

Storied Sketches: Making Meaning of Culture's Role in Teaching

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Through anthropological analysis, two professors—one Mestiza (Apache and Spanish American), one Northern-Western European American (Danish, Swedish, German, French, English, and Irish), and six Native American educational leadership doctoral students offer storied sketches of three college professors on intersections of culture and college teaching. Professors took part in a year-long culture and teaching faculty development project and engaged in cultural introspection to understand how their values, identities, and cultural origins influence their teaching and interpretations of students. Researchers used open thematic and metaphorical analysis of published cultural autobiographies, teaching observation notes, and interview transcripts for each professor to develop storied sketches of their meaning making of culture and teaching. Professors' cultural self-reflections yielded original insights about teaching across cultures. Authors share paths forward for culture and teaching introspection and for developing teaching across cultural strengths and ways of being.

It is helpful to look at where you come from to better understand the current perspectives you have, but also to help shape new ideas for the future. – Catherine N. Montoya, 2018

To facilitate complex learning among students, teaching benefits from the strengths and wisdom of many cultures (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). When faculty explore cultural selves in relation to teaching, student learning improves, and faculty gain insight into our cultural influences on teaching and interpreting students, as well as how our teaching is experienced and interpreted by students (see 25 culture and teaching autobiographies in Longerbeam & Chávez, 2016). This anthropological study provides insights from and about three professors who participated in a yearlong faculty development project on intersections of culture, teaching, and learning. Culture, a term from the field of anthropology, is a foundation of individual and collective assumptions, values, beliefs, priorities, and behaviors developed by a population over time, shared by a group of people, and passed from generation to generation through teachings by family, culture, Tribe, and community (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Kuh, 1993; Mead, 1971).

Frameworks of Culture

Peoples around the world and within the United States live within distinctive frameworks of culture. Peoples of Color often have distinct cultures that differ in sometimes profound ways from the competitive, linear, component based, individualistic norms often underlying U.S. higher education, where

academic and teaching cultural characteristics originate primarily from German conceptions of knowledge and research (the scientific method) and Oxford, English conceptions of teaching (lecture, recitation, exam, and writing). Yet even Northern European cultures vary across a wide range of academic and personal cultural practices.

“The twenty-first century is a turning point in the country's history in which opportunities exist to change the cultural paradigm of education and society as a whole.” – Patrick C. Lewis-Jose, 2018

With this article, we explore cultural identities, meaning making, and teaching practices to explore the richness of culture faculty bring to their teaching, while identifying cultural assumptions made, values enacted, and possibilities discovered through development of teaching across cultural strengths. These professors engaged great courage to delve deeply into their own sense of self, culture, teaching, and interpretations of students. Each faced discomfort as they, explored, and sometimes questioned their own cultural assumptions, engaged with students, crafted new pedagogies across a balance of cultural norms, and made profound changes in their own teaching across cultural strengths.

Culture, Self-Reflection, and Teaching: A Review of Literature

Deep writing and reflection develop understanding of our identities (Garrod, Kilkenny, & Gomez, 2007), open us to greater learning in our teaching (Cajete, 1994), and challenge us to think in new ways.

Reflection upon ourselves transforms our teaching through the introspective process (Shim, 2018).

The ability to self-reflect, to grow as a person is an important skill we can all utilize. Working within our Indigenous communities we are constantly reflecting on our ability to serve our students and communities more effectively. What worked in our communities might not work in our current community, so it is imperative that we always take the time to reflect on our practice to better ourselves and the opportunities or experiences we provide others. – Zane J. Rosette (2018)

Reflecting upon our early cultural learning and how we were taught to learn provides insight into assumptions we make and implicit biases we hold about student learners and their learning (Longerbeam & Chávez, 2016). Uncovering our early and sometimes implicit messages about learning yields a trove of insight into our teaching, into the reasons why we teach the way we do, and into what lies underneath our interpretations of students. Teaching is profoundly influenced by our own cultures of origin and yet for most takes deep introspection to understand (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). Reflection is a powerful tool for uncovering cultural influences in ourselves and within academic systems and practices, as well as for naming experiences with oppression and access to power (Grande, 2004; Ibarra, 2001; Longerbeam, 2016; Miheuah & Wilson, 2004; Toyosaki, 2014). Also, reflection is useful for recognizing and acknowledging privileges, especially when access to privilege is difficult to name (Garrod et al., 2007; Longerbeam, 2016). Reflection on social identities such as culture—especially those related to power, privilege, and oppression—positions us for a deeper understanding of students (Toyosaki, 2014). Reflection yields insight into how students experience us as teachers and increases our ability to understand students' lived experiences (Flores Carmona & Luschen, 2014) as learners:

In moments of grace I sometimes step outside myself and watch my cultural performance from afar. How do students experience me?—especially those from cultures other than my own? Is my teaching meeting their learning? I am embarrassed to not-know. Few critical mirrors are offered, only normalized ones. My culture is dominant in the academy. Words, gestures, pedagogies—I am amazed to not-know how I am perceived culturally -- how I move into the world, speak, act out culture. Occasionally the not-know is eased—I am offered the gift of cultural knowing; so I seek it

out, because the not-knowing diminishes learning. And student learning is my heart. – Susan D. Longerbeam

Many faculty ask students to reflect as a part of course requirements, advising sessions, and class sessions. Yet exceptional teachers ask of students only what we are willing to ask of ourselves (Rendón, 2009; Tisdell, 2003). When we commit to both reflexive practice and engagement with students, we may find courage to reflect deeply upon ourselves (Shim, 2018).

