

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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A story of teaching, knowledge and emotions in the times of Covid: In three acts



By Jerry Gale, PhD, Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, The University of Georgia, Taos Associate and member of the Associate's Council

Act I: Preparing the classroom and students for the coming (pandemic) storm

Covid-19 is 'noticed' in the US (March 2020):

When Covid-19 came to be noticed in the United States, my university shifted frequently on their plans and messaging to the campus community. Between *March 2 to March 16*, emails to the campus community went from “no reports of Covid-19 on campus” to “enjoy spring break and be ready for the semester when you return on Monday, 3/16” to “instruction is temporarily suspended for two weeks—effective on Monday, 3/16 to allow time to test our business continuity plans and online instruction modules and for state officials to continue to assess the current situation regarding coronavirus” and later that same day, “classes, when they resume, *may be* online” and 3 days later, “ignore the many rumors or unsubstantiated information that you might receive from other sources and classes *will be* online.”

These communications were leading to confusion and a range of reactive emotions. Faculty were feeling burdened, overwhelmed and confused. Students were on a pendulum swinging from elation to fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

Act II (behind the zoom screen: constructing new realities)

Social constructionism and appreciative inquiry

The course I was teaching on civil discourse was built on the frameworks of social constructionism and appreciative inquiry. Social constructionism is how our intra and inter talk and actions provide the scaffolding of meaning making and our experiential worlds. Appreciate inquiry is a profound shift for viewing changes processes, and considers ecological attunement of human systems in their environment to inquire into that system's strengths, resiliencies, possibilities and successes. Taken together the two frameworks offers skills, practices and perspectives in achieving relational agency for addressing conflict, emotional reactivity and possibilities of personal and social beingness. Emotions and ideological values come into play as they become gravitational horizons

influencing meaning construction. For example, emotions such as fear, anxiety and anger are mutually amplified by epistemologies of dualities (self/other, control, oppression, commodification and pathologies).

Teaching with a little help from my TAOS friends

Social constructionism and appreciative inquiry shaped my teaching of all my courses. The civil discourse course, in particular was also shaped by my involvement with the Taos Institute. In the beginning of the semester I had already invited three other Taos Associates to participate in my class and they helped encourage and shape the reflecting process. Cees Hoogendijk, Peter Whitehouse, and Paul Leslie were involved. They participated through responding to prompts generated from the students in class. The students had bios of each person. Questions from the students centered around how each associate was addressing the pandemic personally and professionally as well as in their own location. Through recorded zoom conversations the four associates (myself included) shared and talked with each other about how appreciate inquiry and social constructionism were providing us the skills to navigate the changing global landscape. Cees, Peter and Paul were open and generous in sharing of their lives and responding to the students' questions.

Act III: The experiences of teaching reverberated in my other classes

The fundamentals of social constructionism and appreciative inquiry guided my other courses. Hearing many students reporting some aspects of anxiety, uncertainty, fear, grief and loss of focus I began each zoom class with a guided meditation. I incorporated a variety of practices, but generally attended to breathing, awareness and scans of body, mind, emotions, energy and sense of purpose/value, as well as skills for releasing stress, enhancing concentration and opening up compassion for self and others. I shared local, national and international news reports about Covid-19 and how local and national establishments were responding to diverse populations including non-citizens, the elderly, people in prison, people of color, people of low SES, people identifying as LGBTQI, and people with disabilities, and more. We discussed how implicit bias and historic systemic racism/oppression effects institutions and policy with consequential effects. Acknowledging the science and impact of social determinants of health, the focus of lectures and discussions were on strengths and resilience, and examining the intersection of science/policy/politics and personal values. There was attention on the tension between individual agency and social/cultural constraints, and discussions on responsibilities and accountability including how the social media platforms can influence our thinking.

Coda

In all of three courses there were discussions on how the pandemic was disrupting or extinguishing many of our explicit and implicit traditions, ceremonies and rites of passage. Building on appreciative inquiry and social constructionism, we discussed how individually and collectively we can construct new ways and possibilities of being. We shared examples of how people and communities were creating novel ceremonies of celebration, transitions and loss.