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Renewing Multicultural Education: An Ancient Mariner's Manifesto

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Carlos E. Cortés
University of California, Riverside

In 1972, I became chair of UCR's Chicano Studies, became deeply involved in developing the new fields of multicultural education and ethnic studies, and in 1994 took early retirement to dedicate myself to diversity lecturing, consulting, training, and scholarship. In the process, I developed the Cortés triad, a 3-line, 15-word personal framework to guide my thinking and action. Here it is.

Look unflinchingly at the past.
Apply it to the present.
Then pivot to the future.

Staring at the Recent Past

As I discuss multicultural education today, I'm going to do lots of looking, applying, and pivoting. So let's start with the very near historical past. Eleven days ago, we had an election. It was a profoundly multicultural event, surprising in many ways, with dramatic implications for the future trajectory of our nation and our field. Let's look unflinchingly at the past through a few multicultural facts from the election.

- People of color moved dramatically away from the Democratic party and toward the Republican party.
- That move was also intersectionally gendered, with an unprecedented split between men and women within all ethno-racial categories.
- Some Christian nationalists unabashedly proclaimed that they wanted to rescue our country from religious equality and transform it into a Christian nation in which all other religions would be secondary.
- Jewish Americans split over the State of Israel, but came together in the belief that they felt under siege in America.
- Muslims felt shunned, particularly by the Democratic party, which translated into the ballot box.
- Marriage equality, previously a hot button election issue, virtually disappeared from the campaign.
- In contrast, gender identity took center stage, most dramatically in the oft-played, in-your-face media ad, "Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you."

There's an old Jewish proverb: "A wise man hears one word but understands two." The one word is election; the two words are societal change. In 2013, I edited the four-volume *Multicultural America* encyclopedia. In one decade, the United States my encyclopedia portrayed has changed dramatically.

In some respects, my encyclopedia captured these changes-in-process. In other respects, it is relentlessly antiquarian. But multicultural educators can't afford to be antiquarians. We must adapt to change by pivoting to the future in the face of new realities.

Six years later, in 2019, I began writing a monthly column for the national ezine, *American*

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Diversity Report. In those columns I wrestle with the past, apply it to the present, and pivot to the future. My theme for this year is Renewing Diversity. Today I'm going to focus on renewing multicultural education.

Reflections on Multicultural Education

Now when I say renewing, I'm not suggesting that multicultural education has been unsuccessful. Quite the contrary. In fact, multicultural education has become an educational success story in ways that cannot be fully documented by educational metrics.

When I started university teaching, the term multicultural education didn't exist. Now it is a staple of college departments of education, while teaching multiculturally has become part of many teachers' DNA. It has influenced textbooks in almost every subject, from history to English to science to music. It has remade college departments in myriad subject areas, as reflected in course titles and research agendas.

In 2020 on my campus, the University of California, Riverside, our relatively new School of Medicine decided to establish a required curricular thread entitled Health Equity, Social Justice, and Anti-Racism. For a number of years I had been giving an annual cultural competence lecture for first-year medical students, so the academic dean invited me to become part-time co-director of the new thread, partnering with a real doctor, a pediatrician named Adwoa Osei. I was hired for 1 year. I'm now entering my fifth year. Next week we teach classes on the neuroscience of diversity and on the health care experience of people with disabilities.

Our classes are prototypes of multicultural education. We look at issues of health disparities for marginalized groups, the need for physicians to understand cultural variations of their patients, how to work more effectively with language translators, and the health care experiences of transgender people. This would not have happened without the influence of multicultural education.

But maybe multicultural education's most profound impact has been on the very texture of our society. It has changed attitudes toward otherness. It has influenced behavior regarding difference. It has inspired students to go forth to bring about further change.