I met myself in a wood -- startled by who I really was, greeting myself with all my bumps and bruises, all my idiosyncrasies, all my strengths, all my fears. I found joy and discomfort, sometimes simultaneously, as I journeyed into knowing and becoming my authentic self as a teacher. I looked into the mirror of my cultural self and there found marvelous possibility in the cultural selves of students. – Alicia Fedelina Chávez

There is little to be found in existing literature on how culture influences teaching or ways that teachers' cultures of origin influence their teaching overall, choices and use of pedagogies, or interpretations about students. Most existing identity and college teaching literature is focused on race, oppressive teaching behaviors toward specific populations such as microaggressions, methods to develop identity tolerance among students, and retention of ethnic populations of students in college classrooms. There is sparse existing literature specifically on how culture influences college teaching (Longerbeam & Chávez, 2016). However, some extant research focuses on college student learning (Chávez, Ke, and Herrera, 2012; Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016; Rendón, 2009), communication across cultures in the classroom (Toyosaki, 2013), silence in the classroom across cultures (Covarrubias & Windchief, 2009), and more generally on adult learning (Tisdell, 2003), higher education (Ibarra, 2001), and scholarly reflexivity across cultures (Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis, 2008). One promising trend is a new area of study, focused on higher education within the Society for Applied Anthropology, which has been developing over the last few years. However, most of the focus is on areas other than college teaching such as cultural aspects of policy and structural systems. This study is meant to contribute a deep glimpse into meaning made by three professors about intersections of their own cultures of origin with their teaching.

The Culture and Teaching Faculty Development Project

Thirty-seven faculty—19 from Northern Arizona University with an enrollment at that time of over 30% students of color, and 18 from the University of New Mexico with an enrollment of over 62% students of

color—participated in a yearlong project to develop their teaching across cultures. These faculty engaged in cultural introspection to understand how their cultural values, assumptions, behaviors, and beliefs influence teaching practice and interpretations of students. Culture and teaching activities with participating faculty included a two-day retreat, readings, regular meetings, a culture and teaching autobiography, consultations, and teaching observations (followed by feedback and suggestions). Project leaders observed, consulted with, and encouraged faculty to apply and share how they developed their teaching practices across cultures over time. At a final gathering of faculty from both campuses, participants shared innovative teaching practices, insights, and self-knowledge developed about culture and college teaching.

The Study: Journey of Inquiry

This study was designed as qualitative and anthropological to explore deeply the underlying cultural values, assumptions, behaviors, and beliefs influencing participant identity, teaching philosophy, interpretations of students, and pedagogical practices. Data collection methods included reflective faculty writing, interviews, and teaching observations. Faculty participants wrote and submitted a culture and teaching autobiography to identify and make meaning of underlying cultural values and assumptions influencing their teaching (see Longerbeam and Chávez, 2016 for the instructions on writing a culture and teaching autobiography). Faculty authors carried out teaching observations and conducted 90-minute interviews. For this study, three faculty, two from NAU and 1 from UNM, were selected for deep cultural case analysis. The three faculty were selected from the 37 participants to provide a diversity of perspectives and background in ethnicity/cultures of origin, academic subject area, institution, and class type/size (see additional participant information in the results section).

Participant data sets for each professor included an interview transcript, published culture and teaching autobiography, and teaching observation notes. Each data set was analyzed by the authors applying open thematic (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) and auto-reflexive ethnographic analysis (Tomaselli et al., 2008) to consider concepts of self and other, as well as metaphorical/symbolic (Wilson, 2008) analysis. Special attention was given to analysis of cultural norms including values, assumptions, and beliefs, along with how professors made meaning of them in relation to their lives, teaching, and students. Thematic data analysis across the full 37 faculty participants was published earlier with a *Model of Cultural Frameworks in Teaching and Learning* (see Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016).

To make meaning of our analysis of culture and teaching for each of the three professors, we developed our own concept of “storied sketches” to interweave deep cultural analysis, meaning making, and discussion by blending the tradition of a teaching story—an ancient and continuing form of facilitating learning (Cajete, 1994) and conducting every day research (Wilson, 2008) common within Indigenous cultures—merged with components of case findings. To make meaning of each professor’s teaching, we offer “storied sketches”: “storied” to share stories of their teaching and making meaning through deep cultural narratives underlying each individual’s way of being as teachers and human beings and “sketches” to acknowledge that even through thick description (Creswell & Miller, 2003), it is possible for us to offer only a glimpse of who they are and the exploratory introspections they engaged in during a year of delving into self, culture, teaching, and learning. A key aspect of these storied sketches is weaving a “mix of voices”: a singular written voice of professors from their published culture and teaching autobiographies; a conversational voice between researchers and professors in semi-structured interviews; and researcher voice describing teaching practices from observing professors during their teaching as well as adding interpretation about intersections of culture and teaching. Crafting deeper, lengthier storied sketches of each professor allowed us to bring their teaching alive for readers through a mix of voices and storied illustrations about teaching, to offer complex interpretations, and to make meaning of findings about intersections of culture and teaching.

