

A Study of Multicultural Course Change: An Analysis of Syllabi and Classroom Dynamics

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Abstract

Multicultural Course Change involves deliberate and thoughtful attention to developing and presenting course material that focuses on well-defined multicultural goals. In this qualitative study, nine faculty participated in a Summer Diversity Institute designed to support multicultural curriculum development and instruction. Syllabi were reviewed for multicultural content and assessment, while direct classroom observations were conducted to assess instructional strategies and classroom dynamics. A review of syllabi revealed moderate implementation based on Morey and Kitano's theoretical model of Multicultural Course Change. Classroom observations illustrated that faculty were able to engage students in multicultural course goals to a greater degree than specified in the analyzed syllabi. Implications for institutional diversity programming and faculty professional development are discussed.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Classroom Community, Instructional Strategies

According to the United States Department of Education (2013), the percentage of postsecondary minority students is rising, with Latino and African American students now comprising 14% and 15% of four-year enrollees, respectively. In light of this, institutions of higher education have had to revisit traditional curricular and instructional practices to provide diverse learners with meaningful educational experiences. A review of university mission statements reveals that over 60% of colleges report having *diversity* directly or tangentially tied to its established mission and/or student learning outcomes (Humphreys, 2000).

To successfully fulfill its professed undertaking as it relates to diversity, a university must support the teaching and learning process for diverse populations. While diversity initiatives may be prioritized at the macro-level, at the micro-level faculty report feeling ill-prepared for the tasks of developing course materials that speak to various types of diversity, often encountering student resistance to broaching traditionally sensitive topics, such as race, socioeconomic status, and privilege (McHatton, Keller, Schircliffe, & Zalaquett, 2009). Faculty become frustrated at their perceived failure to successfully support multicultural curricular initiatives, or they choose to disengage from the process altogether (Allan & Estler, 2005).

In response to changing student demographics and faculty concerns about diversity issues, numerous institutions have developed programs to support faculty curriculum development and instructional practices that relate to diverse populations of students (Krishnamurthi, 2003). In this study we report the results of faculty participation in a diversity institute implemented to help faculty transform their syllabi and select instructional tools to reflect the range of student cultural backgrounds inherent in today's college classroom.

Literature Review

The literature on multicultural education and diversity is extensive. Many definitions have been put forth to operationalize the meaning of multiculturalism as well as cultural diversity (Gorski, 2009; Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). One of the most prolific definitions is attributed to Banks (2004), who explains multicultural education as an outgrowth of teaching and learning that underscores "content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture" (p.23). In this paradigm, college courses with a multicultural approach emphasize social action, reflexivity, and power dynamics. To that end, college instructors who subscribe to a multicultural framework seek to develop critical thinking skills in their students. The goal is to affect social change by capitalizing on students' strengths and background experiences. It is important to note that the students of diverse circumstances are not the only ones who benefit from such an approach (Zirkel, 2008). Majority students in educational environments with little diversity gain a more well-rounded experience by exploring how issues such as privilege, access, and dominance frame one's reality and positionality in the global world.

Closely related to multicultural education is the movement toward Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Originally, CRT was championed by K-12 educators primarily, but now its tenets are being adopted by faculty and staff at postsecondary institutions across the country. Professors who assume a culturally responsive teaching style view "cultural differences among students as assets" (Gay, 2010, p.31). They plan and deliver instruction in a way so as to build student content knowledge based on their personal frames of reference and cultural backgrounds. In short, course content is made relevant to students' lived experiences (Bennett, 2011; Billings & Brown, 2008). They are urged to make connections with others in the classroom setting, based on the multiple identities that all students bring to bear on their learning experiences; therefore, a culturally responsive professor "must respond to the cultures actually present in the classroom. [They] connect new information to students' background knowledge, and present the information in ways that respond to students' natural ways of learning" (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 45).

