



## On Learning to Thrive in the Academy by Turning Outsiderness into Strength

Christine Sleeter



I grew up in single-parent family during the 1950s and 1960s after my father died of a massive heart attack when I was six. At that time, very few families in my community were headed by one parent. While I missed my dad, I didn't feel there was anything inherently wrong with my family. But I clearly felt as though most people around me thought just that. I recall hating to have to explain to people that my father was deceased, then watch their faces freeze as they struggled for a response. Father-daughter events at school, and art projects illustrating our families or making Father's Day cards – these were some of the

practices that spotlighted my fatherlessness. The problem was that such practices assumed a particular family structure, and my family didn't fit. As I grew older (and as more and more families experienced divorce), I grew less sensitive about my family structure, but never forgot the sting of other people's pity when I was young. This early experience of feeling different probably incited my commitment to inclusive classroom and school practices.

If you don't see things the same way as everyone else, if you feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, can you succeed in the academy while staying true to yourself? Can you survive, thrive, and make a significant contribution?

These personal questions connect with my professional work in multicultural education and ethnic studies, both of which interrogate institutionalized processes and structures in education that benefit groups with power at the expense of everyone else. I have spent much of my professional life trying to figure out how to transform those processes and practices to support the intellects, cultures, identities, and perspectives of students in our schools, and particularly those from communities minoritized on the basis of race. At the same time, I have had to wrestle with various dimensions of my own outsiderness, and learn how to thrive in academe without losing myself.

When advising young scholars and graduate students faced with vexing choices that affect their professional and personal lives, I always tell them to listen to their gut, to follow their heart. This is something I learned to do gradually, as I waded through years of distrusting myself. I also advise

them that following your heart is not necessarily easy. Academe may well not be organized to support your passions and perspectives, so to thrive, you must be willing to invest effort in learning how academe functions in order to map out a path that fits you. But ultimately, thriving in the academy begins by valuing what makes you, you.

## Feeling Like an Outsider

The loss of my father, which made my family structure different from what was considered “normal,” attuned me to how outsidersness feels. Those feelings were magnified as I struggled with what it meant for a girl to be smart. I grew up at a time when the culture didn’t value girls who did well in school. If you were a girl, you could be smart, or you could be cool, but you couldn’t be both. Adults (especially my teachers) loved me. Other smart kids liked me; most kids were intimidated by me.

I remember trying out for the cheerleading squad in junior high. We were supposed to make our own pompons for the tryout, so I bought crepe paper in the school colors and constructed what I thought were respectable pompons. I didn’t realize I had cut the crepe paper with the grain rather than against it, so when I arrived for the tryout, mine were limp while the other girls’ were fluffy. For me, this was proof that I could invest time and energy in schoolwork, and it always turned out well, but when I invested in something other girls were doing, I was a dismal failure.

After graduating from high school and going off to college, I came up with a solution to the problem of feeling like an outsider because I was a smart girl: I adopted a scatterbrained persona, and studied in secret. I kept my grades up but I became adept at convincing my peers that I was an air-headed social butterfly. Up to a

point that worked – until I graduated with no game plan.

These outsider experiences derived from parts of myself that I couldn’t change. While plenty of people in my life supported me – my mother, my grandparents, a few close friends, my teachers – I felt there was something wrong with me. I couldn’t quite relate to the experience of having a dad.

And when given an academic assignment, I could do it well, but when asked to relate to my peers, I was lost unless I acted like I was someone else. Only gradually did I learn to value my abilities. As I did so, to my surprise, I discovered that these

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strength, enabling me to chart out a direction that worked for me.

## Learning to Listen and Embrace Outsider-ness

I grew up in southern Oregon, which was 99+% white at the time. (My high school class included one Mexican American student, and the class behind me included a Chinese American student.) I completed my undergraduate degree at predominantly white Willamette University, then (for lack of a better plan) moved to predominantly white Ellensburg, Washington, for a year. The only substantive experiences I had with people of color during that time was a summer spent in Japan, and interactions with a few students of color in what were otherwise predominantly white settings.

By accident, in 1971, I ran across and enrolled in a teacher education program based in inner city Seattle and designed to prepare urban educators. There, I was placed in a 10th-grade world history class for eight months. I say “by accident” because I aspired not so much to become a high school urban teacher – indeed I didn’t know what that meant – as much as to leave

the rural central part of the state for a more interesting location.

Many people end up working in high poverty urban schools by accident, which is not a good reason to be there or stay. I stayed. Why, and why did that turn out to be a good thing?

