

Cultivating *Una Persona Educada*: A *Sentipensante* (Sensing/Thinking) Vision of Education

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the need to educate the new *persona educada*, a dignified, honorable person with a good measure of social and personal responsibility who also possesses the habits of the mind and heart. To cultivate *una persona educada* requires a newly formed vision of education and pedagogy. Examples of three entrenched agreements that have become part of higher education's harmful hegemonic structures are discussed. Finally, the elements of creating a sensing/thinking pedagogy, which unites the *sentir* of intuition and the inner life and the *pensar* of intellectual development and the outer life, are presented.

In his marvelous book *How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*, Wayne Muller (1996), founder of Bread for the Journey, a nonprofit charity that serves the poor and underprivileged, offers four simple, evocative questions that help frame the true purpose and meaning of our lives:

Who am I?
What do I love?
How shall I live, knowing I will die?
What is my gift to the family of the earth? (p. xii)

These tender yet profound questions allow for an inward meditative analysis of our character, the things we hold most dear, our commitment to personal and social responsibility, and how we desire to live our lives. Our greatest and most unique gift in this world is ourselves, and our daily lives offer us a multitude of complex challenges that await our keen intellect as well as our wisdom, compassion, and generosity.

The Best and Worst of Times

As I reflect on these questions, I recall English novelist Charles Dickens, who in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859/2008) articulated a paradoxical world order, albeit in the mid-1800s:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,

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we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. (p. 1)

Dickens's words are an excellent example of the concept of "oppositional complementarity," the nature of life that at once holds two opposing, distinct ways of being that represent the paradoxical nature of the universe. Today, this paradoxical life context continues to permeate our lives. Over the past 10 years we have been dealing with complex social issues such as poverty, climate change, war, hunger, terrorism, drug wars, egregious human rights abuses, disease, economic instability, and natural disasters, to name a few. It is the best and worst of times. At a time that most of the Western world operates with financial abundance, the Third World struggles to survive. While some scientists are convinced our planet is in danger due to climate change, others denounce global warming as a great hoax. When the World Trade Center towers collapsed and darkened our nation, some reported that the next day a flock of white doves emerged from the ashes and rubble. In the midst of the chaos in Egypt as ordinary people fought to bring freedom and democracy to their country, a beautiful rainbow appeared in the sky. Hope and light can coexist with despair and darkness. When our economic system was collapsing in 2008, it appeared we had nothing before us, that we had lost most if not all our financial assets. And yet many of us hung on to the hope that this too would pass, that change and better times were ahead of us. And indeed our nation elected a young, vibrant, new president who embodied the notion that hope was alive. "Yes, we can" became the anthem of a generation caught between the worst and best of times.

Una Persona Educada

Our future requires a newly-fashioned vision of education and a new kind of leader who can function within a complex world order imbued with oppositional complementarity—with the contradictions, uncertainties, messiness, and complications of our lives. In my culture, there is a concept that can serve as a basis to describe such a new leader: *personas educadas*. *Una persona educada* transcends social stature. Whether rich or poor, *una persona educada* is a dignified, honorable person who is held in high regard.

This person is a sage in the community—wise, experienced, respectful, friendly, controlled, considerate of others, personally and socially responsible, and open to diverse perspectives. We need to educate a new breed of *personas educadas*—well educated, thoughtful individuals possessing a good measure of internal and external equity. These individuals are intelligent in a broad sense of the word. They are book smart, yet reflective and discerning; good critical thinkers and problem solvers, yet intuitive and perceptive; good decision makers who can act swiftly when necessary, yet keenly aware of taking risks that carry unforeseen consequences. These *personas educadas* possess habits of the mind and heart. They embrace reasoned thinking as well as emotional intelligence and diverse ways of knowing. They know when to act slowly as well as spontaneously. They are deeply perceptive and judicious in their actions, respect all forms of life, and are concerned about matters of equity and social justice.