But alongside these achievements, there are continuing setbacks. The growing demonization of immigrants. The merciless scapegoating of transgender people. The rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim feeling. Yet with all of that, the United States of 2024 is far superior multiculturally to the racially-segregated, religiously-divided Kansas City, Missouri in which I grew up in the 1940s. Obviously, we haven't created a multicultural utopia, but evidence of multiculturalism's impact is all around us.

Points of Light

Former President George H. W. Bush used to talk about America's thousand points of light. He was criticized as being too corny, but he was on to something. As a scholar I spend each day observing and contemplating points of light … and of darkness. And almost every day, I encounter points of light that illustrate the impact of multicultural education.

- My periodontist who, before grafting bone into my jaw, asked me if I had any religious objections to particular kinds of bone. No previous dentist had asked me that multicultural question.
- The manager of a restaurant who didn't know my wife and me from Adam yet off-handedly mentioned that he and his husband were about to get married. Seventy years ago, in the early 1950's, the U.S. Postal Service refused to deliver copies of *One* magazine because it was pornographic. The magazine's sin: its cover read "Homosexual Marriage?"
- The news story that for the first time in history the California state senate will be half women.

Those are points of light. I have no hard data to prove it, but I firmly believe that multicultural education contributed to those three events and thousands like them by encouraging the recognition and respect for otherness. So we ought to take a celebration lap—not quite a victory lap—because we still face lots of challenges.

But now it's time to pivot to the future. So here's the futuristic multicultural dilemma. In the face of dramatic societal changes, such as those displayed by last week's election, how do we keep multicultural education relevant? More than relevant. Visionary, capable of demonstrating that multicultural education can help move the United States toward a more equitable and inclusive future.

To do that we must be continuously reflective, brutally self-critical, and relentlessly self-correcting. This includes addressing bad habits that, over time, have crept into multicultural education thinking and practice. Permit me to share three of these bad

habits and suggest ways to renew ourselves as we pivot to the future.

Bad Habit No. One: Admiring the Problem

Let me go back to the Cortés Triad. Multiculturalists have been pretty good about looking unflinchingly at the past and applying it to the present. Pivoting to the future? Not so good. In fact, in recent years diversity teaching and scholarship have become increasingly backward looking rather than pivoting to the future.

I say this as a historian who was trained to look back. But I'm also a multiculturalist who cares greatly about the future that I'm leaving to my six grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. That's why, when I work with educational institutions or governmental structures or religious entities or private businesses, I insist that we limit our wallowing in the past and forcefully pivot to the future. Questions like how are we going to retain things that have served us well and change things that have served us badly?

Reflective multicultural educators and other diversity specialists need to develop a healthy, constructive skepticism, even about their own endeavors. How much good are we really doing? How can we do it better? Are we doing things that are ineffective, maybe even counter-productive? That skepticism among some diversity thinkers has given birth to the idea called "admiring the problem."

Today there are tens of thousands diversity educators and trainers who make a very good living by encouraging people to admire, re-admire, and further re-admire problems, like inequality or racism or oppression. They help people wallow in the past and cleanse their souls in the present. But when it comes to pivoting to the future and actually making things better, they provide little in the way of concrete, constructive action.

Several decades ago, I co-facilitated a 2-day educators' retreat with my friend Vine Deloria, Jr., the noted Native American scholar who wrote the seminal book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Throughout those 2 days, whenever a participant would launch into ritualized whining about the terrible things that have been done to the American Indian, Vine would intervene and ask the F question: so what are you going to do about the future when it comes to Native Americans? He wouldn't allow participants to cleanse themselves with apologetic language and then walk away feeling that they had paid their multicultural dues by confessing the sins of their forefathers.

Look, probably 95 percent of the people in this room are beneficiaries of settler colonialism by owning homes on land that once belonged to some Native American nation. I certainly am. But I'm not going to sell my home and give all of the money to Native people. Nor are you. That's why superficial performative acts like calling for the eradication of settler colonialism ring so hollow. They don't begin to meet Vine Deloria's future-oriented challenge.

