaped who we are, our journey, and who we are becoming (Kenyon

& Randall, 1997). In using a narrative framework to explore our diversity stories, we go back in time and are able to reflect with greater insight, make meaning out of our experiences, and transform our narrative.

In addition to diversity stories, leadership narratives are growing in the book market, such as memoirs where anyone can read about the personal insights, struggles, and business strategies from people like Jack Welch (Slater 1998) or Carly Fiorino (Fiorino, 2006). In *The Secret Language of Leaders* (2007), Stephen Denning writes about how stories are an effective way for leaders to transfer knowledge and build trust with their employees. When working with corporate executives and their diversity stories, I urge them to write and share them. Several stories speak to adversity, bravery, and lessons learned that strengthened character. Leaders who earnestly grapple with their diversity stories experience "letting their guard down" and exposing a part of themselves making them more vulnerable, therefore, more human, versus machines.

### **The Core of Transformative Narrative Work**

Four core elements that set up transformative narrative work are, 1) **Literature** (e.g. poetry, short fiction, essay, and brief memoir pieces); 2) **Writing** (e.g.



reflective, free writing, and creative writing); 3) **Listening** (e.g. active, constructivist, and narrative listening), and 4) **Dialogue** (e.g. intentional structured conversation flows such as *Insight Dialogue* and *Dialogue With Difference*). Each element is an intervention strategy that fosters self-awareness, empathy, and social skill, all competencies associated with building emotional intelligence.

When used in diversity learning, literature plays a driving role in framing the topic for writing and dialogue. I usually choose literature directed toward revealing individuality, exploring areas such as who am I and where am I from. Other writings include stories and poems having to do with life experiences from people in subordinated and dominant social identity groups, or literature that expresses ideal states of harmony across differences. There is an intentional process in selecting the right pieces of literature to use; a thoughtful approach to forming the right questions for writing; creating a supportive container for participants to listen deeply; and a process for insightful dialogue.

Organizations have narrative structures that contain lots of stories. There is a dominant organization story which can be classified as the culture in an organization. At the same time, there are silenced stories among marginalized groups of people and business groups that have an

experience of being impacted negatively and do not share the feeling of espoused values or dominant stories leaders share. For example, when working with organizational stories as part of the data collection stage, leadership interviews and material reviews, dominant stories emerge. Through anonymous employee surveys and facilitated focus group sessions led by external consultants, stories that run counter to what top leaders claim to be true emerge. A common dynamic is how revenue producing business groups drive the cultural norms, feeling included and valued in the company, while staff groups feel stifled and silenced. Another common dynamic is when top executives profess having a diverse leadership base, while women and people of color are either few in numbers or not represented in the top five or ten percent leadership roles. In many cases, the highest ranking women or person of color may be a first or second level supervisor. Stories of access and inclusion are very different between people of color and whites, and between women and men. Working with the continuum of organizational stories requires a leader to develop a lens to see the pattern and link systemically by social identity groups. Although these skills may appear simple, they require rigorous study and practice by a transformative narrative facilitator-coach who is trained in diversity skills, honoring a

“do no harm” principle. When teaching about diversity, participants deserve a skilled practitioner to support their self-discovery and awareness process.

**Applying Transformative Narratives with Leaders**

In this section, I discuss the four core elements, literature, writing, listening, and dialogue, and use literary examples to show how it might apply in leadership diversity workshops.

**Literature**

Selecting literary material is not based on picking personal favorite poems (although after sifting through many poems, you might become attached to a few!) I

draw on my expertise in working from a biblio/poetry therapy framework. Biblio/Poetry therapy pioneers Arlene Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry authored *Biblio/Poetry Therapy: The Interactive Process: A Handbook*, which shares a detailed view on selecting literary material when working with individuals or groups in both therapeutic and personal development settings. Looking for good material that help spark thoughts and feelings, and facilitates meaningful discussion, typically breaks down into two categories--thematic and stylistic. In Table 1-1, the two categories, thematic and stylistic dimensions are shown along with four dimensions:

**Table 1-1**  
*Hynes & Hynes-Berry Literary Material Selection*

Thematic Dimensions	Stylistic Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal experience or emotion</li> <li>• Powerful</li> <li>• Comprehensible</li> <li>• Positive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compelling rhythm (sing/song, syncopated)</li> <li>• Imagery (striking, concrete)</li> <li>• Language (simple, clear)</li> <li>• Complexity (length of piece)</li> </ul>

