



**Let's Talk and Engage: Dialogue, Empathy,
and Critical Insight in the Classroom and Work Setting :**
Back to the Bay Fall 2026

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Land Acknowledgement for California State University East Bay



Cal State University East Bay recognizes that it is located on the ethnohistoric territory of the Jalquin (hal-keen) / Yrgin (eer-gen), the ancestral and un-ceded land of the Chochenyo Ohlone speaking people. This land was and continues to be of great importance to the East Bay Ohlone Tribes and their familial descendants, as well as for the Bay Miwok, and Delta Yokut people. We recognize that every member of the CSUEB community has, and continues to benefit from, the use and occupation of this land, since the institution's founding in 1957.

Consistent with our values of community, inclusion, and diversity, we have a responsibility to acknowledge and make visible the university's relationship to the East Bay Ohlone people and their unbroken relationship with this land. It is vitally important that we not only understand and honor the history of this land we call home and where we work, but also that we commit to supporting local Indigenous nations through actions by advocating for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, and to amplify and strengthen Indigenous voices, stories, perspectives, and narratives. We honor their past, present, and future generations, who have lived here for millennia and will forever call this place home.

Year of Dialogue and Structured Engagement



Two Years of Difficult Dialogue Facilitator Training for CSU System (continuing into future)

- Employee program open to all CSU campus employees, twice a year.
- Four cohorts, Fall 2024, Spring 2025, Fall 2025, Spring 2026
- Zoom in as campus from well-equipped Zoom Room. Small group and pair work with campus colleagues.
- ~500 employees trained across system.

First Year Experience-Summer Orientation 2026

- Dialogue and empathy skills for critical thinking, and norming active engagement in interaction with faculty and staff and peers.

Back to the Bay Dialogue and Empathy Plenary Coffee and Chat

Online Block Party-Structured Interaction and Engagement for Online Students

COMMUNITY NORMS

- 1. Confidentiality-** You are a part of the leadership team. This work is hard, heavy intellectual and emotional lifting to learn about systemic racism and systemic inequity and how it is manifested in daily work and interaction. We ask you to keep these sessions and their content confidential.
- 2. Empathy & Listening-** Both cognitive (perspective taking on the details and context and affective (emotional). Make effort to understand another's experience.
- 3. Take Ownership of Ideas-** "I perceive that as racist to my group," or "I perceive that some people may find that racist or exclusionary." Rather than, "that is racist," or "you are homophobic."
- 4. Supportive/Active listening/participating-Nods,** ask supportive questions, and check for accuracy of your own understanding. Work to use listening when appropriate, but not as a crutch to avoid sharing.

COMMUNITY NORMS

5.Connection and relating is NOT always identification. Identification can erase others. Do use careful dis-identification. Resist saying “me too” or “I know exactly how you feel” OR “This happens to my group too.” Instead use, “That sounds awful. I don’t know exactly how it feels but what you described is terrible.”

6.Disagreement and conflict are a natural part of relationships. Though it may be uncomfortable in the moment, the goal is not to get to a point of agreement, nor to suppress disagreement. Acknowledging and listening to different perspectives should take precedence over persuading agreement. Intent is different than impact.

7.Mind the traffic and the gap in turn-taking. Is your turn taking and talk time approximating power and status differentials by rank, gender, race/ethnicity, educational status, academic affairs/student affairs, etc.?

8.Remember: The most powerful organizational learning is in shared learning spaces. Do your part to make it shared. Process dynamics in this work are important.

16 to 25 Year Olds Developing Key Cognitive Capacity



Pre-Frontal Cortex not fully developed

- Capacity for reasoning, decision-making, judgement, and impulse control
- Limbic system responsible for emotional and behavioral responses is almost fully operational around age 12.
- Gap between these two means limbic can easily override the developing pre-frontal cortex processing.

16 to 25 Year Olds Developing Key Cognitive Capacity

Hot & Cold Cognition

Cold Cognition

- Thinking that takes place under ideal conditions fairly developed in 16 to 25 year olds.

Hot Cognition

- Thinking that takes place under conditions of emotional or social arousal and contradicting information (Steinberg, 2015). Ability to override emotional arousal, anxiety, fears, ambiguity is not developed in 16 to 25 year olds.