With the exception of the summer living with a family in Japan on the Experiment in International Living, my earlier experiences of feeling out of place were minor compared to how I felt in a large urban high school. Most of the students were of color and virtually all were from working class backgrounds. I felt very white, and very ignorant of my surroundings. While in Japan, I had developed a tolerance for hypervisibility, and patience with learning basics from the people around me. In Seattle, those things helped. I couldn't change my whiteness, and I wouldn't pretend to be someone I wasn't, as I had done in college. But I could do something about my ignorance, starting with my ignorance of the students.



Christine Sleeter, around 1974

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During unstructured times before and after school, as well as between classes, I began asking students about their lives. Then I listened. The more I listened, the more they shared with me. And the more they shared, the more I tried to figure out how to be useful to them. For example, when I found out that the gym was to be closed during lunch hour because no teacher was available or willing to supervise the boys playing basketball, knowing nothing about basketball myself, I volunteered. The school allowed me to do that for only a few days, but it wasn't lost on the kids that I would stand up for them if needed.

As another example, when I took over the class as a student teacher, initially I copied my cooperating teacher's banking style pedagogy. As Paulo Freire (1998) explained, the banking model treats students as empty vessels into which someone else's knowledge is poured for retrieval later. In contrast, Freire described the role of the teacher as "one of inciting the student to produce his or her own comprehension" (p. 106). At the time, I wasn't familiar with Freire's work, but I could see that the banking model put my students to sleep. So, I switched immediately to cooperative learning – which I had no training in at the time, but, when co-constructed with the students, woke them up. This experience deeply influenced my subsequent interactive and constructivist approach to teaching.

Coming into Seattle woefully ignorant of the histories, cultures, literatures, and philosophies of African Americans, Latinos/as, and American Indians, but aware of the protests for ethnic studies that had begun a few years earlier, I started to read. I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Vine Deloria's *Custer Died*

for your Sins, and many more. Initially I had very little experience or background knowledge to connect with what I was reading, but over time this ongoing program of reading gradually reshaped my understanding of the US through the eyes of minoritized and colonized peoples.

During the six years I spent in Seattle as a student teacher, a substitute teacher, then a classroom teacher, I didn't forget my status as a white outsider from southern Oregon, but I became a more knowledgeable and educable outsider. By educable, I mean that I learned to listen and to take criticism. For example, when African American friends unloaded with each other, while in my presence, about racial microaggressions they had experienced during the day, I simply listened without challenging them. I assumed they were speaking a truth that was different from what I knew, and that the best thing I could do was to keep my mouth shut, listen, and learn.

It was more difficult learning to listen to criticism directed at me. I recall mentioning to an American Indian teacher who had been invited to present in one of the classes I student-taught, that I thought I had a bit of American Indian ancestry, and I was interested in bringing Indian American literature into the classroom. I probably elaborated with some clueless teaching ideas. She blasted me, first for dissembling some American Indian identity I clearly lacked, and second for being very ill informed about American Indian literature. My face burned. But on reflection I realized she was right. I survived her calling me out (as I would survive other such incidents), and learned from it.

I completed my master's degree at Seattle University while teaching, which prompted me to start investigating doctoral programs. Having become a learning disabilities teacher, I figured I would pursue

a doctorate in special education. But I had become intrigued by multicultural education, which was in its early stages of development. One of my master's degree courses was co-taught by the director of Seattle's Ethnic Cultural Heritage Program, a program I had become enthusiastic about.

Seattle's schools were undergoing voluntary desegregation, and I became interested in how teachers were being prepared for their newly desegregated student populations. The director, Mako

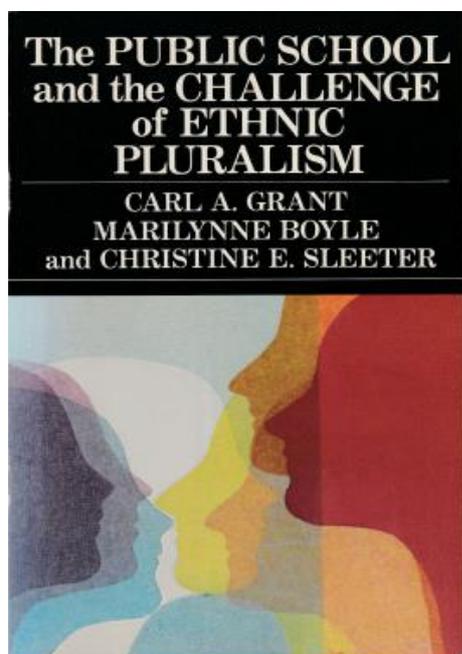
Nakagawa, included multicultural education as a topic in the course. I found myself wondering whether there was a place for white people in that work.

So, I penned a letter to one of the authors we read, Carl Grant, asking just that question. In a phone call, Carl managed to convince me that white people who are willing to listen can learn to work in multicultural education. I wouldn't need to choose between special education and multicultural education, as I could study both at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Further, he had money to hire graduate students. His response was inviting. When my advisor suggested I should go where graduate students were financially supported, in 1977, off I went to Wisconsin.