Thematic dimension has the priority over stylistic dimension (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). For example, I use Mary Oliver’s

“The Journey” poem as entry for coaching or leadership work when knowing that the individual or leadership team will embark on

a long tough change process. Oliver (1986) opens the poem,

One day you finally knew  
 what you finally had to do, and began,  
 though the voices around you  
 kept shouting  
 their bad advice—  
 though the whole house  
 began to tremble  
 and you felt the old tug  
 at your ankles.  
 “Mend my life!”

each voice cried.  
 But you didn’t stop.  
 You knew what you had to do,  
 though the wind pried  
 with its stiff fingers  
 at the very foundations,  
 though their melancholy  
 was terrible (p. 38).

The rest of the poem continues with short clear lines and vivid imagery. It meets several of the Hynes and Hynes-Berry criteria:

Thematic Dimensions	Stylistic Dimensions
1) Universal experience or emotion 2) Powerful	1) Imagery (striking, concrete) 2) Language (simple, clear)

When working with leaders in organizations, they seem to have the largest reaction to the opening line,

One day you finally knew  
 what you finally had to do, and began,

The line exposes feelings of a defining moment when the realization that a tough transformation lies ahead, requiring a long-term commitment to change. Its power is in acknowledging the awareness of *having* to change and in *taking* the first step.

Because of the poem’s simplicity of language and imagery, it encompasses more universal feelings that people across race, ethnicity, and gender can relate to personally and in work situations. In a workshop setting, asking leaders to draw on their stories in work and in life that link to the poem’s message, and then sharing with colleagues, sets a tone for seeing each person as an individual with personal histories. This is an initial stage of building connections around common experiences.

As the workshop or coaching sessions move along, the group development

sequence (Tuckman, 2001, p. 66), literature selection coincides with the group's maturation. Keeping an eye out for the "right" pieces of literature, and then categorizing according to the Hynes and Hynes-Berry dimensions and along the group development stages, requires a trained eye.

### Writing

At the beginning of this article, I shared a piece of reflective writing from an old journal speaking to my experience on the first day of a diversity workshop as a participant. The opening may have raised questions for readers, or perhaps others could relate to the experience. *Reflective writing* is a focused act of self-inquiry to process one's experience on a blank page. Reflective theorist Christopher Johns offers a definition of being reflective as, "either within or after experience, as if a window through which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand, and move toward resolving contradiction between one's vision and actual practice" (Johns, 2006, p. 3). Coming to know one's narrative structure and writing one's story, is in itself a transformative process. The writing reveals hidden patterns and helps make meaning out of experiences.

In the case of leaders learning about

diversity, making overt one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions in writing, especially when responding to a piece of literature, is an important step toward engaging the feeling domain for self-regulation in emotional intelligence. Sharing what was written with others, particularly in a diversity workshop, coaching, or even classroom situation, is an act of disclosure, another important step toward connecting with others, as required in developing emotional intelligence. This is an initial stage for building connections around common experiences.

In a cultural diversity course I teach at the University of Phoenix, I ask students to read and respond to some reflective questions when they write their reaction to the poem, "Discrimination," by Kenneth Rexroth. The beginning of Rexroth (1966) poem goes:

I don't mind the human race.  
I've got pretty used to them  
In these past twenty-five years.  
I don't mind if they sit next  
To me on streetcars, or eat  
In the same restaurants, if  
It's not at the same table. (p. 210)

Students' reactions mirror comments I typically receive in diversity leadership workshops when using this poem. One

student, a white man, wrote:

What stands out to me in the poem, "Discrimination" by Kenneth Rexroth is that the reader gets a glimpse of what it is like to be discriminated against no matter what their race or ethnicity because the author uses the term "human race." The author takes a lot of the discrimination and stereotypes faced by African-Americans and applies it to all people. I think this poem is trying to tell the reader how unreasonable discrimination really is. No one would think these things about humans in general but people do think these things about different races and ethnicity (student post, November 2009).