Previously, I served on the National Advisory Board of the John Templeton Foundation–supported Core Commitments Initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The project focused on five major dimensions of personal and social responsibility and those aspects of campus culture that might positively or negatively affect the development of these key dimensions of identity. These included the following:

- developing a strong work ethic,
- recognizing and acting on a sense of academic integrity,

- recognizing and acting on the responsibility to contribute to the larger community,
- recognizing and acting on the obligation to take seriously the perspectives of others, and
- developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning.

These fundamental traits that constitute the character of a *persona educada* need to be made a reality in today's college classrooms.

In this essay, I will focus on two questions:

1. What newly constructed belief system is appropriate to design a vision of education that would cultivate *una persona educada*?
2. What kind of pedagogy would elicit the habits of the mind and heart—in short, the broad inner and outer knowledge, skills, and competencies students need to have to solve complex world problems and build a vibrant democracy and civil society?

Toward a Newly Designed Vision of Education

In his book *The New Agreements* (1997), Don Miguel Ruiz offers a provocative view of life:

If we can see it is our agreements which rule our life, and we don't like the dream of our life, we need to change the agreements. (p. 22)

Ruiz is offering a spiritual dream or vision of life, which is predicated on what he calls agreements. The agreements represent societal rules, beliefs, and laws that govern our lives. Our lives are predicated on the extent we are in or out of line with these agreements. Some of these agreements are flawed and need to be exposed and replaced with new beliefs. In education there are both unspoken (covert) and spoken (overt) agreements. Covert agreements can be more powerful and destructive than overt belief systems. For example, there is a covert belief held in mass consciousness (though not by all individuals) that the scholarship of women and people of color is at best mediocre and that White men are most adept in fields of study such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. There is the agreement that academic leaders should not be challenged even when they are wrong. There is the agreement that academic affairs should be kept at a distance from student affairs. Yet another agreement is that educators should be concerned solely with developing the mind (reasoning, problem solving, critical thinking) and that other ways of knowing (emotional intelligence) are “touchy-feely” and unworthy of attention. The more educators hold these beliefs in mass consciousness, the more dominant and entrenched they become. It takes a great deal of courage to challenge these agreements because there are rewards and punishments associated with adhering to the agreements or going against them.

This belief system is no less than the consensually practiced hegemonic structure that validates and perpetuates the status quo. To transform these hegemonic structures, we need a vision of education focused not on mediocrity, but on excellence; not on unprincipled engagement, but on personal and academic integrity; not on self-interests, but on responsibility to the collective whole; not on self-aggrandizement, but on taking seriously the diverse perspectives of others; not devoid of meaning and purpose, but concerned about fostering moral and ethical reasoning. To shatter hegemonic structures we need to break out of the trance-like collective state that allows harmful subtractive belief systems to survive and thrive.

Like Ruiz (1997) I believe that a group of people can begin to hold an opposing belief system to develop a new set of agreements to shape a transformational change. A small but critical mass of individuals can create what Gladwell (2000) calls a “tipping point,” a boiling point when an idea, trend, or social behavior, like an epidemic, bursts into society and spreads like wildfire.

In this section I briefly expose three dominant agreements in need of transformation in higher education. For each dominant agreement I offer an example of a new agreement that could assist in creating a transformed belief system to help realize a new vision of education. I refer readers who are interested in more detailed information about transforming entrenched belief systems to my book, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* (Rendón, 2009).

The Agreement of Monoculturalism

Monoculturalism is an example of a very powerful at times covert and at other times overt belief present in varying degrees in many academic departments and has been documented by numerous scholars (Arredondo, Hurtado, Klahn, Najera-Ramirez, & Zavella, 2003; Collins, 2000; Harding, 2008; Hurtado, 1996; Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The vision of monoculturalism is characterized by the following:

- Almost exclusive validation of Western structures of knowledge (i.e., focus on individual achievement and rationality and subjugation of knowledge created by women, indigenous people, and people of color).
- Course offerings that preserve the superiority of Western civilization (e.g., the belief that Western science contains the history of all science and adherence to conceptions of scientific rationality, objectivity, and progress to distinguish the “civilized” from the “primitive”).
- Dominance of faculty and administrators who subscribe to monocultural paradigms.

