

**Transforming the Activity of Teaching a Foundation of Diversity and Equity Course**

Dean P. Vesperman  
University of Wisconsin River Falls

---

**Abstract:**

What happens to a Foundations of Diversity and Equity in Schools course when the main mode of instruction changes? The shifting of the class from face-to-face to virtual asynchronous instruction due to COVID-19 led to a transformation of the activity of the course. To replace the use of various discussion techniques, the author redesigned the course using content area literacy techniques melded with asynchronous voice and electronic thread pedagogies.

---

**Introduction**

How do you teach a class on the foundation of diversity and equity in schools virtually? This was the quandary I faced when we were informed that courses were going from face-to-face to online within two weeks. The other issue I needed to address was that a quarter of my class did not have consistent internet to allow synchronous classes. Holding synchronous classes that excluded pre-service teachers (PSTs) was simply unjust. This required me to consider the activity of teaching the course and how to modify the tools used to guide my PSTs in constructing their understanding of teaching for diversity and equity. The purpose of this paper is to engage in an action research (Mertier, 2018) examination of the pedagogies used melded with second-generation activity theory (Engeström, 1987).

**CHAT: A Theoretical Foundation for Curriculum**

My work in teaching and learning is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), in that teaching and learning is a dynamic process of social interaction and is “a function of the joint actions and understandings of the participants” (Gutierrez, 1993). The construction of knowledge

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

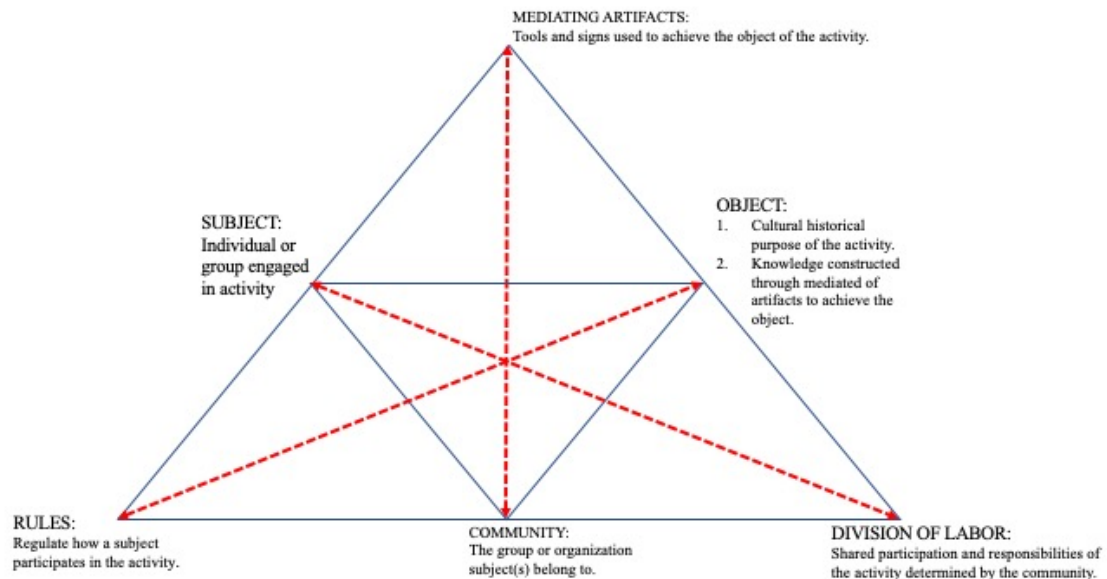
<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

occurs in the everyday activity that subjects (individuals or groups who are members of a community) engage in as they progress toward an object of the activity. Next, that activity has a cultural historical origin that permeates the activity (Engeström, 1987). The origins of the activity guide how subjects engage in mediated action as they progress toward the object of the activity. Lastly, it is important to remember that an activity is not rigid; the subject may choose to pursue different actions and use a multitude of different operations while pursuing the same object as other subjects (Cole, 1996; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991). Thus, teaching and learning are not monolithic activities with predetermined outcomes; it is a fluid space.

