

Review Essay

The New American Scholar

John Saltmarsh

University of Massachusetts Boston

Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation

Laura I. Rendón

Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009

“There are more and more of us (including white men and women) who are not buying into this flawed model of academic success. In the 1990s, as our numbers multiply, our power grows. If the academy refuses to change, we will change it. We will claim the curriculum, for we have always been a part of history, science, math, music, art, and literature. We will change teaching and learning to accommodate diversity. We will find our voice and use it to assert our rights and control our destiny... We will change the academy, even as the academy changes us. And more and more of us will experience academic success – with few, if any, regrets.” (Rendón, 1992, p. 63)

For service-learning practitioners and scholars, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy* is one of those rare books that subtly but fundamentally alters the purpose and scope of our work. It is a book about the future of our community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship and the future of higher education. It is a future that is already upon us but one to which higher education has not effectively responded nor embraced. This is a book that recognizes that non-Western, non-traditional, highly diverse students and faculty increasingly are *in* higher education but not *of* higher education. Their ways of knowing and habits of being are not validated by the structures and cultures of the academy. Fundamental change is needed.

Bringing about change in practice and transforming our academic homes is a heart-wrenching struggle, one often painfully difficult, taking its toll on the reformers, as the passage above reveals. I think of bell hooks and her observation in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) that “we have to realize that if we are working on ourselves to become more fully engaged, there is only so much that we can do. Ultimately the institution will exhaust us simply because there is no sustained institutional support...” (p.160). For the past three decades and more, Rendón has engaged this struggle, and, as she reveals in the book, it has taken its toll; but it has also

produced this magnificent vision of authentic education and what higher education can become.

In the early 1970s, Paulo Freire offered a groundbreaking critique of education in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For many of us who have implemented service-learning since the mid 1980s – and for Rendón herself – Freire’s work has been foundational to our theory of education and our practice in the classroom. He brought social justice into the foundations of service-learning, connecting education to wider social change. He reframed classroom practice from a banking model of education to one in which learning occurred through a dialogue between teacher and students. In dialogue, reflection on experience informs the teaching-learning process, and the teacher is de-centered from the front of the classroom into a relationship with students so that students are teachers and teachers are students. This all made good sense to us as service-learning educators. It is what we were experiencing in our courses.

We also experienced resistance to the kind of transformative education we implemented as we connected our courses to the local community and the content knowledge in the discipline to the public relevance of that knowledge. Much of the early service-learning was marginalized on campus, and viewed as lacking rigor or as risky activity for early career faculty if they were going to be successful in accommodating their academic careers to the norms of their disciplines and the academy. Yet, over time, with shifting national demographics that have created deeper awareness of the diversity of learners in our classrooms and the diversity of scholarly agendas that underrepresented faculty bring to their career aspirations, along with a widening interest in reclaiming the civic purposes of higher education, the kind of education Freire proposed moved from the margins to the mainstream and in doing so presented new challenges to the dominant cultures of higher education. Rendón’s work is part of a growing body of scholarship (Antonio, 2002; González, & Padilla, 2008;

Hale, 2008; hooks, 1994; Ibarra, 2001; Rhoades, Kiyama, McCormick, & Quiroz, 2008) that will continue to challenge the academy, continue to meet resistance, and will ultimately either successfully counterbalance the dominant cultures or become irrelevant to emerging scholars and to the wider public good.

Rendón's book, I would argue, is the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for our time, bringing the lenses of feminist, postmodernist, anticolonial, and critical theory to bear on liberatory education. She writes that "social justice becomes a theme anytime faculty work with underserved students (i.e., low-income, first-generation, underrepresented) in a way that seeks to liberate them from past invalidating experiences that have fostered self-limiting views in order to transform them into powerful learners" (p. 92). The oppression she addresses is not only about students whose academic success is not supported, but about the liberation of faculty from invalidating experiences that have fostered self-limiting views in order to transform faculty into powerful teachers and scholars. We can't achieve the former without the latter. For both students and faculty, we need "democratic structures that honor diverse voices, ways of knowing, and participation in knowledge production" (p. 34).

