**Multiperspectivity: The Case for Culturally Responsive Learning Space**

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Abstract

*"Multiperspectivity" accepts as a fact that effective learning in the twenty-first century will result best from a realization that modern challenges are multifarious. They are complex, whole-society-based, and global. These challenges are most successfully met, addressed, and resolved by promoting a "culturally responsive learning space" engaging learners and teacher alike in critical, interactive "multilogue". Exemplary ways already exist that facilitate the incorporation of multiperspectivity across the curriculum, in sciences hard and soft, in humanities, and in the arts.*

*The present paper comprises a study, analysis, and discussion of multiperspectivity. The paper contains three primary parts, which can be summarized as: Definitions, Exploitations, and Proselytization*

Part 1 – Definitions, realizations: What and why

What? *Multiperspectivity* has been defined in both *idealized theory* and *realized fact*; that is, theoreticians have set forth what it is in their minds as a concept, and practitioners have demonstrated how that concept may be—and is--"realized" or exemplified on the ground, in various societies and assorted academic domains. Too, and quite naturally, both theoreticians and practitioners have considered the *why* of *multiperspectivity*.

The definition of *multiperspectivity*, sometimes alternatively called *polyperspectivity,* comprises the notion of a pluralized point of view. That is, the term means literally “more than one way of looking at something”. Linguistically and conceptually related to the notions of plurality, perspective, and point of view, the word implies “a relationship, rather than a concrete entity” (Niederhoff, 2011), which connects the viewing subject and the viewed object.

As such an abstract, theoretically connective notion, *multiperspectivity* suggests that “values,” “position”, and “personality” have an influence on how what is presented by whom to whom, as Niederhoff (2011) has opined. Indeed, as Niederhoff has noted, the term “perspective” that is at the base of *multiperspectivity* “can be spatial, but does also imply ideological and emotional stances.” Niederhoff adds that references to “point of view” in definitions of both “perspective” and *multiperspectivity* “already hint at the many facets of the concept,” *concrete* as well as *abstract* (Liewald, 2017).

Of course, the *concrete* side of *multiperspectivity* has been expressed in the arts for hundreds of years; clearly, theatrical presentations performed in the round, sculptures and works of architecture, as well as songs that are interpreted in varying ways, all exemplify the concept.

Why? As Richards (2013) has written, humans have since time immemorial wanted to share with one another their views of the world and the things within it. Telling tales, singing songs, and recounting epic poems served them well in concrete, face-to-face situations, and sculptures and carvings offered them good possibilities to leave lasting images to others, but people also wanted to lay out on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional notion, “creating an illusion of (offering) a window through which the immobile eye of the observer looks at an outside, three-dimensional world.” What [Richards](https://10perspective.weebly.com/artwork.html) calls “efforts to create a 3D effect” became notable to westerners during the Renaissance, when vanishing points, colors, light sources, and shading offered popular new ways for artists to show observers what was close and what was far away, all at once. This is artistic perspective.

With increasingly fast transmission of data, news, facts, and opinions, delivered as numbers, words, or images, we humans must learn how to use mental perspective, too. Skills of “critical analysis… interrogating what (these things) tell us about the way things are and why…seeing beyond the familiar and the comfortable, understanding that (everything transmitted) are informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives whether conscious or otherwise” (Clarke and Whitney, 2011); these skills must be honed, so that the beliefs and perspectives may be accepted and then analyzed. Indeed, as Clarke and Whitney continue, “multiple meanings” underlie just about every message, every datum transmitted; we must always regard everything, they advise us, “through the consideration of *perspective, positioning*, and *power*.” It might be noted, in this latter regard, that *general semanticists* have, since at least the time of their primary influencer, Count Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), held the notion that we humans inhabit “a world that just isn’t what it really is” (Sharp, 2015). The general semanticist, a person “who never steps in the same river twice”, as some say, holds that “the public is conditioned by the institutions of the status quo and fed with the hope that their leaders understand what is needed.” And in a world whose leaders very often “lack scientific understanding of problem solving, scientific understanding of humankind and of the world we live in,” as Sharp (2015) summarizes Korzybski’s beliefs to have been, “we need a *new* science, a *human* science, with more than a simple symmetry.” Our world is nuanced, the general semanticist states, colored by the hues that alternative human perspectives cast upon it; our descriptive system “must be non-symmetrical… with order expressed only in terms of asymmetrical relations, such as before, after, greater, more, less, above, past, etc.”

