

FEATURE

and Living Learning beyond One Dimension

Dustin L. Dooly
ddooly@fortsmithschools.org





“Anna is acting chippy,” yelled the ten-year-old, Barrett.

“I don’t think that’s a word. Perhaps you mean ‘chipper’?”

“No, ‘chippy’ is a word!”

“Let’s Google it...”

We have a rule in our home, and these two squabbling siblings know it well. No adult had to intervene in this conversation. The rule is simple: do not argue about knowable things. For the record, “chippy” is a word. As an adjective, it means “touchy and defensive, especially on account of having a grievance or a sense of inferiority” (Oxford 2017). The ten-year-old was right. Anna, the seventeen-year-old, was acting chippy.

Sometimes we think we know everything.

“Where is Ecuador? That can’t be a real place. I’ve never heard of it.” This from a sixteen-year-old student who attends a high-minority-population high school with actual Ecuadorians. I have the same simple rule in my classroom: do not argue about knowable things. So we Googled Ecuador, looked at a map, and compared the population of Ecuador (which the student argued “had” to be tiny and insignificant) to the population of Arkansas, our state. (For the record, its population is five times smaller than Ecuador’s.) By the time the conversation was over the student was acting, let’s say, a little chippy.

Sometimes we think we’re the only one who matters.

One-Dimensional Views in Tempestuous Times

I hear a lot of people acting chippy these days as different groups vie for attention—people thinking their way is the right way, their knowledge is

the best knowledge, their perspective is the only perspective. We seem to instinctively crave information that confirms our biases. Rather than learning knowable things, we shrink inside ourselves and hunker down with the familiar, comfortable information that feeds our narrative of what we think we know, of how we think the world works.

With information at our fingertips, how are we still so blind to all the knowledge available to us? Amidst the cries of fake news, biased media, unvetted opinions, social media hoaxes, and everyone shouting into the wind—it can be overwhelming at times, this deluge of words and ideas, yet I watch in horror as people of all ages shut down and shun information rather than lean into it for comfort and clarity. If knowledge is power, why do we suddenly feel so powerless when we have access to unlimited knowledge? Because despite having the entirety of the world readily available to us, we still choose to live in our one-dimensional versions of reality, and sometimes we feel like our reality is slipping away.

I know all about reality slipping away. Our family is transracial. My husband and I are both White, as are our two biological children, while our two adopted children are Black. My learning curve about Black culture was steep. Going from a family of four to a family of six was overwhelming enough, but add becoming a transracial family to the mix and I suddenly felt like I was drowning in unknowable things. Prior to adoption, I would have told you that we live in a post-racial society and that racial tensions exist only in the past. Obtusely ignorant, I carried a perspective suffused in White privilege that shattered when we adopted and began dealing with the realities of what it means to be Black in America.

Not wanting our children to be raised in the one-dimensional White world in which we were raised, my husband and I began making conscious choices about where we lived, worshipped, worked, played, shopped, and more. We were intentional about every aspect of our lives. One of those major life decisions was the choice for me to move from a small, predominantly White, upper-middle-class private elementary school to an urban, high-poverty public high school to teach French where the majority of students are Latino, followed by Black and Asian; White students are the minority. My learning curve about other cultures steepened a bit more. I realized that there was so much more I did not know. Prior to working in this school, I would have told you that every student has access to equal and appropriate education if they are only willing to apply themselves. Obtusely ignorant, I lived in a world of middle-class privilege that shattered when I changed jobs and began educating myself about the realities of being poor in America.

Shifting Perspectives

In a short span of two years, my entire life’s certainty had shifted and the simplistic, one-dimensional foundation on which I had built my reality crumbled out from under me. I began seriously questioning my knowledge as a mother, as an educator, and as a human being. I began to feel quite chippy about my ability to know the things I needed to know to be an effective, impactful, and empathetic mom and teacher. Oh, there were people around me who had experienced similar things, but I could not find people who were truly examining their own knowledge base and worldview for bias and were actively working toward building new knowledge and new perspectives. I was floundering on my own.

Youth today consume information as fast as it is generated. While they sit in my fifty-minute class period, something in the world shifts, and they know it from the very seats where they sit not listening to my French instruction. But, much like adults, I've learned that they take in only what feels meaningful to them. My Black students rage about racial injustice of law enforcement, while my Hispanic students read about ICE raids. My Muslim students watch video clips from inside Syria and share them amongst themselves. Of course, we all argue about whether male rompers should be a thing, but, by and large, each individual group is steeped in its own brand of information. Their worlds, in many ways, are just as one-dimensional as mine was at one time, and no one is teaching them to look outside themselves and their experiences, especially when consuming information.

I do not want myself, my family, my friends, my colleagues, or my students living one-dimensional lives. I move to help everyone who crosses my path to create a more multidimensional view of the world.