In this case, the entire class read what they wrote and a lively dialogue took place that revealed the differing perspectives across their multiple dominant and subordinated group identities. My experience while training diversity leadership workshops is similar except for one critical factor. In the workplace, leaders remain in relationship with team members or direct reports beyond a semester. The stakes are higher and memory among colleagues can foster long stories. When

inviting participants to write, I always give them the option to read aloud or pass. This is critical for maintaining a safe and supportive diversity-learning environment. I encourage leaders to write truthfully because the process is transformative. I praise those who take the risk to read aloud what they wrote. It offers a deeper awareness and reveals a more private self in the hopes of developing authentic relationships with colleagues. Positive encouragement typically frees leaders to read what they wrote.

Freewriting is a different form of writing I've used with leaders to explore the unconscious realm as they learn about diversity. According to writing process teacher Peter Elbow (1998), "Freewriting helps you learn to just say it" (p. 15). Freewriting is known to access unconscious feelings by starting with emptying mental ramblings onto a blank page. This stream-of-consciousness writing, usually timed, can reveal thoughts, worries, or insights in the moment. Elbow (1998) further states "If your feelings often keep you from functioning well in other areas of your life frequent freewriting can help: not only by providing a good arena for those feelings but also by helping you understand them better and see them in perspective by seeing them on paper" (p. 15). The ability to step outside of yourself is critical for diversity learning. Freewriting can help

achieve that effort.

No doubt freewriting can be a tool that helps build emotional intelligence's self-regulation and empathy. Because so much of our deeply held assumptions about privilege, bias, and prejudice are largely unconscious, freewriting can get underneath some of those triggers or hot buttons. For example, if through my freewriting exercises, I noticed a pattern that my stories centered around my own subordinated social identity groups (African American woman), and I never looked at my privilege as heterosexual and upper middle class, I'd miss a significant piece of learning concerned with the privilege and oppression that I carry. My awareness would only be at the subordinated level. Given that I've held executive level positions and currently own a company, as a leader with positional power, I risk losing understanding the impact I have on others when exercising my dominant group power. Leaders learning about diversity want to know their full continuum of power, privilege, and access.

In the text *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, the authors state, "...[there is a] disequilibrium people experience as they begin to see the reality and pervasiveness of social oppression. Confrontation with the effects of oppression invariably calls into question deeply held assumptions about the social world and can literally throw participants off balance" (Adams, Bell,

Griffin, 2007). I remember being confronted with my own awareness of positional power through stories from my staff of men and women, whites and people of color. They presented a few situations where my access and positional privilege transcended my race and gender oppression. I was able to see the complexity of the dominant and subordinated dynamic at play all the time. The stories from my staff helped me bring in a new consciousness. Freewriting can accomplish something similar. Choosing freewriting works best when adequate group safety is established, and they're ready to go deeper.

### Listening

When I wish to set the tone for listening with leaders in a workshop, I open with a poem by John Fox, international leader in poetry therapy (Intrator and Scribner, 2007), "When Someone Deeply Listens To You." It begins as:

When someone deeply listens to you  
it is like holding out a dented cup  
you've had since childhood  
and watching it fill up with  
cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim,  
you are understood.

When it overflows and touches your  
skin,  
you are loved. (Loc. 1869-71)

This poem goes on for three more stanzas with greater imagery on what the affects of being heard elicit in the teller. I've found that this poem resonates with leaders. In the workplace, many leaders are familiar with active listening as a skill to strengthen communication between employees and customers. Even though it has proven effective for mutual understanding, some active listening models are interpretive and even sometimes evaluative, as part of the listener's meaning making process. Active listening is an important skill for leaders. What I've come to know is that only one way of listening may not be appropriate for every situation. Listening to narratives requires being tuned in differently.

Another type of listening that influenced my work is called *constructivist listening*, developed by Math Professor and Education Change Advocate, Julian Weissglass. According to Weissglass (1990), "The constructivist listener aims to enable the talker to express feelings, construct personal understandings, and use his or her full intelligence to respond creatively to situations rather than rely on habit or rigid strategies" (p. 356). The "talker" is empowered to guide the conversation. The "listener's" role is not to gain his/her own understanding, but to create a safe container for the "talker" to feel heard without interpreting, reframing, or evaluating what is being said. The

"listener's" role is to be caring, accepting, and learning what questions are helpful to encourage the "talker" to go deeper in expressing his or her feelings (Weissglass, 1990). The key to constructivist listening is that the listener is holding a nonjudgmental container for the talker to speak with as much depth as possible.

