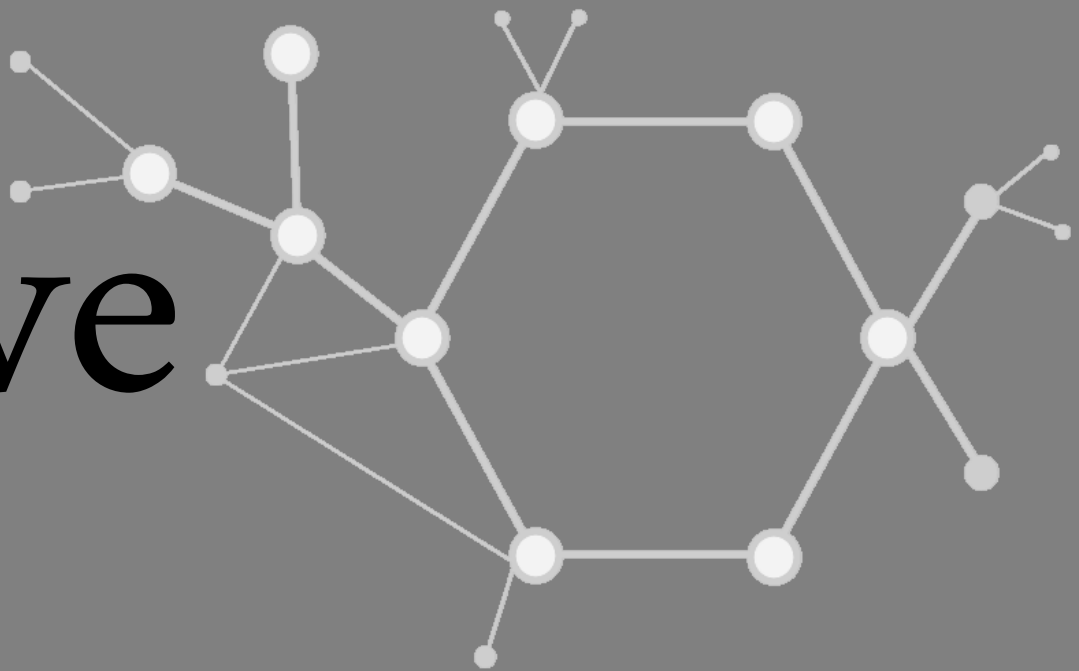# Transformative Education:

Learning

How to

Live

Presentation of Asset-Based Community Learning®

Transformative Living Community, International

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INTRODUCTION

"Education means to bring out wisdom. Indoctrination means to push in knowledge."

\- Dick Gregory, Civil Rights Activist, Comedian, & Social Critic

Social dysfunction in America is, in part, an educational issue. In his 1969 spoken word album The Light Side: The Dark Side, Dick Gregory stated that the problem with American education is it only teaches students how to make a living, not how to live. This hasn't changed. The purpose of teaching is to educate, yet the purpose of education in America is to systematically program students to conform to a sterile standard by which they can be readily employed. The primary focus is task oriented, with a purpose of functioning within an exclusive collective form. Anyone who does not complete the task, does not conform to the purpose and is therefore dysfunctional. We then send them to social services with professionals trained in healthy human development. Their job is to educate dysfunctional people.

This model of learning is backwards.

Transformative Education has largely been reserved for adult learners. Transformative learning helps adults build their ability to critically think as autonomous individuals for the purpose of self-reflecting on dysfunctional beliefs and experiences that may impact the way they engage in the world. If we began this learning as children, rather than waiting for adulthood, we would have a lot more wisdom and a lot less social dysfunction.

The true purpose of education should be to acquire more than basic skills required for economic survival. Education should also develop the character and skill set necessary to thrive as an active citizen ready and able to make valuable contributions to build a better society. Yet, if you ask students why they are in school their answers will likely be summarized: "So I can get a job and pay bills. " If they've had any experience in the standard educational system, few will state that they go

to school to learn how to "expand my consciousness through the transformation of my basic world view and specific capacities of my self." This is the definition of transformative learning as practiced in Asset-Based Community Learning® (ABCL).