Rendón refers to herself as "a reflective, socially active scholar" (p. 6) and "a scholar of color who has worked hard to establish herself in the academy" (p. 2). Her academic training in higher education began at Laredo Community College and ended with a Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Michigan. Currently, she is professor of Higher Education and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University. Her research focuses on access, retention, and graduation of low-income, first-generation college students and the transformation of teaching and learning to emphasize wholeness and social justice. As she revealed in a piece she wrote just at the time when she had completed her doctorate and entered into her first faculty position, "*From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of Mexican American 'Scholarship Girl'*" (1992), she was the first in her family "to take this long journey into the mystifying world of higher education." Her experience as a young scholar was that of "academic shock – a feeling of alienation...that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style, and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices, and assumptions" (1992, p. 56).

There is a powerful subtext in *Sentipentsante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, which is about the difficulties endured by scholars of color who attempt to "negotiate academic shock," (1992, p. 56) a struggle Rendón begins writing about in "From the Barrio to the Academy." "If the scholar persists in using past experience to affirm himself

or herself," she wrote, "not only do rewards become more difficult to attain, but the student is riddled with the guilt, pain, and confusion that arise from daring to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted by neither" (1992, p. 56). Rendón is a person "of color who comes to the academy as [a stranger] in a strange land" (1992, p. 59). In "From the Barrio to the Academy," she writes that "what makes Laura Rendón an individual is not only who she is now but what happened to her along the way" (p. 60).

Thus, we would expect that a book about pedagogy would be about both ways of knowing and habits of being, and that they would be inseparable for each other. In *Sentipentsante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, Rendón writes that "epistemology is often contrasted with ontology, which refers to the nature of being...dominant Western ways of knowing divorce epistemology from ontology and separate the subject from the object that is being studied" (p. 67). Through what she calls a "participatory epistemology," she seeks the "union of the knower and what is to be known" validating "the knowing that occurs when the perceiver and the perceived are united as a single consciousness" (p. 86). This book is personal. If the academy is going to embrace the Barrio, then higher education "must communicate that students of color are capable of academic thought and expression and that we believe and trust that their experience will guide them as they develop their intellectual capacities" (1994, p. 62). This means that "we must find ways to change the linear model of teaching [and] focus on collaborative learning and dialogue that promotes critical thinking, interpretation, and diversity of opinion" (1994, p. 62). For Rendón, the personal is the pedagogical – and the pedagogical is the political.

Rendón is best known for her development of "validation theory" (1994), a challenge to Tinto's "integration theory" (1987) which explained students' academic success through their individual characteristics related to social and academic integration into the college experience. Rendón's theory takes an assets-based approach to understanding student success, and seeks to validate the students' strengths and to change the educational environment into one that validates the rich knowledge, experience, and cultural perspectives that students bring to the classroom. As she wrote in 1992, "it is my belief that institutions must consider past experience, language, and culture as strengths to be respected and woven into the fabric of knowledge production and dissemination, not as deficits that must be devalued, silenced, and overcome." "We need to validate students' capacities for intellectual development," she writes, "at the beginning, not at the end, of their academic careers" (p. 62). "Validation," she writes in *Sentipentsante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, is "an enabling and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that

fosters academic and personal development” (p. 35). It is a response to the dominant culture of education in which “many students feel that who they are and what they represent are not valued” (p. 35).

The essence of this book is an argument for what Rendón calls a “new pedagogical vision” (p. xiv) which unpacks the implications of validation. She extends it to what she sees as a “knowledge validation process” that challenges “a monocultural framework...[that] serve[s] to control and validate Western structures of what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge gets taught, who should be hired to transmit knowledge, and what gets rewarded as exemplary teaching, research, and service” (p. 43). “The core question guiding...” her inquiry is... “What is the experience of creating a teaching and learning dream (pedagogic vision) based on wholeness and consonance, respecting the harmonious rhythm between the outer experience of intellectualism and rational analysis and the inner dimension of insight, emotion, and awareness?” (p. 2). Her vision is aimed at “guiding the transformation of teaching and learning in higher education” and shattering “the belief system that has worked against wholeness, multiculturalism, and social justice” (p. 1). She calls this “learner-centered” pedagogical vision “*sentipensante*,” which is a combination of two Spanish words: “sentir, which means to sense or feel, and pensar, to think” (p. 131). *Sentipensante* is “a pedagogical model that [speaks] to wholeness, authenticity, and spirituality in higher education” (p. 6) where “outer knowing (intellectual reasoning, rationality, and objectivity)” is brought together with “inner knowing (deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition, and emotions)” (p. 27) to validate the learner and discover new knowledge. As a collaborative process of learning, it is a “student-centered model” that “reestablishes a communal authority over the cult of the expert” (p. xi).