We would like to thank Professors Kashanipour, Oakes, and Montoya for their generosity and courage in the use of their names so that we could analyze and quote from both their published autobiographies and their interviews, as well as describe their teaching through our observations.

Results & Discussion: Storied Sketches of Culture, Teaching, and Learning

To enhance deeper understandings, we chose to weave interpretations, meaning making, and discussion through individual storied sketches of three faculty, each highlighted in its own subsection. Each begins with a quote by the professor that we hope captures the spirit of their teaching, then describes, illustrates, and makes meaning of key aspects of cultural origins and their influences on teaching.

We would like to note and emphasize that the focus of this study and project was to have professors explore their own cultural origins and the ways in which these origins influence their teaching practices and interpretations of students. This means that culture as academic course content was not the focus. Of the three

professors storied here, only Professor Montoya, who teaches in Ethnic Studies, included cultural academic content and pedagogical activities designed to have students explore culture. We experience in our research, and in our work with faculty development, that higher education discourse often confounds and prioritizes course content on culture or a pedagogical focus on student cultures with instructor cultural influences on our own teaching practices and interpretations of students. We find that faculty are often more comfortable avoiding reflection about culture within themselves, as well as denying any relationship between culture and their academic subject, teaching practices and philosophy, or student learning. We urge the criticality of faculty introspection about how our individual cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs influence our teaching, as well as our interpretations of students. For some, culture is unconscious and was not spoken of overtly within their upbringing, and yet there are ways to learn about our cultural origins through anthropological analysis and reflection (see Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016 for reflective exercises).

Rippling into the world: R.A. Kashanipour

“I believe it to be vital for students to reflect on the particulars of their own conditions to identify relations of authority and power that shape their world. For instance, in many of my courses, I require students to collect and reflect on the presence of issues raised in the class as they appear in the world around them and shape their perceptions” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 147)

Professor Kashanipour, a teacher of history at Northern Arizona University, creates deep intersectional meaning from his cultural upbringing with who he is, how he teaches, and the depth of reflection and learning he wishes for students. In his culture and teaching autobiography (Kashanipour, 2016), he provides insight into experiences as an immigrant child growing up on the outskirts of Houston, Texas and how those experiences influence his teaching philosophy and practice. Central to his identity are ethnicity, culture, and history, which he writes were “constantly reinforced within my family household as well as a feeling of being a conspicuous outsider” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 146). He explains, “I was five years old in 1979 when I learned that my family was marked as distinct, foreign” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 143). Yet he also writes, “Unlike in the outside world, I found few such sharp edges within my household” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 145). Persian and Jewish heritage were sources of pride. His background is important in both its contrasting nature as well as in equal levels of importance each identity had in his life. Kashanipour’s family on his father’s side identified as Persian, which connected them to ancestors and ancient

civilization: “To be Persian was to be tied to ancient traditions that valued family, convention, and conservatism” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.147). Yet with this is a confluence of American life:

My parents taught myself and two siblings patriotic songs and told stories of founding fathers. We celebrated summers at the community pool and made periodic voyages to the American Jerusalem of Las Vegas and Disneyworld. We played weekend softball. My Mother hosted weekly Bible studies while my Father was a regular at the Indian casinos. All this was the norm of life in suburban America (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 145).

In addition, Kashanipour’s father was a practicing Shi’a Muslim and his Mother a “German Jewish devout evangelical Christian” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.145) closely tied to the history of Jewish people in Germany. Being Jewish and German necessitated the inclusion of history within his family, particularly, that which pertained to experiences during World War II. Though his Mother practiced Christianity, she identified with her Jewish background in terms of family experience with the Holocaust. As Kashanipour notes, “Conversations of my maternal family rarely extended beyond the savageness of the twentieth century” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.147). Judaism is an important part of the family’s historical narrative and Kashanipour’s own identity and worldview. He writes, “The importance of ethnicity, culture, and history were constantly reinforced within my family household” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.146). Such practice shows the value placed by family on ensuring all three remained a significant part of the family’s experience in the United States. While various aspects of culture and history were reinforced within the family, the differences within the family facilitated a culture of acceptance and identity that transcended Muslim and Christian Jew. Backgrounds were celebrated, while five languages—Farsi, Arabic, German, Yiddish, and English—were spoken in their household. The dynamics and diversity of the family facilitated acceptance.

Perhaps the most profound results of the diversity within Kashanipour’s family are not the distinctions themselves, but rather the acceptance, celebration, and embrace of differences. Viewed from historical and contemporary perspectives, Muslims and Jews are not expected to coexist, yet Kashanipour’s family defies such perceived logic. This resistance, in turn, created a new identity dynamic for Kashanipour as he writes the following:

“In the day-to-day relations of my family, I witnessed that individuals forge relationships regardless of supposed boundaries. I learned of the malleability of

culture and that distinction was always. In this vein, I always experienced identity as fluid and subject to change” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.147).

Kashanipour learned the value of individual negotiations of culture, while continually recreating culture through contributions to it. He facilitates learning among students through this complex lens.