We need to change the agreement that Western ways of knowing are superior to all other forms of knowledge. What is an example of an agreement that would speak to the notion of broadening and balancing the curriculum to embrace and validate diverse epistemological frameworks?

New Agreement: The agreement of multiculturalism and respect for diverse cultures.

The Agreement to Privilege Intellectual/Rational Knowing

This rather overt agreement privileges mental knowing and puts on a pedestal what Howard Gardner (1993) calls linguistic and logical-mathematical forms of intelligence. This agreement

- privileges cerebral abilities such as verbal, scientific, and mathematical abilities and
- prizes and rewards outer knowing (intellectual reasoning, rationality, and objectivity) at the expense of inner knowing (deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition, and emotions).

What is being held in mass consciousness is that the true work of education should focus mainly, if not solely, on developing intellectual abilities. This entrenched belief exists despite growing evidence that there are more than one or two intelligences. For example, Daniel Goleman (1998) identified emotional intelligence (EQ) and its connection to neural systems in the brain. EQ has five elements, including self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships. Goleman advocates that EQ is more important than IQ when it comes to job performance and leadership. Another example is Gardner’s (1993) theory of multiple intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

We need to reframe the agreement that educational achievement and success in life depend solely on linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities. What would be an example of a reframed agreement that is based not on a single approach to learning but on multiple ways of knowing?

New Agreement: *The agreement to work with diverse ways of knowing in the classroom.*

The Agreement of Work Addiction

Somehow, many of us consciously or unconsciously, have bought into the notion that our lives should overwhelmingly be about work, work, and more work. In fact, we have come to the point that we are embarrassed to say we are taking a vacation or enjoying time for rest and replenishment. When we are asked, “How are you?” the collective response mantra seems to be “I am so tired” and “I wish I had more time.” My life and the lives of so many of my peers provide examples of how we privilege outer work and concentrate on keeping ourselves constantly busy with multiple projects, often to the point of burnout, stress, illness, and even death. We need to take time to balance our inner and outer lives. We need a new belief system that associates contemplative practice and personal replenishment with the character of a sage who leads a balanced, highly productive personal and professional life. Focusing solely on outer work does not give us time to be in touch with our own lives or to reflect on the larger questions of life and why we do what we do.

We need to change the agreement that outer work in the form of workaholism and its corollaries of stress, disease, and lack of intimacy is the preferred way to approach our work in higher education.

New Agreement: *The agreement to balance our professional and work lives with rest, introspection, and replenishment.*

These new belief systems are exemplars of what is necessary to redesign a vision of education focused on cultivating *una persona educada*. These new agreements can offer a framework for the creation of a sensing/thinking pedagogy that builds internal and external equity.

Toward a Sensing/Thinking Pedagogy

Earlier, I discussed the notion of a *persona educada*, a broadly educated individual of refined character who incorporates habits of the mind and heart. But what kind of pedagogy would best elicit these habits? I propose a sentipensante (sensing/thinking) classroom (Rendón, 2009). Sentipensante pedagogy represents the union and coexistence of two seemingly opposite concepts: the *sentir* of intuition, introspection, and the inner life and the *pensar* of intellectual development and the outer life of action and service. This pedagogy contains the following elements.

