

# Personal Perspective

## A Multicultural Education Instructor's Reflective Self-Analysis:

### Facing the Challenge of Teaching and Learning

*By Elavie Ndura*

Multicultural education courses pose individual challenges to both students and instructors. Such courses, by their nature, raise powerful and unavoidable questions about issues of sexism, racism, social inequality, and linguistic as well as religious diversity, which tend to be uncomfortable topics for students and teachers to discuss.

As Ahlquist (1992) indicates, "whether unconscious or conscious, intentional or unintentional, prospective teachers find it difficult to accept that whites have benefited economically, socially and psychologically from institutional and interactional racism, and males have benefited from sexism" (p. 89). Such attitudes can create tension between students and instructors and among students themselves in multicultural education courses, as demonstrated in the article by Gutierrez-Gomez (2002). This tension may raise resistance, which is a major obstacle to learning and achieving desired change.

The journey towards effectively helping students become aware of their biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and privileges must begin with multicultural education instructors themselves. They must explore their own cultural preconceptions and ideologies through careful and truthful reflective self-analysis in order to be able to manage and constructively interpret theirs and their students' shared societal and classroom lived experiences. Teaching multicultural education is much more than

dispensing content and knowledge. It is about building relationships (Nieto, 1999), and do so in a classroom environment that fosters mutual recognition and validation.

This article looks closely at the challenges of teaching a graduate multicultural education seminar from an instructor's personal perspective. First, I discuss my cultural identity and my rationale for teaching multicultural education. Second, I explain my philosophy of multicultural education. Third, I outline the objectives of the course. Fourth, I discuss the teaching challenges I encounter in teaching the course, from the perspective of a faculty of color on a predominantly White campus. I conclude with some recommendations for learners and teachers of multicultural education.

#### Cultural Identity and Reasons for Teaching

##### **Who Am I?**

I am a Burundian Hutu who witnessed first hand the victimizing and devastating consequences of intolerance, discrimination, and genocide for the first 30 years of my life and who will suffer from the effects and aftermaths of the resulting wounds and scars until I draw my last breath. I am an immigrant whose English accent is constantly questioned and seen as an exotic element of curiosity, a hindrance, or a weakness.

I am a Black woman who has to confront the daily pressures of being Black in a society that judges me through stereotypical lenses. I am a single mother raising two children that society almost expects to become the next school dropout,

criminal, or teenage pregnancy statistic. I am an educated educator who works twelve to fourteen hours a day, yet cannot afford to save money for retirement.

I am a university faculty of color with great academic and professional potential, who will most likely have to fight for recognition. I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who wonders why so few people look like me in my chapel. I am an African who considers Africa to be the real motherland. I am a refugee who resents the separation from family. This is who I am and this cultural identity influences and shapes my teaching philosophy and approaches.

##### **Why Do I Teach? And Why Do I Teach Multicultural Education?**

My short response to these probing questions may seem naïve to anyone who does not understand the depth of my dream as a multicultural education instructor. I want to change the world, one person at a time.

My teaching approach in multicultural education is to guide students through the process of discovery, understanding, and appreciation of self and others. To this effect, I encourage students to explore their own cultural roots and to reflect upon the extent to which their culture influences their attitudes, actions, and behaviors.

I establish a comfortable classroom environment that allows students to communicate with one another; thus, they learn that communication is the key to understanding each other and the diverse world around them. I also emphasize re-

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search and first-hand experiences. I require students to research cultural or social groups or teaching practices. I design and implement activities that integrate superior critical thinking skills and the resolve to embrace and practice multicultural education.

Teaching multicultural education enables me to engage the students and help them understand that they must become active agents of change in their community and the world. Teaching is sowing seeds that will bear mighty fruits. I teach because humanity can no longer afford to dwell in the luxury of ignorance (Howard, 1999). History has demonstrated quite painfully that what you don't know can kill you. I have come to appreciate even more the Burundian adage that "*Ibuye risohotse ntiryica isuka*," whose literal translation means, "An exposed rock does not damage the hoe."

Therefore, I teach multicultural education to help expose the hidden sources of human conflict and social suffering that have for so long annihilated and even destroyed the human spirit and potential. I teach to resurrect hope and faith in the humans' transformative power and ability to make a difference.