Interrogating history. Kashanipour’s pedagogical practices and larger goals for student learning are influenced by his upbringing, education, and cultural identity and yet transcend them as well. He shares in his autobiography, “I stress that history is a product of the intersection of power, perception, and experience, which are central to Paulo Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 147). Considering Kashanipour’s experiences as a cultural outsider during his formative years, it is perhaps not surprising that he would subscribe to a theory of critical pedagogy in which the established order is questioned. Kashanipour describes three aims in his teaching. The first is the desire to “push students to confront stereotypes, inequities, and obfuscations in the contemporary world by exploring their historical roots” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 147). Individuals and families often relate to history as part of personal history, such as Kashanipour’s maternal family remembering their history with the Holocaust. He points out that stereotypes have their own historical roots and are often normalized in contemporary society. His second aim is to “get students to move beyond their everyday world to critically examine the past” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 147) and to “challenge common perceptions and popular approaches” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.148). Oftentimes the past is a difficult and messy thing to address, but it can also be a foundation for resolution or new and deeper understanding: “As individuals wrestle with beliefs and practices they borrow widely from their unique and distinctive backgrounds” (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 148). Kashanipour’s third aim in teaching history reflects his experience growing up as a perceived outsider by teaching “the methodology of history as a method of skeptical analysis” (Kashanipour, 2016, p.148). His family, targeted on the basis of geopolitics, is a part of his story; student learning benefits from his challenging and fruitful approach of grappling with the complexities of ethnicity and nationalism throughout geopolitical as well as personal history.

In his interview, Kashanipour described how he provides “students methods and models of how people have dealt with these things,” referring often to intersecting geopolitical stories students bring to the classroom. He takes students further by providing tools that go beyond the classroom and allowing them to contend with historical as well as current challenges in a meaningful way. For him it is equally important to engage all students, especially when it comes to

confronting stereotypes and difficult historical legacies. Kashanipour considers it shortsighted to think that history does not play a role in contemporary society, yet he finds history often left out of discussions that involve challenging topics such as race, ethnicity, prejudice, and discrimination. Intersections of these topics are purposeful and evident in his teaching practices. The challenge he poses to students is to introspect, seek outcomes that enhance students’ understanding, facilitate wisdom, and improve human conditions. In his interview, Kashanipour further explained his values, expectations, and wishes for the students he teaches:

At a basic level, my fundamental objective is for students to be a little uncomfortable in the sense of seeing the world from a different perspective. This could be historical, to look at things through different lenses that they have experience with and know a little bit about, but the ability to look at problems from different perspectives. This could be cultural, or historical, individual, or personal and that sort of thing. That’s my overall objective, and I have content objectives too. More specifically that objective is that they are aware of the contradictions of the world we live in, and as contradictions evolve things come out of that like social justice and human rights.

Kashanipour sees the importance of helping students contextualize their perspectives through studying history. He is purposeful in facilitating students’ questioning and interpreting history, as well as in developing greater understanding in part through their own sense of culture and identity. Kashanipour reflects in his autobiographical writing on his youth:

...[[E]xperiences] taught me to value the individual distinctions of everyone, to recognize that divisions are often products of broader social and political forces and celebrate those that stand in opposition to injustice of the dominant norm, which is what I try to impart to my students (Kashanipour, 2016, p. 148).

Kashanipour teaches students to use the lens of historical and cultural analysis within their own lives, as well as within a larger societal context, to develop knowledge and encourage their development. His culture and life experiences led him to effect change and he wants to have an impact on students and empower them to effect change in their own ways. He challenges students to explore their own histories and to approach history through skeptical analysis. For students of color, analysis is an opportunity to explore position and power in relation to dominant society. For students from dominant cultures, analysis is an opportunity to explore privilege and challenge biases. Kashanipour believes that while it is

important for People of Color to reconcile their histories and place in society, it is equally important for members of the majority in society to reconcile historical legacies and confront their impact on contemporary society. As a professor, Kashanipour provides opportunities for students to reconcile history through critical pedagogy and encourages them to reflect inwardly and outwardly, individually as well as collectively.

A Divided Heart: Leslie S. Oakes

“I work to make my classes colorful, noisy at times, physically active, and fun. We draw accounting concepts. Sometimes we chant (students have to remember certain accounting rules). Sometimes we act things out; we pound on our desks whenever we talk about annuities due. We boo liabilities and cheer assets” (Oakes, 2016, p. 88).

Professor Oakes is an accounting professor at the University of New Mexico who teaches large entry-level courses with uniquely engaging and relational practices and a determination to understand students and facilitate their learning and success. In many ways her culture, as well as gender and upbringing, profoundly influence her teaching. At age eight, she lived in Boise, Idaho with her father, mother, and sisters. In her autobiography she describes her mother as Swedish, yet born and raised in Mexico, and she writes that her father “was born to a poor family in the Ozarks, but his family became middle-class by bottling Coca Cola” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). She shares early scenarios from her life depicting origins of her values of individualism and hard work while navigating contradictions between her own beliefs and gendered, heterosexual, middle class societal expectations. She describes sitting on the floor with her sister looking over the *Sears and Roebuck Catalog*—picking out wedding dresses, furniture for her first home, and baby things—where all the models were White. She explains, “This scenario captures much of my deepest identity or what Bourdieu would call the habitus, which is White, middle-class, heterosexual, and gendered” (Oakes, 2016, p. 85). She describes her family expectation to get an education and career and that they worked hard, did not complain or ask for help, and overcame emotions. Oakes expands in her autobiography on her upbringing in relation to race, language, family, and culture:

...[W]e speak English, ...[W]e watch White people speak English on TV, ...[O]ur teachers are White Americans, ... [W]e have no close extended family, ...in Boise girls get married and have families, ...[W]e are taught that we are individuals and responsible for our own lives and actions (Oakes, 2016, p. 85).