The focus of ABCL is relationship oriented. The purpose is forming the unique individual within an inclusive collective. We develop the human first in relation to the collective, critically reflecting on the assets, experiences and desires of each individual. Once the students share and understand their narratives, they can begin to analyze and assess how to best collaborate within the collective learning experience.

FOUNDATION

"And what is interesting here is that evolution now becomes an individually centered process, emanating from the needs and desires of the individual, and not an external process, a passive process where the individual is just at the whim of the collective."

- Eamon Healy, Chemistry professor at St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas

ABCL started at California State University, Long Beach in the Black Studies Department. The pedagogy was initiated by Erica Fuller, an adjunct professor from 2001-2003, in response to her frustration with the lack of student engagement. After further research she learned that what she had developed over several years was a form of Transformative Education and built upon the foundation of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Freire based his theoretical analysis on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. As the balance of power between the have's and have-not's is still evident today, one can only conclude that the most effective way to liberation is to transform this relationship. This is an educational process and starts with the relationship between the *teacher, student and society*.

RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHER

The role of teachers in ABCL must first begin by examining the character of the educator. In Western educational settings, the teacher is the authority. With this authority comes power. Teacher's can either wield their power or share it. Sharing power requires a teacher who is humble, vulnerable and compassionate. In ABCL, these traits are defined using translations that describe an affect upon the human spirit or soul—spiritual descriptors intentionally avoided within public education. For example, the common usage and understanding of the word *compassion* is "sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others." In ABCL, the meaning is found in the ecclesiastical Latin origin: to "suffer with." Consider how this distinction manifests in the student/teacher relationship. The former is a noun; a passive feeling that can often create distance

and disconnection.   The latter is a verb; a compelling action to align, create a bond. It also signals greater depth in character. In Western educational systems, however, teachers are trained to avoid this level of depth. It is often seen as weakness and goes against an assumed need to cut a clear separation between the student and the teacher, one that eases the teacher's effort to build a structured environment, manage the classroom effectively and efficiently, with authority. This top-down teaching is based on systems that dominate and control, with the goal of restricting freedom. This is an ideal relationship when the purpose is to educate en masse, which our educational system has been designed to do. Teachers have limited choice to behave otherwise within this system.

In ABCL, teachers must liberate themselves from these limits by becoming a child again, asking critical questions that start with "Why?" The average test results for public school students of color reveal a catastrophic failure of the system, demanding this question. The answer is greater than glaring errors in curriculum, or a perceived lack of parental engagement. In fact, both of these issues come down to the character of the teacher, who is likely white with only a rudimentary understanding of issues faced by students of color. These issues are exacerbated by school systems founded on task and function, which for many, regardless of cultural background, is like learning to read upside down. ABCL turns this system right side up—that is, the student stands at the right of the teacher, free to engage in an equitable exchange of learning.

ABCL is not reformation, it is complete transformation of the relationship between the student and teacher, one that side-steps the casual acquaintance and moves directly into a position of mutual trust and respect. In an ABCL environment, the teacher excels beyond the boundaries of systemic expectations to become a bold *facilitator of freedom* from systems of control and socially constructed limitations.

RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENT

ABCL is in line with cultural learning patterns, while avoiding generalized inferences, by re-positioning the role of the student. In ABCL, the student is co-creator with the facilitator in developing lessons. In standard instruction, the teacher deposits a program of learning into the minds of students for study. In ACBL the facilitator studies the students—their knowledge, experience, values and beliefs—to discover a framework from which learning is facilitated. Thus, students are free to be themselves in the learning environment, and are empowered to see their value in a community. Culturally relevant curriculum reflects student experiences because in an ABCL environment students' lives inform the material and vice versa.