### What I Believe

I believe in education. I have faith in the power of multicultural education to change lives and mediate peace among people and nations. I view education as a life-changing experience that brings the teacher and students together to explore the existing knowledge and its impact on the individual, the community, and the world, and to develop an educated and constructive vision of the contribution that each participant must make towards the building of a shared, gratifying, and prosperous society.

The purpose of multicultural education is to develop an understanding of and appreciation for our individual and communal roles in the sustenance of our national and international mosaic. We are a diverse people with one common destiny. Multicultural education must help students acquire the knowledge and commitments necessary to make responsible and reflective decisions and to take personal, social, and civic action to advocate for and support democracy and democratic living (Banks, 1996, p.344; Nieto, 1999).

I believe that teaching is more than a job. It is a calling. It takes one's full power of the mind and heart to fulfill this calling. In addition to being a calling, teaching multicultural education is an oppor-

tunity. It is an opportunity to alter dispositions and behaviors and to refocus our human and humanistic energy on creating a peaceful society where equity and social justice are afforded to all people regardless of their cultural backgrounds. I value this opportunity.

Nevertheless, I recognize the challenges inherent to such an endeavor as it aims at confronting diversity and multicultural education issues head on and at challenging students' cultural frames of reference. Designing a course of study, therefore, is an engaging, complex, and rather intriguing process. The following section explains my Multicultural Education Seminar's objectives and their rationale.

### Seminar in Multicultural Education: Course Objectives

I consider multicultural education courses to be a valuable opportunity for me to sow the seeds of social transformation and for my students to determine their individual and collective roles in the process. At the same time, I am aware that for the majority of my students, the diversity and multicultural education dialogue is a new and sometimes uncomfortable experience.

So, while I would like to push for immediate and instant transformation, I recognize that only careful negotiation will generate an open and honest conversation about multicultural issues. Thus, the course objectives are designed not to force transformation but to lead the students towards a self-constructed awareness of the compelling need for change, their undisputed power to effect social transformation, and their ultimate responsibility to make a difference.

The overall goal of the Seminar in Multicultural Education is to provide the students the opportunities to explore, examine, evaluate, and discuss literature, society and schooling practices concerned with educational equity, as a prime prerequisite to the implementation of democratic principles in a pluralistic society (Banks, 1992; Campbell, 2000).

Six broad objectives guide the selection of instructional materials and classroom activities throughout the semester: (1) understand the fundamental concepts of multicultural education; (2) demonstrate critical awareness of current literature in multicultural education; (3) develop a cross-cultural perspective that is essential to the design and implementation of multicultural

school and curriculum reform; (4) develop sensitivity to the background, needs, and expectations of culturally diverse students and communities; (5) define culturally responsive instruction and evaluate teaching/learning materials for cultural appropriateness; and (6) commit to being agents of change and liberation in the schools and community (Freire, 1993).

Through the course, students learn to critically analyze and question information and societal assumptions that are often taken for granted. They learn to value and appreciate human diversity. Most of all, they learn that becoming an active agent of social transformation is not a charitable act to help the socially disadvantaged but a necessary step that must be taken to shape our shared human destiny. Naturally, designing and implementing such a course pose serious challenges to me as the instructor. These teaching challenges are discussed in the next section.

### Teaching Challenges: From the Perspective of a Faculty of Color

Multicultural education courses present special challenges to both students and instructors because they require consistent questioning and re-examination of individual and collective cultural frames of reference in a society that does not particularly encourage open dialogue about diversity and multicultural education issues. The challenges I face as I plan and teach the Seminar in Multicultural Education can be grouped into four categories that will be discussed in this section individually: (1) my own assumptions; (2) time constraints; (3) transformation without resentment; and (4) the end of course anguish.

#### **My Own Assumptions**

Being a person of color and teaching on a predominantly White campus impacts my views and expectations of my students. My assumptions about their knowledge of and attitudes towards diversity issues often make my goal to teach for transformation look like an almost impossible task.

