Teaching and Learning Multicultural Competencies: Finding the Key Within

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Recommended Citation
Published in Journal of Critical Inquiry Into Curriculum and Instruction 4(3), 23-28
Teaching and Learning Multicultural Competencies: Finding the Key Within

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The instructor and four graduate students in a multicultural counseling class describe the course work and how it impacted the students' journey toward becoming culturally competent counselors and effective social change agents. Course work helped students to explore their cultural identities, to learn about the world-views of others, and to actively engage with culturally different populations. Included are excerpts from student identity papers and service learning projects and the students' application and interpretation of course activities. Students share how they learned that the key to multiculturalism and the power to change themselves and others is found inside each one of them.

Instructor Definition and Praxis

For counselors in training, learning how to become multiculturally competent counselors is considered to be an important part of becoming an effective counselor (Arredondo, 2001; Constantine, 2001, 2002; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Parker, Moore & Neimeyer, 1998; Sanchez & Fried, 1997). Multicultural counseling is broadly defined as counseling between and among individuals from different cultural backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, nationality, social class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability (Sue & Sue, 1999; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000).

Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) as proposed by Sue, Arredondo, and McEachraine (1992) and later operationalized by Arredondo et al. (1996) entails three general characteristics: understanding one's own (counselor's) worldview; understanding the worldview of others (clients); and using culturally relevant intervention skills. Each characteristic is further discussed under three domains: attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills. The philosophical underpinnings of the MCCs, according to Arredondo and Arciniega (2001) are that all counseling is multicultural in nature; sociopolitical and historical forces have a significant influence on client and counselor worldviews; and counselor preparation and practice should include the various dimensions of diversity. The American Counseling Association and several other associations have adopted the MCCs (Sue & Sue, 1999). The competencies are applied in various counseling specialties; namely, group, career, marriage and family therapy, and counselor education (ASGW, 1999; Constantine, 2001; Evans & Larrabee, 2002; Parker, Moore & Neimeyer, 1998).

The operationalizing and widespread application of MCCs have, also, spurred much discussion and research with reference to the nature and content of multicultural training (Arredondo, 1998; Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Burkard, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Alfonso, 1999; Constantine, 2001, 2002; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Merchant, 1998; Parker, Moore & Neimeyer, 1998; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000). Arredondo and Arciniega recommend a competency-based framework of teaching that addresses the various general and specific domains of the MCCs. It is suggested that multicultural training involve the integration of three components: personal awareness and growth (identifying one's own values, biases, attitudes and beliefs, and personal identity related to various social constructs); cultural knowledge (gaining cognitive and experiential knowledge about various cultural groups, enhancing social consciousness); and development of cross-cultural skills and relevant practices (using appropriate assessment and intervention strategies, and developing multilingual skills.) (Arredondo & Arciniega; Parker, Moore & Neimeyer; Sue & Sue, 1999).

Learning and teaching multiculturalism, however, is a complex process and requires the integration of multiple strategies in order to adequately address cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. Pedagogical practices that support such learning involve a combination of guided reading, verbal and written self-reflection exercises, critical analyses of literature and research, oral presentations, role-plays and simulations, small and large group discussion, guest speakers, and active learning beyond the classroom, such as service learning, site visits, and other action-based projects in the community (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Merchant, 1998; Sue et al., 1998b).

Teaching multiculturalism is further challenging because it requires attention to both content and process issues in the classroom. In order to nurture growth and awareness while dealing with topics that are often uncomfortable and challenging to one's core beliefs and values, the instructor is required to draw on many skills to develop conditions that create a safe and trusting environment in the classroom. Such skills include understanding group process and dynamics, knowing how to deal with emotions and conflict, allowing student voices to be heard, and accommodating multiple perspectives and learning styles (Merchant, 1998).

