

Realizing a Transformed Pedagogical Dreamfield: Recasting Agreements for Teaching and Learning

By Laura I. Rendón

If we can see it is our agreements which rule our life, and we don't like the dream of our life, we need to change the agreements. Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements (1997, p. 22)

In *The Four Agreements* (1997) Don Miguel Ruiz, a healer and teacher who studied the teachings of the Toltec in Mexico, explains that the mind dreams 24 hours a day. When the mind is awake, we dream according to the framework of what we have been taught and what we have agreed to believe. When the mind is asleep, we lack this conscious framework, and the dream changes constantly. In the awakened state, we function according to society's Dreamfield--a collective, holographic reflection of our shared beliefs. In higher education, our shared beliefs about teaching and learning constitute the agreements that guide our present pedagogical Dreamfield. This Dreamfield is fraught with some powerful, entrenched agreements that, though shared by many, are in need of revision because they do not completely honor our humanity and our freedom to express who we are and what we represent.

Purpose

In this essay, I seek to: 1) expose the privileged agreements that govern teaching and learning in higher education; 2) provide an intellectual and spiritual framework for recasting the agreements in order to transform teaching and learning; and 3) join the many existing voices of educational transformation to contribute to the generation of a movement that wishes to create a new dream of education. The foundation of this dream is a more harmonic, holistic vision of education that honors the whole of who we are as intellectual, compassionate, authentic human beings who value love, peace, democracy, community, diversity and hope for humanity.

Privileged Agreements Governing the Present Pedagogical Dreamfield

To create a new teaching and learning Dreamfield that is intellectual (i.e., based on high standards of academic achievement, allows students to engage in

problem solving, decision-making, critical thinking, etc.) and spiritual (i.e., honors our humanity, instills a sense of wonder, sacredness and humility in our college classrooms, respects and embraces alternate cultural realities, and connects faculty and students in meaningful ways) requires an examination of at least six agreements that are firmly entrenched in the academic culture of the academy.

The Agreement to Privilege Mental Knowing

It is one of the teachings of wisdom that the merely logical mind—when it is cut off from the intrinsically higher human feelings of wonder and the sense of the sacred—inevitably becomes a plaything of the external senses, convincing us that only what is perceived with these outward-directed senses is real—Jacob Needleman, The American Soul (2003 p. 12)

The agreement to privilege cerebral abilities such as verbal, scientific and mathematical ability puts on a pedestal what Howard Gardner (1993), who developed the theory of multiple intelligences, calls linguistic and logical-mathematical forms of intelligence typically used to measure our IQ (Intelligence Quotient). IQ is linked to faith in the scientific method, leading us to prize and reward outer knowing (intellectual reasoning, rationality, and objectivity) at the expense of inner knowing (deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition and emotions). However, there are a number of theories, which point to the notion that human intelligence is multifaceted. These key theories are paraphrased below.

Theory of Multiple Intelligences Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is predicated on seven different ways of knowing, and he describes them in practical forms in his book, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (1993). The intelligences Gardner identified include: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner believes that linguistic and logical-mathematical forms of intelligence may get a student into college because college entrance tests such as the SAT prize verbal and mathematical abilities. But what receives less attention is that college academic achievement and success in life depend on all intelligences, and Gardner (1993) states that "all seven of the intelligences have an equal claim to priority" (p. 8).

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) In his book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) psychologist Daniel Goleman discusses EQ's connection to neural systems in the brain linked to cognitive skills and knowledge. According to Goleman (1998, p. 24): "Our emotional intelligence determines our potential for learning the practical skills that are based on its five elements: self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships." Goleman notes that EQ is far more important than IQ for job performance and leadership. It is also important to note that brain researchers are making an important link between cognition and emotion. Antonio Damasio's book, *Descartes' Error* (1994) and

Stanley Greenspan's book, *The Growth of the Mind* (1997) contain neuroscientific research findings showing that reason and emotion are not separate and irreconcilable.