These identities, relationships, and experiences serve as the foundation for her core values, as well as some her family and she consciously chose to leave behind. Oakes writes of sitting with her Sister at the local YWCA with a group of

anti-war activists, “My parents, who do not believe in God, have joined the Unitarian Church...so that my Sisters and I will meet other non-believers...we sing anti-war songs and songs of the civil rights movement” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). These actions displayed by her parents do not fit into the social expectations of a White, middle-class family. She goes on to mention a debate about the church becoming a sanctuary and having heated discussions about the war with her Father. “I have become a rebel child, although I still like to look through the *Sears Catalog*” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86).

Oakes describes an individualistic culture in her writing and interview, and she uses phrases such as “I,” “my sister,” “my parents,” “others,” implying an independent view of life which separates herself from others. She defines herself based on personal traits that are distinct (not part of a group). Her descriptions of family life are also individualistic: “We have no close extended family and are expected to leave home when we go to college, never to return” (Oakes, 2016, p. 85), and, “We were a solitary family and we spent long hours in our separate rooms reading or working” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). It is these first-hand experiences that become engrained in Oakes and later shape her relationships and subsequently her ways of teaching, relating to, and interpreting, students. Yet these are also values for which she sometimes feels contradiction and conflict in her teaching.

Oakes’ parents served as her first teachers. She witnessed contradiction in her parents’ actions creating in her what she describes in her autobiography as a “divided heart.” Neither of her parents grew up middle class. Oakes focuses in her autobiography on contradictory actions and beliefs within her family, sharing that her father went to Harvard and “became an outspoken supporter of civil rights in all its forms” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86), yet, “his family continued to refer to a part of Tulsa as ‘N(word)town’ decades later” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). She shares that her mother, who also attended Harvard, “was born...in a household that did not express emotions, didn’t show weakness, and was extremely solitary” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). Her Mother could sing and tell jokes only in Spanish, giving an impression that these activities were not present in her own Swedish culture of origin. Her sisters and she were encouraged to read from the family’s extensive library that included *Das Capital* and *Mein Kampf*, yet her Mother threw out all books of fairytales, which she writes in explanation, “...because she didn’t think it was good for girls to read about mythical princes riding to the rescue” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86).

Oakes muses in her autobiography, “I am the conflicted child of conflicted people” (Oakes, 2016, p. 87). Her parents struggled with the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and their belief in God. She writes that her father’s actions throughout his life were confusing to her: “Though he remained a registered Republican, after college

never voted Republican again” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86). Her mother was no different, writing that when she asked about the meaning of life, her mother told her, “There was no meaning of life” (Oakes, 2016, p. 86), yet pointed out that her mother crossed the border for nearly 30 years of her life to serve others. These contradictions impacted her and influence her teaching. Her conflicted heart appears throughout Oakes’ autobiography, interview, and teaching observation, influencing her teaching in areas of diversity, relationships, and her own growth and learning.

Diversity. Oakes values diversity instilled by her parents. In her interview she reflects on her conscious attempts to diversify her teaching: “I’m trying to find other ways to allow people of all different cultures to participate in a way that is comfortable for them.” She creates opportunities for many processes of learning and relating. During our teaching observation, Oakes made personal connections with students in a variety of ways, such as using student table tent name tags and moving around the room encouraging individual students and groups of students, often through humor. She seems to understand that a one-size-fits-all education model does not work in the ever-changing world her classroom represents. Oakes makes a conscious effort to use a wide diversity of pedagogies to engage students with the subject, as well as with her and with each other. She acknowledges struggles with elements of her upbringing as she works to ensure that she is using a more balanced cultural approach to teaching and learning.

Relationships. Oakes narrates conflicted memories about childhood relationships through her writing. In her interview, she communicated her attempts to build strong relationships in her life and classroom and described her own education: “I love to take classes as a social act, sort of.” Researchers remarked during her interview, “You really use humor a great deal and interact constantly with students during your class.” Creating a constant positive narrative is important, especially in diverse classrooms where many students are likely to originate in highly relational communities (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). In her autobiography she explains, “I have encouraged them to work together and have set up workshops on the weekend and Monday night where they can meet and where I can help them complete the assignments” (Oakes, 2016, p. 87). When writing about a quiet student who rarely talks and is helping another student, she notes, “Good. Now he’ll have a friend” (p. 87). Oakes characterizes her teaching role as facilitator, and she believes learning is a collective, relational process.