One popular area of medical research is the topic of health disparities: how have medical history or medical culture or medical structures or medical practices contributed to health disparities based on race or ethnicity or sex or gender identification or disability or religion or language? So when I began working with the medical school, I attended webinar after webinar about health disparities. And then I stopped. Almost every webinar consisted of admiring the problem, but very few pivoted to the future. Now I look for webinars that actually address concrete steps to make inroads into this problem.

So I say to my fellow multicultural educators, of course you need to look unflinchingly at history and of course you need to apply this to the present. But don't get trapped into admiring and re-admiring problems. Pivot to the future and help your students develop the habit of pivoting to the future.

Bad Habit No. Two: Lack of Inclusivity and Transparency

Your students will be diverse, intersectionally diverse. You need to make certain that all of their diversity is included in your multicultural thinking and pedagogy. This can create dilemmas and force you to make difficult choices. Here's a concrete example.

One of my first college students was a young Panamanian American named José Medina. He later was elected to the California state legislature. Several years ago, José proposed a bill to make a course in Ethnic Studies a statewide high school graduation requirement. The bill underwent a rocky journey, but it was finally passed and signed into law. However, the bill did not specify what ethnic groups should be included or excluded from the required course. That was up to counties, school districts, and individual teachers.

At the same time, the California state legislature passed a parallel bill instructing the California State Department of Education to create an Ethnic

Studies Model Curriculum. The curriculum committee, consisting mainly of high school and college teachers, composed a first version that, by state law, had to be posted for public comment. Within a short time that version received 21,000 posted public comments, 18,000 of them negative, with criticism coming from multiple directions.

A number of pro-ethnic studies legislators then refused to support the Medina Bill until the Model Curriculum was significantly revised. At the request of the California State Board of Education, I drew up a 12-page statement of suggested ethnic studies principles. That statement helped break the logjam, became incorporated into the revised Model Curriculum, and helped pass the Medina bill. In that process I received withering criticism both from supporters of the original Model Curriculum, who labeled me a turncoat, and from opponents of the Model Curriculum because my statement did not criticize the original version. So be it. I pivoted to the future.

Then the ethnic studies process shifted to the local level. According to the Medina Bill, school districts can but do not have to adopt the state's Model Curriculum. Instead, they can develop their own ethnic studies approaches. The state Model Curriculum emphasizes the experiences of four ethnic clusters: Native Americans; African Americans; Latinos; and Asian/Pacific Islander Americans. But it does not exclude other ethnic groups, including white ethnic groups. In fact, in its monstrous appendix there are lesson plans on various white ethnic groups.

So here's the dilemma for individual teachers and school districts. Should their ethnic studies courses focus exclusively on the four named ethnic clusters or should the courses also include other ethnic groups who don't fall into those designated clusters? From an equity perspective, there is a restorative justice dimension when ethnic studies courses feature people who traditionally have been omitted from the curriculum, an issue addressed by the 1971 California textbook task force where Jim Banks and I met. But from an inclusivity perspective, there is the question of how to decide what ethnic groups should be included or excluded?

These are thorny conceptual and pedagogical issues. They also raise student-centered and community concerns, because when you include or exclude group content, you send messages about belonging or not belonging to students sitting next to each other in the classroom. And to their parents. And to the community. Particularly to the exploding number of mixed-ethnicity families and children to whom we may be sending the message that the curriculum recognizes part of you, but not all of you.

My Journey with Inclusivity

I wrestled with this inclusivity issue in January, 1970, when I introduced the first Chicano History class at my university. The course required one research paper. Chicanos could write about their own families. Non-Chicanos could choose to interview a Chicano family or conduct some other kind of Chicano-focused research.

One young lady of Irish American ancestry came to me and asked if she could write about her own family. Since it was a Chicano History class, my immediate reaction was to say no, that she had to write about Chicanos. However, instead I told her I would give it some thought.