Assessment in multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching is a critical part of ensuring positive student learning outcomes. A professor's curricular content may follow the principles of culturally responsive education, but, without valid assessments in place, an educator does not have insight into the degree to which measurable learning has taken place (Ayala, 2008; De La Colina & Davis, 2013). To ascertain student mastery of core course concepts, rigorous assessment measures are needed to determine congruence between objectives and outcomes. Proponents of culturally relevant teaching promote the use of various assessment tools to demonstrate competency. Providing opportunities for students to be creative, work interdependently, and reflect on their learning has been shown to increase student engagement and course mastery (Gardner, 1999; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009).

Multicultural education and CRT do not focus solely on the curricular and assessment practices an educator selects, but also on specific instructional strategies utilized to support student growth (Smith, 2013). Research shows that the interactions students have with their teachers and peers directly affect engagement and academic performance (Bain, 2004; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2013). To best facilitate learning, professors must create a sense of belonging among their students by exhibiting warmth, caring, empathy, and positive regard. Similar to the previous discussion about assessment, a range of approaches must be used when employing culturally responsive techniques. Group work, debating, and role-playing are some options instructors can use to make their teaching relevant to students. When faculty deliberately opt to practice instructional techniques that are evidence-based and provide students with multiple opportunities for expression, a positive classroom environment is more likely to develop organically (Banks & Banks, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is Morey and Kitano's (1997) Model for Multicultural Course Change. According to this approach, every course can be characterized by the level of diversity content and instructional strategies used to support students' critical thinking and social interaction skills. An instructor teaching to the *exclusive* level relegates diversity to the margins of the course. The instruction is teacher-centered, and students are not challenged in their beliefs about social dynamics, such as power and privilege. At the *inclusive* level, the focus shifts to a greater emphasis on student knowledge construction and exploring different societal perspectives, but the instruction is still professor-focused. When an instructor moves to the *transformed* level, students are encouraged to challenge one another's views and reflect on personal and societal values as they relate to diverse populations. The professor guides and supports students as they examine these ideas, without being the focus of instruction. All members of the class benefit from each other's active participation.

In the present study, Morey and Kitano's framework was used to examine the syllabi of professors who had completed a Summer Diversity Institute (SDI) at an urban research university. Of additional interest to the authors was an observational component, whereby the researchers were able to watch classes taught by the participants of the SDI. Our goal was to investigate the level of congruence between what is expressed in the syllabus and what instructional and curricular information was employed in faculty's individual courses. Both content analysis and inter-rater agreement were employed. The research question of inquiry was: to what degree do Summer Diversity Institute participants infuse tenets of multicultural course transformation into their undergraduate classes?

Methodology

Context

The university in the present study is located in a midsized urban setting in the Southeast. There were roughly 22,000 full-time undergraduate and graduate students enrolled during the time of the research project. The student body is 27% culturally and ethnically diverse and is 52% female and 47% male. Of the 895 faculty, 60% is male, while 40% is female. Ethnically diverse faculty comprise 19% of the population, while 81% of the faculty is

European American. The campus has seven colleges, including Architecture, Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Computing and Informatics, Education, Engineering, and Health and Human Services. The campus currently has 10 doctoral programs.

A Summer Diversity Institute, sponsored by the Office of the Provost, is held each year for the purpose of supporting faculty in using multicultural teaching practices in their courses. Specifically, attendees are taught how to develop multicultural course goals and objectives, select appropriate learning activities, design authentic assessments, and create a positive learning environment for all students. Institute modules encourage both individual and large-group activities to help faculty reflect on how to implement culturally responsive teaching in their respective courses. Faculty explore multicultural content integration, how to initiate and respond to student questions about diversity, power, and privilege, and ways that their individual backgrounds can influence the learning environment.

Upon completion of the program, faculty are asked to participate in ongoing professional development activities throughout the following school year. These learning experiences could range from informal peer observations of their teaching to formal scholarship on the nature of multicultural education in postsecondary education. At a minimum, the expectation is that they would incorporate the information learned during the institute in their fall and spring courses.