This form of listening is most effective when there is a power difference (e.g. position, social, economic) between the talker and listener. In the case of power differences in diversity, the dominant social identity group member starts as the listener. The subordinated social identity group member starts as the talker. This model has been used successfully by shifting the power of listening to those individuals whose voices have been typically silenced or invisible in systems.

Shifting how we typically communicate is a powerful intervention in itself. A leader's willingness to break the power dynamic in conversations, invites others to share more deeply, and can build trust and alliance more quickly.

The creative writing arena provides listening and responding associated with workshopping, a process for providing a writer with feedback on a manuscript. Writers read what was freshly written, and peers listen and only comment on what they heard in the writing, what they liked, and where they felt lost or had questions (Perl &

Schwartz, 2005). Another listening and responding method, developed by Pat Schneider in partnership with a group of low-income women writers in Chicopee, MA, offers a slight variation from the traditional workshopping method. The process is called the Amherst Writer's and Artist's Method (AWA). Writers read new work and the peer group responds to what is strong, what stays with them, and what they remember. There is no critical feedback in the moment, questions, or clarifications. I've always liked this method of workshopping better because it supports positive improvement ideologies like Appreciate Inquiry (AI). In AI, the focus is on positive change, building on what is working well, thriving, and effective (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Receiving affirmative feedback that asks individuals to build on what is working and strong gives a concrete image from which to improve.

The type of listening I've introduced when working with leaders learning about diversity through transformative narratives I coined as *narrative listening*. It is a combination between some of what constructivist listening offers, along with the listening and responding approach from the AWA method. It also separates the person from the problem story as with narrative therapy (Morgan 2000).

In narrative listening, listeners reflect back to the storyteller and what they heard

in the writing. Leaders are coached to not interpret the words or put their own story into another's work. Unlike some active listening techniques, there is no clarifying or reframing to make meaning to satisfy the listener's curiosity in the moment. At this stage, the objective is to have the storyteller/writer be in command of his or her story. We want the storyteller to feel that the listener heard what was said.

To work this into diversity workshops, I prompt leaders to write a story about their first race experience that aroused some feelings inside of them. In listening to leader's stories, I refer to the core of the story, and avoid using "you said, you did, etc." as I reflected back what I heard. For example, a response I would make after hearing a story might be, "What stays with me is how the grandmother in the story teaches the child how to make fun of the Chinese neighbor's accent." Avoiding the use of "Your grandmother did..." takes the sting out of any shame or judgment the storyteller may feel inside, at the same time being supported while risking to write and read the story aloud.

When leaders share their diversity stories with each other, narrative listening offers a powerful way to hear, acknowledge, and affirm each person's experience. By focusing on listening, the group's energy slows down for reflecting and taking in new learning.



## Dialogue

Transformative narrative work used as an approach for leaders learning about diversity begins with responding to literary prompts, then moving to writing and listening to what was written. Having a conversation about the entire experience is reserved for the dialogue stage.

Characteristics of an effective diversity dialogue group are:

- Participants practice dialogue as opposed to debate (point/counterpoint)
- Individuals in the group commit to ongoing conversations (over several days in a row or specific time blocks, i.e., two hours a week for a year)
- Participants become conscious of their individual, social identity group membership(s), and organizational systems level frame of reference, and how they are unfolding meaning as they engage in the diversity learning process.

Questions are explored and assumptions checked in dialogue. When facilitating diversity learning groups, I often pose questions that require leaders to notice similarities and differences among the various stories shared. I guide participants to explore stories and their curiosities at the individual, social identity group, and system levels. Leaders are encouraged to notice the patterns of experience by social identity groups. The ability to see an individual's story, and at the

same time notice the pattern of experience by social identity groups, allows leaders to see through different lenses or perspectives. Leaders are able to recognize the multiple stories people carry through personal and social identity. For example, if I noticed that half of my leadership team wrote stories about growing up in low income or poor households, that might give me some insight into past times where I judged them as being "irrational" when splitting a dinner tab, or being extremely anxious when increases or bonuses were delayed. Understanding personal histories and social identity group behaviors, particularly subordinated social identity group members in my low-income example, becomes a critical skill to develop in diversity learning. Knowing the social construct helps me understand, rather than judge, and awareness allows me to respond differently.