I did, and recognized that my assignment excluded this young student who yearned to find out more about her own roots. So I gave her an alternative assignment. She could write about her own family. But because this was a Chicano History class, she would need to write a comparative paper that also addressed the similarities and differences between her family's journey and the Chicano historical experience. She wrote an excellent paper. The next year, I included this more-inclusive comparative history option in my course syllabus. Lesson learned.

The issue of inclusivity came up just last week at a county Ethnic Studies Summit of teachers, administrators, and community, which I helped organize and facilitate. When asked about this dilemma, I presented my position. In the pursuit of equity, it makes perfect sense to *emphasize* the ethnic clusters that traditionally have been omitted from the curriculum. At the same time, in the pursuit of inclusivity, we need to make certain that no student gets left out and that all students enjoy the opportunity of seeing themselves as part of our nation's ethnic journey.

There are various ways to do this. I'll name two. All students in an ethnic studies course should enjoy the opportunity of exploring their own ethnic heritages, to help place themselves on the map of the world. In addition, all ethnic studies courses should incorporate community dimensions, such as by studying local history, examining current ethnicity-related local issues, and addressing the community's future directions, including through civic action, public advocacy, and other change-oriented projects.

In response to my answer, one teacher asked me if my position on the inclusion of all ethnic groups suggested that they shouldn't teach about topics like white privilege. My answer was simple. White privilege is an eminently important topic in understanding our nation's ethnic trajectory. Driving while White is an unearned advantage. White drivers don't have to leave home with the lingering thought that they might be stopped by a police officer because of the color of their skin.

However, while teaching about whiteness and racial inequalities, multicultural educators also need to bore down even further, to go beyond whiteness (including the stereotyping of white people) and to recognize that there is enormous ethnic diversity within racial whiteness. Multicultural educators can walk and chew gum at the same time. If we, as multicultural educators, truly believe in inclusivity and not simply mouth it as a buzz word, we need to act inclusively with our content, pedagogy, and student-centered actions.

Pursuing Transparency

We must also include members of the community, including parents. I recognize that this is a terribly complex issue, particularly in current times with parents coming to school board meetings armed with down-loaded statements about critical race theory and grooming and transgender indoctrination. Teaching in the digital age, particularly about multicultural topics, is no stroll in the park. But it's a part of the cosmos in which we must operate.

My response? Multicultural educators need to become more adept at combining inclusivity with transparency. Increasingly we cannot operate behind closed doors. So let's open multicultural education to more community input and be prepared to provide convincing answers to skeptical and sometimes belligerent parents. This means crafting careful, precisely worded messages about how students—all students—will benefit from your multicultural endeavors.

These days, when I work with an educational entity, I insist on transparency. At last week's Ethnic Studies Summit, I facilitated an opening plenary panel of teachers who were developing and presenting ethnic studies courses. This was followed by a plenary panel of school administrators. Finally, at my insistence, came a panel of community people exploring their hopes and, yes, their fears about the implementation of the state's ethnic studies requirement. The three-panel plenary structure was lively, fully transparent, and extremely revealing.

Just this past Tuesday, I met with the ethnic studies planning committee of a school district with which I am currently working. For this meeting, the committee invited community members to give input into the year-long ethnic studies course they are developing. It was an intense, thoughtful, and in many respects inspiring ninety minutes, a teacher-community collaboration in pursuit of an excellent educational experience for their kids, all of their kids. This was the kind of inclusive, transparent partnership that could hold a key to multicultural education's future.

Bad Habit Number Three: Linguistic Madness

Multicultural educators need to resist or, in some cases, liberate themselves from the linguistic madness that has crept into the diversity project. Over the years, I've watched it grow and, in the process, alienate some of multiculturalism's natural allies. But first let me put this into historical context.

Language concerns have always been an important part of the diversity project. Group-targeting slurs. Debates over group labels. Evolving terminology within disability communities. The gendered identification of job positions.