I picture my students as socially privileged individuals whose only concern is their own advancement. I think of them as culturally blind and unwilling to see the social inequities that have been caused by all the isms resulting from ill-managed diversity. I see them as unmotivated to learn to see these inequities as if they have nothing to lose. I think that they are insensitive to the plight of all the victims of intolerance and discrimination. I see them

as heirs of a societal power structure that will always benefit them and their progeny. Such assumptions are obviously the product of the societal portrayal of people of different cultural backgrounds in educational materials and practices that I was exposed to, the media, and social encounters.

These assumptions influence my teaching practices in a variety of ways. The first one is fear of projecting my own biases into my lesson. I work exceedingly hard to overcome these biases in order to present course materials and lead class discussions with an open-mind. Thus, lecture is kept to a minimum, and even when I do lecture, I do so to raise questions for the students to ponder.

I have learned to lead my students to the construction of the answers they look for as we examine the causes and consequences of educational inequity and social injustice. I help them become their own critics and the architects of their own transformation with the potential to effect social reconstruction. My awareness of my own assumptions helps me empower my students in the Seminar in Multicultural Education and other multicultural education classes that I teach.

The second way in which my assumptions influence my teaching practices is questioning credibility and intent. As I plan and lead intense class discussions on social class, gender, race and racism, I constantly wonder whether my students capture the unselfish transformative intent that inspires all of my lessons or whether they resent my efforts as an unnecessary pay-back opportunity used to breed guilt and discomfort.

Therefore, I make a conscious effort to establish a comfortable and trusting working environment in my class. I hold no hidden agenda. I also bring in multiple voices through literature, videos, and students' own contributions. I work with my students, not against them, to effect change. Thus, rather than being limiting challenges, my assumptions constructively inspire my teaching philosophy and practices in multicultural education courses.

### ***Time Constraints***

Achieving the course objectives listed above requires time. However, the Seminar in Multicultural Education is scheduled for only 45 contact hours, like any regular three-credits college course. This is a serious challenge. The course must afford students ample opportunities to deconstruct the knowledge and assumptions that society has inculcated in them since birth and to build a new vision driven by a firm and honest com-

mitment to social reconstruction, all in 45 hours.

The course aims at helping students develop a cross-cultural perspective and sensitivity to the backgrounds, needs and expectations of culturally diverse students and communities. These skills and dispositions require sustained interaction between the students and culturally diverse people and communities. There is no time for such opportunities in one semester. Ideally, students should visit schools and observe veteran teachers working in order to identify the characteristics of culturally responsive instructional strategies and materials. There is no time for such an experience, though valuable.

Finally, the culminating objective of the course is for the students to commit to being agents of change and liberation in the schools and community. This is an extremely ambitious objective. The course aims at moving students from cultural oblivion to social activism in just 45 hours.

Nevertheless, the challenge of time constraints is no reason for despair. After all, becoming culturally aware and developing all of the dispositions outlined in the course objectives is a process that cannot be timed nor forced. This process is better described as an individual journey towards change and transformation. It is an ongoing process that is never actually completed.

Therefore, as I put my energy and soul in leading the Seminar in Multicultural Education, I do not let time constraints distress me. I know every seed counts even though I am humbled by my inability to determine its germination schedule.

### ***Transformation without Resentment***

I was startled and rather shaken by the honesty and crude straightforwardness of a students' question a few years ago. As we concluded the introductions and syllabus overview at the beginning of a multicultural education course, a male student of European-American descent raised his hand and stated, "Before I decide to stay in your class, I want to know what your course has to offer to the White Redneck." Even though I was able to formulate an answer that helped keep this particular student in my class, I have never taken it for granted.

Uncovering and discussing issues of diversity and multiculturalism generates mixed reactions in the classroom. Feelings of guilt, defensiveness, and resentment are very common. These feelings lead to more closed mindedness and are not conducive to transformative learning. The challenge that I face as instructor is to present the sometimes disturbing facts about educa-

tional and social inequities that affect the lives of people of color without alienating my white students.

It is a challenge to help them recognize their unquestioned social privileges and make them allies in the equity dialogue at the same time. It is a challenge to make them face historical atrocities and current injustices committed against people of color without losing them to collective guilt. It is difficult to get them out of a very dismissive mode of thinking into a voluntary state of awareness and action. I want my students' transformation process to be self-initiated and self-directed. This is a powerful, but challenging task to undertake.