As Matherne (2003) has written in a review of Korzybski’s major opus, *Science and Sanity*, “general semantics…takes into account the living individual, not divorcing him from his reaction…but allocating him a plenum of some values….The analysis of such living reactions is the sole object of general semantics as a natural empirical science.” The general semanticist holds that “whatever we may say an object is, it is not, because the statement is verbal, and the facts are not.” Each human statement naturally diverges from the next; each expresses a perspective.

*Multiperspectivity* is therefore significant because it recognizes the diversity of humankind, the variations in each human’s reactions to the outside world, and the need we humans have to share our reactions for understanding and progress.

*Part one question*: How would/can YOU define *multiperspectivity* in your own words and in your own life, both academic and day-to-day?

Part 2 – Exploitations: How and where

*Multiperspectivity* can enrich everyone’s life. It stimulates thinking about everything. It can be used in religious and political systems, as well as in societies as a whole. Thus and of course, it can be exploited in any academic domain, as well, where it can begin to be deployed on day one in any class.

How? Seventeenth-century Theatine priest and writer Camillo-Guarino Guarini lived at a time when distinctions between religion, politics, and the various arts tended to blur, when drama, vitality, movement, tension, and the belief in emotional exuberance were keys. People of the 1600’s enjoyed taking advantage of the multiple perspectives with which we are born to look at things in alternative, joy-filling ways. This was the epoch commonly called “baroque”, a time when grand ideas led to grand things. Indeed, Guarini was not just a writer-cleric, like many priests of the day; he was also a mathematician and an architect. Guarini is said to have “retained the objective harmony of the Renaissance” in his work, while “using the most advanced mathematical techniques of the day” (All-Art, n.d.) in designing palaces, theaters, royal homes, and religious structures. In doing these things, he conceived exemplarily in Italy’s Santa Sindoni what some have called “a kind of miracle,” “projected on the basis of multiples of three (the Trinity) and perfect figures (circle, triangle, and star), an explicit reference to the universe moving towards sunlight…and Salvation” (Barberis and Zaccone, 2015). Guarini, a religious man entranced by light, art, and shapes, wanted to, and did, create in the Santa Sindoni chapel, designed to house the Shroud of Turin, “a realm of pure illusion…a huge kaleidoscope…an endless funnel of space,” conceived with the help of exact mathematics married to the hope that each visitor to the building would realize in *experiencing* it his own unique multiple perspectives.

Nearly 350 years later, in the early twenty-first century, when faith, politics, and self-expression, as well as history, literature, and the arts, along with the society enfolding them and the justice regulating them, have gone beyond blurred distinctions and now overlap or overlie one another, tools such as the American Library of Congress’s “Teaching with Primary Sources” (TPS) lay out objectively the “multiple perspectives and challenges” facing educators essaying to teach curious students what is what. For example, Bean Creative’s Masri and Soares (2019) have deployed TPS tools as resources underlying rhetorical questions posed in their civics-centered CaseMaker program, such as: Does it matter when people express their political ideas? Do things change if/when that happens? Is it a good thing when opposing groups express their ideas, even when they disagree? What’s the point of voting about anything? Masri and Soares have conceived “challenges” in CaseMaker that exemplify problem-based learning tasks, in which real-world conundrums are addressed with reference to historical documents, along with timeless and time-sensitive multiple media.

Exploiting problem-based learning—along with its larger, more theoretical, “messier” educational umbrella, project-based learning---is in fact the very essence of what *multiperspectivity* does, by definition, as the general semanticist would point out, noting that projects very literally cast us forward (pro- + ject), move us, leave us never stationary or unchanged. As Masri and Soares (2019) write, “challenges… entail the expression of differing, changing opinions…multiple perspectives.” Masri and Soares’s CaseMaker Challenges incorporate sample questions that express a problem, and these lead to further inquiry. Learners are invited to use data—facts—to support well-reasoned opinions, usually colored by perspective. And to discover what each differing opinion is, as Short (2018) has written, fellow students “develop confidence in their ability to craft meaningful questions and share their responses.” They learn how to structure their perspectives, so that they will stand in context.