Spiritual Intelligence (SQ) In their book, *Spiritual Intelligence* (2000), Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall review scientific evidence carried out by neuropsychologist Michael Persinger and neurologist V.S. Ramachandran and his team at the University of California. Their research points to a form of spiritual intelligence located among neural connections in the temporal lobes of the brain. This "God spot" allows the brain to ask profound questions of meaning and value. To paraphrase Zohar and Marshall, a highly developed SQ includes the following characteristics: flexibility, self-awareness, capacity to face and use suffering, capacity to face and transcend pain, capacity to be inspired, reluctance to harm others, ability to see connections among what appears to be different, tendency to ask Why? or What if? questions, field-independence and ability to work against conventional thought. Similarly, in his book, *Thinking With Your Soul* (2001), clinical psychologist Richard Wolman identified seven factors that make up human spiritual experience and behavior: Divinity, Mindfulness, Intellectuality, Community, Extrasensory Perception, Childhood Spirituality and Trauma.

Heart Intelligence (HQ) Recent research, though not thoroughly conclusive and controversial, is pointing to the notion that our hearts may also be sites for another form of intelligence. For example, studies being conducted through the Institute of HeartMath (IHM) Research Center in California are attempting to provide a scientific basis to explain how the heart affects mental clarity, creativity, emotional balance and personal effectiveness. Research points to the heart having a self-organized processing center that communicates with and influences the cranial brain via four major ways: "neurologically (through the transmission of nerve impulses), biochemically (via hormones and neurotransmitters), biophysically (through pressure waves) and energetically (through electromagnetic field interactions). Communication along all these conduits significantly affects the brain's activity".

We need to reframe the agreement that educational achievement and success in life depend solely on linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities.

The Agreement of Separation

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness --Thich Nhat Hanh

The underlying tenets of the agreement of separation are that: 1) teaching and learning are linear and information flows primarily from teacher to student; 2) faculty should keep a distance from their students; 3) faculty are the sole experts in the classroom; 4) teaching is separated from learning and 5) any kind of faculty outreach to students such as validation, caring or encouragement is more often than not considered a form of coddling students who are presumed to be

adults and who should be strong enough to survive the collegiate environment on their own. Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), has critiqued this separation Dreamfield of teaching and learning, calling it the “banking model of education,” where faculty distance themselves from students, and “deposit” their knowledge in the classroom. Freire asks educators to transform oppressive structures and to create liberatory pedagogy where teaching and learning can be democratic, participatory and relational, allowing both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge. In vogue over the past 10 years is the notion that learning is more important than teaching, giving rise to “learner-centered” approaches to education. The belief is that the focus in the classroom should be on learners and learning, and not so much on teachers and teaching. While it is understandable that educators would want to create a pedagogical model that works against the tendency of some teachers to be autocratic and oppressive, the key to good teaching and learning is likely found in both teachers and students (Palmer, 1998).

Another assumption educators typically make is that students, regardless of background, should “tough it out,” and that all students should learn how to succeed without any intervention. While it is true that many students believe that they work best alone and are able to care for themselves, my own research (Rendon, 1994; 2002) documents that there is a large class of students who benefit from what I call validation, “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendon, 1994, p. 44). Validation theory calls for faculty and staff to get closer to students, to reach out to students to offer assistance and to help students make social and emotional adjustments in college, if not in their personal lives.

We need to change the agreement that good teaching and learning evolve from a model that distances teachers from students and that separates teaching from learning .

The Agreement of Competition

If you look deeply into any living being, a mosaic of intimate interrelationships will be revealed. Life is all about relationships. Joel Levey & Michelle Levey, *Living in Balance* (1998, p 199)

In the Agreement of Competition students are pitted against each other in a fiercely competitive teaching and learning environment. As a concept, competition has a scientific origin--Charles Darwin’s natural selection theory, a form of survival of the fittest. In higher education, we know this agreement as merit, where only the “best and the brightest, ” as defined by grades and test scores, are deemed worthy of attending college. But how complete is Darwin’s hypothesis? Lynn Margulis, a professor of geosciences, challenged Darwin with her own theory of endosymbiosis, and argued that coming together, not

competing, is what advances evolution. In short, Margulis proposed that cooperation, interaction, and mutual dependence among life forms are the driving force behind evolution. Relationships, not competition, form the essence of life. Margulis' theory, advanced in her book, *Symbiosis in Cell Evolution* (1981), is fascinating. Not only does the theory break the Darwin-based agreement of competition, it offers a viable, alternative explanation for the evolution of life.