There are a couple of dialogue models that I've found to be useful in exploring diversity. *Dialogue With Difference* developed by Delyte D. Frost, PhD, consultant and author, and *Insight Dialogue*, by Gregory Kramer, Buddhist practitioner and author. Both result in participants feeling heard, and important information shared.

Frost's work in developing the model, *Dialogue With Differences* (1984, 1996), aims to liberate the voices of

marginalized, silenced, subordinated group member voices. In her model, the subordinated group member begins the conversation (teller) with the dominant group member being a fully engaged and curious listener (seeker). Frost (1984, 1996) states, "The steps in the Dialogue with Difference model are a differentiation/integration process. To bring people who are different together and allow them to work effectively together, the steps of differentiation and integration must not be ignored. Before similarities and points of agreement can be seen with difference, it is essential to first fully explore and know the separate and unknown aspects of the other (p. 3)." The dialogue focuses on exploring where the teller, then seeker are different first, before moving into where the pair may be similar.

Another useful dialogue process comes from the work of *Insight Dialogue* developed by Gregory Kramer (2007). The six step process allows for conversations to slow down, and for each voice to contribute authentically. This approach is a structured mindful dialogue practice based on Buddhist traditions, and has quickly taken on uses in other forums. In brief, the steps are:

- **Pause** - *slow down*
- **Relax and Release** - *let go of attachment to views, and bring ease into mind and body*
- **Openness** - *move out of habitual patterns,*

*embrace multiple realities*

- **Trust Emergence** - *call in courage, end doubt, be with the moment*
- **Listen Deeply** - *be genuine with curiosity, be receptive, connect to heart*
- **Speak the Truth** - *ethical and kind speech*

What I like most about this approach to dialogue is the recognition of body and mind sensations as listeners and speakers engage each other. Also helpful is letting go of attachments to ideas and views as a way of opening up mindsets to let in a different reality other than one's own. Insight Dialogue supports being courageous in the moment--to be unafraid to say your truth in the here and now. I slow down my own speech, pause and make deliberate choices with my language and gestures when facilitating using Insight Dialogue. I also role model being vulnerable by personally acknowledging my own struggles of letting go of existing views in the moment of dialogue. Establishing a safe space for conversation is crucial for the success of any type of dialogue approach.

Using Insight Dialogue and Dialogue with Difference for diversity conversation are ideal. Conversations about race or sexual orientation can raise tempers and increase the intensity of dialogue pretty quickly. Subordinated group identity members often feel silenced in diversity conversations. As a facilitator, there is a need to create space for subordinated

identity group members to be heard. Privileged or dominant social identity group members typically want to defend their view at the individual level when the conversation is geared toward social identity group level experiences. According to Gregory Kramer,

I have seen how wholesome this process can be when it unfolds in intentional communities. We can also fundamentally transform our views of other people and cultures by way of multicultural dialogue that, powered by meditative awareness and concentration, slices through the fog of social assumptions. Such individual transformation will have an impact on social structures over time. As we evolve, so does our society and does our world--gradually (2007 p. 261).

Insight Dialogue slows the pace of conversations. Participants are encouraged to release outmoded beliefs and attachment to viewpoints. Many beliefs and views about diversity have been largely derived from powerful social constructs such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and other

categories of diversity. When we recognize how people give power to these social constructs, releasing attachment to these ideas open new possibilities for exploration and diversity learning.

### **Limitations of Transformative Narratives**

The interdisciplinary nature of transformative narratives leave a few possible limitations for its use. I've thought about this from the perspective of a facilitator and also as a participant.

Since use of literature plays a large role in the transformative narrative process, some participants may feel intimidated by their own level of literacy and comprehension. In my diversity and leadership work, I notice an increasing number of professionals who are reading disabled (i.e. dyslexia). Since the process of transformative narrative methodology requires reading poetry or other selected literature out loud, the anticipation of reading a line or two in front of peers can leave a participant feeling exposed and vulnerable. To help mitigate this problem, I've used certain support strategies such as having participants sit with the literature for a specific time before reading aloud, or to read aloud in duos or trios, lessening the exposure.