Professor Embraces a Sentipensante Approach

One of the most important people in the classroom is the teacher, for it is this person who not only selects curricular materials and assignments but also sets the tone and learning structure of the classroom. Unfortunately, much of what we find in college classrooms today is an overly competitive environment where the teacher is the sole expert and not invested in getting to know students or in fostering their transformation into *personas educadas*. A new vision of education would include master teacher/learners who connect pedagogy to personal transformation and social

change. Ideally, a professor who embraces a sensing/thinking approach:

- has adopted a contemplative practice of his or her own and is a reflective scholar/practitioner.
- makes efforts to employ a holistic, humanistic approach to teaching and learning, while decentering the Western-based pedagogic model that overprivileges mental knowing, competition, monoculturalism, and separation.
- employs an inclusive, democratic curriculum.
- employs a pedagogy that promotes self-reflexivity and the emergence of a critically aware, socially responsible individual.
- sets up a validating, relationship-centered classroom context based on caring and community.
- is deeply invested in student learning and personal growth.
- helps students to awaken their social consciousness and personal empowerment. Students are assisted to find their self-worth, sense of purpose and voice.

Pairing Content With Contemplative Education

Student and academic affairs faculty and staff are now giving increased attention to holistic student development. A holistic approach to education decenters the privileged belief system that is focused almost exclusively on the development of intellectual skills. The idea is to appreciate and foster not only intellectual development but also skills that allow an individual to access inner knowing. Pedagogic practices are based on the following:

- Understanding, appreciation, and respect for all that make us intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual human beings.
- Focusing on the balance between interior and exterior knowledge. Theoretical physicist Nicolae Basarab, an advocate of the transdisciplinary reconciliation of the sciences and humanities, writes that “Knowledge is neither exterior nor interior: it is simultaneously exterior and interior. The studies of the universe and of the human being sustain one another” (2005, p. 8). Although no one would argue against the idea that students need to be critical thinkers as well as excellent writers, mathematicians, and scientists, there is also the need for deep, reflective inner processes that allow for self-awareness and development of clear sense of meaning and purpose in order to act responsibly in service to the community at large.
- Employing diverse forms of contemplative practice in the classroom to elicit inner knowing. Contemplative practices are a tool to quiet the mind to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2007). At its best, a contemplative education challenges students to engage with the world in deep, meaningful, and effective ways. Some examples include meditation; mindful walking; ritual; storytelling; poetry; music; yoga; communing with nature; freewriting; journaling; creative expressions such as mandalas, artwork, and photographs; and field trips and community work where social justice themes are highlighted.

Learning course content can be made much more effective and meaningful when paired with some form of contemplative activity. Because of the intense nature of contemplative practice, this does not need to happen every time the class meets or with every assignment, but the course would significantly benefit if it incorporated some form of contemplative activity. When properly

employed, contemplative practice allows for a participatory epistemology in which students are encouraged to reflect and engage more deeply with the material. One powerful example that comes to mind is the *cajita* project, designed by University of San Diego Latino and ethnic studies professor Alberto Pulido. A *cajita* is a personal reflective box students create that includes artifacts symbolic of the students' lives and that represent who they are as persons. Depending on the nature of the assignment, *cajitas* may also include artifacts that make political and philosophical statements, honor ancestors and loved ones, and speak to purpose and meaning. In an assignment related to recognizing the Latino historical and cultural celebration known as *El Dia de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead), Pulido (2002) asks students to construct sacred boxes in order for them to have practical, hands-on, and experiential knowledge about Mexican and Chicano cultural expression and to allow for the intersection of academic intellectual knowledge with that of the everyday life experience. Pulido explains the special significance of the *cajita* project:

One of my major challenges as a teacher is to continually explore how to make abstract concepts and ideas come alive for students in order to get them excited about classroom topics. . . . The *cajita* project allows students to make connections and articulations via their boxes because students are encouraged to create a story of ancestry, of family, of biography, and of history associated to their interpretation and understanding of the day of the dead. It is about recognizing those who came before us and celebrating their contributions and importance. It is about recognizing something that family, ancestry, and community represents, understanding their agency, and celebrating their contributions to this society. (2002, p. 73)