I vividly recall a 1970s college meeting when the committee head repeatedly referred to a department chair as Madam Chairman despite her repeated requests that she be referred to as chair. She finally stormed out of the room. Teaching moment successful. He changed. Multiculturalists won most of those 1970s' language battles.

Then came 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The organization took this action partially in response to pressure from such cohorts as Holocaust survivors, women's rights advocates, and Vietnam veterans' organizations. Our recent misadventures in the Middle East further exposed PTSD as something dreadfully real.

The idea of trauma ultimately penetrated the diversity movement. Some diversity trainers now conduct what they call "trauma-informed" workshops. And not just *individual* trauma. It can be passed down as *intergenerational group* trauma.

And those traumas can be triggered. How? Among other things, by speech. Ergo, diversity training in which participants learn about things they should avoid saying, for example, things that may be viewed as microaggressions. And since traumas can be triggered in the classroom, professors

are being urged to include trigger warnings in their course syllabi.

Many of those language changes were long overdue. But the language change process also had a downside. In the minds of some diversity advocates, the issue of language morphed from being one dimension of the diversity movement to becoming THE focus of their attention. I refer to this cohort as the therapeutic strand of the diversity movement.

This shift did not occur without criticism, even from within the diversity movement. For example, some critical theorists now deride diversity therapeutics for obsessing about personal feelings, thereby distracting from more important issues like inequitable structures and systemic racism. Other diversity advocates, like myself, are concerned that the emphasis on language mistake avoidance is undermining robust discussions of important diversity issues. Efforts to completely disinfect the speech environment can silence even diversity supporters who fear crossing some invisible speech line and getting "called out" for their efforts. Better to remain silent.

Conversational Rules?

Consider one dimension of current multicultural orthodoxy, the idea that before beginning any discussion you need to establish conversational ground rules. During my first year as health equity curriculum co-coordinator we held a year-long series of zoom-based community panels that provided personal perspectives on health care experiences, needs, and obstacles. After the panels, attendees—mainly medical students, faculty, and administrators—broke into small discussion groups and then reassembled for a plenary discussion. In the final plenary there was faculty and administrator discussion, but students remained silent. Why?

In preparing for these sessions the planning committee, over my objection, insisted that we begin each gathering by posting a list of discussion rules, reading them aloud, and emphasizing the primacy of following the rules, which were direct, blunt, and ominous. "Own your impact." Students saw the rules and owned their impact by saying nothing.

After the second event I again argued that we drop the discussion rules. The others reluctantly went along with me—more or less—for a one-session experiment. We briefly showed the slide listing the rules, but dropped the solemn verbal exhortation of its contents. The result: students began to talk. The reading of the rules remained in permanent hibernation.

Contrast this with December, 1999, when the Mayor of my hometown, Riverside, California, brought together a large group of community leaders to discuss diversity issues. That gathering would ultimately morph into the Mayor's Multicultural Forum, a quarterly town hall with the Mayor, open to anyone in the community. There we discuss often-contentious diversity issues. The Mayor asked me to facilitate the first meeting. I've now been doing it for 25 years, working with three different mayors.

Before the first meeting, the Mayor asked me if I thought we should develop discussion rules. I suggested that we give the group a chance to talk without rules and see what happens. We've been operating for a quarter century without any discussion rules while holding direct discussions of important and contentious topics. By operating without rules we have gone through the natural process of developing mutual trust while accepting personal responsibilities to be cognizant of others. Moreover, the trust we've built up over the years helps us to be nimble.

After the 2020 Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, the Mayor asked the Forum to develop an Anti-Racism Vision Statement for the city. We finished our effort within two months, got it passed 6-to-1 by a politically-divided City Council, were featured by a big article in the front section of the *Los Angeles Times*, and received requests from other communities to use our statement. I talked to others around the country engaged in similar initiatives and some told me that they got stymied because their committees split over discussion rules and the definition of anti-racism.