It is for these reasons that cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987; Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009) is a key tool used in designing curriculum (see Figure 1). CHAT reveals the object, the culturally mediated artifacts used in knowledge construction, the community of which the subjects are members, the rules of the activity, and how labor is divided.

**Figure 1:** Second Generation Mediation Triangle CHAT (Engeström, 1987; Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009)



---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

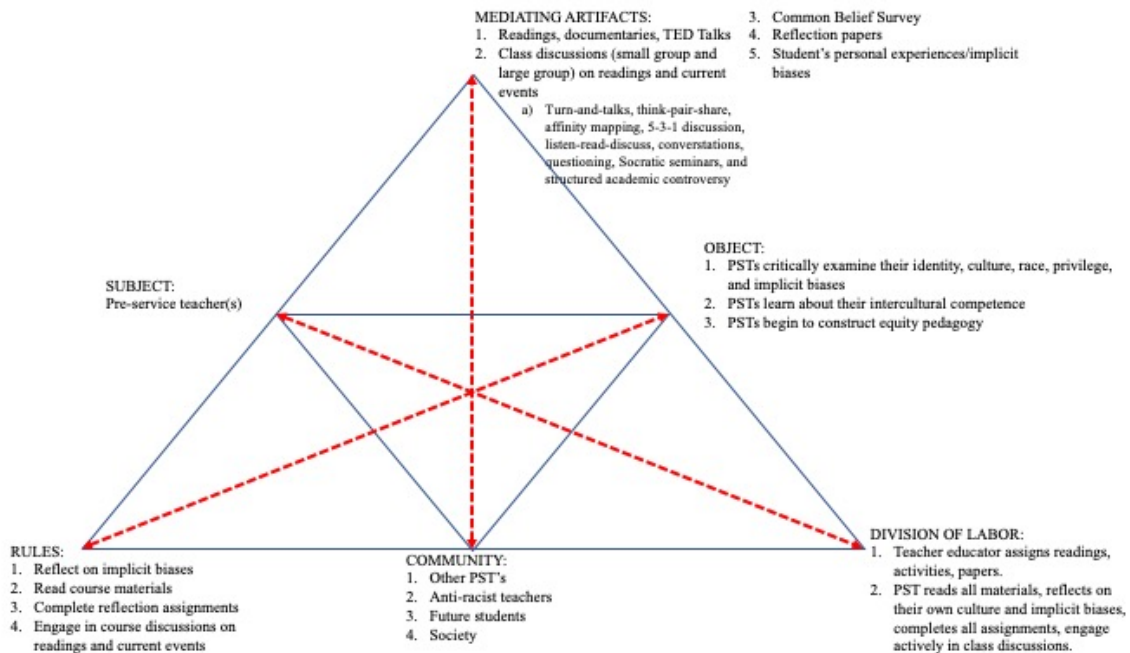
©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

The interplay of these foci allows for an examination of how a subject's knowledge of teaching and learning can be mediated as pre-service teachers move toward the object of the activity. It is for these reasons that this model of curricular design was used to create my Foundations of Diversity and Equity class (see Vesperman & Leet-Otley, 2020) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Second Generation Mediation Triangle for Multicultural Education Class (pre-COVID) (Vesperman & Leet-Otley, 2020)



### Foundation of Diversity and Equity Before COVID-19

A key aspect of the course before COVID-19 was the use of small and large group discussions on the readings and current events (see Figure 2). These discussions were used as the primary tool in the construction of knowledge because classroom discussion is a particularly “powerful instrument for developing critical thinking skills, teaching content, and increasing tolerance” (Hess, 2009, p. 29). Discussion allowed PSTs to explore what they had learned from readings and apply those ideas to their future classrooms. Several pedagogies were used to facilitate active discussions, including turn-and-talks, think-pair-share, affinity mapping, 5-3-1 discussion, listen-