If Margulis' theory holds true, then what does this have to say about our work as educators? Assisting students to learn involves building a relationship between teachers and students, and the connective aspects of teaching and learning can be lost if the classroom context is based mainly on competition. Learning communities, which involve a great deal of peer interaction and relationship-building, have documented promising outcomes such as increased rates of retention, high grades, as well as social, emotional and spiritual development (Burgis, 2000; Goodsell-Love, 1999; Cabrera, 1998).

We need to change the agreement that competition is the primary and most useful method to advance learning.

The Agreement of Perfection

The greatest peril of the path for those who seek Enlightenment is not leaving enough room inside themselves for what they do not know. And the greatest peril of the path for those who already are enlightened is neglecting to leave enough room inside themselves for what they do not know—Andrew Cohen, Embracing Heaven and Earth (2000), p. 83.

The Agreement of Perfection is witnessed in an academic model where there is usually little, if any, room for error in the classroom. However, feminist learning theorists suggest that in a context where human imperfection is downplayed, many students become intimidated by professors who either bombard them with too much information or leave them confused and frustrated with too little information (Belenky, 1986; Gilligan, 1977). Along the same lines, Andrew Cohen, author of *Embracing Heaven and Earth* (2000), indicates that behaving as if we already know everything is a symptom of arrogance, a way that the ego protects itself from what it does not know. Not only are we judged as arrogant when we behave as if we know everything, but our sense of wonder, which requires that we embrace the mystery of darkness, is also diminished. Learning, according to anthropologist Joan Halifax, author of *The Fruitful Darkness* (1994), is not being in a state of all knowing perfection; it is more a process of initiation, of leaving some sense of security behind us and venturing forth into the unknown. In *Native Science* (2000), Gregory Cajete points out that there is no word for "education" in most Indigenous languages. Rather, education is best described as "coming-to-know," which entails a: "journey, a process, a quest for knowledge and understanding. There is then a visionary tradition involved with these understandings that encompasses harmony, compassion, hunting,

planting, technology, spirit, song, dance, color, number, cycle, balance, death, and renewal” (p. 80).

We need to revise the agreement that being in a state of tentativeness and imperfection is always a sign of intellectual weakness.

The Agreement of Monoculturalism

Because of the emphasis in this country on a monocultural social and personal identity (although it really has never existed in the United States) and the philosophical and political underpinnings of rugged individualism, the very notion of multiplicity has been conceptualized as deviant or pathological—Aida Hurtado, 1996, p. 375.

The agreement of monoculturalism has created an epistemological dream underscored by: 1) the almost exclusive validation of Western structures of knowledge; 2) the subjugation of knowledge created by indigenous people and people of color; 3) course offerings which preserve the superiority of Western civilization; and 4) the dominant presence of faculty and administrators in colleges and universities who subscribe to monocultural paradigms of knowledge production and comprehension. Modern Western science has been critiqued on a number of fronts by some feminist researchers, as well as scholars of color and Indigenous scholars. For example, one area of contestation is the erroneous assumption that Western science contains the history of all science (Harding, 1991; Broomfield, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Despite claims that the academy is open to diversity and multiculturalism, the fact is that most of what gets taught and how it gets taught is predicated on a paradigmatic status quo based on what M. Annette Jaimes Guerrero (1996) identifies as “Euro-American privilege and the presumed superiority of Western civilization” (p. 49). Non-Western views of truth as (i.e., Third World perspectives, Eastern ways of knowing, indigenous knowledge, etc.) are generally at best objectified as “the other,” and at worst, as primitive and anti-intellectual.

Higher education is admitting perhaps the most diverse student body ever, and adding to this complex scenario is religious diversity. In her book, *A New Religious America* (2001), Diana L. Eck notes that Americans are the most religiously diverse people in the world, and our schools and colleges are witnessing varieties of people from every part of the world. Of course, college and university students are also diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, worldview, and class. Consequently, a multiplicity of perspectives are consistently engaged (overtly and covertly) in higher education classrooms whether professors want to recognize that or not. To push and expand theoretical paradigms regarding knowledge construction, production and use requires a multicultural perspective that embraces diverse ways of knowing which emerge from multiple perspectives.

