Making Multicultural Education Personal

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In this article the author examines changes in students’ self-awareness of multicultural topics during a multicultural education course. The course is a three-credit elective course offered in the university’s school of education but taken by students across disciplines at a large, public research university in a mid-Atlantic state. Course instructors encourage students to reflect on what multicultural education topics mean to them and how they interact with students different from themselves. This qualitative study followed six students’ experiences using interviews, student topic papers, and student reflection papers. Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS: Bennett, 1986, 1993) was used as a framework for evaluating changes in self-awareness concerning ableism, racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. All participants showed an increase in multicultural self-awareness. Students assessed the instructional strategies they felt supported their growth in self-awareness. Small group discussion, interactive activities, and personal interaction each week were seen as supportive strategies of instruction. Assessing the impact of the course may assist in planning more effective learning experiences to improve students’ cultural competency.

Introduction

The most effective method to teach multicultural competence may be to get personal. Race, sexual orientation, class, and exceptionality are all very personal issues. It’s not enough to know statistics and information about the topics. Students need to think critically about how these topics impact their life and how they as individuals affect the topics and other people. Teaching information is just the beginning of effective multicultural education. Students then need to use that information to make decisions and choices that support multicultural competency. This is especially important for students seeking a career in public education, since the population is becoming more diverse. This article will discuss how students’ self-awareness of multicultural topics changed while taking a multicultural education course that emphasized personal feelings, perspectives, and reflections on multicultural topics.

National educational organizations have learning goals or position statements concerning the importance of students developing multicultural competence (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2008). However, there is little guidance concerning the best methods to achieve these goals. Understanding how students perceive a course in multicultural education may help plan more effective learning experiences that support students becoming multiculturally competent. Multicultural education courses need to be assessed to discover what works and provide guidance for improving current curriculum.

The multicultural education course in this study is a three-credit, elective course offered in the university’s school of education but taken by students across disciplines at a large, public research university in a mid-Atlantic state. The university is located in a small college town and is highly competitive with a fairly diverse student body. The course curriculum is based on Banks’ Social Action Approach (Banks & Banks, 1989), which requires students to assess their beliefs, make decisions, and evaluate events in the light of social justice norms. Instead of focusing on facts about different cultural groups, the course presents activities that provide many different perspectives on the topics. Opportunities for students to discuss the topic in small groups and later write reflection papers help students assess their own beliefs and views. Then students are encouraged to look for actions they can take to make a difference.

This is an interactive class focusing on supporting student’s self-awareness of their own biases and offering many different perspectives on each topic. The course
seeks to provide a safe space for students to discuss and assess how they view multicultural topics. It is presented as a learning experience with no one correct answer, but many perspectives. Weekly reflection papers provided students with the opportunity for further thought on the topic and how it impacted their own choices and their lives. One strong focus of the course was to create a safe environment so students could express their perspectives, without impacting their grade. This multicultural education course focuses on topics such as exceptionalities, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation which many believe supports a more balanced approach to multicultural competence (Banks, 2002; Finch, 2008; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003).

The questions for this study were:

1. How did students’ self-awareness of their own biases and perspectives change during a multicultural education course?
2. Which instructional strategies did students perceive effectively supported their growth toward self-awareness and multicultural competence?
3. Did a curriculum based on Banks’ Social Action Approach (Banks, 1989) support students moving through Bennett’s stages in the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986, 1993)?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was developed by combining the DMIS and Banks’ approach to multicultural education (See Figure 1). This study used the DMIS to examine whether students’ self-awareness of multicultural topics changed during a semester course. The DMIS provides a framework of how people view diversity on a continuum through six stages that can be generally divided into two categories; Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism. How a person views cultural difference can be shown by their reaction to difference and includes six ways of interacting with that difference: Denial, Defense Reversal, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaption, and Integration.

The first three stages of interacting (Denial, Defense/Reversal, Minimization) are in the category of Ethnocentrism. The focus in Ethnocentrism is on the person’s own culture and avoiding cultural difference by denying its existence or being defensive about the difference. The second three ways of interacting, (Acceptance, Adaption, Integration) fall under the category of Ethnorelativism. Ethnorelativism accepts cultural differences as important and incorporates them into their identity. In Ethnorelativism, one’s culture is experienced in the context of or in relation to other cultures, as just one culture out of many.