Students now have the same access to knowledge, instantly. Thus, the teacher's role as content expert shits to the student. Facilitators help students assess and analyze the information to create their own learning experiences, establishing goals based on their history, passions, networks and cultural frameworks.

RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

ABCL environments are student-centered. Still, ABCL acknowledges that each student is a part of a respective community which includes generational history, immediate family, social networks, and the environment, both local and regional. ABCL is designed for learners from traditionally disenfranchised communities, though students who are not from these communities benefit as well.

Training facilitators in ABCL requires coursework that prepares them to effectively engage with communities of color. Classes include cultural competency courses such as the social construction of race in America, white fragility and privilege, the collective experience of trauma, restorative justice, and the economic and policy impacts on communities of color.

"School currently focuses too exclusively on knowledge and not enough on skills. There's a pile of evidence about the most effective 'education.' Summarized, it points to relationship-rich and work-integrated learning experiences."

- Brandon Busteed, President of Kaplan University Partners.

The primary objective of the ABCL classroom is for the student to feel safe and connected. The outcome is that students enjoy the process of learning, feel their value, and are eager to share their assets with the learning community.

ABCL employs the 3R's of Neural Education, (Reflect, Revised Thinking, and Report Out) which capitalizes on personalized learning, encourages continued engagement, and adds depth to understanding. This is combined with techniques from Teach Like a Champion to aid in classroom management.

Learning focuses on valuing the assets each student brings to the learning environment, encouraging collaboration to the benefit of all. Strengths are shared and growing edges are smoothed and shaped in the safety and support of peers aligned with the collaborative classroom agreement.

Rather than compete against one another, students work collaboratively to critically think through content and solve problems. Instead of isolating and intimidating students with comparative assessments between superior and inferior performance, the learning environment is transformed into a mutually supportive, non-competitive grouping, where intelligence builds on intelligence. Though individuals are autonomous community citizens, their unique contribution becomes needed assets for community success.

Almost all assignments are project-based and are both written and orally presented. Qualitative and quantitative research required for these projects builds skills in assessing and analyzing data. Service placement in local community organizations and company internships encourages students be

open and curious to learn from others, and grant opportunities to adapt to new situations in the moment. Students routinely teach back what they learn through innovative use of the latest technology, group activities, and artistic mediums such as short videos, informative websites, plays or visual art. Though creative presentation is not new to the classroom, it is generally not the focus of learning and is often restricted by time and curriculum design.

Feedback is continuous and informal and given to both student and facilitator to build trust in the collaborative process. There are no "mistakes" or "failures." Students simply "create opportunities to learn." Language is used as a tool to uplift and encourage rather and label and stratify.

ABCL fully integrates the top seven skills identified by Tony Wagner as imperative for success in school, career and community. The active learning that occurs in ABCL environments yields better educational outcomes. Coupled with both service learning and job placement, students practice an applicable skill set that businesses and communities are calling on education to teach.

ASSESSMENT

"Teachers will need to pursue dynamic pedagogies and model 21st century skills, and assessments will need to reflect the nature of the skills, and also, in the process, reflect those skills themselves."

- Esther Care & Alvin Vista

The focus of learning in an ABCL learning environment is not exclusive to the content of subject material, rather the subject material is used to teach the content of character needed to thrive in society. Subject matter is simply a tool to use for healthy human development and skill mastery. The learning begins each time students witness the facilitator model the character and skill set exercised through active learning practices. The success of student learning is determined by 1) how well they have taught and learned from each other, 2) how well they have shared their strengths to uplift the community, 3) how frequently they practiced critical skills such as initiative and entrepreneurialism or curiosity and imagination, 4) an increase in emotional intelligence and strength of character, and 5) the ability to balance autonomy with collaboration.

Tests for success are taken weekly and at the end of the grading period. All tests are conducted orally and the class is graded as a whole rather than individually. A student is called upon, but if the answer is not known, it can be passed to another student. There is no individual penalty for not knowing. If no one knows the answer, this is realized immediately and the answer can be given and explained in the moment, as opposed to after the students turn in their individual tests and wait for results and further explanation that the teacher may or may not have time to give.