As Stevens (2000) has written, the notion of project-based or problem-based learning (PBL) is commonly thought of as something of “soft science,” in which knowledge is “applied to a real-world problem…for an authentic learning experience.” PBL should not be restricted by academics in this way, however, Stevens maintains, suggesting that problems and projects exist in every human and academic domain. Thus, “Project-based mathematics (PBM), “ Stevens continues, comprises “the ethnomethodological, whereby the orientations of the students or the teacher or both toward events, representations, or actions as ‘mathematical’ provide the analytical basis for selecting and analyzing them…” Stevens proposes that “problems in PBM emerge in the process of pursuing non-mathematical objectives, such as designing a livable building…planning and emplacing a vivarium in an Antarctic research station, etc.” Stevens summarizes his stance: “we need analytical tools that can recognize and analyze mathematics *in* an activity, not only *as* an activity.” Stevens would have us all open our minds to alternative perspectives; “differences between students are critical,” he writes, but effective deployment of a mathematical point of view can help teachers and students to arrive at “a cooperative sense-making situation,” in which multiple perspectives are recognized.

Where? Mathematics instructor Brett Stevens (2000), cited above, would have his students leap right into the notion of multiple perspectives by tossing out to those learners on the first day of class a “mathematical application”, rather than the arithmetic tests or placement/level tests of mathematical—or simply arithmetic—ability that usually take up early-in-term math sessions. Stevens states that he wants his students to see from day one that an “application (is a) simulation of some part of the real world…with many different solutions and paths to solutions.” These applications, usually architectural or botanical, environmental and social, are “anchoring events” in Stevens’s mathematics classes; the linear and numerical, geometrical, and formulaic craft that are anchored to them may be seen from numerous perspectives. Stevens states that the socioeconomic heterogeneity of many twenty-first century classrooms has made his early-in-term project-planning both fun and enlightening. Heterogeneity brings with it *multiperspectivity.*

A clear, simple example of Niederhoff’s aforementioned claim about the nature of *multiperspectivity* can be seen in southern California teacher Ian Byrd’s “flexible thinking” exercises. That is, just as Niederhoff wanted us to recognize that *multiperspectivity* comprises things “ideological and emotional”, as well as things “spatial,” so does Byrd deploy exercises in *multiperspectivity* in which “students will become comfortable with complex situations that have multiple ‘right’ answers…welcom(ing) others’ viewpoints and opinions” (Byrd, 2009). “It is essential that our students think flexibly and consider multiple perspectives,” Byrd writes. “Flexible thinking leads to innovation, creativity, and diplomacy…”.

Byrd (2009) uses maps, words, and names on the first day of class to “hook” students into accepting alternative points of view and, he hopes, the abstract and concrete realizations of *multiperspectivity.*

The teacher enters the classroom holding a Big Gulp-style cup or an aluminum can. “What do you call the stuff inside here?” he asks. “Is it soda? Is it Coca Cola or Coke? Is it pop?” He then flashes a [map](http://popvssoda.com/countystats/total-county.html) on a screen before the class, and the students are fascinated. None of the names for the drink can be called right or wrong, but they are indeed different. Hmm… one thing can have more than one name! Students begin to ask one another where they come from, how their parents call the drinks, where those people came from, how and why such different names may have arisen for one thing. Perspectives broaden.

Then, Byrd asks his students to think about their own names. He tells them that he himself is called by various appellations in various contexts: “Students call me Mr. Byrd, friends call me Ian or Byrd, my wife calls me ‘honey’, my sister calls me ‘bubba’, and my mom calls me ‘bubby boo.’ I won’t let anyone else call me that one.”

Even in graduate school, the need for a *multiperspective* approach to things can be made plain and fun from day one. For example, City University of New York’s Limor Pinhasi-Vittorio begins graduate seminars on “Literacy in the Twenty-first Century” with a song; students are asked to listen to the music, read the lyrics, and then “describe the images that came to their minds; what you see.” Pinhasi-Vittorio writes that she is “curious to see how different or similar the images would be; each (student) imagined or created a different story in their minds.” Thus begins, writes Pinhasi-Vittorio, “the conversation about the importance of accepting multiple perspectives…the role of imagination and empathy in opening awareness…”

Pinhasi-Vittorio is one of many educators to have noticed that “awareness of different ways of understanding a text or an idea” can happen “optimally…through the use of art, the physical experience, and the making of art/poetry/music.”