Methodology

This qualitative study followed six students throughout the semester to examine if their self-awareness of the topics changed. Participants were purposefully selected for ethnic and gender diversity. Three females; Korean-American, White, and African-American, and three males; two White, one African-American, were selected. Five of the participants were undergraduates and one was in the first year of a master’s program, all were between 22 and 25 years of age. Data included: two interviews with each student, one at the beginning of the semester and another interview at the end of the class, 14 weekly reflection papers, and 5 topic papers.

Participants were interviewed at the beginning of the semester to establish a baseline of their self-awareness and beliefs about multicultural topics and again near the end of the semester to clarify ideas from the papers, check for the reader’s understanding of the papers’ meanings, and for further insights. Interview questions were both specific and open-ended.

For the weekly reflection papers, students were asked to write their feelings and thoughts about the topic,
Did curriculum based on Banks’ Social Action Approach support students moving through Bennett’s stages in DMIS?


Each reflection paper was required to be 200–300 words. Topics for the other papers included Quest, Oppression, Prejudice Elimination, Language Reflection, and Button. In the Quest paper, students were asked what they expected to get out of the class, and how they would like to change the world to make it a better place, and their goals and objectives for the semester. The Oppression paper was a short research paper based on an oppressive act, where the student was not the target, but rather the agent. In the Prejudice Elimination paper, students identified a personal prejudice and developed a plan to eliminate it. They also included a story about a time when this prejudice occurred in their life. In the Language Reflection Paper, students reflected on their language as it relates to the topics covered in class, such as how they refer to people of other ethnic groups or describe gender or sexual orientation, and consider how they might choose more appropriate language. For the last paper, the Button paper, students each receive a button that says “Support Gay Rights.” They decide whether or not to wear the button and then write a paper about what they did and why; they are not required to wear the button, only to write about what they did and how they felt about it.

Student comments were analyzed using Bennett’s DMIS (1986, 1993) as a framework. Constant comparative data analysis was used to code data; reflection papers, topic papers, and interviews were coded using preset categories from DMIS. Triangulation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to check for inconsistencies and provide a deeper understanding of the participants’ experience of the class. Collecting data throughout the semester allowed for changes in how the participants viewed topics, to be revealed and to check for consistency of ideas. Participant responses to the activities were compared for common themes both across papers and interviews and between participants. Analyzing the data from two perspectives, by the individual participant and then by topic, allowed the complexities of multicultural education to be seen.

**Findings**

The study showed that overall all participants moved toward greater self-awareness of the topics. While the participants were not aware of the stages of DMIS, the words and phrases that they used were those used by Bennett to describe the different stages. Five of the participants moved into an Ethnorelative stage in the DMIS by the end of the semester. The one student who began the semester in an Ethnorelative stage was the participant who had the most prior interaction with difference.

Since each strategy of instruction was seen by at least one participant as supporting growth, it appears to be important to use a variety of instructional strategies to meet student needs. Small group discussion was the strategy most often ranked as most supportive.

Participants ranked instructional strategies that they perceived supported their growth toward multicultural competence. Since each strategy of instruction was seen by at least one participant as supporting growth, it appears to be important to use a variety of instructional
strategies to meet student needs. Small group discussion was the strategy most often ranked as most supportive. Participants met with the same small group each week for one hour to discuss the activity and topic. The discussion was facilitated by a pair of trained discussion leaders in each group of 10 students. Training for group facilitators included methods for creating a safe environment so all students would feel free to contribute their perspectives to the conversation.

When speaking about small group, one participant said, “It allowed me to reflect on who I was, while dealing with other people and bouncing ideas off other people.” Another participant who said she was shy about speaking in a large class said that small group made it easier for her to share her perspectives. She said, “I feel like I was given an incredible opportunity to speak to a group of friends who were willing to share their personal experiences.”

The interactive class activity was ranked second as supportive of growth. This is a whole group activity that in some way relates the topic to the student’s life. An example of a whole group activity would be the Crossover Activity. Students stand in a line and prompts are read. If the prompt applies to the student, then he or she crosses to the other side of the room. After looking around, the student crosses back for the next prompt. This allows a visual representation of similarities and differences within the group. Many of the activities involve movement so they may support kinesthetic learning. One participant called the large-group activities “revelations.” When asked what had the biggest influence on his self-awareness, he said, “I think that the activities in the large group did, they were sort of a revelation.” However, he also stated that small-group discussion was closely linked to the large-group activities, in terms of supporting an increase in his self-awareness. He said, “Yeah, so you learn something new, but the implementation in yourself would have taken longer without the small group.” So it seems that for some of the participants having a large group activity and then reflecting on the meaning of that activity in a small discussion group supported increases in self-awareness of the topics.