With most adults as they mature, experience, and ability to focus on rewards, positive connections, ability to overcome and survive failure decreases the ability of emotions and chaotic circumstances to negatively impact cognitive function.

16 to 25 Year Olds
Developing Key
Cognitive Capacity

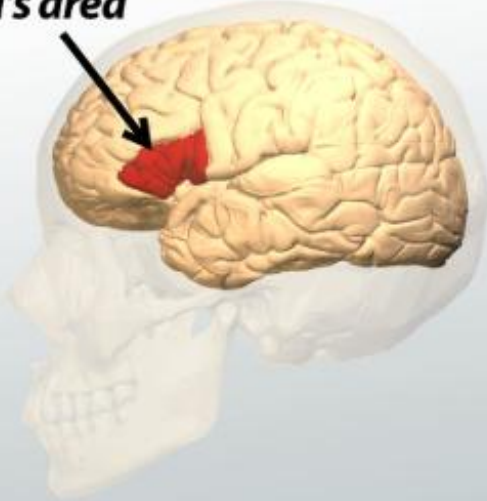
Increase cognitive
performance under
hot cognition
conditions

Classroom and Structural Adjustments in the Student Workplace

- **Provide clear grading rubrics or performance rubrics:** Give students detailed guidelines before assignments to lower anxiety about the unknown.
- **Offer low-stakes practice:** Use ungraded quizzes to help students get used to exam material without the emotional pressure of a grade. Develop low stakes practice sessions for front desk protocols or phone answering protocols.
- **Build in reflection pauses:** Stop a heated class discussion or work discussion for two minutes to let students write their thoughts down privately before speaking.
- **Allow flexible deadlines:** Offer a short grace period on assignments to reduce panic-driven submissions and late-night stress.

Talking and Learning and Lone Learning

Broca's area



©Study

Talking Boosts Intellectual Growth

- **Active engagement:** Back-and-forth dialogue forces you to test, shape, and fix your ideas in real time.
- **Brain growth:** Spoken exchanges stimulate brain regions like **Broca's area**, which handles language and cognitive processing.
- **Instant feedback:** Talking with others exposes gaps in your logic and introduces fresh viewpoints you might miss on your own.

Lone Learning Reinforces Depth/Breadth of Knowledge and Long-Term Memory

- **Deep focus:** Studying alone allows long blocks of uninterrupted time to master hard facts.
- **Self-pacing:** You can slow down or speed up to fit your personal learning style.
- **Strong memory:** Quiet reading and solo reflection help lock information into long-term memory without social distractions.

Talking and Dialogue Boosts Cognitive Complexity

Key mechanism is real time multiple perspective taking and adjustments of your own perspective as you listen and interact at the literal word and meaning level.

Very different than debate, where you defend a perspective, interpretation, or position.

Another key process is scaffolding meta level framing on top of the actual talking or dialogue.

- For example, “So that helps me shift my perspective a little, because now I understand that this aspect is not something I have thought of before.”

Integrative Complexity in Intelligence



Integrative Complexity

How people process information by assessing their ability to see multiple sides of an issue (differentiation) and connect them into a coherent whole (integration).

Able to:

- focus on the structure of thought, not just content.
- form conceptual links and understand the specific interrelationships between different viewpoints on a problem or project.
- handle ambiguity, make decisions, and solve problems, especially in high-pressure or uncertain situations like political crises.

People and teams with higher IC are able to embrace nuance, leading to more effective synthesis of complex data, while lower IC often shows black-and-white thinking.

Integrative Complexity in Intelligence

Any difference is a threat
Change becomes a threat
Disagreement is a threat
Hierarchies of
power determine value of
perspectives.

Traditional ways and
processes bound up
ideation.

**Opposite of Integrative
Complexity is
Authoritarianism/Dogmatism.**

Unable to handle conflict,
ambiguity, and pushes people to
solution quickly which shuts down
innovative or conflicting thoughts
that do not align.

Quick to "no" or "yes," everything
gets sorted into buckets
immediately. Funnel thinking, get
down to the solution.