### ***The End of Course Anguish***

Teaching multicultural education courses is a very engaging and personal experience. It is an experience that gives me hope that maybe I can change the world, one person at a time. The same expectations I hold for myself, I hold for my students. I expect them to want to change the world, one person at a time. Thus, as the course nears to the end, I worry about my students' long-term commitment to social transformation and about their ability to persevere in a society where their newly acquired views and dispositions might single them out as misdirected.

I anguish over their motivation and tenacity once in a classroom of their own, where they and their students are the only witnesses to their teaching practices. Will they be willing to go the extra mile to teach mutual respect and appreciation? Will they teach from a multicultural perspective, or simply be content with the traditional eurocentric curriculum? Will they be vocal agents of social transformation, or will they let their newly developed cultural dispositions vanish into oblivious silence?

I can only pose these questions. Their answers are out of my reach. My challenge, therefore, is to trust that the hope that inspires my teaching can translate into my students' social activism. Only time will tell.

The challenges of teaching multicultural education courses are real. They must be confronted and managed in order to create the most productive teaching and learning environment that enhances the potential to make a difference. But, before they are faced as challenges, they must first be recognized as such. The remaining part of this paper discusses what instructors and learners need to know in order to effectively deal with the challenges of teaching and learning in multicultural education classes.

## Multicultural Education: Implications for Teachers and Learners

Nowhere else do the frailties of human nature become more apparent than in a multicultural education classroom when the task of teaching and learning is undertaken with honesty and utmost humility. This section outlines what teachers and students need to know in order for their multicultural education course to become a life transforming experience for all participants.

First, both teachers and students need to be prepared and willing to explore their own cultural identities. Knowledge of self precedes knowledge of others. In other words, they must be prepared to dig deep into their ancestral heritage and to confront the history so created. The past may appear haunting, but they must face it head on. Knowledge of self is a prerequisite to positive self-concept. Teachers and students who are aware of their own cultural identities are more likely to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations and to appreciate their potential for change. They are more likely to hold a wider worldview, which helps them become more engaged and receptive learners of multicultural teachings.

As they explore their overt and hidden identities, both teachers and students may relive memories that might stand as stumbling blocks in the way to mutual understanding. They must hold on firmly, because knowledge and appreciation of self is the sure source of the inner-power they need in order to overcome both visible and invisible obstacles.

Second, teachers and students need to know that social transformation is a shared responsibility. This may be a challenging task especially for instructors who believe that they have already achieved a high degree of expertise in the field and thus have

little or nothing to learn from their students. The task may be equally challenging for students who feel like the need for change is either non-existent or exaggerated. A successful multicultural education classroom has no master. It unites both teachers and students as participants who inspire and enrich one another.

Understanding their shared responsibility helps teachers and students develop respect and appreciation for each other's views, or at least the sense of honesty and openness that makes such views public. This allows the participants to carefully negotiate their agreements and disagreements as they, together, search for workable solutions to cultural issues under study. Teachers and students are partners in the social transformation process that begins in the multicultural education classroom, one person at a time.

Finally, teachers and students need to know that uneasiness or emotional discomfort is part of the learning process in the multicultural education classroom. In order to understand the fundamental concepts of multicultural education, students must be exposed to materials and activities that sometimes contradict and challenge dispositions and beliefs that they have held for many years.

Developing a cross-cultural perspective and sensitivity to the backgrounds, needs, and expectations of culturally diverse people is equally challenging for both teachers and students. This requires all participants to listen to and respect emerging voices that would be otherwise silenced, ignored, or discredited. These voices may openly challenge the basic concept of truth and fairness and redefine issues of equity and social justice.

An effective multicultural education course brings participants' hidden lives, prejudices, fears, and dispositions out in the open. This is not a comfortable process at the beginning. Fears of being misunderstood and judged are common to both

teachers and students. It takes careful preparation on the part of teachers to establish an environment of trust, which alone can allow open and honest exchange of information, viewpoints, and feelings.

Teaching and learning in a multicultural education course are equally challenging tasks. Accomplishing these tasks with long-term life altering results requires that both teachers and students understand their individual cultural identities, as well as their feelings and shared responsibility toward social transformation.

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