Course work is described with particular attention paid to three class activities that had a significant impact on the students; namely, the identity paper, the service learning or action project (Figures 1 & 2), and the reading of a book entitled, We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multicultural Schools by Gary Howard (1999). The students and instructor were privileged to meet the author in person during his visit as a consultant at the university.

In order to understand the dynamics of the classroom, it may be helpful to understand the teaching philosophy of the instructor and the lenses through which the students incorporated what they...
Figure 1: Service Learning/Action Project Instructions in Syllabus

This project will be designed by individuals based on their interests. It is expected that you will be engaged in this activity for approximately 6-7 hrs (i.e., hrs related to direct involvement in the activity) and may include one of the following:

(a) immersion in a particular culture (through interviewing resource persons, attending cultural gatherings, visiting particular places that are representative of that community, attending a gathering where you are in the minority, etc.)
(b) attending a series of seminars, workshops on and off campus (attendance at professional conferences will also count), presenting at a conference or a workshop, etc.
(c) doing service learning/volunteering at sites that serve diverse populations to give you hands-on experience.
(d) addressing cultural and/or social justice issues at an institutional/system/political level in the community or work setting (e.g., serving on a board or committee; becoming involved in social change, etc.).

This service learning/action project will then be submitted as a paper and presented to class at the end of the quarter. The paper should include three components: an action component; a literature review component; and an integration component (self analysis, learning, integration of what you learned with concepts learned in class.

learned. The instructor approaches her teaching with a strong belief in empowering students and helping them find their “voice.” In other words, students are encouraged to examine and understand their values, beliefs, attitudes, strengths, and cultural identities; to articulate and define who they are and what they believe in; and to understand their impact and influence in a social and societal context. Every attempt is made to make students feel safe in the classroom and to create an environment where dissenting voices can be respectfully expressed and heard without fear of being put down or labeled in a certain way. A feminist view of downplaying hierarchies while recognizing the inherent power differentials is employed, as well as appropriate personal sharing, teaching by example, and engaging with students as learning partners. Experiential learning is promoted through service learning/action projects, self-awareness activities, site visits, and simulations in the classroom.

Various learning styles are accommodated by providing assignments that include action, written, and oral projects, as well as through other creative expressions such as art, drama, and music. Creative expressions are promoted via class presentations where groups of students select a topic and provide multiple perspectives of the issue in any creative manner of choice. Students are encouraged to gain multiple perspectives of issues discussed. Diversity is, therefore, embraced in all its complexities, both in content and process within the classroom.

Participants

This paper is an attempt to share the process and content of a graduate-level, multicultural counseling course from the perspective of the instructor, an Asian Indian American female with training in both psychology and counselor education, and four White American female students in a medium sized mid-western state university. The class consisted of 18 students (4 male and 14 female), 16 students identified themselves as White Americans, and 2 as Japanese. Four graduate students from the class chose to participate in writing this paper after completing the Multicultural Counseling course. Molitor is a non-traditional student coming back to school following 20 years of working as a corporate employee. Aysta is also a non-traditional student returning to graduate school after a 25-year absence from school counseling. Turk and Engblom are traditional graduate students, having recently completed undergraduate work.

Student Application and Interpretation

The course activities, assignments, and discussions gave students opportunities to explore their own values, biases, and identities as they also explored various multicultural groups’ beliefs, values, and attitudes in a safe, nurturing environment. Students gained insights, abilities, skills, and knowledge that enriched their lives and allowed them to grow towards becoming multiculturally competent counselors.

The texts used in the course were Sue and Sue’s (1999) Counseling the Culturally Different and Howard’s (1999) We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools. The texts gave students a solid foundation of multicultural counseling knowledge to pursue the experiential and self-exploration aspects of the course. Because traditional counseling theories originated from a European American context, they do not always account for the multicultural perspective of some clients. Both the Sue and Sue and the Howard texts showed students another human dimension which brought them closer to the complexities and experiences of diversity.