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

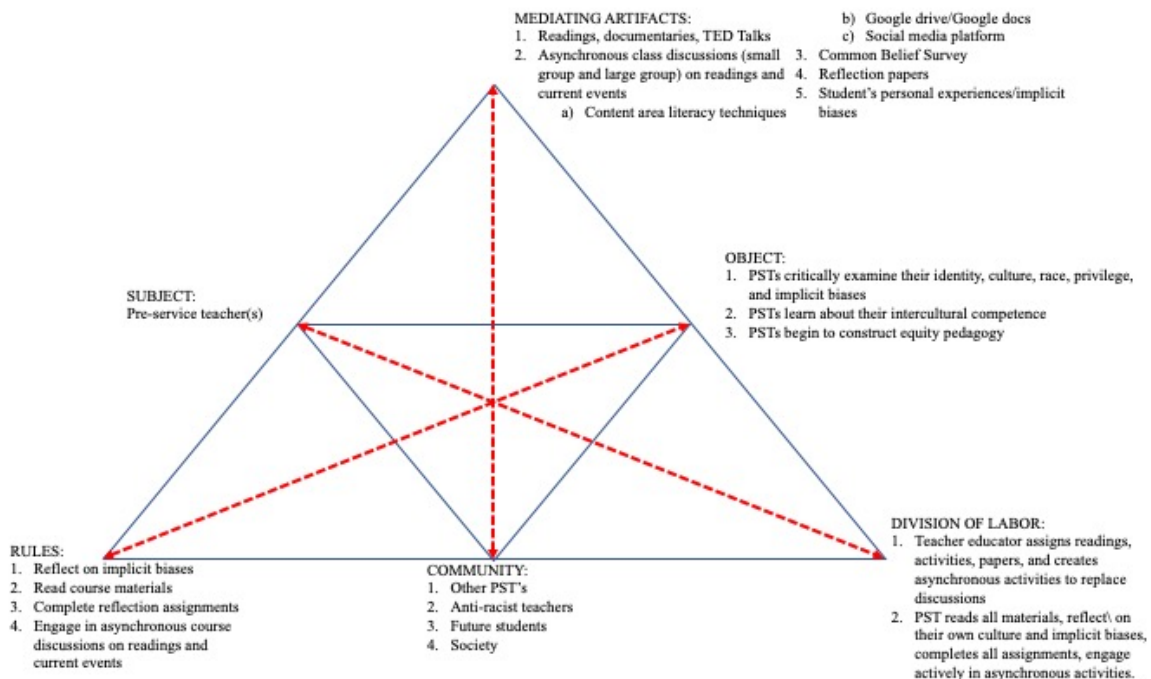
<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

read-discuss, conver-stations, questioning, Socratic seminars, and structured academic controversy. Another standard pedagogy is an electronic thread to provide space for students to explore major concepts of diversity.

### Changing the Mediation Triangle

The decision to shift classes from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction caused me to reexamine the activity. This process began with me revisiting my mediational triangle for the activity of this course (see Figure 3). First, changing the object of the activity, which is based on Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016), was not an option, as a key component of the course is helping pre-service teachers grow toward being anti-racist teachers (see Hooks, 1994; Lowenstein, 2009).

**Figure 3:** Second Generation Mediational Triangle for Multicultural Education Class During COVID-19



Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrfl.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrfl.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

Given the desire to not change the object of the activity, it was important to focus on other aspects of the mediational triangle to ensure that my PSTs engaged in the mediational process of using particular signs and tools to achieve the object of the activity. It was important to acknowledge that this could lead to contradictions and inner tensions in the activity (Engeström, 1987; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). These inner tensions could lead to runaway objects (Engeström, 2009), which can have unintended effects as the subject moves toward the object. A key runaway object that I sought to avoid was PSTs choosing to not fully engage with the readings or class activities. The other object to avoid involved PSTs ceasing participation in the course discussions completely.