The way that Rendón makes her case for this new pedagogical vision is to carefully and meticulously interrogate what she calls the “privileged agreements” that “are firmly entrenched in the academic culture of the academy” (p. 26). The privileged agreements are not unlike what Rice (1996) described as “the assumptive world of the academic professional” (p. 16), which is made up of unspoken values, underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, and processes; patterns of perceiving, thinking, and feeling; shared understandings and common interpretive frameworks. For Rendón, these are: “the agreement to privilege intellectual/rational knowing,” “the agreement of separation,” “the agreement of competition,” “the agreement of perfection,” “the agreement of monoculturalism,” “the agreement to privilege outer work,” and “the agreement to avoid self examination” (p. 26).

These agreements, she explains, reify “the entrenched belief system privileging separation,

monodisciplinarity, competition, intellectualism, and passivity at the expense of collaboration, trans-disciplinarity, intuition, and active learning, especially that focused on social change” (p. 135). By privileging these ways of knowing and habits of being in the academy, other epistemologies are invalidated, which not only excludes those who learn and construct knowledge in ways contrary to the privileged agreements, but prevents higher education from effectively fulfilling its academic and civic missions.

Sentipensante Pedagogy contributes to a growing body of literature suggesting that the next generation of faculty approach engagement with a strong and even seamless connection to the work of diversity on campus. Asset-based approaches that validate the contributions of culturally, socially, economically, racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse students value their community experiences and bring those experiences to bear on their education. A greater diversity of students also brings a greater diversity of – and awareness of – learning styles and attention to how students learn which relates to whether or not students persist and succeed academically. It is also clear that culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse faculty express tendencies toward shaping their research agenda and academic careers with attention to social issues and community connections, and seek academic homes that validate their scholarly identities. The next generation of faculty takes it as axiomatic that civic engagement cannot be done effectively without a strong commitment to diversity, and that diversity on campus cannot be meaningfully accomplished without a strong commitment to community engagement. The next generation of scholars weaves together diversity and engagement as the foundation for educational participation and success in a diverse democracy. When Rendón explores the meaning of a learner-centered educational environment, she infuses it with issues of social justice and valuing what it is that a diversity of learners contributes to teaching and learning.

Of the faculty she studied for this book, some used service-learning as their primary pedagogical method. And for Rendón, service-learning has qualities that make it emblematic of *Sentipensante Pedagogy*. Rendón is interested in how service-learning brings together “activist practices, such as community work where social justice themes are highlighted.... And relational practice, such as storytelling, autobiography, free-writing, journaling, dialogue, and deep listening” (p. 67). She sees in service-learning the potential for “contemplative practices” that “increase awareness and insight and compassion for oneself and others that has often been overlooked by Western education” (p. 70). The essential element of service-learning, as a vast body of literature has shown, is student reflection on experience and course content. For Rendón, this is the key. “The process of working in the commu-

nity included self-reflexivity designed to foster awareness and personal growth” (p. 101). The process of reflection allowed students to bring together thinking and feeling because it “served to engage students in the examination of their values and beliefs and the emotions associated with them. Self-reflexivity became a sophisticated form of personal engagement that allowed students to note what was happening inside of them as they engaged in social justice work in communities” (p. 102). One service-learning professor “taught the theory and uses of art” but also “used community service as a contemplative practice where students acquired wisdom in the form of developing critical consciousness, compassion, and self-awareness” (p. 105). He took up the “challenge...to find a balance and harmony between inner and outer learning” and “to foster the generation of academic knowledge and wisdom” (p. 89).

While this is a book centered on pedagogy, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy* raises the fundamental, central question of epistemology and the deeply political implications of academic epistemology for transforming higher education so that it can effectively fulfill its academic and democratic purposes. She puts questions of epistemology, such as “What is knowledge? What constitutes valid knowledge? How is knowledge assessed? How do we know what we know?” (p. 66), at the center of her argument because they go to the core of academic culture. She challenges what she understands to be colonial “epistemological frameworks based on modernist rational knowing, linear development schemes, the notion of objectivity, the divide between theory and practice, and the exclusion of the contributions of women, indigenous people, and people of color” (p. 15). She counterbalances these with “non-Western, anticolonial epistemological and ontological perspectives” (p. 66). For Rendón, her vision is more than a question of pedagogy; it is about how we know what we know and what is considered legitimate knowledge in the academy. And, as Donald Schön (1995) once wrote, this “means becoming involved in an epistemological battle” (p. 32). It is battle that has implications not only for institutions of higher education but for the wider democratic culture. Expert-driven, hierarchical knowledge generation and dissemination is not only an epistemological position but a political one. Traditional academic epistemology devalues the knowledge and agency of citizens without academic credentials and undermines reciprocal learning and democratic practices (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). For Rendón, epistemology has implications for power, agency, and democracy.