One-dimensional living changes only when we can learn to recognize the breadth and depth of the world outside of our own perspectives, perceptions, and experiences. This is the reality that I was missing prior to adoption and changing schools. This

is the reality that our students are missing. This is the reality that many educators are missing.

To begin, we must examine our own implicit bias. Implicit bias speaks to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Everyone has implicit biases. The danger lurks in refusing to recognize them. People love to tell me how "not racist" they are because they love my children. I always giggle and say, "That's funny, because I love my children, too, but I'm totally racist." Self-evaluation of long-held deeply seated beliefs that affect how we interact with students, what we expect in their learning, and our expectations for their futures is necessary if we are to move past our current views of how the world works and build a more multidimensional worldview.

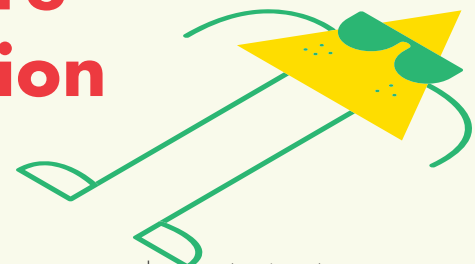
Imagine a school librarian with several White students gathered around her talking openly with her about the need to "build that wall," while Hispanic students sit nearby trying to study. Many of us cringe at this scene, which I recently witnessed, but when we look beyond the shock of the actual offense, we see the reality of how the librarian's bias might affect the services she provides to the Latino population of the school. Am I calling her racist? No. Am I saying she has implicit bias that she isn't even aware of? Yes. And without

that awareness, she can never fully engage and actively participate in the education of that subset of the population. Does she have to agree fully with Hispanic students' views on immigration? No. Does she have to learn to acknowledge that their experiences and perspectives differ from her own and should be taken into consideration? Yes, she does.

Building Relationships and Empathy

How empathetic are we to the lives of the students we are educating? This is a question of immense importance. What I've learned the hard way, as a mother and as an educator, is that empathy does not develop outside the bounds of relationship. And this development of relationships is so hard. And takes so much time. And can be emotionally overwhelming. And is the only way to truly gain the responsiveness needed to reach a population group about which we simply are not familiar. This past spring, the aunt of one of my Syrian students was caught up in President Trump's initial ban on people from Middle Eastern countries entering the United States; the aunt was detained in the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. My student asked if she could share her aunt's story with my classes and share her own struggles that come with being a Muslim in this country. Many of my students, especially my

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Hispanic students, were in tears upon hearing the racism the student encounters daily in her everyday activities. Questions were asked and answered frankly. Education was happening in the rawest and truest sense. Empathy was born. A feeling that “our struggles are the same” was recognized and relatable.

Returning to the idea of my “golden rule” to not argue about knowable things, empathy plays a key role in its application. I tell my students all the time that if the impact of an event, opinion, or idea isn’t directly felt, they should be listening—not talking. If we are not immigrants, we shouldn’t be talking about immigration. We should be listening. If we are not Black or in law enforcement, we shouldn’t be talking about police injustice. We should be listening. If we are not Syrian, we should not be opining about the civil war in Syria, we should be listening. Without listening, how will we ever develop compassion? Without compassion, how will we ever truly understand or care that the experiences and lives of our students can be drastically different from our own? Without moving past our implicit bias, we will continue to reap the harvest of students who are telling us in so many ways that they feel unseen, unheard, unloved, unwanted, and unimportant.

A graduating Latino boy told me recently, “You’re the only teacher who ever truly saw me and cared about me as a man.” After his thirteen years of education and countless teachers, this was the saddest thing he could have said to me. We must do better.

But it’s not only about seeing our students. It’s about teaching our students to see others. Many, many of my Latino students get wrapped into their own bubble of believing immigration is only an American problem—that they are the only

Students do not naturally know how to open up their perspective to other points of view. We must model it. We must teach it. We must practice it.

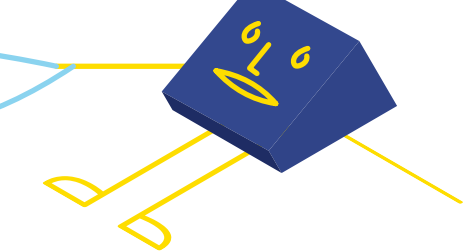
ones who hear “Go back where you came from.” As a French teacher, I spend an enormous amount of time talking with my students about the immigration crisis in France as people flee North Africa, East Africa, and Syria. We read stories, watch movies, investigate crimes that all stem from anti-immigrant sentiments in France. My Muslim students are shocked to hear that France has, not once or twice, but multiple times, tried to use laws to ban the hijab from their country. My Black students grow upset when they see maps and we talk about immigration routes, as they begin to understand that, in France, Black Africans receive similar, if not worse, treatment as Hispanics do here in the United States. All of this develops a sense of empathy for groups outside of our own. These lessons in French class force a one-dimensional view of the world to shift again and take on new perspectives.