Integrative Complexity & Innovation in Teams

Integrative complexity enables innovation by supporting nuanced problem framing, synthesis of diverse ideas, and tolerance for ambiguity—but it must be balanced with decisiveness and execution to translate insight into impact.

Very high integrative complexity can have downsides:

- Overthinking
- Decision paralysis
- Difficulty committing to a single path

Innovation tends to peak when Integrative Complexity is paired with:

- **Motivation to act**
- **Tolerance for risk**
- **Execution discipline**
- **Sometimes even a temporary reduction in IC during implementation**



High Integrative Complexity & Innovation in Teams



Better problem framing

Innovation often depends more on how a problem is framed than on the solution itself.

- See problems as systems, not isolated parts
- Notice trade-offs rather than false binaries (e.g., “efficiency and creativity,” not one vs the other)
- *Reframe constraints as design inputs*
- Leads to more original problem definitions, which is a known precursor to breakthrough innovation.

Synthesis → novelty

Most innovations recombine existing ideas rather than inventing from scratch.

- Combining ideas from **different domains**
- Bridging conflicting goals (e.g., user needs vs technical limits)
- Generating hybrid solutions that wouldn't emerge from single-perspective thinking

Important in **interdisciplinary innovation** (tech + design + policy, etc.).

High Integrative Complexity & Innovation in Teams

Team Interaction & Psychological tolerance for ambiguity & conflict

- Openness to dissent, disagreement, dialogue, debate (4 d's of innovation)
- Can explore multiple solution paths in parallel without feeling threatened and cross-pollinate ideas.
- Ability to integrate diverse viewpoints and ideas.
- Don't rush to premature closure, elimination, or narrowing
- Comfortable with incomplete information, changing information, and ambiguity
- More productive conflict
- Avoid groupthink
- More cross-team expertise and willingness to discuss across disciplines or departments

Shao, Y., Nijstad, B. A., & Täuber, S. (2019). Creativity under workload pressure and integrative complexity: The double-edged sword of paradoxical leadership. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 155, 7–19.

Zamora-Maldonado, M., Plaza-Ferreira, M., Orozco, Y., Espinoza-Juarez, V., & Serra-Barragán, L. (2023). Current research trends on cognition, integrative complexity, and decision-making. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1156696.

Tetlock, P. E., McGuire, C. B., & Mitchell, G. (1995). Psychological perspectives on integrative complexity. In *Complexity in political decision making* (pp. 43–77). University of Michigan Press.



Science of Cognitive Empathy & Integrative Complexity



Cognitive Empathy-

Building Block of Integrative Complexity

Deep perspective taking and the ability to identify or understand why someone may think, feel, and behave the way they do, EVEN if their perspective is very different from your own.

Cognitive empathy requires you to hold your own perspectives in check to deeply learn and become literate in someone else's perspectives, ideas, and thinking while resisting the cognitive trap of mostly thinking about how your ideas are threatened or being challenged.

Maintain literacy on multiple perspectives without having cognitive dissonance that results in cognitive paralysis.

Gurin, P., Nagda, B. (Ratnesh) A., & Zúñiga, X. (Eds.). (2013). *Dialogue Across Difference: Practice, Theory, and Research on Intergroup Dialogue*. Russell Sage Foundation.
[Encyclopedia of Human Behavior \(Second Edition\), 2012](#)

Science of Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive Empathy

Becoming literate about other people's possible perspectives and ideas.

Being able to imagine what other people's perspectives might be if they are not present.

Being able to communicate what other perspectives might be to the team.

This is a SKILL.



Intergroup Active Listening Promotes Cognitive Empathy

- Cognitive empathy is deep perspective taking so that you can explain why someone may think and feel the way that they do.
- It helps us bypass bias pathways in our working memory.
- Your working memory is not something you can direct.



Active Listening

HEARING VS. LISTENING

HEARING

- Accidental
- Involuntary
- Effortless

LISTENING

- Focused
- Voluntary
- Intentional



Active Listening

- **Demonstrate Attention**
 - Make good eye contact
 - Listen to focus on understanding, rather than to respond
- **Give Feedback**
 - Verbal and non-verbal
- **Reflect and rephrase to check for accuracy**
- **Ask good questions**



Intergroup Active Listening

- Position yourself relative to the listener
 - As someone who has only been on campus for a semester...
 - As someone who did not grow up here..
 - As someone who grew up here...
 - As someone who is not a woman, I have not had that experience, can you explain a little more? Thanks...
 - As someone who is a parent, I have experienced something similar, but I would like to hear more about how you are experiencing this.



