

2017 TESOL Conference Reflections

By Jamie L. Olson

Attending the 2017 TESOL Convention at the end of March was truly a rewarding, enriching and thought-provoking experience. I am always grateful to be able to attend conferences, in particular WAESOL and TESOL. I replenish my toolbox of effective and dynamic instructional tools, learn about new research, and become inspired and humbled by my colleagues from around the world, who not only give so much to their students but also to our TESOL community. I was also very fortunate to attend the conference with my nearly my entire ESLA department from Whatcom Community College in Bellingham. As I described to my teenage son, this was my chance to go “nerd out on teacher stuff with my friends from work”. I felt much like a kid with a catalog of goodies as I pored through the conference schedule choosing and highlighting all of the potential presentations, forums, and topics to choose from. How many of you feel the same way at a conference?

While I attended around 18 sessions over the three days (truly a mental marathon!) I was most moved, challenged and excited by the sessions and forum on diversity and equity in our field. Having graduated in 2013 with my M.Ed. and explored this topic as a TA in an Education, Equity and Diversity course, I have found very little discussion about this topic amongst colleagues and in a wider setting. Even at the 2014 TESOL conference, I did not notice much light being shed in this direction. I was more than thrilled to see it discussed more at this

conference with an assortment of dynamic professionals sharing their wisdom, experience and perspectives on these issues.

In consideration of the position of power that we hold being English language instructors for non-native speakers, it seems that explorations of privilege, power, equity, inclusion and diversity are essential for us to tackle as this professional field expands, and we serve more and more students from all parts of the world. As educators, we have a huge responsibility to our students, and I believe implicit in this responsibility is our own self-reflective process. We are all products of an educational system, and if English is our first language, we have inherited all the culture, power, biases, coded ways of communicating about race, class, gender, and values albeit mostly unconsciously.

The most thought-provoking and transformational sessions I attended were “Colonization of the Mind” by Elisabeth L. Chan, (N. Virginia Community College) and “Towards Epistemic Decolonization” by Ana Campos-Solanos (University of Massachusetts –Boston). Both of these sessions gently guided attendees through a process of discussing and explaining larger concepts, such as what it means that the English language has been used to continue the process of Western colonization through education, explaining explicitly how ideology is inherent in language and how we as educators are unknowing participants in this intellectual hegemony unless we begin to consciously consider these issues outside of the mainstream, dominant culture narrative

that we have inherited and live within. Given that we have all had differing experiences and levels of familiarity with these concepts, I greatly appreciated the care and thoughtfulness with which these two educators presented. Their presentations gave an abundance of research alongside sharing their personal experiences and invited the participants to explore these ideas for themselves.

As a discipline, I believe it essential that these issues of equity, diversity and pedagogy be brought forward in TESOL and WAESOL communities for wider exploration in safe, inclusive ways. It can certainly be uncomfortable territory for those of us from the dominant culture (White), but we lose nothing by being willing to be vulnerable and challenge our beliefs. We have the opportunity to grow exponentially as individuals, as educators and world citizens. We do have an awful lot to lose if we choose to continue with the status quo and ultimately would do our students and discipline disservice. As I often tell my students, “You didn’t come to my class to stay the same and be comfortable. You can here to learn, and learning involves some kind of discomfort and finding your edge.” This is the most significant take-away for me from this amazing conference filled with dynamic presenters and these particular presentations: It’s time for me to a little uncomfortable, find my edges, confront more of the issues around equity and diversity in my profession, and become an even better teacher and colleague. I invite you to come along and see what you discover at your edges.

Resources

TESOL Diversity Collaborative Forum is listed in the TESOL groups section of the TESOL Community website. They also have a website open to anyone, not only TESOL members, which you can find at: <http://tesoldiversitycollaborative.weebly.com>

Elisabeth Chan's PowerPoint presentation on "Colonialism of the Mind" has fascinating information and plenty of academic research to get you started. Check it out here: tinyurl.com/nyxzbus

Ana Campos-Solanos's website: <https://asolanocampos.com/publications/>

Fantastic newly published by TESOL Press: "Social Justice in English Language Teaching" edited by Christopher Hastings and Laura Jacob. This book has chapters from various TESOL members ranges from introducing social justice issues from gender, orientation, race and working across borders)to language rights and classroom practices.

A great primer on beginning to understand "Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education" by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo



Jamie Olson received her M.Ed. and TESOL certificate from WWU in 2013 and is currently an instructor at Whatcom Community College in their ESL Academic program, which she thoroughly enjoys. Currently, she is teaching an academic composition course with a sustainability theme and an elective ESLA service-learning course connecting students with the wider Whatcom County community to develop their cultural and communication skills. She is also a member of the 2016-2017 WWU Community Engagement Fellows.