

Community, Unity, Identity, Multiplicity, and Diversity: Are They Compatible?

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Delivered in Philadelphia during the United States' 2008 presidential campaign, the then presidential nominee, Barack Obama's history-making *Race and Unity Speech*¹ encapsulated a social and spiritual paradox that is, ironically, sometimes forgotten within academic arenas. Referring to his own family's diverse origins and experiences, he noted the reality that "this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one." The idea that unity coexists with and emerges from a multiplicity of perspectives is not new within academia, but it *is* intensely radical, in that it asks us to swim against the seemingly instinctive—albeit reactionary—tides of professional territorialism.

Similar to Deweyan ideas of growth, President Obama's speech implied that effective problem solving is a dynamic process. Continued growth requires openness to change; securing individual freedom necessitates risk taking on behalf of others. To lose sight of these paradoxical realities is to gradually become myopic. Within higher education this can mean that courses and research, which were once valued for their potential to aid our communities, are eventually reduced to professional currency hoarded for purposes of territorial safeguarding. Colleagues are objectified as we conveniently embrace an artificial separation of the professional and the personal in order to "send messages" to our academic communities or to remake work environments within our own images. A "world" or two might be gained by a narrow commitment to the promotion of self and territory, but at what cost? Academic freedom, which is the cornerstone of meaningful research and education, cannot

survive, much less thrive, unless academic communities are committed to making room for multiple viewpoints and ways of knowing. Regardless of the illusions of security and control that we create when new or differing paradigms are temporarily constrained or silenced, our connectedness to “the other” is ever present. The question, then, rests in whether we will honor this connectedness and grow in positive ways, or whether we will deny, ignore or fight it, only to stagnate within partial realities.

Obama touched on this idea in his *Race and Unity* (2008) speech when he noted,

I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

President Obama illustrated that growth and freedom necessitate a dynamic balancing and interaction between individuality and community needs. Embedded throughout his call for “perfecting” unity is the notion that in order to thrive, our storied lives require an emphasis on honoring diverse identities (including one’s own), accommodating differing standpoints (or storylines), behaving with integrity and building bridges via our “common hopes.” But what does this call—these “requirements”—look like within the concrete realities of academic life?

Both directly and indirectly, the authors within this issue provide concrete examples, alternative possibilities, and new storylines regarding some of the ways in which we in academia might honor and negotiate the notion “that out of many, we are truly one.” Paul Theobald and Kathy Wood, the authors of “Communitarianism and Multiculturalism in the Academy,” speak directly to this notion when they write,

Ours has evolved into a society devoid of the very communal dimensions that might bind us together around a conception of the common good. Individualism has left us responsible only for ourselves and for those we permit into the circle of our immediate private lives, and for the latter, even these decisions are often measured solely in terms of utility defined in individualist terms.

Reminiscent of Obama’s campaign speech, the authors point to our dire need to engage with and grow through community. And they do so by examining the common hope that exists between two paradigms that are often erroneously regarded as wholly contradictory: communitarianism and multiculturalism. After touching on the origins and purposes of both, they not only discuss the ways in which the two philosophies’ concerns are unique, but they also highlight the larger common goals

that the two philosophies share. Rather than waste time through a reductionist dismissal of one philosophy over the other, the need for both standpoints within our larger social picture becomes evident. Unity through multiplicity is evident.

Rodney A. Clifton's article, "The Education of Graduate Students: A Social Capital Perspective," points to the need for a similar type of unity if graduate programs are to meet students' diverse needs. He explains that in order to

facilitate the scholarly development of graduate students, professors and their students must develop social networks based on trust, so that norms, obligations, and expectations for scholarly work are enhanced, information channels are expanded, and the conceptions of both students and professors change from the "I" to the "we" (Nisbet, 1971, p. 112; Vedder, 2004, p. 118).

Reflecting earlier references to paradox, Clifton calls for professors to generate a creative balance of empathy with demanding expectations and to maintain an authoritative stance with respect.

For other authors in this issue, the idea of actively accommodating diverse paradigms reflects—albeit in very different ways—Obama's emphasis on the storied nature of our lives. For instance, within Danny Wade's, Courtney Vaughn's, and Wesley Long's article "The Power of Fiction: A Novel Approach to Presenting Research Findings," Wade details the experience of coming to know the power of narrative inquiry and fictionalized auto ethnography. Not only do they illustrate why specific voices and storytelling are necessary for a research context to be dependably encapsulated for readers, but they also explain that narrative is needed if classroom research contexts are to grow in connection and community. Quoting Tom Romano, they make the point that "facts and analysis are not enough. If our decisions are to be both sound and humane, we need to understand emotion and circumstance, as well as logic and outcome."²

The objectification of participants and colleagues—so detrimental to growth and unity as well as to a host of other considerations—has no place in the open ended research journey this article describes. By accommodating a new research paradigm, that of fictionalized narrative, the writers point out that they are not only being faithful to their particular research contexts, but as Wade explains, he is also accommodating the dispositions of English Education students, who are more likely to "engage in and think deeply" about research findings presented within narrative formats. Such accommodation allows for an active, ongoing growth within both the individual researchers and within their student

communities, in that it “exploits individual aptitudes and activates wider varieties of human intelligence.”³

Integrating narrative formats into research explorations and presentations also plays a major role in Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan’s, Anne Wagner’s, and Njoki Nathani Wane’s “Rekindling the Sacred: Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy in Higher Education.” The authors note that in spite of the ways, in which spirituality is actively repressed within academia, it is a persistent reality. They continue to explain that although spirituality literature is increasing, little exists that “addresses how spirituality may be integrated into teaching for anti-oppression in the context of higher education.” In addition, they contend that recognition of spirituality within the academy is politically “central” to decolonization. Having incorporated a “new” way of being and knowing, the authors recognize the necessity of adopting an academically alternative communication format—the interactive narrative or dialogue—in order to encapsulate the journey-like qualities of their research experiences. As they explain,

Rather than conforming to traditional academic practices, we have chosen to present our theorizing in the form of an interactive dialogue, to explicate the process through which our thinking has developed. We intend this to be “part of the countercurrent of resistance to dominant hegemonic forces in the world” (Graveline, 1998, p. 35).