Growth through students. Oakes strives to work through her conflicted feelings and values through interaction with students. In her autobiography she describes how her long-held values of timeliness and personal responsibility conflict with the very real lives students have to negotiate, and in some ways she

navigates this because of her dedication to their learning and success:

I am about to start class. Most of the students have turned in their assignments. When the clock in the room clicks to 9:30, I pick up the assignments, put them away in a bag. Out of sight. Unreachable. Several students come dashing into the room late. Their assignments are not stapled. Three have not brought a folder as instructed. I am annoyed. I will not accept their smaller, weekly homework assignments late. “No way,” a student protests when I refuse to take her assignment. “Yes way,” the class responds. They already know the rules about late work, but they can drop almost half of these small assignments, so the penalty is small.

I am torn.

I do not like students being late. I find it personally insulting on some deep level. Work is work, and play is play. Individuals are responsible for their own destiny and must follow the rules. Also, I know from experience that most of the students who are late will not have completed their assignments anyway. Most but not all and I really want students to succeed. I want them to feel good about themselves. Our lives are not fair. Some of these students have family obligations, commute from other places, are struggling with PTSD, and have other barriers to education that I never faced. “OK,” I concede. Just this one time (Oakes, 2016, p. 87).

Through her interactions with students and attendance to reflection and empathy Oakes develops understandings outside her own life. Oakes shares in her interview, “I don’t like competitions unless they are fun and no one really cares who wins,” and, “I just can’t stand to have students be humiliated in my class or feel frustrated...” She expresses the importance of making students feel included because feelings of humiliation, embarrassment, and failure interfere with student learning. She feels internal struggle and shares in her autobiography, “Maybe somewhere in my subconscious I am still trying to overcome the feeling that as a woman I don’t really know what I am doing, that, after all, I am still a silly girl” (Oakes, 2016, p. 89). As a child, she felt doubt and conflict; yet as an adult, her relationships with a diversity of students encourage her to respond in new ways.

Teaching as looking in a mirror. Oakes regularly looks through a mirror into her self-described divided heart and conflicted cultural sense of self. She is at times unsure, yet through reflection and through her students she gains evolving perspectives. In her interview Oakes discusses how she “struggled internally with allowing students even a little bit of leverage on due dates, classroom groupings, and

grading... [yet learning how] profound this flexibility is on learning, student feelings of safety in learning, and on their trust of me as a professor.” The strategies she uses in her classroom are not strategies she experienced as a student, yet through her own self-reflective process, she realizes the real needs of learners in her classroom. Increasingly she strives toward a diversity of cultural strengths, sometimes against her own comfort.

In her autobiography Oakes describes her values as both individualistic and collaborative, considering her work with students through a rear-view mirror of her life. In her autobiography, Oakes clearly shows and expresses individualistic values as though writing headlines from her childhood, “education is work, and work is serious, solitary, and silent, done in black ink on white paper” (Oakes, 2016, p.88), and “some people (people with formal education in recognized colleges) are smarter and better than others” (Oakes, 2016, p. 88). Yet she deeply wants all students to succeed—including those raised with values very different from her own. Oakes demonstrates much more than the individualistic values common to her childhood—perhaps showing the rebel evident in her upbringing. Oakes now uses many techniques that move outside of more individual ways of learning by engaging her students through mind, body, emotions, and spirit, thus overcoming cultural assumptions of her youth and the pressures to conform within academe. She writes in her autobiography,

I pair up students in class. I call pairs to the board to demonstrate solutions to problems. I encourage students to work together on everything except two in-class exams. I have those exams in part because of the pressure of colleagues who only have in-class individual exams and in part because I am conflicted (Oakes, 2016, p. 88).

Oakes’ experiences are filled with continuous social interactions she characterizes as White middle-class, yet she also experiences social justice and diversity events, and diverse social interactions, allowing her to consider life through differing lenses. Through stages of her life and through many kinds of relationships, she continuously evolves. Oakes muses in her autobiography, “I now understand that students have divided hearts, because I have a divided heart” (Oakes, 2016, p. 89). This internal conflict, with reflection, allows and assists her to grow and develop as a teacher.

Teaching with No Box: T. Mark Montoya

“So, how do I reach those students who have put me in a box? I reach them with humor, active learning, sharing my teaching thoughts out loud, and continual support for them as learners. Due to these ‘box’ restrictions, I emphasize the need to ‘unlearn’” (Montoya, 2016, p. 168).

Professor Montoya teaches in Ethnic Studies at Northern Arizona University and understands that his cultural, ethnic, and racial identities are indelible parts, including how students might interpret him as in a particular identity “box”. He shares that as a teacher he doesn’t ask students to think outside the box but asks instead who created the box and what the box is for, and then encourages them to challenge its very existence. He writes in his autobiography about his ethnic and cultural identity, “...I variously identify as Latino, Chicano, Hispano, Mestizo, and as a borderlander native and college professor of Ethnic Studies” (Montoya, 2016, p. 164). He describes himself as a “deliberate daydreamer,” writing about an elementary teacher comment, “Mark’s work is improving, but he still needs to work at a faster pace. He daydreams quite a lot” (Montoya, 2016, p. 165). Montoya sees his work as deliberate and slow paced—and explains that daydreaming allows him to see things. In his interview he shares that he pays attention as a teacher and human being, even noticing when someone is wearing fun socks, explaining that this seeing allows him to create learning environments that encourage intimacy and provide comfort for sharing. He learns best through his own experiences, writing, “I am not a narcissist, but I play one in the classroom” (Montoya, 2016, p. 163). He wants students to experience their own deliberate daydreams and see themselves and the world more deeply.