We need to change the agreement that Western ways of knowing are superior to all other forms of knowledge.

The Agreement of Workaholism

Whether they are Hispanic or Native American, Caucasian or Black, the more their lives speed up, the more they feel hurt, frightened, and isolated. Despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, their work in the world rarely feels light, pleasant, or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: I am so busy—Wayne Muller, Sabbath (1999, p. 2).

My life and the lives of so many others who work in the academy provide ample examples of the Agreement of Workaholism, which requires that we remain constantly busy with multiple projects often to the point of burnout, stress and illness. Faculty and administrators are socialized to believe that the “best” academics are those who are constantly publishing, getting millions of dollars in grants, putting in long hours, working on weekends, and traveling extensively. When we ask our colleagues: “How are you?” we almost never get the answer: “Oh, I am so relaxed! I got so much rest this weekend. I had time to do everything I wanted to do with my family.” In his book, Sabbath, Wayne Muller (1999) maintains that lack of rest, poor nutrition and lack of exercise is a form of bodily violence often resulting in disease, poor relationships with our loved ones, constant stress, burnout, drug and alcohol abuse and even death. In a study involving close to 200 faculty members, Alexander Astin and Helen Astin (1999) found that faculty experienced a wide range of negative reactions to stress, including “health problems, divorce, over consumption of caffeine and sleep deprivation” (p. 27). While working hard to make more money has its merits, Mark Nepo author of The Book of Awakening (2000) notes that love, truth and compassion are what matter most in life, and that money is best used “to make love work, to bring truth into being, to allow generosity and compassion to flourish” (p.77).

We need to change the agreement that workaholism, and its corollaries of stress, disease, and lack of intimacy, is the preferred way to approach our work in higher education.

Recasting the Agreements: An Intellectual and Spiritual Framework for Transformation

Below I outline four steps to engage in the process of transformation to assist in realizing a transformed pedagogical Dreamfield. In essence, what I am proposing is an alternative process of educational transformation that engages paradox, disturbs the status quo, and represents a synthesis of what may be considered intellectual and spiritual. As we interrogate our belief system, we enter into in an

intellectual process that calls forth our high-level analytical, critical thinking and reasoning skills. Yet this process is designed to elicit what may be considered spiritual in nature--our emotions, sense of wonder, possibility, purpose and meaning, as well as our compassion, imagination and creativity.

Steps to Transformation

The process of transformation involves the following steps:

Step 1. Identify the agreement(s) being privileged This step brings the belief system of a particular aspect of educational practice into awareness. For example, if educators wish to transform pedagogical practice, one of the first things they would do is to identify shared beliefs that are being privileged in teaching and learning within their own institutions. For example, one of the beliefs could be the agreement to privilege mental knowing. Taking an inventory of these shared agreements allows us to be more focused about what we are trying to transform.

Step 2. Interrogate the agreement(s) being privileged Interrogation involves identifying progressive and regressive elements and calling into question any assumptions behind a particular agreement. For instance, regarding the agreement to privilege mental knowing, one strength of this pervasive belief is that working with the mind and engaging in intellectual activities enhances our cognitive development. Few can argue that an essential part of education is to help students develop reasoning, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, the shadow wisdom of this agreement is that a unitary view of knowing can lead to a diminished appreciation for the plurality of intelligences. At the same time, I note that shadow elements of agreements we helped to create and validate on a day-to-day basis should not always be viewed with total disfavor. In fact, the disowned and unconscious aspects of ourselves and our behavior can harbor great wisdom. Working through points of resistance, tensions, fears, doubts and difficulties can allow us to heal, be liberated from belief systems that are inflicting harm, and eventually become more whole. Interrogating agreements also involves providing evidence that a particular agreement is in place. Evidence can highlight the extent that the problematic elements of the agreement exist on campus, as well as possible harm the agreement may be inflicting. As might be surmised, engaging in the deep work of confronting institutional flaws and personal shadows can involve excitement and joy in the process of inquiry, discovery and freedom to explore new ideas. Yet the process can also evoke strong feelings such as fear, confusion and anxiety. Consequently, this step should be taken with care, compassion, and humility. If we truly wish to engage in transformation, we must be willing to step into (as opposed to circle around) pain and discomfort, recognizing that joy and excitement can be part of the process as well.