As Giralt-Miracle (2008) has written of the artist Pablo Picasso, “any technique…eclecticism” might be exploitable at any moment, in any domain, to stimulate thought. It is “the variety of processes and ways of understanding…; there is not just one. But multiple ways of looking at the world, and they all attempt to get close to reality.” As the general semanticist would say, not all reality that one takes to be “objective” is indeed objective; our multiple perspectives may be in play in ways we hardly realize or recognize.

*Part two question:* How might YOU exploit *multiperspectivity*, using techniques similar to those described above, or otherwise? Do you teach in/work in a discipline that depends upon/takes advantage of *multiperspectivity*? How so?

Part 3 – Explanation and proselytism: When and how?

 A *multiperspective* approach can and does change students' understanding of a particular question, and it will change how they might interact with that question in their lives, every day. Since one of the essences of learning entails question-asking, students must begin right away, in any class, feeling comfortable about asking, not just about what happened, but about the effects of what happened upon varying groups of people, themselves perhaps and others of course. The National History Education Clearinghouse (2019) proposes that students ask questions that lead to other questions, gradually diving deeper to “think critically and make personal and civic decisions based on information from multiple perspectives.” Too, the Clearinghouse suggests, students are reminded to ask their questions in the clearest way possible, without buzzwords. If definitions of terms are required, questions about those must be posed, too. Explanation leads to clarification, to groundwork-laying. Students need not have the same perspective about the ground being worked upon, but they know its makeup and can make reasoned decisions about it from there.

When? When is the best time to meld the *multiperspective* into a learning experience? Teacher Ian Byrd would say, “now!” Byrd feels that getting learners to ask questions and to think must happen almost randomly, unexpectedly, keeping them on their mental toes and prepared for the multiple. As New York Times arts journalist Brenson (1989) wrote of cubism, which he called “the most influential development in 20th-century art,” the notions of “instability, indeterminacy, and multiple points of view” have become since the early 1900’s “staples of the modern.” These are the new timelessnesses of our time; they define *multiperspectivity*.

If the geography teacher walks into the classroom on day one and turns the room’s wall map upside-down or gives a twist to the globe so that its poles are reversed, students will get a new view, really and physically. If the history teacher, in encouraging cross-cultural and cross-epochal empathy asks students how their feelings, opinions, awareness might change upon finding out that the Cherokee proverb “walk a mile in his moccasins before you abuse, criticize, and accuse” is actually a line from the nineteenth-century American Methodist minister and poetess Mary T. Lathrap’s “Judge Softly”, then those students will begin to question their accepted mindsets. If the mathematics teacher proposes that all student scoring on tests is to be done this term in base 2, then those learners will learn quickly how to calculate with a different approach. If “foreign” language teachers require that questions be posed, haltingly or otherwise, in the “target” language that is being learned, they will soon have a new outlook.

How? The Guggenheim Museum’s Jan Avigkos (n.d.) points out that one of the essences of *multiperspectivity* is that “configurations exist as clues that must be pieced together…the total image must be ‘thought’ as much as ‘seen.’” As the aforementioned foreign language instructor knows, concepts in a new language are imagined, thought, and then, much later, expressed. Mathematics teachers know that the mathophobes in their classes have to get over the obstacle of fear before they can have fun with formulas, not to mention the knowns and unknowns in them. As Byrd suggests, the best way to incorporate *multiperspectivity* into any subject matter is to know one’s students, to understand their means of attacking the new, and to lead them with gentle questions and guidance each into a new point of view. Making learners realize that learning things means creating new interpretations is key.

As the National History Education Clearinghouse points out, much “traditional history” has always “focus(ed) on dominant groups and communities…(whereas) good historians don’t just settle for one perspective on a historical issue—they piece together many sometimes competing versions of a story to construct an accurate interpretation…multiple perspectives are usual.” In the twenty-first century, when classrooms are dotted with diversity, and when multiple media can be called upon to create facts-and-data mashups, the *multiperspectivity* of our epoch may in fact be this century’s new cubism, at once “bold and solicitous, impetuous, and exciting,” (Avigkos).

*Part three question*: Can you please suggest when/at what point what sorts of exercises in multiperspectivity can and should be incorporated into your course curricula? Can you give an example of an instance when multiperspectivity changed students’ understanding?

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