Over-Identification and Active Listening

- Saying "Me too," or "I know exactly how you feel," may not be helpful in terms of connecting with someone and learning about their perspective.
- Why would this be?



Intergroup Active Listening Exercise



Why Empathy is Important in Learning

(J. Medina, University of Washington)

Empathy frees up cognitive and affective brain space:

- Motivation
- Meta-level thinking, beyond rote learning



How Do We Use Cognitive Empathy?

Speaking Cognitive Empathy into the Classroom or Workspace. Bell Curve of Perspectives.

Goal: Make people feel heard without having to speak or feeling pressure to disclose. Student or co-worker can feel they are being empathized with merely through listening.

“Our next paper is due in 2 weeks, check your syllabus. You may have some questions bring them to next class.”

For some of you, you may be experienced in writing papers so you may only have a few informational questions, for some of you, you may be anxious because you have never written such an extensive paper, for some of you, this has already been a difficult semester for academic or personal reasons so you are anxious or maybe you are even retaking this class. For all of you, I am here for you.



How Do We Use Cognitive Empathy?

Speaking Cognitive Empathy into the Classroom or Workspace. Bell Curve of Perspectives.

You are doing three things:

Normalizing the range of perspectives and lived experiences in the room which reduces unnecessary internal dialogues about whether the professor/or supervisor will understand them.

Creating cognitive empathy among students, staff, and faculty for future interactions in one-on-ones small groups or within class or workspace.

You are supporting and scaffolding meta-learning, meaning helping student focus on the mechanics of learning, not just the assignment or task.



How Do We Use Cognitive Empathy?

Speaking Cognitive Empathy into the Classroom or Workspace. Bell Curve of Perspectives

Goal: Make people feel heard without having to speak or feeling pressure to disclose. Student or co-worker can feel they are being empathized with merely through listening.

Practice in Small Groups.

Share a situation in your workplace. Classroom or Program Office, for example.

Practice a sample script of the range of experiences and perspectives.



Personal Identity & Social Identity

- ❖ **Social identity** refers to people's self-categorizations in relation to their societal group memberships (the “we”).
 - These categorizations are often assigned to us or something we are born into within society.
 - These social identity groups have been historically valued differently in a hierarchy from each other.
 - Examples include race, ethnicity, gender, sex, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, religion/religious beliefs, national origin, and emotional, and developmental disabilities and abilities.

- **Theoretical Frameworks on Identity**

- **Personal and Social Identity**

- Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups to people belong are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world.

- **Personal identity** refers to the unique ways that people define themselves as individuals (the “I”). Personal Identity markers are often the things we choose to define us throughout our lives - team affiliation, musical tastes, and style.

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Ingroups/Outgroups

An **ingroup** is a social identity group whose members and identity are valued more highly in society in terms of esteem, access to resources, and opportunities. They are often the reference group to which outgroups are compared.

An **outgroup** is a social identity group whose members and identity are valued less in society in terms of esteem, access to resources, and opportunities. They are often seen as not deserving of the same esteem, resources, or opportunities as those in the ingroup.

In both ingroups and outgroups members feel a sense of loyalty within groups and a sense of competition across groups. There often is historical prejudice between groups.

Social Identity Exercise



Discussion Questions

Discuss in your group of four:

- Share ONE perspective that you learned from someone else on one of the social identities that you found particularly informative, interesting, enlightening, appreciative, etc.
- Share ONE thing that you learned about yourself that was enlightening as you shared a particular social identity.