Another barrier I've experienced involves working with literal minded leaders. I've observed some leaders having difficulty

comprehending and transferring meaning from a poem or piece of literature into their own circumstances, or how it may be analogous to what is happening in a work group or system. Resistance shows up quickly as rejecting the process because of the creative and abstract nature of the approach. As a former corporate executive and even now as a consultant to CEOs, I hear a common complaint that centers on the lack of senior level leaders ability to deal with ambiguity, as well as lack innovation and creativity. Harvard Business Review did a series on Breakthrough Ideas in 2004, where Daniel H. Pink wrote how the MFA is the new MBA, listing examples from Fortune 500 companies how “thinking art” is leveraging better goods and services (p. 12). Pink’s point is that most MBA programs have only nurtured the financial acumen of leaders and have not helped graduate students cultivate an innovative culture. In Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s work on creativity, he speaks to ten paradoxes of creative people, giving examples such as needing to be imaginative and fantasizing while also being rooted in reality (1996). Reading literature, writing creatively, and using language to make meaning out of experience, is both a right brain and left brain activity. How might the transformative narrative process ignite creativity, deal with what is unknown, and help people generate new ideas and new things? Is this method

a concrete tool that could help facilitate innovation? I’d be curious to further explore these ideas.

The fear of writing is a hurdle in this work. If some participants become overwhelmed with the notion that they will have to write, and then read what they wrote, there is a likelihood that people will freeze and shut down. Creating a safe container for writing and sharing requires establishing clear boundaries. Participants need guidelines on how to respond to each others’ written work. Before anyone shares a piece of writing, I remind participants of the norms to responding what is spoken.

For participants who are find it difficult to write down anything, I’ve developed strategies that help ease participants into writing more “prosy.” I first ask them to list key words or phrases that tell their story. Then I ask them to show me through words, what happens next. With the right facilitator training, there are ways to help people feel safe and move beyond the fear of writing.

In the spirit of *do no harm*, it is important to have skilled facilitators leading this work. Foundational knowledge includes having behavioral science, social science, or psychology framework at a minimum, along with training in cultural diversity. Many times, deep wounds concerning cultural identity experiences occur in people’s stories. Having the skills to facilitate through

that process is critical for the individual telling the story and for the participants listening. If not handled well by the facilitator, it could create a feeling of not being safe in the learning community. The result is that workshops may then lack stories with depth and texture. For this reason, I established a set of competencies that facilitators need in order to lead transformative narrative work. There is also a development program designed to support building these skills. I look to further test these competencies and development programs over time, so I am open to new suggestions on how transformative narratives can be used in diversity learning and leadership development.

In terms of future possibilities with transformative narratives, I'm choosing to follow the lead of poet Rita Dove in her poem, "Dawn Revisited" (2000),

....The whole sky is yours  
to write on, blown open  
to a blank page. Come on,  
shake a leg! You'll never know  
who's down there, frying those eggs,  
if you don't get up and see. (p. 36)

Questions I ponder as a way to "get up and see" are how might transformative narratives be used virtually through social network sources, asynchronous or synchronous discussion boards, or in virtual worlds? How might we engage the

storymaking and sharing with others through text messaging, smart phones, Skype, iPods, or iPads? There are limitless possibilities for exploration in deepening transformative narratives in diversity work.

### Conclusion

When combining literature, writing, listening, and dialogue as a way of learning about diversity and developing leadership skills, I've experienced positive results when working with women and men across race and sexual orientation, to increase self-awareness and concrete ways of applying newly learned skills that facilitate personal change.

I began a process of personal writing while a corporate executive over 18 years ago as a way to express my "un-dealt" with feelings in a diversity workshop. I initially hated the process and resisted the notion that it would be helpful. As I forced myself to write, revealed were the contradictions between my true feelings, desires, choices, and actions. I came to see that I had two conversations operating within me—one that arose out of duty and responsibility and the other that was my personal truth. The disconnections were quite disturbing for me (Hyater-Adams, 2003).

My writing evolved into a way of developing my leadership and diversity competencies. Today, my writing process is being used with clients for business

planning, leadership development, executive coaching, diversity learning, and personal growth work. When I imagined bringing together reading and writing poetry with leaders learning about diversity, I never thought that the experience would be so moving, memorable, and cross functional. I knew what it meant for me. I just didn't consider that others would also be as moved.

Transformative narratives support people in claiming their power through relating to others' words, as well as writing and telling one's own story. We are a storied people. We make meaning out of our experiences through narratives. I welcome the use of poetry and other forms of short literature to help teach, inform, and bring awareness to our own and others' experiences. In my mind, using transformative narratives is one small way we can enhance our humanity.

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