The primary focus on changing the activity was the mediated artifacts being used. The inability to do synchronous classes necessitated creating asynchronous activities that would generate discussion similar to in-class activities. Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas (2009) provided a useful model for implementing content area literacy techniques, which became the framework for achieving the aforementioned goal. The key reason for using Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas's (2009) framework focuses on subjects engaging with readings in three important ways: using pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading strategies. These strategies focus on a fluid, interactive (mediational) model of how subjects construct knowledge as they engage with readings. The strategies were then shaped to meet the technological realities of virtual teaching. To achieve this, it was important to consider technology and how it constrains learning (Nardi & O'Day, 1999). The best format that would allow for asynchronous discussions close to in-class activities was to use Google Docs. This allowed all PSTs, including those with limited connectivity, to work collaboratively and deliberate on the issues raised in the readings.

### **New Mediating Artifacts**

The change in the activity led to the creation of new mediational artifacts. These new artifacts fell into the categories of pre-reading, during-reading, or post-reading strategies (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009). After reviewing the readings that would be covered for the course, several pedagogies seemed to fit the new virtual format of the course; the majority of these were either during- or post-reading strategies.

#### **Pre-Reading: Anticipation-Response Guide**

During virtual teaching, only one pre-reading strategy, the anticipation-response (A-R) guide, was used (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009). A-R guides are used to activate the reader's prior knowledge about a topic covered by a text. Thus, as students engage with the text, the guide has

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

highlighted key concepts. Next, after the students have completed the readings, they fill out a post-A-R guide. This allows students to reflect upon how their ideas about a key concept have changed due to what they read.

Prior to reading, the pre-service teachers answered three two-part questions in a Google Form (see Table 1). The first part of each question was a value statement PSTs either agree or disagree with on a five-point Likert scale. The second part was a short answer on how they felt about the statement. The A-R guide was used to activate PSTs implicit biases about immigrants and schooling, which might differ from the values, beliefs, and concepts presented in the readings (Gorski & Pothini, 2013). Next, the questions on the A-R guide allowed PSTs to explore several key concepts presented in the readings before reading the text. After completing the text, the PSTs completed a post-A-R guide. This literacy technique ended with PSTs sharing a video in a social learning platform detailing how their ideas, values, or beliefs changed from the pre- and post-A-R guide due to the readings.

**Table 1:** Sample A-R Questions for Cases on Immigrant Status (Gorski & Pothini, 2013)

1. Immigrant children need to become Americans because the U.S. is a melting pot.
2. All immigrants face the same problems when coming to the U.S.
3. Schools should not have to protect immigrant children.

### **During Reading: Strategic Reading Guide**

Given the complexity of the topics contained in the readings, a strategic reading guide (strategic guiding questions) provided a framework for analyzing multiple readings on the same topic (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009) (see Table 2). The purpose of a strategic reading guide is to aid readers in analyzing a reading using multiple cognitive tools (signs). Typically, a strategic reading guide is provided to students in the form of a graphic organizer or worksheet. The first question is used for students to summarize the main ideas from the readings. The next question requires students to write about key aspects or concepts from the reading and provide evidence. Lastly, the third question allows students to write about how they feel about the readings they completed.

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

**Table 2:** Sample Strategic Reading Questions: Immigration, Bilingualism, and Schools (Au, 2014; Gorski & Pothini, 2013)

1. What are the main ideas across the readings? (focus on two)
2. What are the important details from the readings? (Make sure you cite where you found these ideas using paraphrasing (Gorski & Pothini, 2013, or Au, 2014).)
3. After reading all four sections, how do you feel about this issue and why?

This strategy was modified only slightly. PSTs were provided with the three main questions. The first question required PSTs to summarize the readings and to synthesize the main patterns across a diverse set of readings (for example, three chapters from Au (2014) and a chapter from Gorski & Pothini (2013)). The next question required them to determine key evidence from the readings to support their synthesis. This allowed the PSTs to determine key supporting evidence for their claims, which required analysis of the text. Lastly, the third question focused on PSTs exploring the affective aspects of reading. This question required PSTs to explore their implicit biases and how their beliefs were influenced by the readings. They were asked to create their own Google Doc in a shared folder where they wrote the answers to three main questions. After PSTs completed the task, they were asked to read four other responses to the readings and determine two patterns they saw across their peers' answers in an electronic forum.