The final top ranked instructional strategy was the “meet and greet.” This beginning of class activity provided opportunities for students to interact with people who are different from themselves. Students were required to have a five minute conversation with someone different from themselves at the beginning of each class. This is a strategy that could be implemented in many different courses. One participant said:

I like the fact that we were forced to sit beside somebody new. At first I didn’t like it because I was taking it with a few of my friends and I was like, “I just want to sit with my friends.” . . . By the end of the semester, I liked it because I met so many people in class that I probably never would have sat next to because I would have been sitting next to the same group in my comfort zone that I’m familiar with. So I thought that was a good part of class.

Being required to move outside of her comfort zone supported increased interactions with difference which may have led to a greater comfort level when interacting with difference.

All three of the top ranked instructional strategies were interactive and required students to talk to and work with people different from themselves. The participants who showed the greatest increases in self-awareness of multicultural topics were the participants who ranked the interactive strategies as most supportive. Since participants who highly ranked interactive strategies of instruction showed greater increases in self-awareness, it may be important to structure courses using interactive strategies.

Implications for the Field

Since all participants showed an increase in self-awareness of multicultural topics, colleges may want to support courses similar to this course in order to support students becoming multiculturally competent and to help meet the goals and standards of the school, accrediting agencies, and professional organizations. Further research is needed concerning the curriculum, sequence, and grading of the course for impacts on student growth.

Since the curriculum of the course did seem effective in supporting increased self-awareness of the topics with the small sample, it may be important to have a course dedicated to the study of the topics while still incorporating the opportunity to interact with different people across the curriculum. Dedicating a course specifically to multicultural education may encourage the students to think critically about the topics by allowing both the time and safe space to discuss the topics. The importance of a stand-alone course may be seen by the participants stating that they had never discussed these topics in other courses. Several times participants stated that they had never stopped to think about the topics, so providing the time and space to critically think about the topics should support student growth. Since the grading of the course was not tied to student perspectives or beliefs, students may have felt safer expressing beliefs. This is an area that deserves more research.

Since the participant with the least amount of prior interaction with people different from her also showed the least increase in self-awareness of multicultural topics, it would suggest that an increase in interaction
with difference may support increased self-awareness. This may indicate that many courses across the program of study should include multicultural elements and opportunities for students to interact purposefully with people different from themselves. A strategy as simple as the “meet-and-greet” which only takes about five minutes at the beginning of class could provide the opportunity for interaction with difference in many different classes. Since the topic of conversation could relate to the content of any class, the students would have interaction with people different from themselves while focusing on the course content.

Creating a positive class climate is important and should be considered when planning curriculum for a multicultural education course. While class climate was not examined as a separate topic, the fact that participants did share personal stories and perspectives about these sensitive topics illustrates that they felt comfortable in the class. Participants shared their thoughts in papers, small group discussions, and in the interviews. Creating a learning community where students feel safe to express varied opinions and beliefs is important in any class, especially a class that deals with sensitive topics. The course under study sequences the more challenging topics later in the semester so small discussion groups have time to create a sense of community before the more difficult discussions are encountered. Small group facilitators are trained to lead discussions and create a safe environment for discussion. The class structure, sequence of activities, and grading criteria should all be considered when planning future courses that will support creating a safe environment so students feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics.

Providing opportunities for students to interact with people who are different from themselves may be an important component of multicultural education courses. The meet-and-greet, large-group activities, and small-group discussions were the three strategies that most participants stated increased their self-awareness. All three of these activities are interactive and require students to talk to and work with people different from themselves. It is interesting that the two students who ranked the three interactive strategies of instruction as supportive of learning moved at least two stages in the DMIS during the semester. It is possible that prior interactions with difference made them more comfortable interacting with people different from themselves. It is also possible that learning styles or personality traits may have influenced their choices of effective strategies. However, since participants who ranked interactive strategies of instruction higher showed greater increases in self-awareness, it may be important to structure courses using interactive strategies.

Small group discussion was seen as supportive by the students and should be considered when structuring a multicultural education course. This strategy was ranked highest by the participants for supporting their growth. The dynamics of the small groups should be examined in a later study, as well as how creating a positive environment supported small group discussion.

Overall, the curriculum, sequence, class climate, and grading criteria should be examined more closely for impact on student learning. The philosophy behind the class deserves to be examined since it appears the course supported increases in self-awareness of multicultural topics and increased students understanding and acceptance of those different from themselves. It is possible that this course could be replicated in other colleges.

References