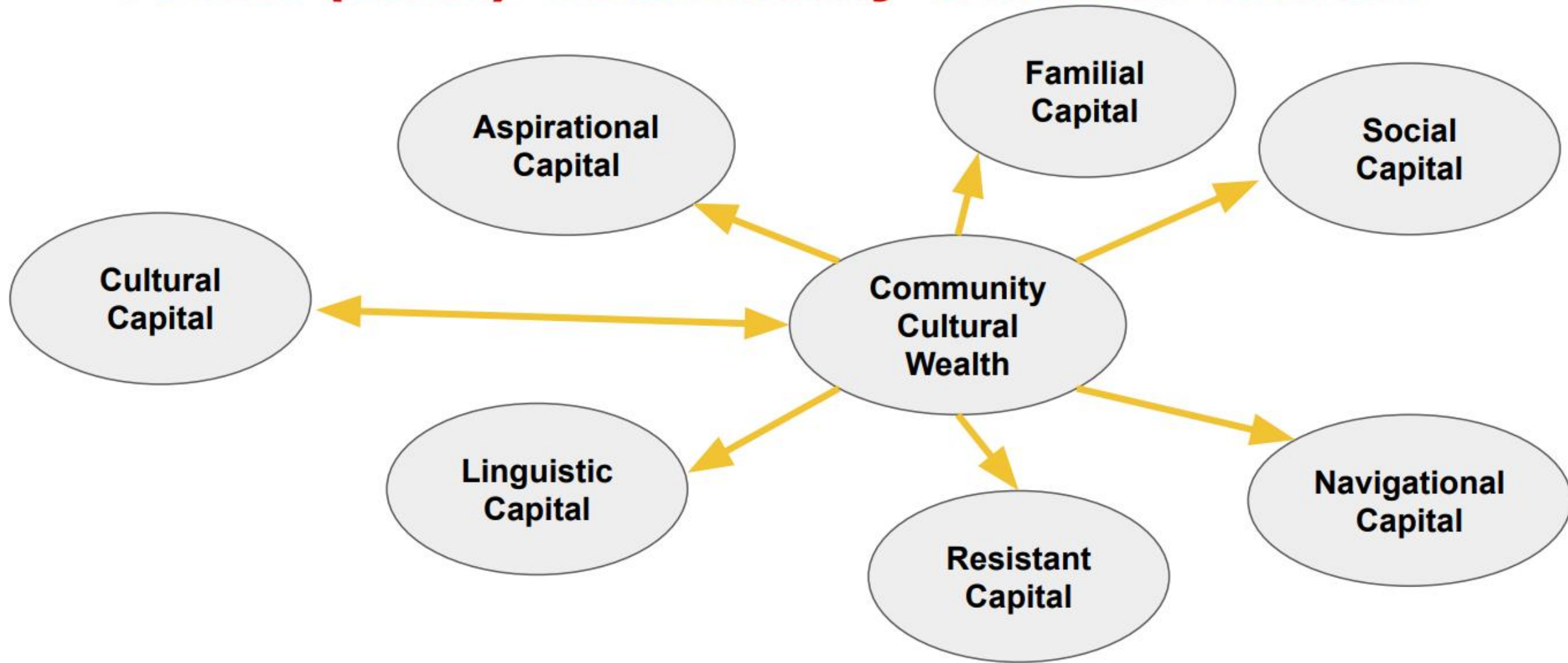
Prepare to share one perspective from your group. Ask permission. It must be another person's perspective, not your own.

Ask for permission to share a perspective from another person with another group.

Keep it to three sentences so everyone can share.



Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth



Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth

Aspirational capital is the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality. Yet, aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts, often through linguistic storytelling and advice (consejos) that offer specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions.

Therefore, aspirational capital overlaps with each of the other forms of capital, social, familial, navigational, linguistic and resistant.

Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth

Linguistic capital-Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills.

May have skills from storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories (cuentos) and proverbs (dichos).

May have served as translators for parents and other relatives, linguistically adept at code and language switching.

Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth

Familial Capital An expansive concept of kinship or familial relations which can include elderly and extended families.

Can include friends, relatives' friends, community friends from church or community organizations.

Our kin also model lessons of caring, coping and providing which inform emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness.

Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth

Social Capital networks of people, community resources, peers and social contacts who provide instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions

Navigational Capital Various social and psychological 'critical navigational skills to maneuver through structures of inequality permeated by inequality.