The therapeutic wing of the diversity movement has moved in the direction of speech repression. Avoid offense at all costs. Develop equity language lists with arbitrary pairs of do's and don'ts. Maybe most toxic, wallow in the topic of microaggressions.

I believe in language equity and find equity language lists to be excellent sources for multicultural discussions. However, I encourage my workshop participants to retain a healthy skepticism about such lists, which often go overboard in pursuit of far-fetched ways to be offended.

As for microaggressions. Well, this began as a worthwhile concept. But as time passed, it became toxic, particularly as its acolytes began imposing Derald Wing Sue's microaggression list. As a diversity trainer-of-trainers, I began to observe trainers who didn't use his list as a useful source for

discussion, but rather as an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts. Obey the list and you are on the side of the angels. Err and you get sent to diversity purgatory. In the process, microaggressions became an object of scorn and a butt of jokes by college faculty.

We Failed George Floyd

For the current issue of the monthly ezine American Diversity Report I wrote a column entitled "We Failed George Floyd." Following is a brief excerpt from the column.

* * * * *

My ah-hah moment came at a meeting a few months after Floyd's death. As we gathered, I perchance asked someone where she was from, precipitating a getting-to-know-you interchange about places where each of us had lived. A minute or so later, I felt a tug on my sleeve from a friend of mine. "Carlos, we're not supposed to ask that question anymore." "Why not?" I responded. My friend then launched into a solemn dissertation about having recently attended a post-George Floyd microaggressions workshop where the presenter had projected Derald Wing Sue's well-known microaggressions list on the screen, led by "Where are you from?" "We're supposed to avoid saying those things," said my earnest friend.

Let me be clear. I like the concept of microaggressions and explore it some of my workshops. Explore it, but not bow down to it. Sue's list is a fine entry point for exploratory discussions about interpersonal relations. However, it should not be used as a definitive list of do's and don'ts.

It is absurd and counter-productive to teach that you should automatically react to "Where are you from?" as if it were a form of othering. Instead of building interpersonal bridges, such a training approach breeds suspicion by encouraging people to come up with the worst possible interpretation of another person's statement. (Note: if somebody follows up "Where are you from?" with "Where are you *really* from?," then we've moved into real othering territory.)

That ah-hah moment raised my suspicions. Unfortunately, my observations of diversity training since that time have confirmed those suspicions. Many diversity trainers have let George Floyd down. Instead of helping people analyze structures and practices while developing constructive strategies that can further substantive equity, inclusivity, and social justice, many continue to encourage people to mope about themselves ("do the work," whatever that cliché means).

I recognize that some of my readers might write me off as a cranky old timer, which I admit to. So be it. I make no apologies when I say that I far prefer the action-oriented "We shall overcome" of the 1960s to the self-absorbed "I'm offended" or "I don't feel safe" of the 2020s.

* * * * *

Today some diversity trainers insist, out of fear of the follow-up question, that we should avoid the excellent bridge-building "Where are you from?" question. Throw out the bathwater. And while you're at it, throw out the baby. In my personal efforts to oppose the tide of microaggression mania I now encourage institutions to celebrate "Where Are You From?" Day.

Moving Beyond Offense

Multiculturalists should encourage students to begin with respect for a speaker's intent. They should avoid leading students into the adoption of an attitude of interpersonal distrust and its accompanying tendency to view personal statements through the lens of negativity. Above all, don't go looking for new ways to be offended. We need to build bridges, not barriers.

Multicultural education needs to pivot away from "I'm offended" and microaggressions as core topics and toward a future of multicultural bridge-building. In the process, we need to emphasize the development of personal resilience in preparation for the long struggle ahead. There are plenty of antagonists out there who detest diversity, who would love to bury the concept of social justice, and who would like nothing better than seeing diversity advocates retreat into little self-absorbed corners where they can mope about being offended. The Democrats just ran a presidential campaign based in part on being offended and, in the process, they lost America.