Montoya values language, the use and power of it. He interprets storytelling as a use of language and upholds the power of personal narrative. He writes in his autobiography, “In the classroom, I am a storyteller. I did not always think of storytelling as a pedagogical tool; I just know that I usually remembered the stories my college professors shared” (Montoya, 2016, p. 164). He believes students are more apt to share their stories and become more capable of seeing their own learning through the cultural processes within which they were raised; as a result, he strives to include many kinds of pedagogy in his teaching. Montoya sees diverse learning as a path in life, not only his but his students: that like him, they are able to process and understand broad topics. He narrates being a “narcissist” in his classroom, and at first glance the title to his autobiography, *Rage, Courage, Encourage: Citizenship in the College Classroom*, might lead some to think about anger rather than how he defines himself. He shares that rage, courage, and encourage are *not* neutral concepts. Instead, he interprets, “...they involve respect, well-being, dignity, empowerment, democracy, justice, and particularly belonging” (Montoya, 2016, p. 164). He explains that we must be just a bit narcissistic to learn from ourselves, our own experiences, our own interpretations.

Rage. From Montoya’s perspective, rage is about passion that leads to courage and creates a personal desire to learn. In his autobiography, he writes the following:

I first had to make clear that its meaning was not solely based on anger or violence. It is not. Rage is also about passion. My idea is that rage will lead to courage, and having courage allows me to encourage; thus, I create some sort of messy teaching and learning sequence. (Montoya, 2016, p. 163-64)

He compares his educational experiences to his Grandfather's—how they differed and were similar in experiencing vast challenges in educational pathways. Both experienced rage at lost opportunities and barriers; both crafted bridges to their futures. Montoya shares that rage allows students to become passionate so they too can create their own bridges through challenges and hardship along their paths. He writes that in his classes he asks students “Who are you? How do you identify? Where do you come from? Where do you want to go? Take some time to deliberate. Daydream!” (Montoya, 2016, p. 165). He explains, “This is how I encourage my classes” (Montoya, 2016, p. 165). In his interview he shared that once he is able to establish a passionate environment within his classes, students are more apt to share their stories and begin to recount their personal narratives through an academic lens of Ethnic Studies. Montoya facilitates students exploring their own passion: passion to continue toward their degree, to choose a profession, to craft a life. He understands that for students to share their stories, he first has to create an encouraging learning environment where students feel safe, a critical aspect of teaching in a multicultural context (Chávez, 2011). He wants students to experience their own and others’ feelings, thoughts, and perspectives so they learn ways that ethnicity, culture, race, and other identities influence individual lives and larger societies. At times Montoya does want students to feel rage as anger—rage at inequities and injustices in both individual lives and larger societies.

Courage. For Montoya, courage is about discovery and being the change as a teacher as well as in facilitating courage within students so they too will go out to influence the world. He uses a variety of pedagogical techniques to facilitate understanding, self-exploration, and courage to act in students. During his observed class session, he showed a brief film clip to introduce a concept about societal inequities, followed by a facilitated conversation with the class, drawing out student insights, feelings, and impressions. He wrote terms on the chalkboard in four columns for visual and organizational effect – historical, institutional, ideological, and personal, referring to examples from social media platforms in everyday use by students (including Facebook and Twitter), to situate learning in student lives (Baxter-Magolda, 2001). Not only did Montoya use tools, he also used a variety of pedagogical discussion skills that encouraged students to stay with difficult material. Montoya deftly

facilitated student discussion, applying multiple modalities to involve and include all students: drawing out the quieter ones and asking the more vocal ones to hold onto their thoughts so that all could contribute. He deftly moved about the room, leaning forward towards students who spoke. Montoya used silence as well, pausing after asking a complex question to elicit critical thinking. The silence served to deepen student answers; at times discomfiting for some students, yet the complexity of their answers affirmed its value.

Encourage. “There is no box” (Montoya, 2016, p. 163). Montoya writes in his autobiography that problems exist because particular meanings or values are placed on people, identity, and cultures. He uses discussions and examples of racism to deconstruct the structure of problems, asking students to discern the patterns. In his autobiography he shares a racial/ethnic contrast to illustrate,

Several years ago, an influential mentor, who was known for his work on critical race theory (see Olson, 2004), told me that he as a White man, had it easier in Ethnic Studies classes because no matter how much he talked about racism, about privilege, and about systems of oppression, he would always be taken as neutral and objective. I on the other hand would be another ‘minority’ complaining. (Montoya, 2016, p. 168)

When Montoya teaches and advises without the box, students are able to draw on their strengths and their hardships, realizing that experiences allow them citizenship in the classroom and elsewhere. Their lives and identities exist and matter. Montoya writes in his autobiography about his Father’s frequent refrain, “I come home with a hurt back, so you can come home with a hurt brain” (Montoya, 2016, p. 167). To further explain his father’s meaning, sacrifices were made, and the road was paved for him to obtain an education, so coming home exhausted and tired from educational work is nothing to complain about.