A qualitative methodology was utilized in the present study. Qualitative research was chosen to answer the proposed research question due to an emphasis on lived experience, personal narrative, and participant voice. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) noted, "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research involves an interpretist, naturalistic approach..." (p.3). In this study, the world is the college classroom, and the observers are those on the research team who facilitated the Summer Diversity Institute. We sought answers to how (if at all) faculty who participated in diversity training would use culturally relevant and multicultural concepts, such as content integration and empowerment, in undergraduate education. The aim was not to test a theory as in deductive research, but to understand how these ideas are expressed in the "real world" via a college classroom setting. Whereas the development of a theory about multicultural course infusion was not the goal, this study does give useful insight into how these participants "practiced what was preached."

Sample

During the fall semester, the previous summer's faculty class was asked to participate in a research study to examine how instructors used information from the SDI in their courses. Out of 15 institute members, nine full-time faculty agreed to participate in the present study. These faculty represented disciplines in engineering technology (n=2), dance, chemistry, English, sociology of law, computer science, first-year writing, and communications. Female professors were the majority of the sample (females n=7; males n=2). Six faculty identified as persons of color. Faculty ranks represented included lecturers, tenure-track, and post-tenured professors. All faculty had been employed at the university for a minimum of two years. Table 1 presents detailed demographic information about the faculty participants.

Instrument

The rubric used in this study was constructed from a review of literature on multicultural education and Morey and Kitano's (1997) Model for Multicultural Course Change to include

descriptions of the four course practices (i.e., Content, Instructional Strategies and Activities, Assessment, and Class Dynamics) on each level of multicultural education integration (see Figure 1 for the model). Any demonstration of the descriptions identified by the rubric during the observation period determined the level of multicultural education integration. Participants received a rating of *none*, *exclusive*, *inclusive*, or the *transformed* level of multicultural education integration for any of the course practices they engaged in during the observation period.

Three groups of five multicultural education scholars reviewed the rubric for content validity. In addition, the scholars reviewed the rubric to determine whether the instrument established sufficient operational measures for multicultural education integration within the course practices. Reviewers were asked to respond to the following questions regarding the validity of the rubric: (a) Were the definitions of course practices clear? (b) Were the descriptions of levels of multicultural education integration for each course practice easy to read as worded? (c) Were the descriptions of levels of multicultural education integration for each course practice understood in a consistent way?

On the basis of the responses from the three groups of reviewers, the researchers did not need to revise any additional descriptions in the rubric. The final rubric consisted of four descriptions in Content, four descriptions in Instructional Strategies and Activities, two descriptions in Assessment of Student Knowledge, and four descriptions in Course Dynamics. Sample items are listed in Table 2.

Data Collection

In the first part of the study, all participants were asked to submit their syllabi for review by the research team. Of particular interest to the researchers analyzing the syllabi were the Content and Assessment parts of the model. According to Kitano (1997), a syllabus should “accurately reflect multicultural intent. All course goals, including multicultural goals, should be made explicit to students, actualized in content and instruction, and their attainment monitored” (p. 19). In line with these guidelines, each syllabus was reviewed by two research team members to determine the congruence between multicultural course content, student learning outcomes, and curricular resources. Specifically, were instructors selecting content that reflected the cultural experiences of their students as well as those of other groups? For each syllabus, Assessment would be evaluated based on the degree to which faculty encouraged student evaluation of their progress toward learning goals and supported higher-level critical thinking skills, such as synthesis and analysis (Krathwohl, 2002). Additionally, analyses were conducted to see if assessments were in place that gave students opportunities to show mastery of the course information in diverse and non-traditional ways.

To study Instructional Strategies and Classroom Dynamics, it was important to conduct an observation of participating faculty in the classroom setting. In the second part of the study, 60-minute, one-time observations of each faculty member’s class were completed by two trained observers of the research team. With respect to Instructional Strategies, areas of inquiry included the use of questioning, deconstruction, and “intergroup interaction” (Kitano, 1997, p. 26) to understand complex social issues. Classroom Dynamics focused on the instructor’s ability to be inclusive of student perspectives, create a safe space for the expression of sensitive subjects, and facilitate, not direct, student learning. Careful attention was paid to whether faculty communicated clear expectations for student behavior, monitored levels of student participation, and were able to create a welcoming learning environment for students.