**Post-Reading: Conver-stations, Five-Minute Write/Chat, and Digital Response Chaining**

Post-reading strategies were used most often during the virtual teaching of this course. This group of strategies required PSTs to explore implicit biases and merge prior knowledge with information in readings into new knowledge they applied (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009). These strategies allow for checking comprehension, aid in the construction of new concepts, and reveal misconceptions that might arise from the readings. These strategies were then connected to the pedagogy of asynchronous voice (Larson & Keiper, 2016) to create a space for a digital discussion of key topics.

**Conver-stations as an Electronic Thread**

This post-reading strategy requires students to connect prior knowledge to what they have read and create a running dialogue in response to a discussion question (Gonzalez, 2015). In a standard classroom, complex normative statements or questions regarding readings are posted around

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

the room in stations. During the first rotation, groups deliberate and write the first response to the question/statement on a common document. As participants move from station to station, they discuss the question/statement and previous groups' responses. After discussing, they add more to the common document at each station, creating a flowing dialogue.

Given the constraints of technology, one of the primary components of an electronic thread discussion (Larson & Keiper, 2016) was integrated with conver-stations: Individual PSTs respond to the posted questions instead of small groups. Instead of physical stations, questions (see Table 3) were posted on separate pages in a single Google Doc. To ensure the PSTs would collectively construct answers to the questions, the first respondent to a question was asked to write only one or two sentences in response. Each subsequent respondent had to add to the previous participant's comments before expanding the collectively constructed answer. Thus, each participant added something substantive to the dialogue. The result was a flowing discussion/dialogue that explored questions in greater depth. This pedagogy was used for discussions on exceptionalities and on institutional racism in schools.

**Table 3:** Sample Conver-station Questions: Exceptionalities (Gorski & Pothini, 2013)

1. Why do we need IDEA?
2. When comparing IEPs and 504 Plans, what is the biggest difference you noted between these two methods of addressing exceptionalities?
3. Do all teachers need to be concerned with accommodations?
4. Should teachers try to meet all accommodations?
5. Should schools be allowed to ignore some accommodations?

### **Five-minute Write/Chat**

Another key post-reading strategy is the five-minute write, which is used to increase participation, promotes linear analysis of the reading, and "induces a greater sense of agency and ownership" of analyses (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009, p. 137). Typically, students perform a five-minute write/chat after they finish reading a section of a text. Students are given a general prompt and are allowed to write for five minutes in any format they choose.

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---



This pedagogy was modified by incorporating aspects of an electronic thread (Larson & Keiper, 2016) and write-pair-share (Marzano, 2017). After reading about bilingual education (Au, 2014; Gorski & Pothini, 2013), PSTs were asked to perform the five-minute open write in their own Google document about the major ideas they learned from the readings. Once completed, they shared their five-minute write with me and one other PST. PSTs then read and commented on each other's analysis of the reading. This lesson finished with PSTs taking their five-minute write and their peer's comments to produce a five-minute video of their thoughts about bilingual education. Thus, participants had two opportunities to interact with a peer and engage with the readings in two formats.

### **Digital Response Chaining (Whip Around)**

The last pedagogy was a digital version of a response chaining (sometimes referred to as a whip around) (Marzano, 2017). The purpose of this pedagogy is to create an environment in which students work collaboratively in small or large groups to respond to a complex question. In a typical classroom, the teacher asks a small group or whole class a complex question. The first person to answer can only say one sentence. The next student rephrases the previous answer and then adds another sentence. Thus, the group creates a co-constructed answer to the question.

For virtual teaching, this pedagogy was modified using some aspects of an electronic thread (Larson & Keiper, 2016). PSTs were given four questions (see Table 4) related to teaching about race in K-12 classrooms (Au, 2014). They were allowed to write only one sentence in response to the question. The next participant had to start with the previous PST's answer and add more information, thereby collectively answering the question. Additionally, they were also allowed to add comments to the Google Doc when answers lacked cohesion. PSTs were given two hours to complete posting twice for each question. Thus, participants created a free-flowing response to the question, which required them to connect with the readings for the course, analyze previous participants' answers, and collectively construct an understanding of the issue.