I have employed a *cajita* project in courses taken by graduate students because I strongly believe that those entering academic and student affairs positions ought to have a contemplative practice of their own and need to become reflective scholar/practitioners. In a research course in which students were writing the first three chapters of their dissertation, students constructed *cajitas* that included artifacts that symbolized their lives, the people who had influenced them to enter and continue graduate education, and how they hoped their research would make a difference in society. In a special social justice seminar and in my foundations of student affairs course, I have asked students to create *cajitas* that include artifacts that represent their identity, what they bring to the student affairs profession, individuals who have influenced them, and how they hope to make a difference in the lives of students and in the world of college. Toward the end of the term, students bring their *cajitas* to class, and we do a silent gallery walk that employs background music. Students silently observe the *cajitas*, marveling at the breathtaking artistry and revelatory power of these intensely personal artistic expressions. On a volunteer basis, students present and talk about their *cajitas*. Out of everything that is taught in these courses, students remark that the *cajitas* project became the most valuable and powerful learning experience in class.

Focus on Multiculturalism and Social Justice

Earlier I discussed the need to decenter and transform the entrenched agreement of monoculturalism. To cultivate the *persona educada*, students would benefit from a dynamic learning context that promotes social and personal responsibility, appreciation for diverse ways of knowing, and compassion and skills to engage complex, real-world issues.

To these ends, faculty should focus on the following:

- Select course content and materials that reflect multicultural perspectives to enable students to gain from both theoretical knowledge and practical experiences. The curriculum should be democratic, inclusive, and reflective of student backgrounds and needs.

- Employ diverse pedagogic practices that actively engage learners such as group work as well as reflective experiences that involve contemplative practice and service learning. In courses where students engage social issues, students should not only be observers of social justice; they should also be able to immerse themselves in that sort of lived reality.
- Encourage independent and collaborative projects that reflect student personal passions and commitments.
- Foster what Paulo Freire terms “critical consciousness,” the ability to recognize inequities and take action to remediate them. Praxis (action, reflection, action) becomes an essential process for learning.
- Promote student transformation through pedagogy. Students find their self-worth, sense of purpose, and voice.
- Validate diverse students (Rendón, 1994) by giving them voice and by acknowledging their reservoir of knowledge—that what they bring to class, including academic and experiential knowledge, is important and valued.

One example is the Naropa University (whose mission is contemplative education) newly developed peace studies course *Border Studies: Lower Rio Grande Border Witness Immersion*, in which students immerse themselves in the Texas–Mexico border, which is currently fraught with horrific drug-related violence and unspeakable crimes. There are also multiple examples of professors who choose to include a service-learning component as part of their courses. For example, California State University–Long Beach art professor Carlos Silveira employs community service as a pedagogy to connect his students with social issues in the community. In the process he assists students in seeing hope and possibility and in becoming compassionate humanitarians (Rendón, 2009).

Transdisciplinary Model of Learning

The education of a new *persona educada* requires a transdisciplinary approach to learning. Transdisciplinary education is concerned with that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge. To solve complex problems and to have a deeper understanding of the world, learners can draw from knowledge that cuts through disciplinary approaches. Key aspects include collaboration, problem solving, real-world engagement, openness to all disciplines, rigor, and tolerance (International Center for Transdisciplinary Studies and Research, 1994; McGregor, 2004).

The Challenge Before Us

In this season of light and darkness in our lives, many of us are hearing the calling to create a new vision of education that cultivates the new *persona educada*. This is not an easy task. To do so we must have the valor to step out of our comfort zones, for we are being asked to challenge the status quo in order to liberate ourselves from the hegemonic belief system that works against wholeness, social justice, and the development of moral and ethical personal and social responsibility. We are being asked to create a vision of education based on newly constructed agreements that will form the basis of a belief system undergirding all that we do in higher education. We are being asked to turn inward, to become more self-reflective about our views and our willingness to entertain diverse perspectives. Not all are ready for this monumental yet exciting endeavor. For those who accept the challenge, perhaps two simple, powerful questions can start us on this adventure of inward and outward transformation:

Who am I?

What is the greatest gift I could give to foster a vision of education focused on wholeness, social justice, and liberation?

Welcome to the journey.

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