My first published booklet three years later was coauthored with Carl and Marilynne Boyle, another graduate student I collaborated with quite a bit. In *The Public Schools and the Challenge of Ethnic Pluralism* (Grant et al., 1980), we addressed a question that continues to be asked: How can the public schools "give a diverse public its money's worth?" (p. 6). We went on to outline the kinds of transformations envisioned by an education that is multicultural, such as challenging the idea that all children need to learn the same content, and that content should derive mainly from European and Euro-American

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intellectual thought. While the booklet never received much attention, it was one of the projects that helped me learn to become an academic writer.



By the early 1990s, my outsiderhood to urban and multicultural education – my whiteness – had become a significant focus in my work, visible in articles such as “Resisting racial awareness: How teachers understand the social order from their racial, gender, and social class locations” (Sleeter, 1992a) and “White racism” (Sleeter, 1994). My outsiderhood began informing my academic work in other ways as well. But to make use of it, I had to learn to trust my own thinking.

### **Learning to Trust My Own Thinking**

I had always been a good student in school. Give me an assignment, and I follow directions well. I could take in what teachers wanted me to learn, and produce work that aligned with their expectations. Occasionally I went beyond those expectations, such as the time I wrote a play in German for a favorite German professor.

But until I finished graduate school, I never thought to question respected authorities, especially those whose work I was reading and citing. That wasn’t because graduate school skimmed over critique, however. My doctoral program taught us to

critique what others wrote, and being the good student that I was, I became adept at it. Unconsciously, as a result, I learned to divide the works of published authors into two categories: those whose work is solid and beyond reproach, and those who are fair game due probably to inferior training. But there was a bigger issue at play here. Whenever I wondered whether an established authority might be using faulty reasoning or missing an important insight, I turned away from that thought, figuring it indicated my own lack of understanding. I didn’t trust my thinking. In a patriarchal society, women commonly distrust their own thinking, and are often rewarded for taking up rather than challenging men’s ideas. As a graduate student, I noticed (and periodically affirmed with other women) that our male colleagues assumed more authority to speak than we women did.

One snowy day, while driving from my first higher education job (Ripon College) to Madison, a bold critique formed in my head. Having been a learning disabilities teacher in Seattle, one of the courses I was assigned to teach at Ripon was Introduction to Learning Disabilities. The textbook we used – indeed, all of the texts about learning disabilities at that time – explained its underlying cause just as I had learned it in my master’s degree program: minimal brain dysfunction. But that explanation clashed with my experience. As the first learning disabilities teacher in the high school where I taught, I did not test nor treat students for brain dysfunction. Students were identified for the program by failing their classes because they read significantly below grade level, and by testing at or near normal on an IQ test.

In my doctoral program, in the context of examining the social reproduction function of schooling, we looked critically at tracking – who gets selected for which academic tracks, and the impact of tracking on teaching and learning. I began to wonder how we would think about learning disabilities if we regarded the program as a lower track. I also reflected on the six months I had spent substitute teaching in

Seattle Public Schools before obtaining a full-time position, when I was called occasionally for special education. I had noticed that the learning disabilities students tended to be white, while students classified as behaviorally disordered or mildly retarded (terms in use during the 1970s) were disproportionately Black and Latino/a. (All of them were disproportionately male.) Could learning disabilities be understood as a social construction that factored into the social reproduction function of schooling, and that served the function of protecting white children from failing?

I decided to look into the context in which learning disabilities first appeared during the 1960s. What categories existed for children unable to keep up with their classmates in reading during that time? Did it matter that simultaneously schools were undergoing racial desegregation?

Pursuing these questions led me to write “Learning disabilities: The social construction of a special education category” (Sleeter, 1986). This article questioned the medical model on which learning disabilities was built, thereby challenging the entire basis of that special education category. It put forth a sociological analysis of the sorting function of race and class in schools. And it appeared in *Exceptional Children*, one of special education’s leading journals.

I had actually worked up to this challenge through a couple of papers I wrote while in my doctoral program. The clash I felt between the conventional wisdom within special education and my own experience as a teacher gnawed at me. But in writing my earlier papers, I wasn’t sure how to address that clash. The inspiration I received while driving in the snow led me to the library, where I tried to figure out the racial and social class composition of students in different special education categories during the 1960s. The only way I could manage to do this was to find empirical studies conducted during that decade, and compile data describing the

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samples by race, gender, and (if possible) social class.