This perspective on higher education connects educational practice to institutional change, reframing the professional identity of educators to be more than disciplinary experts and to become agents changing their disciplines, departments, and the institutions that are their academic homes. Clearly, traditionally prepared faculty “will need

professional development in the use of contemplative practice and the design of a relationship-centered classroom based on caring, trust, support, and validation” (p. 136). Yet, change in practice is not sufficient. The real question is not how do I change my practice to become a more authentic and effective educator. It is, as Rendón explains, “how do you work against entrenched, hegemonic institutional structures” (p. 145)?

She has spent her career “engaging in the work of institutional transformation” (p. 47) through a variety of strategies. “Pedagogical dissent,” she writes, “involved designing overt and covert ways to work through the political structures of the institution” (p. 114). These include: “operating under the radar screen,” “playing the game” by “emphasizing scholarly achievement,” “adopting an ethic of working harder than others,” “finding supportive colleagues,” “assuming powerful roles on campus,” and “having a strong mentor” (pp. 114-117).

Perhaps one of the most important lessons from this book is that if we want to see a change in institutional acceptance of the practices of teaching, learning, and scholarship for which Rendón is advocating – including service-learning – we need to be equally attentive to and devoted to changing the institutional environment in which the practice takes place as we are to the practice itself. Otherwise, “shaking up a system” (p. 147) in the way that Rendón has admirably attempted in her practice and writing will also require the owning of what she calls “the valor to step into the pain of admitting that we have been trying to transform higher education by working around [the privileged] agreements rather than trying to change and recast the agreements themselves” (p. 49). Valor is noble, but we need more than valor going forward to prevent others from having to go through the sacrifice that comes with it. As Rendón writes, “this book calls on faculty to gather the courage to free their voices to articulate a different truth...The calling is about revising the institutional belief system” (p. 146).

Read this book. Read it now. Savor it and treasure it. If you are an educator who cares about the deeper public purposes of higher education; who cares about improving teaching and learning for an increasingly diverse student body; who cares about education as transformative, holistic, integrative, civic learning; who cares about the tenure-seeking woman of color as she enacts her faculty roles connected to social concerns and new ways of generating knowledge; who cares about changing the culture of higher education so that it is better able to fulfill its academic and civic missions; and who cares about whether higher education two or three decades from now will be contributing meaningfully to solving social problems and building a more vibrant democracy – then read this book and put its wisdom into practice in your own work and lives as educators. This will mean recasting your identity as an academic to include being an agent of social

change in higher education to promote a diverse democracy. Do it. And pass this book on to your students and colleagues.

References

- Antonio, A.L. (2002) Faculty of color reconsidered: Reassessing contributions to scholarship. *Journal of Higher Education*, 73(5), 582-602.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- González, K.P. & Padilla, R.V. (Eds.). (2008). *Doing the public good: Latino scholars engage civic participation*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Hale, C.R. (Ed.). (2008). *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship*. Berkeley, CA: GAIA Books, Global, Area, and International Archive, University of California Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Ibarra, R.A. (2001). *Beyond affirmative action: Reframing the context of higher education*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rendón, L.I. (1992). From the Barrio to the academy: Revelations of a Mexican American “scholarship girl.” In S. L. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 55-64). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rendón, L.I. (1994) Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33-50.
- Rhoades, G., Kiyama, J.M., McCormick, R., & Quiroz, M. (2008). Local cosmopolitans and cosmopolitan locals: New models of professionals in the academy. *The Review of Higher Education*, 31(2), 209-235.
- Rice, R.E. (1996). *Making a place for the New American scholar*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards, Working Paper Series 1.
- Saltmarsh, J., Hartley, M., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). *Democratic engagement white paper*. Boston, MA: New England Resource Center for Higher Education.
- Schön, D. (1995). The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change*, 27(6), 26-35.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Author

JOHN SALTMARSH (john.saltmarsh@umb.edu) is director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and professor of Higher Education Administration at the University of Massachusetts Boston.