Multicultural educators should call a moratorium on being offended. Instead, let's be determined. In the current struggle, I want allies who don't waste time being offended, who can shrug off perceived microaggressions, and who demonstrate resilience by plowing ahead in the face of insults.

But the language problem goes even further. Therapeutic diversity advocates, particularly those with an authoritarian, punitive right-or-wrong approach to language, are also alienating people who should be our natural allies.

In 2018, I was selected to be an inaugural fellow of the University of California's new National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. Since the 1970s, I have been studying diversity and expression, primarily through research on the mass media. My book, *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach about Diversity,* was published in 2000 as part of Jim Banks' Teachers College Press series on multicultural education. That book led to many other opportunities, including becoming Creative/Cultural Advisor for Nickelodeon's "Dora the Explorer" and "Go, Diego, Go!," two series that thoroughly embodied principles of multicultural education. Examining diversity and speech seemed like a natural extension of my media work.

In my research application, I proposed to investigate the fifty-year trajectory of the relationship between diversity and speech. The result will be a book that I have nearly completed. My guiding question: why has there been a growing conflict between the idea of diversity and the idea of freedom of speech?

That question has brought me into the free speech and academic freedom discourse communities. What I learned is that most free speech and academic freedom defenders I meet are natural allies for diversity, including multicultural education. They recognize inequities, believe in action to address them, and point out that diversity advocates have long benefited from a robust speech environment, which has helped enable them to spread their social justice messages.

At the same time, however, free speech and academic freedom defenders are furious at the holier-than-thou, speech-restricting linguistic arrogance emanating from the therapeutic wing of the diversity movement. Worse yet, some of these natural allies have wrongly grown to view the entire diversity movement as an enemy of freedom. They see speech rule making and microaggression mania as anathema to free speech and academic freedom, particularly when multiculturalists also support punitive actions against those who happen to transgress their arbitrary speech demands.

My friends, within a half-century multicultural education has forged a fine record of accomplishment and has had a societal impact that goes well beyond measurement in metrics. But if we don't pivot away from the I'm offended present into the let's get things done future, if we don't stop alienating natural allies, if we don't provide a clear, renewed vision of what America can become … Well, so be it. Own your impact.

So these are my three steps to multicultural education renewal. First, reduce time spent admiring the problem and instead focus on future-oriented concrete actions to make constructive change. Second, pursue greater inclusivity while also becoming more transparent about our endeavors. Third, liberate ourselves from the "I'm offended" strategy that increases interpersonal distrust and alienates our natural allies.

Elevating Our Language

But as I close I need to add one more factor. As multicultural educators, we need to elevate our capacity to communicate effectively with those outside of our confirmation bias echo chambers. In the 1970s multicultural educators dedicated themselves to communicating with and convincing the public about the value and importance of their efforts. Today, we mainly talk to each other using jargon that is increasingly unintelligible and alienating to the public at large. In the process, we have surrendered the moral high ground of the public square to our opponents and antagonists.

Let me return to the Trump ad that I mentioned earlier. "Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you." It tersely and powerfully appealed to the fears of parents of cisgender daughters hoping to earn athletic scholarships and concerned that they might find themselves in competition with transgender women. It appealed to the fears of parents that multicultural educators might be surreptitiously grooming their children or hiding the fact that their 9-year-old might be going through identity concerns.

That ad was bold, resonant, and manipulative. It played over and over and over. Democrats had no effective response. Nor did multicultural educators. So what do we do now?

Well we can take the easy way out by simplistically and arrogantly categorizing people who responded to that message as hopelessly anti-trans. But that would be a gross and misleading stereotype. We need to be able to address those concerns or our pool of support will further dwindle. I want us to lead, not become a cult.

In the 1970s, multicultural educators reached a broad audience of Democrats and Republicans in state legislatures who collaborated to pass legislation supporting multicultural education. We had a powerful message and we delivered it well. Over the years, I have worked with nearly 400 school districts, including in states that today ban critical race theory and eliminate DEI efforts.