Not only does their presentation format unify multiple but not all voices, but it also offers readers a new space from which to examine the ways in which conventional academic perceptions of research and spirituality limit personal, community and academic freedom. Whether one agrees with all of their assumptions and conclusions or not, the implication that many contemporary universities in secular societies are colonizing is a vibrant one, one that merits further attention.

In “The Conundrum of Large Scale Standardized Testing: Making Sure Every Student Counts,” Mary Jane Harkins and Sonya Singer also utilize narrative in order to explore some of the problems attached to uniform approaches to testing. Reflecting a concern for students’ diverse needs, they note that “the critical issue” for them was how educational systems can provide for “the learning needs of *all* students in meaningful ways.” Turning to story, they organize their discussion of the controversial implications of standardized testing around sections of a teacher’s story. Much like Wade, Vaughn, and Long, Harkins and Singer-Chignecto recognize the power of story to include new voices and to provide fresh insights into deeply entrenched problems. Quoting Finn (1999), they explain that “Savage inequalities persist because a lot of well-meaning

people are doing the best they can, but they simply do not understand the mechanisms that stack the cards against so many children” (p. 94). Thus the need for the “counter narratives” of teachers is evident.

Drawing from the standpoints and storylines of others, at least two pieces within this issue examine possibilities for creatively reshaping current realities; and the authors do so through maintaining a creative openness to new or diverse ways of perceiving deeply entrenched presumptive “norms.” Detailing nine foundational attributes of current bureaucratic institutions, Sherrie Reynolds, Robert Lusch, David Cross, and Nowell Donovan, the authors of “Higher Education Administration in a Dynamic System,” re-imagine such institutions as dynamic, fluid, adaptive systems that operate with few rules due to the interdependence of their multiple parts.

Attention to alternative communication modes or ways of knowing is also a focus in Michelle Forrest’s “Does Communicative Competence Need to be Re-conceptualised?” Utilizing Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, she explores how prevailing notions of communicative competence might be deconstructed in order to better examine differences between linguistic forms and meaning. Questioning the dominance of print-based communication, she points to artistic expression as a vehicle for re-conceptualizing communicative competency. In particular, she offers Derrida’s concept of “mediacy” as a lens through which to examine some of the ways in which “curricular needs” can be addressed through post structural notions of difference.

Jennifer M. Bondy also notes our societal need to attend to life narratives within her review of Edward W. Morris’s (2006) *An Unexpected Minority: White Kids in An Urban School*. Within her critique Bondy describes Morris’s study of the ways in which White privilege was reproduced and sustained within a Texas middle school. Significantly, his book not only examines the intersection of race, class and gender in the reproduction of White privilege, but it also specifically explores the ways in which place and schooling practices contribute to this destructive construct. Noting the crucial role that adolescent resistance plays in “accepting or resisting hegemonic definitions of race, class, and gender,” Bondy contends that one reason Morris’s book is so powerful is that it provides readers with adolescents’ life stories.

Topics, perspectives, and storylines within this issue vary widely; yet all speak to concerns involving academic freedom, diversity, unity, or growth. Reflecting Obama’s (2008) *Race and Unity Speech*, many of the authors also emphasized the roles that narrative does or could play in our collective journey towards “perfecting unity.” Others hinted at the persistent reality of our underlying connectedness. The question

still remains, then, whether we will honor this connectedness and grow in positive ways, or whether we will deny, ignore or fight it, only to stagnate within partial realities. The contributors to this issue help us think more reflectively and caringly as we address the question.

In closing, we wish to note that this is the final issue of *Journal of Thought* for which we will serve as editors. One of us, Douglas J. Simpson, has been editor of the journal since 2001, while the other, Sally McMillan, has worked as associate editor since 2004. It has been our pleasure to seek to build on the outstanding contributions of previous editors in providing a meaningful forum for theorizing about issues of interest and importance to education and peoples' lives. We are currently engaged with the publisher, Alan H. Jones at Caddo Gap Press, in a search for the next editor or editorial team, and we trust that the *Journal of Thought* will continue to grow and prosper as it has during its first 44 years of publication.

Notes

¹ Barack Obama's Race and Unity Speech was delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008.

² Tom Romano, *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000, p. xi.

³ Elliot Eisner, The Promise and Perils, *Educational Researcher*, 26(6), p. 8.

A Thank You

A change in editors is always a bittersweet moment. As publisher of the *Journal of Thought*, I am deeply indebted to Douglas J. Simpson for his editorial leadership of the journal from Volume 36 in 2001 through this current issue. His nine years of service as editor have seen the journal grow in quality and breadth of content. We also offer special thanks to Sally McMillan, who as served with Doug as associate editor since the summer of 2004, and to the many other individuals who have contributed time and effort as part of their editorial team at Texas Tech University. While I am sorry to see Doug and Sally leave their editorial roles with *Journal of Thought*, I understand their desire to turn to new academic challenges, and I look forward to identifying new editors who will carry on the nearly 45-year tradition of the journal.

—Alan H. Jones, Publisher, Caddo Gap Press