**Table 4:** Sample Digital Response Chain Questions on Teaching About Race in schools (Au, 2014)

1. Race is a social construct. In what ways did race appear in Heidi Tolentino's classroom and how did Tolentino address these issues?
2. How did Lisa Espinosa deal with the issues of race relations in her classroom?

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

3. How did Nathaniel Smith develop a curriculum that made race enormous, difficult, and personal?
---

4. How do we teach about race (in our classrooms)?
--

### **Discussion**

My goal of trying to recreate the interactive, deliberative nature of my face-to-face course in an asynchronous virtual setting had mixed results. The technological constraints of teaching virtually led to the loss of the interactive discussions and deliberations of important issues of diversity and equity. The use of content area literacy techniques did allow PSTs to explore the major concepts in the readings during the virtual portion of the class. This was especially true for the A-R guide and strategic reading guide. Some techniques allowed limited discussion of essential topics, occurring when using the digital chain response chain and digital conver-stations. Post-reading literacy strategies seemed to be the most effective in promoting asynchronous discussions. The asynchronous discussions with these strategies resulted in a deeper exploration of the topics.

**References**

- Au, W. (Ed.). (2014). *Rethinking multicultural education: Teaching for racial and cultural justice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Rethinking Schools.
- Cole, M. (1998). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Harvard University Press.
- Cole, M., & Engeström, Y. (1993). A cultural-historical approach to distributed cognition. In G. Salomon (Ed.), *Distributed cognitions: psychological and educational considerations* (pp. 47-87). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit Oy.
- Engeström, Y. (2009). The future of activity theory: A rough draft. *Learning and Expanding with Activity Theory*, 303-328.
- Gonzalez, J. (2015). The big list of class discussion strategies. <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>
- Gorski, P. C., & Pothini, S. G. (2013). *Case studies on diversity and social justice education*. Routledge.
- Gutierrez, K. D. (1993). How talk, context, and script shape contexts for learning: A cross-case comparison of journal sharing. *Linguistics and Education*, 5(3-4), 335-365.
- Gutierrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 19-25.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Jonassen, D. H., & Rohrer-Murphy, L. (1999). Activity theory as a framework for designing constructivist learning environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 47(1), 61-79.
- Larson, B. E. (2016). *Instructional strategies for middle and high school social studies: Methods, assessment, and classroom management*. Routledge.

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

- Lowenstein, K. L. (2009). The work of multicultural teacher education: Reconstructing white teacher candidates as learners. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 163-196.
- Manzo, U. C., Manzo, A. V., & Thomas, M. M. (2009). *Content area literacy: A framework for reading-based instruction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Marzano, R. J. (2019). *The handbook for the new art and science of teaching*. Solution Tree Press.
- Mertler, C. A. (2018). *Introduction to educational research*. Sage publications.
- Nardi, B. A., & O'Day, V. L. (1999). *Information ecologies: Using technology with heart*. MIT Press.
- Teaching Tolerance. (2017). Social justice standards. [https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/TT\\_Social\\_Justice\\_Standards\\_0.pdf](https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/TT_Social_Justice_Standards_0.pdf)
- Vesperman, D. P., & Leet-Otley, J. (in press). *Primary contradictions: Qualitative transformations of white social studies teacher identity*. In T. Haefner, L. Handler, & T. Rock (Eds.), *The divide within: Intersections of realities, facts, theories, & practices*. Information Age Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: Sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Harvard University Press.
- Yamagata-Lynch, L. C., & Haudenschild, M. T. (2009). Using activity systems analysis to identify inner contradictions in teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(3), 507-517.

---

**About the Author:**

**Dean P. Vesperman** is an assistant professor of education at the University of Wisconsin River Falls and editor of the Iowa Journal for the Social Studies. He teaches courses in secondary and elementary social studies methods and foundations of diversity and equity in schools.

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---

---

Corresponding author: [dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu](mailto:dean.vesperman@uwrf.edu)

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

---