I spent hours in the library assembling the best data I could to make my case. Then I saw an opening when *Exceptional Children* selected James Ysseldyke as its editor. While he wasn’t asking exactly the same question I was, he had critically questioned how children were assessed for special education. I took a chance and sent him a draft of my article, fearing he would see it as reflecting my own lack of understanding of the field. He didn’t. He encouraged me to submit it for publication, which I did. Since the article was published (Sleeter, 1986), some established figures in the field have taken issue with me. But with that article, I began to learn to trust my own thinking.

A couple of years later, I again found a critique taking shape in my head, arising this time from a conflict between my experience with multicultural education and what I was reading about it from leftist education scholars whose work I generally held in high regard, such as Philip Wexler, Cameron McCarthy, and Michael Olneck. Critical theorists who grounded their analysis in social class generally gave little attention to race, and so ignored or dismissed multicultural education. Other radical theorists who focused on race charged multicultural education with deflecting Black demands by focusing on culture rather than challenging racism. These charges conflicted with my experience with multicultural education, particularly during the 1970s, when activists grounded their work in the Civil Rights movement and the negative experiences African American students faced in newly desegregated white schools.

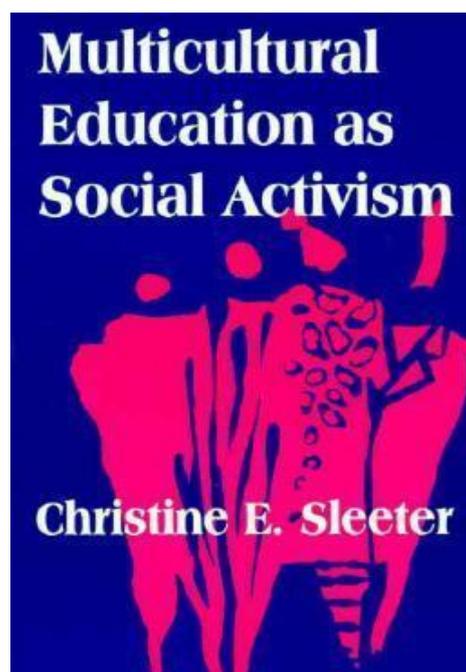
Multicultural education was being viciously attacked from the right, which one

could expect. But I was concerned that some on the left who should be its allies were acting like its adversaries, having failed to recognize or appreciate its roots in racial struggle, and having not distinguished between how its advocates conceptualized multicultural education and how white teachers took it up. Fired up, I wrote.

I framed my argument initially in “Multicultural Education as a Form of Resistance to Oppression,” then sent it to the *Journal of Education*, which at the time was a leading journal for leftist education theory. There I argued that, “Multicultural education in the United States has many insights and theorists needed to strengthen and lead radical challenges to racism through education” (Sleeter, 1989, p. 69). I wanted it published and read by white people on the left who trivialized multicultural education. To do that, I had to study and unpack their critiques, then counter them by making use of some of the same theories they used. In other words, while this article was prompted by a visceral response to what others were saying, I crafted it by getting inside the thinking of the article’s primary audience. In fairly rapid succession, three books followed that took up the central idea of that earlier article (Sleeter, 1991; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sleeter, 1996).

Over the years, I have talked with many graduate students and junior scholars who privately share their critiques of prevailing theories and constructs with me, but hesitate to develop them in writing out of concern not to alienate academic power brokers who, if offended, could hurt them professionally. I try to help these junior academics to distinguish between taking pot-shots at ideas or people, versus doing the work that is needed to ground and present their thinking. Both examples I have described initially arose through a conflict between what I had experienced and what I was reading. In both, it took a while for that conflict to become clear to me because initially I assumed that it was my thinking that was at fault. But as I mentally worked

out the nature of the conflict, I invested considerable effort examining the basis of the ideas I wanted to challenge, creating an evidentiary and theoretical case for my point of view, then crafting that case in a way that spoke directly to those whose point of view was not like mine. When the work was published, read, and taken seriously, gradually I came to trust my own thinking.



This is not to deny, however, that the context in which we work is still hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist. Those are structural power relationships that still need challenging. But at the individual level, one can learn not to snuff out one’s own ideas, but rather advance those ideas in a way they will be heard. It took me years to figure that out.

### **Going where I can Bloom, and Learning to Bloom where I Land**

The academy nudges graduate students and emerging scholars in particular directions when it is time to seek an academic position, but the direction in which you are nudged may or may not be a good fit for your goals. I don’t expect junior scholars to follow my path. I do, however, expect them to figure out what path works best for them, incites their interests, and enables them to thrive

and grow. Then I encourage them to follow that path, regardless of whether it is the path others might expect of them. Know, too, that few people in higher education find themselves in the perfect job. Most jobs involve trade-offs between aspects that work well for them, and aspects that do not. It was during a time when I felt frustrated with limitations of my academic position that a colleague advised me to “bloom where you are planted.” At the time, I was incensed by the advice because it assumed the conditions in which I was working would not change. But the advice turned out to be valuable because it directed me to figure out how to do the work I wanted to do, despite limitations of the position.