Resistance Capital Knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality

CASE #1 The Problem with Coalitions

Your course focus this week is on the history of building coalitions. During class discussion a student shares that the term diversity is problematic. They share that Black and Indigenous people are often erased in diversity work and excluded by believing that all experiences of discrimination are similar. They have a problem with the common statement that “our coalition is so diverse” because it’s mostly Asian American and Latinx students. They state that the term people of color or the use of the term BIPOC can erase the tokenization of highly marginalized groups such as Indigenous groups. They also share that even the term “diverse/diversity” can be toxic when wielded inappropriately. The whole class gets quiet and some students start looking at their phones, their feet or the wall. What was once a lively discussion feels loaded with tension.

What are the different perspectives possible in the room?

How might you introduce perspectives into the discussion?

What can you use from what you have learned today to shape your intervention?

Describe how you might facilitate this discussion.

Discuss the risks and benefits of the actions you might take.

CASE #2- Camera Off/Camera On

In one of your on-line classes you notice that there is a pattern of more students having their cameras off when international students are giving presentations. You have actually watched cameras switched off as the presentation starts. You notice that the student presenters look very unnerved as they also see the cameras switch off. You realize that you have never noticed it before. Has it been happening all along and you never noticed?

What are the possible perspectives in the class?

What lived experiences have you had or have access to that can inform how you intervene in the class?

How do you facilitate a classroom discussion on this?’

What can you use from what you have learned today to shape your intervention?

What strategies can you use to set up on-line participation?

Discuss the risks and benefits of the actions you might take.

CASE #3- It's Your Culture and Passion So It's Not Really Work

It is the end of April and you lead a large department. You meet with your team on Monday mornings. With the end of the school year looming, it is the time of year that you are expecting your team to be writing and submitting annual reports. One of your Latinx colleagues, Teresa, had just completed a major event that engaged community members, high school students and their families from Oakland on Saturday. The event was a big success. At your previous staff meeting, you had reminded your team about the pending deadline for annual reports. During this meeting, Teresa asks for more time to complete the report as she was very focused on the event. At least two other staff members sit back in their chairs and audibly sigh. Carole, a White woman who has worked in the department for the past 10 years and who is working with Teresa on a budget project, reminds Teresa that she needs a response from her regarding the final numbers from the event so that Carole can complete her reports. Always a sarcastic and generally fun person, Carole quips that “while you were having fun at your event doing work that you love, we have all been getting our work done. We are waiting on you.”

Discuss the following while reviewing your case:

- What do you think is going on here?
- Discuss the perspectives of each of the people involved.
- What can you use from what you learned today to frame your understanding of this situation?
- Describe what actions you might take.
- Discuss the risks and benefits of the actions you might take.

California is the Place of Cultural Innovation and Material Innovation



Research has shown that “*diversity of thought based in lived experiences and culture*” drives innovation:

- **Increased employee and community engagement.** When individuals feel included and valued, they are more likely to engage robustly and be motivated to contribute, challenge, coach, and learn from others. Less identity-protecting behavior.
- **Expanded problem-solving and decision-making practices and skills.** More effective at identifying and analyzing complex problems with no easy answer or design because they are more likely to see a range of approaches that may be valid for consideration. This way of thinking becomes habit.
- **Continual improvement and curiosity about diverse markets.** The diversity of employees and participants is better equipped to to understand that there may be different market needs or market behaviors.

*** The Workplace Case for More Diversity. The Wall Street Journal. Deiter Holgren. Oct. 26, 2019. The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy (Our Compelling Interests). Scott Page, 2017. The Power Of Diversity In Innovation Teams. David Hengartner, Forbes, Oct. 24, 2024.*

Bringing It All Together

Talking through perspectives and dialogue using cognitive empathy are key tools that can be used to create:

- a sense of cognitive safety while also creating a higher tolerance for multiple and contradicting perspectives and interpretations of information, data, and experiences.
- meta thinking pathways about interaction, learning, and motivation.
- integrative cognitive complexity.
- shared commitments and appreciation of the diversity and variety of experiences, skills, challenges, and areas of improvement.
- agency to connect and seek social support when encountering challenging situations.



Thank you!

- Q & A