Montoya urges that we too can look at our ancestral history and what it means for our teaching, learning, work with students, and academic subjects. In his autobiography he discusses the role of culture in his own identity,

In this critical inventory of self and of community, I was to talk about how my culture influences my teaching and vice versa, but my culture is always there. My culture cannot be taken as a variable that makes me who I am. It is who I am. I belong to the borderlands—the vague and undefined zones in all of our lives. The borderlands are where cultural formations are variable, continual, and ever changing. Who am I? I am a citizen, and I play one in the classroom. (Montoya, 2016, p. 169)

In his interview, Montoya discusses a doctoral student. He richly describes the student, “as the long bearded, long haired student who rides his motorcycle and is cool.” He refers to him as “...family, where like a real family each member is a different person, and different personality.” Time has allowed him to experience the process of relationship, to be respectful of the student who calls him mentor. His role as his teacher creates space and confidence for the student to create a bridge to his own scholarship.

A wide range of classroom activities assist students to recognize the essential humanity and value of individuals and Peoples. Because his academic area is Ethnic Studies, Montoya not only introspects about his personal cultural influences on his teaching pedagogies as Kashanipour and Oakes do, but also focuses on culture as academic content. Though culture as academic content is beyond the scope of this study and project, there are many ways faculty can facilitate learning among students about links between academic subjects/knowledge building and personal/population identities (see Ke, Chávez, Causarano, & Causarano, 2011). Montoya used a variety of pedagogies in the observed class session, including creating opportunities for students to share stories of their home life, thus sharing windows into many identities and traditions. Using an exercise called “Stereotypes”, Montoya showed people in everyday photographs of varying ethnicities, shapes, sizes, and dress, having students call out their impressions and then facilitating what was helpful and problematic in various characterizations and terms. This activity encouraged students to question their own stereotypes and humanize individuals and groups in the images. In addition to tailoring classroom activities and lessons toward expanding students’ worlds, Montoya facilitates unpacking assumptions.

Being a deliberate daydreamer allows Montoya to reach many students through teaching across cultural strengths. His deliberately multifaceted pedagogical approach creates an environment where students can experience rage, courage, and encouragement, thus facilitating their citizenship in the college classroom and the world.

Our Path Forward: Key Practices to Introspect Culturally and Teach Across Cultures

There are many ways we can teach more purposefully to understand our own cultural influences and develop teaching across cultural strengths. You might consider integrating the following three practices into your teaching life: go inward, learn from and with students, and develop a practice of engaged pedagogy.

Go inward

At some point during this year of faculty development, all 37 faculty shared that until they did so in this project, they hadn’t reflected upon connections between their own

culture(s) and their teaching. This was the case even for those who study culture (e.g., anthropology, Ethnic Studies). Developing understandings of how our culture(s) influence our teaching assists us to understand and reach students through our teaching. The alienating impact on students when faculty are unaware of their underlying cultural influences represents a profound insight from this study. Opportunities to connect and to facilitate learning expand greatly when we recognize how we are interpreting students, as well as how students experience us.

We begin going inward by reflecting upon and analyzing our own values, assumptions, and beliefs and where they originate in teachings from families, cultures, and places, as well as religions, spiritualities, and philosophies. We can consider how each manifest in our teaching behaviors, course design, and perhaps most importantly how they manifest in our interpretations and judgements about students based on our own cultural mores. We can engage with students to get to know them and ask about *their* most natural ways of learning, communicating, and being in learning relationships. Finally, we can gradually integrate some of what we are learning from students and from contemplation of ourselves to balance cultural ways of being and doing in our teaching.

Learn from and with Students

Students are powerful resources for faculty. A helpful question we can ask students is, “When you really need to learn something, what do you do?” It can be startling to discover the many and varied ways students learn. Asking students to identify techniques used by other professors in ways helpful to their learning is also useful. Designing discussions to gather ideas about teaching can also be invaluable. Regardless of the path, facilitating the why and asking students to share what learning processes are helpful to their learning will deepen our insight. Asking can be uncomfortable since we are often expected and expect ourselves to be the authority, yet partnering with and learning from students is a powerful way to develop teaching to enhance student learning.

Develop a Practice of Engaged Pedagogy

As we worked closely with faculty, we noticed most used a static teaching plan for class sessions and did not deviate even when students were obviously disengaged. Student learning benefits, especially across cultures, when we adapt our teaching on the spot when learning or engagement is not happening. We observed many ways to increase engagement: asking students to show or share their insights with the class as they work individually or together, noticing when students are disengaged and then adding humor or a different activity, and even gently teasing to pull students back

into engaged learning. To engage students and their learning, we must observe, then diverge from our plan to “shake things up” and draw students once again into curiosity, involvement, learning, and relationship with the subject, with each other, and with us.

Transformed Teaching Starts with Us

Kashanipour’s outsider skepticism and rippling out; Oakes’ compassion, fun, relationality, and divided heart; and Montoya’s passion, rage, and courage are important aspects of their cultural origins: reflection upon them improved and informed their teaching across cultures. Cultural self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-observation lead to greater effectiveness as teachers across cultures. Knowing and innovating through our own cultural strengths as well as the strengths of students, enable effective pedagogy. What worked for learning in our personal upbringing, education, and communities might not work in our current learning community or in facilitating learning of specific students, so making time to observe and to reflect on our teaching practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs improves learning possibilities. We urge you to introspect culturally, engage with students, question assumptions and judgments about students, and develop cultural balance across teaching.

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