The oral exam will reveal community cohesiveness which relies on its ability to include everyone in the learning process. If students have been left out, it will become immediately evident and attempts to remedy the issue can be done swiftly. The more inclusive, the greater cohesion, the higher the community grade. Each individual shares the same grade earned by the community. Individual success

is measured by the individual strength of character and skill required to create an inclusive, cohesive community of learning. Individual mid-term assessments are conducted in peer-to-peer reviews with full transparency using a rubric established in the collaborative agreement. Student portfolios document the learning journey and include a self-evaluation, rough drafts and examples of both the highest and the lowest proficiency. This gives students a visual account for their growth and development, helping them to understand that learning is a process that values not knowing as important as what is known. Portfolios are not graded comparatively with other students in a competitive fashion. Student work is graded on the individual level of improvement; they compete against their own best score. Individual grades do not bring down the community score, but the community score can boost an individual's final grade. Final grades are discussed in facilitator-student conferences at which time portfolios are reviewed. Challenges to assessments are conducted within the framework of restorative practice.

CHALLENGES

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground."

- Frederick Douglass

- There are two Western institutions that are slowest to change: the church and the school. This is largely because those in charge of administering change can only maintain their position by *not* changing top-down systems. Therefore, administrators will likely be the most resistant to this pedagogy. Further, principals, supervisors, directors, and policy makers are educated to look at the numbers. It will be difficult to see the value in the ABCL paradigm shift. Though ABCL is supported by current research and is aligned with the most innovative thinking in education today, it will be on the teacher to quantitatively account for the reduction in classroom behavioral disruptions or an increase in content acquisition or student development.

- Assessments using standardized methodologies are nearly impossible because unlike standardized tests for subject matter, there is no formally accepted measurement to test the skills acquired in an ABCL environment.

- Initially, ABCL is time-consuming for the teacher. Establishing the cultural structure can be confusing and frustrating for students since it is so unlike traditional learning. However, once it becomes routine, the teacher is relieved of duties like daily lesson planning, high-stakes high stress individual testing and grading.

- ABCL can be messy. When building a bridge, the engineer considers all possible variables to strengthen the design. In the ABCL environment, however, there are a lot of unknowns. Each classroom brings unique students with different skill sets, facilitators can never know for certain what assets are available until the structure is tested. Testing the strength requires putting stress on the bridge to see what it can carry. Collapse, however, is viewed as a positive; both students and

facilitator are granted clear indicators of what is possible in the short and long term according to the developmental needs of each individual. The course objectives are then designed to fit those needs, employing the strengths of individuals to support the growth in others. All are granted an opportunity to witness how their unique character and skills impact collective strength.

- Conflict is needed in order to practice the skills taught in this environment, so facilitators must be comfortable with conflict and be willing to dance with dissonance. They will frequently play opposing roles, as both agitators and mediators. Facilitators create obstacles in the hope that conflict will arise in order to engage the learning process. When conflict occurs, the facilitator must not solve the conflict, rather observe the response, take note of strengths and growth areas, and mediate just enough to guide towards possible resolution. It is imperative, however, that the facilitator be open and honest about this role to prepare students; they need to be clear that the conflict is a good and necessary aspect of learning— in the classroom and in life.

- The ABCL environment may not be well suited for students with special needs that require high structure and standard routine. Further exploration into how ABCL might help this particular student population is an area of research that has yet to be adequately researched at the time of this publication.