Major research universities like the University of Wisconsin-Madison groom doctoral students as future R1 researchers. By the time I completed my doctorate, I felt well-prepared as a beginning researcher and writer, and I was quite aware of the expectation that I and my fellow doctoral students would seek R1 jobs. But I also knew I enjoyed teaching. I missed the students I had worked with in Seattle, and I still have letters some of my former students sent me after I left Seattle. I briefly considered returning to the classroom, probably because I so enjoyed my relationships with high school students and wasn't sure relationships with college students would be of the same quality. In addition, having spent four years as a learning disabilities teacher creating a program and its curriculum, then four years as a doctoral student critiquing schooling, I wanted to use my new insights to create programming to counter oppressive relationships.

These competing interests led to a not well-focused job search. I landed my first academic position at a small liberal arts college, Ripon College. Landon Beyer, a colleague I graduated with, also took a job at another small liberal arts college. He and I had periodic conversations about why we chose small colleges, and how we thought about the possibility of moving later to an

R1. We chose them based partly on location, but also on the basis of small school advantages. At Ripon, I was one of two and a half faculty members in the Education Department. I was in charge of secondary education, and contributed to the programs in elementary education and learning disabilities. In that context, I had considerable authority over the teacher education curriculum. I had seen how nearly impossible it was to change a program in a large institution like the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At Ripon, the approval process for curriculum changes was much simpler, so I was able to have some impact on the program fairly quickly. For example, the program had lacked a social foundations course or even a place in the curriculum to focus on the social and cultural context of schooling. I was able to design and add such a course.

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A further benefit of a small liberal arts college that I had not anticipated was the opportunity it afforded to work with colleagues from across many different disciplines. Ripon capitalized on this asset by holding periodic seminars attended by the entire faculty, in which one department discussed current research in their discipline. I valued the intellectual stimulation of these seminars and other ongoing interactions.

But it was difficult to maintain my scholarly writing there. Lanny Beyer and I would talk about publishing as if we were at an R1 in order to keep the door open to such a position later. Indeed, search committees in R1 universities expect the awarding of a doctoral degree to launch a prolific program of research and publication. Some junior scholars I have talked with believe that one can take a few years off after completing the doctorate, then expect to be taken seriously for an R1 job. By carefully organizing my time in a

way that allowed me to write (for example, I stayed home on Fridays), and by collaborating with Carl Grant on several projects, over three years, I managed to build a strong publication record while at a small liberal arts college.

That was a difficult balance to maintain, though, so I was thrilled when a job in multicultural education – probably the first in the country – opened up at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. UW-Parkside is not an R1. But designed partially around a liberal arts model, it emphasized teaching and research equally, with a teaching load of 9 credits per semester rather than the standard 12-credit load one finds at non-research institutions. That load enabled me to balance my interest in curriculum and program development in a small school context (the Education Department had about nine faculty members), with teaching, academic research and writing.

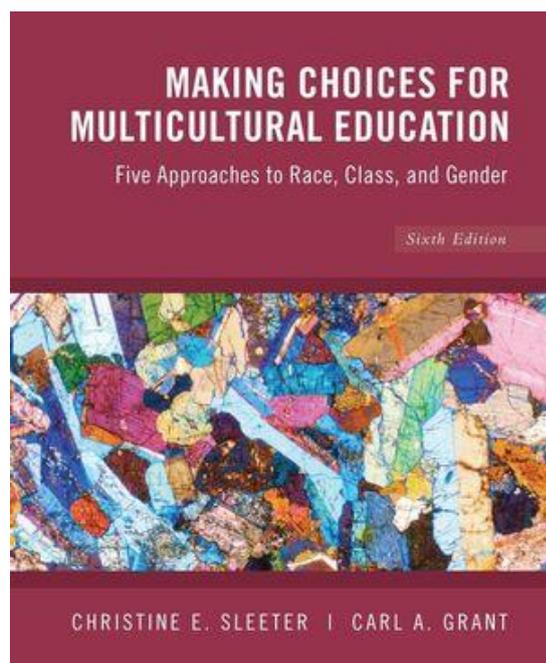
There, I turned my teaching and program development work into the focus for much of my research and writing. For example, about when I was planning my first multicultural education course, Carl Grant expressed interest in reading all the available published articles about multicultural education. That project led to