Data Analysis

Because there can be a disconnect between what is stated in a syllabus and what actually takes place in the classroom setting (Sciame-Giesecke, Roden, & Parkison, 2009), we prioritized our analysis on the class observations. Observational data were analyzed by using the aforementioned rubric. Two types of coding were employed: provisional and inductive. In provisional coding, a priori terms were used (Huberman, Miles, & Saldaña, 2013) that were based in the literature. A content analysis was used to review faculty syllabi based on the theoretical framework from the Morey and Kitano paradigm. As an example, codes such as equity, democracy, caring, etc. were developed before the study. We were aware these codes might have to be revised or modified, based on what we encountered while reviewing the syllabi and/or during observations.

Next, we used a form of inductive coding right after the classroom observations and again 7-10 calendar days later. Each researcher independently read over all syllabi and observational data without taking notes. After a fresh read, each member of the research team noted common key words and phrases pertaining to each section of the Morey and Kitano framework (Content, Instructional Strategies, Assessment, and Classroom Dynamics) but allowed for other categories to emerge as well. Analytic memos of the researchers' reflections and summaries illuminated patterns in the data and highlighted relationships between categories. After independently rating the syllabi and classroom observations, the research team compared their individual findings and shared interrater reliability consensus at 85%.

Positionality, Trustworthiness and Transferability

In the five phases of the research process, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) maintained how the inquiry endeavor is affected by the "biographically situated researcher" (p. 12). As researchers, we bring to bear experiences, conceptions of ourselves and others, and personal interpretations to the data we collect and analyze. Both authors are African-American women professors of education and psychology in the Southeast. We recognize that our racial, socioeconomic, and gender identities influenced our approach to the study and the interpretations that resulted. For this reason, we ensured that the credibility of our study could withstand scrutiny by incorporating checks for both reliability and validity.

Trustworthiness relates to the degree to which qualitative data are confirmable and dependable. The findings in this study are believed to be accurate, credible, and valid, due to: (1) incorporating more than one data collection strategy, (2) having multiple researchers analyze the data and reach acceptable inter-rater agreement, and (3) using theoretical triangulation to examine and interpret the data (Creswell, 2013; Golafshani, 2003). While the findings presented cannot be generalized to other institutions, there is transferability in the sense that other colleges and universities can use the information from this study to support their faculty in incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices in the classroom setting. The description of the participants, the university context, and specific parts of our findings, such as participant quotations and observational details, allow for a respectable degree of transferability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

Findings

Syllabus Review

Syllabi for nine faculty members were reviewed against the Morey and Kitano (1997) framework for multicultural change. Content was assessed by determining whether faculty clearly communicated the purpose and goals of the course and whether readings and materials were selected that addressed issues of cultural diversity. Of the nine participants, only three included course learning goals and objectives that spoke to multiculturalism and diverse perspectives. The professor of dance clearly articulated in her syllabus, “Students will identify similarities and differences with dance practices among cultures.” In an observation of her class, she showed media clips of dancing performed by African, European, and ethnically combined troupes. This instructor then guided a robust discussion of how slaves used specific body movements as a means of communication. Students were encouraged to converse about the interpersonal meaning of physical contact and how words are not always needed as a means of expression.

Other faculty created syllabi with language that required students to engage with diverse material. For example, in a course on law and deviant behavior, the faculty member expressly noted in her syllabus, “Students should be able to identify cultural trends and patterns of relationships in society.” When observing this instructor, she actively discussed women’s rights and racial discrimination on a national level. Her engaging questions and reflective exercises helped students understand deep-seated connections between patriarchy and unjust reproductive legislation. Students were then encouraged to take part in a “think-pair-share” exercise to debate main points from their assigned readings.

An analysis of the course texts and reading materials indicated that there was little variety present. Most instructors relied on the use of textbooks without supplemental readings applied. In the three syllabi that did express a multicultural learning outcome, the faculty denoted expectations of what students needed to demonstrate to successfully achieve the goal. Of particular note was one faculty member who held herself to a personal standard of responsibility for the academic growth of her students. In the syllabus she stated she would “foster three types of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and relational.” In this declaration she indicated to students that she was willing to be accountable for her role in the learning process as well.