If we hope to regain our place in the public square, we need to clarify our thinking, hone our messages, and develop more powerful ways to deliver them. Having in-group conversations, such as at this conference, is needed. Certainly, we benefit from academic scholarship, but we shouldn't expect our jargon to resonate with the general public. We need to reach out and do it effectively.

And when we pivot to the future and try to reach those people who are not yet convinced but could be convinced, we need to elevate our language. For some multiculturalists, mired in jargon, this may be uncomfortable because they have not developed those public language muscles. But they can, if they work at it.

Lessons from My Grandmother

Somewhere in that foreign country called the past I ran across two quotes from Albert Einstein that I have used as communication guideposts. He urged people: "Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler." Since I read that quote I've made it a point to try to simplify my communication.

The other quote went like this. "You don't know a subject well until you can explain it to your grandmother." Admittedly, the quote has sexist and ageist overtones. Nevertheless, Einstein nailed it.

I am the offspring of three immigrant grandparents: from Mexico, Ukraine, and Austria. My Mexican grandfather died before I was born. My Ukrainian grandfather was busy making a living. But I talked long and often with my Austrian immigrant grandmother, who was sharp as a tack but had relatively little formal schooling.

When I got into multicultural education in the 1970s, I had lots of conversations about it with my grandmother. When I could convince her, I knew I had clarified my ideas and had found the language to communicate it. Grandma died in 1985, but I still talk to her out loud every time I write. Sometimes it drives my wife crazy.

When I wrote my Ethnic Studies Principles for the state of California, I generally ignored the first draft of the state's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, suffocated by language like hybridities, nepantla, and cisheteronormative. Grandma would not have the faintest idea what they were talking about. Instead, I made my case with simplicity, discussed the principles with my grandmother, and then tested them out with community groups, only a handful of scholars, before submitting my final draft to the state. My efforts helped the Medina bill get passed. We now have required Ethnic Studies in all California high schools.

When I wrote the City of Riverside's Anti-Racism Vision Statement, I insisted that our language be terse, direct, and brief. Our document turned out to be two-pages long. And it had to emanate from the community. No imported quotes from national figures. When I presented the statement in front of the City Council, one council member challenged me: "Does this statement come from critical race theory." I could answer quite honestly, "No, it comes from Riverside community voices."

When I was recently called back into the fray over the implementation of the California ethnic studies requirement, I looked at several competing ethnic studies curricula. All of them emphasized the inculcation of content, not the development of students. I decided that the last thing California needed was another ethnic studies curriculum coming from me, so instead I took an alternative approach. I developed a student-centered developmental framework based on the concept of bridge-building while adhering to Einstein's concept of simplicity. It's an easy-to-remember six-word conceptual matrix with three vertical columns titled I, You, and We and three horizontal bars titled Past, Present, and Future. Where those columns and bars intersect and form a nine-cell matrix there are no words whatsoever. Let teachers, students, and community people fill in the matrix.

I released my six-page document on August 1 of this year and presented it during the plenary of an Ethnic Studies summit later that month. I went to a breakout session right after the plenary and found that the speaker was immediately incorporating my matrix because it was so accessible. Grandma would have understood it. An independent curriculum developer has now illustrated it in a visually dazzling format that is still simple and usable, including an AI feature in which you can ask me questions about the matrix. She and I will be unfurling the results in a few minutes in a breakout session. Last week, the head of a UNESCO project asked me to become an advisor to their intercultural work. If multicultural educators make better communication with folks a priority, we can recapture the public square.

When I wrote this talk, I got help from my grandmother. I think she understood what I was saying and I think she was convinced. But I didn't write this talk just for my grandmother. I wrote it for you. I hope that at least some of you leave this session committed to talking to your grandmothers and convincing them that, yes,

multicultural education can be the wave of the future, not a monument to the past, because multicultural education is something America desperately needs.

Disclosure Statement

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