Teaching Explicitly and by Example

For these lessons to be possible, I have to consume this type of information. Therefore, necessity leads to the next key question: Are we modeling being good consumers of information? What voices ring in our ears? Do they sound like our own voices? Do they say things we want to hear? How do these voices

differ from our own? What are they teaching us? How are they shaping us, changing us? And, most importantly, are we talking about this process with our students? Multiple times a day I share stories that begin with, “I was reading an article,” “I was listening to a podcast,” or “I saw a video,” and I talk openly about what I learned, how it challenged my prior knowledge, what I will do with what I heard going forward, and how it will change my day-to-day thoughts and actions.

Students do not naturally know how to open up their perspective to other points of view. We must model it. We must teach it. We must practice it. If young people do not see the adults in their lives valuing outside perspectives, changing their opinions, and allowing themselves to grow, students will never understand why expanding their own perspective matters nor how to achieve it. What are we doing inside the educational arena to challenge students in this way? Because my students know expanding my own perspective is an important and active part of who I am, they will come to me with new-to-them information and inevitably ask, “What do you think, Madame Dooly?” My response is always the same, every time. “I don’t know. What do you think?” And the conversation ensues with the only words from me being leading questions like “Why do you think that?” “For what reason?” “In



what way?” “How does that change you?” and the like. For the students, I become a sounding board of ideas, opinions, perspectives, and growth. I am a safe place to talk through their shifting worldview because of the culture I intentionally choose to create in myself, in my family, and in the classroom.

Removing Blinders and Changing Ourselves

Remember our definition of chippy—touchy and defensive, especially on account of having a grievance or a sense of inferiority? When my foundational beliefs about the world and the people in it tilted and then crumbled, I spent more than a few days feeling chippy. It’s a natural response to being told you didn’t know anything about what you thought you knew. Many people I know choose to stay in that state. They learn something about the world that isn’t what they needed or wanted it to be, but they refuse to allow that reality to permeate their core beliefs. However, the people who truly move forward and emerge renewed and reborn, in some ways, exhibit an entirely new quality that students are drawn to: humility. Students will flock to a person exhibiting a posture of humbleness. People want to be understood.

So, how do we go about creating an environment—in our homes, in our classrooms, in our institutions—that fosters expanding perspectives? We can take steps intended to expand our worldviews.

First, we must consider the diversity of our own lives. When we adopted and I chose to change jobs, I knew very few people of color. I often hear people say they are “friends with [fill

in the blank with a minority group of choice]” to show they lead diverse lives. My slight pushback is always, “Have you shared a meal with them outside of work? In your home or theirs? Do your children have sleepovers together? Do you worship together? Do you call them when you need help?” There is a difference between knowing someone (an acquaintance) and being in a relationship with someone (a friend). As an educator, I would find it wholly appropriate to include objective measures in, for example, a professional growth plan to remove any ambiguity or room to hide from steps you need to take to diversify your personal and professional circles. Without accountability, we default to the easiest standard of what and who we know.

Secondly, I would highly recommend a similar strategic evaluation of what voices have dominance in our lives. When we engage in low-effort information processing, we default to stereotypical thinking and stereotype-based judgments. Then, when we act as decision-makers or leaders in our institutions, these biased ideas subsequently replicate, solidify, and spill out into our social and educational interactions with the stereotyped target. Unacceptable. To curb this phenomenon, we must read, listen to, exhibit, talk about, subscribe to, and share information from people with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and lives. We must make room in the professional growth plan for an ongoing

evaluation and improvement of what information comes into the school library and how.

Finally, we must engage the community, the families, the faculty, and the students. These ideas may sound simplistic, but as the hub of institutional information, school libraries should be the optimal place for overcoming input bias. We should host seminars, workshops, TED-type talks, discussion groups, and support meetings for, with, and by the students in our schools. Our library schedules should be full of podcasting listening sessions, documentary screenings, lectures, and more. For our youngest students, do we host people of color reading books to our children about characters of color? This activity matters whether the purpose serves as a racial mirror for culturally similar children or a racial window for culturally dissimilar children. The final professional appraisal piece lies in creating a robust blueprint for how we will model and engage others in the diversity of thought we hope to foster.

I’m one person, one mother, one teacher. I take what I’ve learned into my life, into my classroom each day, and I do my very best to share it with others. As a mom, as an educator, though, I long for the day when the collective norm among educators is to live multidimensional lives that spiral out from around us and influence every child, every student—everyone we encounter. Then, we can truly change the world one child at a time.



Dustin Dooly is

a French teacher at Northside High School in Fort Smith, Arkansas, the wife of a police officer, and the mother of four beautiful children.

Work Cited:

Oxford University Press. 2017. “chippy [adj].” *English: Oxford Living Dictionaries*. <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chippy>> (accessed July 5, 2017).