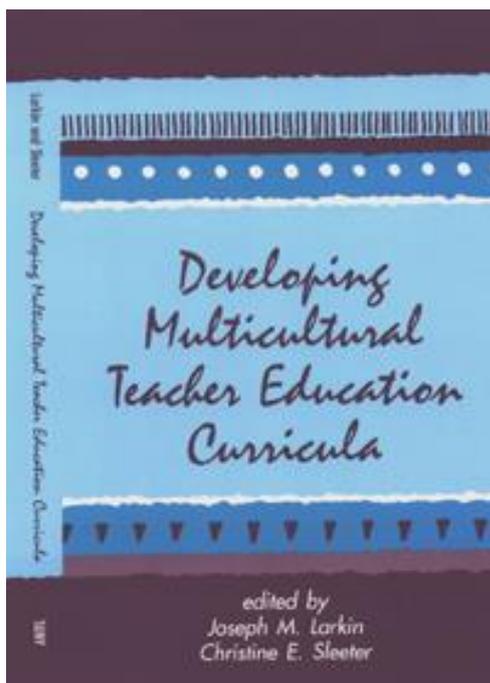
our article “An analysis of multicultural education in the U.S.A.,” published in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). It also gave me a structure for my course syllabus.

Carl and I then co-authored *Making Choices for Multicultural Education* (Sleeter & Grant, 2009), first published in 1988; this book elaborated on the *Harvard Educational Review* article. We wrote *Making Choices* because there were so few multicultural education textbooks and none that met our expectations. As we worked on the book, I tried out drafts of chapters with my classes. We then co-authored *Turning on Learning* (Grant & Sleeter, 2009), first published in 1989. That book illustrates each approach to multicultural education with lesson plans, many of which my students contributed. I used both books as required texts when they were published – indeed that was a major reason for writing them. At the same time, I believed there was an ethical problem with making money from my students, so I donated all royalties to the university’s student scholarship fund.

Later, as part of an effort to construct the entire teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside from a multicultural perspective, Joe Larkin and I co-edited *Developing Multicultural Teacher Education Curricula* (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995). Most chapters were written by our colleagues, illustrating what could be done with each course within a teacher education program.

I also delved into community-based learning while teaching my four-credit multicultural education course at University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Wisconsin at the time had a state requirement that teacher candidates spend 50 hours working with someone of a different cultural background (which in some programs included someone who is disabled or from a low-socioeconomic background). The teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside used that requirement to mandate that teacher candidates (about 95% of whom were white) complete a field experience in schools serving



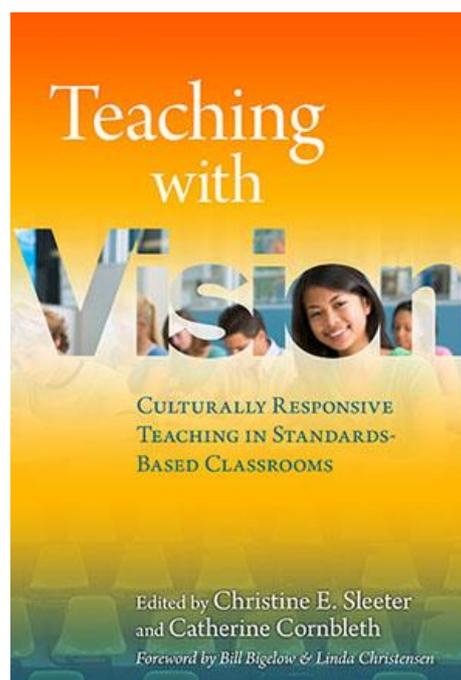


mainly students of color during the multicultural education course. While I agreed that teacher candidates needed to learn to teach in schools attended by students of color, most of the schools did little to affirm the backgrounds and identities of their students of color. I was concerned that interacting with students of color within but not outside the classroom left teacher candidates seeing students reacting to school rather than engaging more fully. I was also concerned that our teacher candidates tended to view culture as a static thing that people of color have and white people do not have, and that many of the white teacher candidates viewed the prospect of entering communities of color with great trepidation.

My experience in Seattle had taught me the value of getting to know people whose backgrounds differ from mine, and doing so on their own turf. So, I developed a working relationship with several grassroots community organizations run by and for communities of color, then moved the 50-hour field experience out into the community. Over several years, I developed various ways of supporting teacher candidates' learning, and of linking their learning with my course content. This work became the focus of a handful of articles

(e.g., Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Montecinos & Sleeter, 1999). It also contributed greatly to my understanding of multicultural education as consistent with its roots in community struggles against racism, and of how teacher education can be better constructed for cultural diversity.