In evaluating the Assessment domain, attention was paid to specific assignments and policies that would indicate student mastery of course content. Multicultural Course Change assumes that faculty will be open to having students demonstrate competency in non-traditional ways, such as with portfolios, social action research, and field activities. One faculty member incorporated formal peer evaluation into the course. The syllabi expressly stated that students would receive feedback from both peers and the instructor. This English instructor had students engage in various reflective and analytical activities to help students “take control of your writing.” Another writing professor encouraged students to “shift from information hunting to knowledge-making by engaging with diverse sources, perspectives, voices and styles and to consider ways of integrating this into your own writing.” In this way, she was using Morey and Kitano’s method of *questioning traditional concepts* to allow for a greater exploration of provocative and controversial topics by her students.

Similar to the findings in the Content domain, overall, the majority of faculty participants had not adopted an approach consistent with the Morey and Kitano framework for Assessment.

All nine faculty relied on traditional measures of evaluation (e.g., tests and quizzes) when assessing student performance. Some (n=4) had a small-group work component in addition to the conventional measures of evaluation. Reflective writings and projects that encouraged students to contemplate deeper social issues were seen in only two syllabi, notably those of the communications and writing instructors.

Classroom Observations

Observations of faculty classroom instruction revealed three predominant themes: (1) the presence of a supportive classroom environment, (2) equity in student participation, and (3) demonstration of strategies that support diverse learning styles. The first two thematic areas related to Morey and Kitano's Classroom Dynamics domain, and the third theme was connected to the Instructional Strategies domain.

Out of nine faculty, seven displayed the characteristics of an instructional style that facilitated *supportive classroom interactions* at the inclusive or transformed level of Multicultural Course Change. Observational data showed that these faculty demonstrated positive personal regard for students, were affirmative in their tone and expressions, communicated expectations for the lesson clearly, and actively engaged students in discussion. More specific examples of this type of instruction involved using students' names before eliciting a response, offering positive feedback for student effort, and praising students' strengths in small-group work. A chemistry professor, who struggled to demonstrate many multicultural tenets in her syllabus, did incorporate small-group discussion and would often refer students to her "stress-free guide to learning chemistry" when students became frustrated with difficult equations during the lesson. The two instructors at the exclusive level of change seldom offered positive feedback to students and, in one case, a professor at the inclusive level was recorded as saying, "[This is] just like talking to myself..."

The second thematic category established was *equity in student participation* in the classroom setting. As Multicultural Course Change is predicated on the development of critical thinking skills in students, how (or if) the professor monitored equal participation from all students was examined. Three faculty displayed an ability to transform their course by monitoring and ensuring equity of participation by facilitating student questions and discussion. A communications professor spent a great deal of the class period in dialogue with her students. After students would speak, she summarized their main points, showing that she listened intently to what they said. She also carefully weaved multiple students' responses into her overall message for the class session. This same instructor had a statement on the first page of her syllabus informing students that, "My role as an instructor is to provide an environment to facilitate learning and contribute to your intellectual growth." This commitment to engage students in spirited debate, field tough questions, and challenge students' beliefs was evident in the classroom observations of this professor.

These three instructors also allowed for a great deal of student engagement by relating the course content to students' communities of origin. Students made connections with the material because the professor ensured everyone was involved, either by calling on students, asking for volunteers, or having designated individuals "report out" after small-group work. Most faculty (n=5) were rated at the inclusive level, whereby some attempts were made to actively incorporate all students into the lesson, but it was not a focus. One faculty member in engineering showed no monitoring of student participation at all.

The final category, demonstration of *the use of strategies to support diverse learning styles*, was observed in only two faculty at the transformed level. Most faculty remained at an inclusive level, with two professors at the exclusive category (i.e., traditional approaches, such as lecture). Instructors who were rated at a transformed level incorporated multiple strategies within one class period to guide students' learning. They shifted between large-group discussion with the professor and the full class to small-group work, so students could interact with their peers. They incorporated technology, when appropriate, and gave students chances to express themselves both in written form and verbally. For example, a writing instructor used notecards to facilitate small-group work on the benefits of journaling, and one communications professor employed social media to spark a debate on globalization and socio-political activism. Students also had a great deal of ownership in the direction of the class period. All members of the group (both the professor and students) remained engaged and actively involved in the lesson.