- Facilitators may experience student resistance to ABCL. Standard thinking in school settings is very much based on individual achievement. The program is downloaded beginning in kindergarten and completely integrated as the standard operating system by college: "I go to *my* class, I take *my* notes, I study *my* book, I take *my* test, I get *my* grade." It's really all about me. ABCL is all about us. The motto is: "If one fails, we all fail." High achieving students may experience high anxiety around relying on others for their grades. Students who lack

confidence in what they can contribute to the community may also resist this motto. This is why it is imperative for the facilitator to model the character of ABCL. The pedagogy should be extensively explained both in word and deed. Exercises that exemplify the advantages of working as a community allow students to experience how working with others can uplift the whole.   Such activities should be introduced in the first several classes in order to get them invested at the onset. Still, in some cases, a student may continue to resist. The facilitator can determine if this is a teachable moment to resistance into resilience instilling a new skill of adaptability, or if opting out is a better option. The choice to "opt-out" of certain aspects of the collaborative experience can be offered with the understanding that the student will not be negatively impacted by choosing to do so, and can opt back in so long as it does not negatively impact community development.

Conclusion

"If one of us is chained none of us are free."

- Ray Charles

Merzirow's Transformative Learning Theory holds that childhood learning is derived from formal sources of authority, whereas transformative learning happens as an adult. ABCL challenges this model by suggesting that this learning can be introduced in childhood and can, in fact, be more readily received. By the time a child grows into an adult, learning continues from a more advanced level, speeding the evolution of human capacity to solve complex, systemic problems. Asset-Based Community Learning is not the answer to all that is ailing the educational system. ABCL does offer a more open, agile and inclusive process of learning that has the potential to have greater impact outside of the system until the system transforms.

Albert Einstein is noted for saying that "Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school." Why is this so? If our future depends on innovative thinking like Einstein's, why are we still teaching as they did in Einstein's day? Why are we not more intentionally teaching "what remains?" The root word in education—*duct*— means movement with the prefix *e* which means "out of." ABCL is a movement out of static systems, doing more than stepping outside of the box, but removing the box altogether. The process of attempting such movement creates opportunities for students to grow what remains: curiosity, imagination, an instinct to work collaboratively. Compassion and humility are modeled, helping to build character. Critical thinking and problem solving are regularly exercised as part of a skill set that will be used in daily life, in home with families, in relationships developed at work and in the community. ABCL develops persons as seekers, creators, tinkers, decision-makers, agents of change, and servant leaders. Ultimately, Asset-Based Community Learning promotes the desire to become a life-long learner, one who views self as an unique asset to creating sustainable, thriving communities.

Asset-Based Community Learning

1. Who is Dick Gregory, what does he identify as the problem with American education?

2. What is transformative education?

3. How might starting age-appropriate transformative learning in elementary school rather than adulthood be a benefit to students?

4. Paulo Freire states that the teacher "is one who is him/herself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow." How is this approach different that traditional learning environments?

5. How did students at California State University, Long Beach first respond to Asset-Based Community Learning (ABCL)?

6. Why is it important for the teacher to model compassion, humility, and vulnerability?

7. How might a more spiritual definition for compassion transform the way a teacher relates to students?

8. What affect might humility have on the spirit of a student?

9. How is vulnerability a strength rather than a weakness?

10. What concerns do black parents have with white teachers?

11. How are students more free in an ABCL environment?

12. How is ABCL a student-centered, relationship oriented pedagogy?

13. How might a pedagogy designed for historically marginalized student populations benefit learners who are not from these communities?

14. How is the structure of an ABCL environment different from a standard classroom structure?

15. How might the ABCL classroom help a student feel safe and connected?

16. How does the "telescopic nature of the evolutionary paradigm" compound "intelligence upon intelligence"?

17. Why is the use of language an important consideration in this pedagogical approach?

18. Which seven skills for survival identified by Tony Wagner are most likely to be practiced in an ABCL environment?

19. How is subject material used in ABCL?

20. How might ABCL increase the emotional intelligence of students?

21. Name one factor that ABCL uses to measure student success that is not assessed in the traditional learning environment.

22. What is the penalty for not knowing in ABCL?

23. What is the purpose of feedback when applying ABCL?

24. How does student perception of how much they are learning differ from actual results of active learning?

25. How is ABCL asset-based? Community-based?

26. BONUS QUESTION: Where is more research needed to strengthen ABCL?