In 1995, I relocated to California as a founding faculty member at California State University Monterey Bay. Again, a small university with plenty of opportunity to create curriculum (think – starting from a blank slate), in a context where I was teaching mainly working-class students (this time much more racially and ethnically diverse than in Wisconsin), and in a university system that is designated for teaching rather than research. And again, I worked to connect my research and scholarship with my teaching. For example, a book I co-edited with Catherine Cornbleth grew out of conversations she and I had over several years, sharing stories of wonderful teachers we were working with. When I came to California, I sought out the best teachers I could find, then created ways novices could learn from them. Some of these teachers became my Master's degree students; others did not but welcomed me into their classrooms. Catherine was working with a similar group of outstanding teachers. We dreamed up a volume in which the teachers



would write about how they learned to do what they do, for an audience of other teachers. That dream became *Teaching with Vision* (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011).

Another example of connecting my research with my teaching has to do with writing literature reviews. In the Master of Arts in Education program I directed, students had to complete literature reviews for their master's project, and I spent a great deal of time coaching them on constructing and writing literature reviews. At the same time I undertook several literature reviews myself, mainly reviews of research on the impact of various ways teacher education programs prepare teachers for cultural diversity (e.g., Sleeter, 2001a, 2001b). I often used literature reviews I was working on as demonstrations or examples of the process of locating literature, writing summaries of it, synthesizing those summaries, critiquing that body of literature, and drawing conclusions from it.

### Learning to Connect Academics with the Arts

Since childhood, I have enjoyed engaging in artistic expression. From writing stories, to playing clarinet in the band, from playing guitar to oil painting, the right side of my brain has always been active. Academic writing, however, is a very left-brain activity, and in the work to complete a doctorate, then obtain tenure at a university, right-brain engagement can wither. Having been an active oil painter while teaching high school, for example, I was distressed to find very little time to paint after I went off to graduate school. Think about it: how many education professors do you know achieve tenure while painting, writing fiction, or singing in a choir?

Actually, quite a few do, but usually with artistic pursuits serving as avocations. I began to wonder: can I write academic work through the arts? My first attempt to do so came about when Martin Haberman was guest editing a special issue of the *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, and invited me to contribute something about urban education. At first I

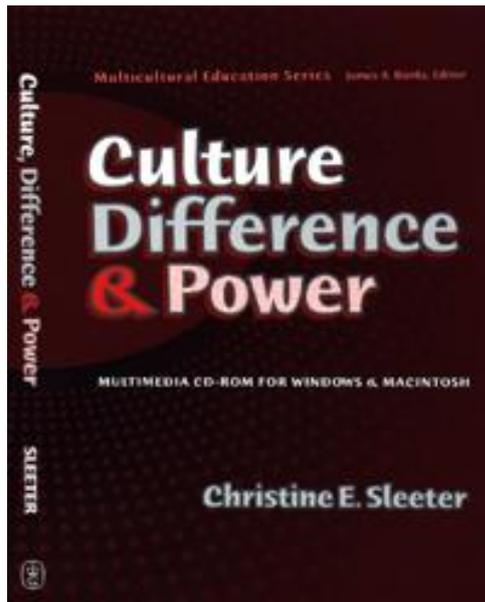
turned him down due to lack of time, but he persisted. "You could even write a play," he said. A play? What an interesting idea!

The result was "Educating the New Majority" (Sleeter, 1992b). Complete with characters and dialog, this short play won no awards as a piece of drama nor as a scholarly tract. However, the process of writing it showed me it is possible to write academic ideas through the arts. This linking of the arts with scholarly research became clearer to me when I listened to my colleagues in the arts at California State University Monterey Bay talk about the research process that underlay the murals, poetry, and drama they produced. Academic writing is one way to convey scholarly knowledge, but not the only way.

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At California State University Monterey Bay, I became intrigued by the potential of technology for mixing visual imagery with text to create course materials, first through PowerPoint, then through Hyperstudio. After creating a syllabus and materials for one of my courses using Hyperstudio, I moved on to Macromedia Authorware. I loved it because there seemed to be no limit to the tools available. Text with hyperlinked references, original cartoons with pieces that could move, photos, videos, music, and interactive activities could be blended in numerous ways, and with pieces hyperlinked throughout. As I became proficient, rather than composing academic text and then adding media, I composed directly in multimedia.

Eventually I created the non-linear multimedia e-book (on a CD-ROM, not the web) *Culture, Difference and Power* (Sleeter, 2001c). I credit my editor at Teachers College Press, Brian Ellerbeck, for helping me think of this product as a book, just in a different form. By then, I was a tenured full professor, so I didn't need to worry about



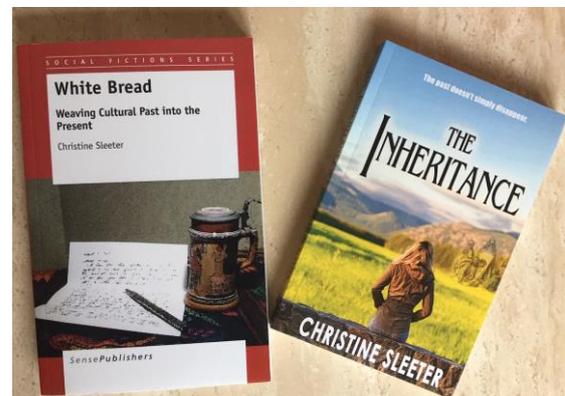
whether it counted for tenure. But I wanted *Culture, Difference and Power* to blaze a trail for others coming behind me by offering an example of an academic text written and produced in an arts-based format.