Discussion

This study intended to explore the degree of Multicultural Course Change exhibited by faculty participating in a Summer Diversity Institute. Findings of the syllabus review revealed there was a moderate level of congruence between the goals of the Morey and Kitano framework and multicultural learning objectives for the various courses. Specifically, most faculty did not express clearly defined learning goals for students as related to a deeper understanding of the contributions and experiences of diverse populations. Course content that used examples from different cultural groups was only detected in one-third of the syllabi evaluated. The Assessment domain fared no better, with very few faculty offering students alternatives to traditional forms of evaluation. There remained an overreliance on tests, quizzes, and term papers to convey student mastery. Observational data provided a glimpse into the classroom setting, whereby useful information was obtained about Classroom Dynamics and Instructional Strategies. Faculty showed a higher level of course transformation by incorporating large- and small-group discussion, monitoring student participation, and maintaining a supportive climate for student engagement and community.

The literature on multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2013; Campbell, 2010) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) encourages educators to use instructional approaches that support the achievement of all students, regardless of cultural background. To that end, multicultural course infusion presumes that faculty are willing to select diverse content, non-traditional assessment strategies, and community-building instructional techniques to influence student learning. The results of this study show that, overall, only a small group of faculty participants were able to be inclusive or transformative in demonstrating these competencies.

Limitations, Recommendations, and Areas for Future Research

There are three primary limitations of this study that speak to areas of future inquiry and recommendations for practice. First, the data collection methods of a content review of syllabi and classroom observational data may not have captured the full experience of these faculty members who completed the Summer Diversity Institute. Without an additional interview component we cannot determine whether faculty beliefs and perspectives on multicultural education align with what was found. Additionally, because just one observation was conducted, the research team only saw a "snapshot in time" of classroom activity. Increasing the number of

observations throughout the term may garner valuable information about ongoing classroom processes and dynamics.

Second, this study was conducted with a subsample of the full roster of faculty that participated in the summer program. It could be proffered that studying a larger sample of participants may yield different results. Research on future cohorts of faculty should address this concern. Third, we found that faculty in certain disciplines incorporated these ideas more often than others. Specifically, instructors in some of the physical and life sciences were unable or unwilling to include principles of multicultural course change in their classes. In the social and behavioral sciences, issues like race, class, and gender are often discussed and analyzed in the larger context of the academic major. It could be that those in STEM fields do not have the natural connection to diversity and multiculturalism that other disciplines have. Again, interviewing faculty to shed light on some of these findings would be a useful direction for future research.

On campuses around the nation, the trend of increased diversity is veering from just race and ethnicity to include varied ages, religions and sexual orientations. Diversity training for faculty has been adopted by universities across the country as a means to better support the ever increasing diversity within their student populations. As a final recommendation, the sample came from one university and, therefore, the results may not be applicable to other predominantly White institutions. Future research should collect data at other universities to determine whether our findings may be transferred to other campuses in similar as well as different geographical areas.

Conclusion

This study examined the micro-level interactions of faculty and students in classroom settings, but larger institutional issues need to be explored as well. The existence of a Summer Diversity Institute is laudable, but if faculty are not able to fully integrate multiculturalism into course content, more targeted and sustained professional development is needed (Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006). When reviewing the findings, several questions arose as to why there was a disconnect between the tenets of the institute and faculty's implementation of said precepts. Are faculty receiving useful feedback from department chairs and deans about ways to effectively integrate diversity education into the existing curriculum? Do faculty have safe spaces to talk amongst themselves about how to incorporate multicultural content into their courses? At the institutional level, are there dedicated funding resources allocated for research and scholarship on culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education? Answers to these questions can offer a deeper understanding of the factors that affect faculty acceptance and implementation of the principles of Multicultural Course Change.

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