Foreword

As we gather this spring in Denver, Colorado, we do so with the knowledge that the curricular and instructional problems in our educational arena cannot be resolved by a single method or understood through isolated research. In the same way that not one learning style fits all individuals, observing students in just one setting does not provide a complete vision of ability or intellect. Nor does limiting ourselves to facilitating learning solely within our classrooms, in situations under our control, provide the most comprehensive and supportive discourse for inclusive learning and growth.

Each of us implicitly realizes that we engage in every situation equipped with personal and communal experiences that affect and direct our approach. Students also enter classrooms holding their own history deep inside them. In Multicultural Education: A Caring-Centered, Reflective Approach, Valerie Ooka Pang contends that the worldviews and perspectives held by educators are reflected in the ways they teach and interact, and impact the values and expectations placed on those students under their care. Indeed, like Dr. Pang, I believe that schools, universities, districts, and educators hold “deep cultural values,” generally a reflection of mainstream society rather than of the students or adjacent community. Further, these deeply held values frame the ways in which students interpret and interact with their surroundings. Understanding this suggests that teachers and administrators are responsible for creating relevant, contemporary, contextualized experiences in order motivate and unite learners.

Like politics and economics, education is a multifaceted phenomenon, affected by a wide range of possible choices as well as failure to make choices. Knowledge is developed through our participation within personal and familial settings, social and peer networks, schools and community organizations, and various corporate media and social-technological networking. Most of the influences in this list are completely unaffected by the kinds of reforms aimed at improving our educational efforts, which are part of a larger social ecology and are therefore highly nuanced and not sensitive to simplistic solutions.

The notion of “classroom” extends far beyond brick and mortar, playground, lesson plan, term paper, and test. Truly engaging students in intellectual study, quality work, and rigorous scholarship requires an act of delving into other settings and resources rooted in the lives of our students, community, nation, and world. To understand the depth and significance of these settings, educators must engage families, communities, agencies, and organizations. As we seek answers to academic challenges, we must adopt a comprehensive approach from cross-disciplinary perspectives and diverse lenses. We must become proficient at negotiating and uniting the wide range of learning environments in order to better respond to the needs of students of diverse backgrounds and experiences. We must develop dynamic learning environments.

This year’s AERA Annual Meeting theme, Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World, is centered on the deep ecological web within which educational efforts take place and which influences teaching and learning. The program focuses on the power of community and relationships and unites our efforts to produce notable research and methodology within the multiple and varied fields throughout the education arena. As education researchers, we shoulder the burden of assessing the quality of the nation’s education efforts. With our expertise, we will either serve or fail to serve as inspiration to help shape the nation’s pedagogical imagination. To succeed in this role we must understand the nexus between teaching, students, and the complex and multifaceted variables affecting education. We must build relationships with our colleagues across disciplines. Many of the sessions at this year’s meeting do just that.

Along with AERA President Carol Lee, I thank you for attending the 2010 AERA Annual Meeting. Welcome to Denver!

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