Teaching for Diversity, Inclusion and Equity: The Expanding Comfort Zone Model

When teaching for diversity, inclusion and equity, teaching and learning become messy, challenging and uncertain. Such teaching messes around with the status quo, existing mainstream knowledges, frameworks, truths, and power. Learners are being confronted with new perspectives and experiences different from their own. Assumptions and ideas that they have held as true and self-evident are being disrupted, worldviews upset, and the self can feel threatened. Such work takes instructors and students out of their comfort zones and can lead students to experience a crisis in the form of emotional discomfort and/or cognitive dissonances. When engaging with students’ discomfort and providing them with tools to enter, manage, and work through it, such discomfort can serve to promote powerful learning and become a potential catalyst for change. Introducing students to the conceptual tool of the “Expanding Comfort Zone” can promote a pedagogical shift that will allow teachers and students to engage with difficult topics in new and productive ways, opening up new lines of thinking and understanding.

The model of the “Expanding Comfort Zone” works from the assumption that learning means that we have to sit with discomfort sometimes, challenges ourselves, take risks and, in the process of doing so, stretch our comfort zones.

Anthony Robbins provides a great explanation of the notion of the comfort zone and how it functions:

Adapted from http://diversityandchange.com/inclusion-guidelines-3-enjoy-the-free-fall-of-not-knowing/
“A comfort zone is something you carry with you as you move through life. This comfort zone is very much like an invisible bubble of sorts that surrounds your psyche. And as you go about your day and encounter different circumstances, this bubble constantly expands and constricts depending on your situation. In other words, as you confront a situation your psyche is either free to do more in that particular situation, or it is in some ways constricted and therefore cannot expand to its full potential. And when your comfort zone cannot expand, your psyche is forced to do less than it is capable of doing.” (http://blog.iqmatrix.com/comfort-zone)

When we are in our comfort zones things are familiar to us, we feel at ease and what we experience and do fits neatly into our value and belief systems. When we remain within our comfort zones, we are rarely being challenged; therefore, we rarely learn.

Encountering new experiences, thoughts and ideas means rubbing up against the boundaries of our comfort zones. We call the edges of our comfort zones learning edges. Being on and moving beyond these learning edges can make us feel vulnerable, anxious, surprised, confused, annoyed, angry, defensive, or in some other way uncomfortable. Our initial impulse often is to avoid or resist these zones of discomfort. Understanding the emotional reactions as a natural part of the process of expanding our comfort zones and part of the learning process, allows us to experience discomfort as being part of a zone of learning and growth. It is here that we are most open to expanding our knowledge and understanding, take in a different perspective, and broaden our awareness (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

While some anxiety or discomfort is a part of the process of expanding our comfort zones, “panic” should be avoided. People generally function poorly when they are in a “panic zone.” When we find ourselves too far outside our comfort zones, we begin to resist new information and withdraw. There is the danger that we shut down or have other strong reactions that make it hard or impossible to comprehend new information.

Remember that everyone has different levels of comfort with different topics, activities, experiences, etc. and that each person is the only one who knows where they are in the different zones. This means that we should try not to judge other people or make assumptions about what might be comfortable/easy for some people based on what is comfortable/easy for ourselves.