Step 3. Explore available choices Reframing agreements involves making choices from the options available. Each choice involves thinking about what would be the most authentic response to the situation, a change that makes sense intellectually, but also one that is compassionate and considers the needs of others. For instance, one choice is to make some modifications in a particular agreement, recognizing that not everything about the agreement is in need of change. The belief is recast to allow for unity and balance of perspective, not to dismantle everything about the agreement. For instance, with regard to the agreement of workaholism, it is not that we should turn into lazy academics, it is a question of balancing work and rest, recognizing that our minds need replenishment and renewal. The greater reality is wholeness—the balance between doing good work and taking time for ourselves and our loved ones. A second choice is to totally dismantle an agreement. For example, in the case of the agreement of monoculturalism, it is likely that everything about this belief needs to be reframed. A third choice, after carefully interrogating an agreement, is to leave the agreement intact. The institutional context and/or players may not be ready for change to occur. If this choice is made, at the very least, institutional representatives should take responsibility for any harm that is being created by leaving the agreement intact and take active measures to begin the process of eliminating any harmful effects of a particular belief system. Every choice (i.e., modification of an agreement, totally dismantling an agreement or leaving an agreement intact) has its consequences and responsibilities. All who select the choice become co-creators of a new consciousness that will ultimately guide institutional practice and policy.

Step 4. Recast the agreement This step engages educators in thinking more deeply about what they wish to see in the transformation they are co-creating. Once an agreement is identified and its strengths and limitations are brought to awareness, the next step is to reframe the agreement. Below, I take each privileged agreement about teaching and learning and provide an example of what a recast agreement might look like.

- To recast the agreement to privilege mental knowing, what would be an example of a reframed agreement that is based not on a single approach to learning, but on multiple ways of knowing? Recast Agreement: The Agreement to Work with Diverse Ways of Knowing in the Classroom.
- To recast the agreement of separation, what reframed agreement would be based on connecting faculty with students and synthesizing teaching and learning? Recast Agreement: The Agreement of Relationship-Centeredness.
- To recast the agreement of competition, what agreement would speak to the concepts of competition and collaboration in the classroom? Recast Agreement: The Agreement to Engage Diverse Teaching and Learning Strategies in the Classroom.
- To recast the agreement of perfection, what agreement would integrate the concepts of expert knowing and “getting-to-know?” Recast Agreement: The Agreement to be Open and Flexible About What We Know and Do Not Know.

- To recast the agreement of monoculturalism, what agreement would speak to the notion of embracing not only traditional, mainstream models, but also views of knowledge espoused by diverse groups such as women, people of color and indigenous people, among others? Recast Agreement: The Agreement of Multiculturalism and Respect for Diverse Cultures.
- To reframe the agreement of workaholism, what agreement would speak to the balance we need in our professional and personal lives? Recast Agreement: The Agreement to Balance Our Personal and Professional Lives with Work, Rest and Replenishment.

Once agreements are reframed, they serve as the new consciousness with which to engage in pedagogical practice. For example, if professors enter a classroom believing in the agreement to embrace diverse ways of knowing, every aspect of teaching and learning is likely to be conducted differently. Efforts will be made to select materials, design activities, and assess students with a broader view of what it means to be an educated person, including not only intellectual, but also emotional, social and spiritual development. Similarly, if professors enter the classroom embracing the agreement of relationship-centeredness, more of an effort will be made to connect with students (i.e., revealing ourselves more fully, engaging in collaborative learning, forming learning communities, etc.). The process of transformation I have outlined builds on Don Miguel Ruiz's (1997) thesis that in effect we can change any agreements that rule our dream of life. A group of educators can work against a flawed belief system and develop a new set of agreements to realize a transformed pedagogical Dreamfield based on embracing multiple forms of intelligence, connectedness, relationship-building, openness to knowing/not knowing, multiculturalism, and care for others, as well as for ourselves. I trust that the process of recasting agreements can provide hope for transforming education and for realizing a deeper awareness of the essence of our humanity.

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