Unfortunately, the technology changed quickly. As operating systems were updated a couple of years after the e-book was published, my Mac was unable to read it, even though I had created it on a Mac. Also, e-books were taking a more standard format, usually as digitized versions of print books rather than non-linear multimedia books as mine had been. Increasingly websites used designs similar to my e-book's general design. Unfortunately, however I wasn't able to simply convert *Culture, Difference and Power* for the web, so its use rapidly tapered off. I briefly considered reconstructing it in a web format, but realized that by the time I would have finished, the content, including videos of teachers in their classrooms, would have needed considerable updating.

I put aside my quest to blend the arts with academic writing until I retired in 2003. Then, as an outgrowth of a family history project I was doing for myself and my family, I began writing social fiction based on that research. I established a structure in which the historical parts of the novels derive from my family history and are based

on meticulous research into not only specific family units but also the wider context in which the families lived; the present-day sections are fictional. After completing a draft of my first novel *White Bread*, I faced the problem of how to get it published. The 40 or so literary agents I queried showed little to no interest, and the academic press editors I talked with considered fiction outside the scope of what they publish and market.

I was thrilled to discover Patricia Leavy's Social Fictions series with SensePublishing (now Brill). The series grew out of her quest to break the bounds of academic writing, and her interest in writing fiction that is based on academic research. In 2015, my first novel *White Bread* was published in this series (Sleeter, 2015). Not long after that, I self-published my second novel *The Inheritance* (Sleeter, 2018). I self-published it so I could price it as a paperback novel rather than a textbook, and also to make it available in Kindle and iBooks. A third novel is in the works.



With these varied works in an arts-based form, I considered the question: How is the work also scholarly? Since I was tenured, I didn't have to answer that question and I could afford to experiment. But in the process of experimenting, I realized how limited the audience of academic writing is. If I brought interests and talents into the academy that did not fit with the traditions of academic scholarship, could I leverage those talents in service of academic work? Might I reach a larger audience by doing so? Might I create a path for other arts-minded

scholars who wish they didn't have to segment their lives into right- and left-brain activities?

## Conclusion

Years ago after speaking at a conference, I was driven to the airport by a counselor who was physically disabled and worked mainly with other people with disabilities. I remember her reply when I asked what kinds of issues people brought to her. She said that people's difficulties stemmed not so much from the disability itself, but rather from the sense they made of their disability. This was not to deny the enormous difficulties social systems create for people with disabilities. But she had worked with individuals facing major limitations who got on well in life because they dwelt on possibilities rather than limitations, and others with relatively minor limitations who struggled to cope.

Her story emphasized the significance of individual agency within whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. We may be able to change the circumstances, but even if not, we can certainly learn to navigate and push back on them. Ultimately, it's up to us how we respond.

For me, being a white person directly involved in multicultural education, and being a woman who used to hide her intelligence and then distrusted it after bringing it out from hiding, figuring out how to thrive in academe has been a constant learning process: learning to listen, learning to trust my own thinking, learning to bloom where planted, and learning to fuse academics with the arts. It is true that my own forms of outsiderhood are dwarfed by the insidious forms of marginalization experienced by many other people.

Readers might be surprised that feeling like an outsider has been significant enough to me to write about. But those experiences inspired and informed my work of the last four decades on relationships between schooling and deeply structured forms of oppression. I have learned that, to navigate and push back against marginalization, I

have had to delve into myself to find agency. I have also had to come to terms with the fact that my learning to navigate and persist has not changed structured and well-entrenched forms of marginalization and oppression. We still live in a patriarchal society in which smart women are penalized; we still live in a racist society that is structured to benefit white people. I did not topple patriarchy or racism. At least, not at the macro level. But I think I have helped to create and expand space for white people working against white supremacy, for smart women, for writers who love teaching and teachers who love writing, and for arts-inclined academicians. Doing this work has given me a sense of balance and purpose that has sustained me for many years.

**I have learned that, to navigate and push back against marginalization, I have had to delve into myself to find agency.**

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## **About Acquired Wisdom**

This collection began with an invitation to one of the inaugural editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.



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