Besides the texts, classroom lectures, and discussions, other valuable learning experiences included a film called The Color of Fear by Lee Mun Wah (1994); a guest speaker who counsels the Latino population; a site visit to a Native American Indian Reservation; a group presentation; an identity paper; and a service/learning project.

The Color of Fear (Wah, 1994) is an intense and powerful film about racism that generates insights and conversation related to the complexities of inter and intra-group racism (Merchant,
Students must acknowledge their emotional triggers about racism, privilege and oppression as recipients or beneficiaries (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001). Viewing the film increased the students' awareness of racial inequities and helped identify the students' responsibility to reduce racism.

The guest speaker, a White American female therapist, provided vicarious experiential learning. She spoke about her experiences living in Bolivia and returning to the Midwest to work with the Spanish-speaking population in a predominantly White community. The class learned about working with a diverse population and an alternate mode of learning. Terry (2001) states that in the style they do not prefer. One small group presentation focused on the abuse and neglect of the elderly. Two students used their acting talents to emotionally engage the class in understanding how loneliness and despair is felt in the elderly. Another group presented international views of the United States using surveys, research, and discussion while yet another group led the class through an experiential activity in understanding poverty. The students thus recognized multiple views and perspectives through various modes of learning.

The daylong site visit to the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, an American Indian Reservation in Minnesota, gave students the opportunity to learn firsthand about the Band. The site visit made the textbook and classroom learning come alive for the students by interactions with real people and hearing their personal stories. A study done by Diaz-Lazaro and Cohen (2001) found that cross-cultural contact is an important factor in the development of multicultural counseling competencies. During the site visit, it was apparent to the students that the textbook teachings were in sync with real world experience. An important attribute of becoming a culturally competent counselor requires racially and culturally based knowledge (Sue et al., 1998a). After attending the site visit, the students gained increased awareness and understanding of the worldview of a group that is culturally different from them.

The classroom setting itself was also an important aspect in promoting multicultural growth and self-awareness among students. A safe classroom environment encouraged open discussion regarding one's own cultural background, including European-American, White views and dominance. It also allowed for questions and issues to be processed that normally don't get discussed due to the fear of offending others. According to Howard (1999), a significant transformation will occur with a deep, ongoing process of multicultural inquiry and growth. Howard suggests that students must first understand who they are racially and culturally before they can understand the societal dynamics of race, social justice, and diversity.

Figure 2:
Identity Paper Instructions—Multicultural Counseling

You are to examine your own socialization as a member of your nationality, ethnic and/or racial group(s), your gender, and your socio-economic class. Search your own memories to discover when you first became aware of your racial and/or ethnic identity and/or other identities and how it subsequently affected you. If your ethnic identity is invisible to you, try to look at your lifestyle and values from a foreign perspective.

Report on your family background, family migrations, etc. What customs, rituals, traditions, did you follow? What foods did you eat as a child? What holidays and celebrations were important to your family? How did your family deal with illnesses, deaths, births, marriages, etc.? In short, explore those behaviors and routines that you accepted even without thinking and try to identify the basis for them.

Describe how you relate to the racial identity development models. Where are you in the process? Where would you like to be?

Examine the impact of your gender on your identity. Analyze how you felt and now feel about your gender and why your attitudes have changed over time.

Explore your socio-economic status. If you feel it is middle class, try to be more specific – upper middle class, lower middle class, professional, blue collar, working class, etc. If your socioeconomic class changed over time, what impact did the change have on you?

Are there other identities that stand out for you? Describe what and why? In what way does your religion, abilities, sexual orientation, etc. define who you are?

Describe what social privileges you enjoy as a result of being a member of your racial/ethnic background, gender, socio-economic status, etc. Give specific examples of the privileges you have encountered.

In summary, this assignment requires you to examine yourself and your family carefully. Its objective is to get you to identify who you think you are, what factors have shaped your multiple identities, and how you feel about yourself.

(Adapted from Cyrus & Cyrus, 2000)
Howard's presentation at the university challenged students to acknowledge participation in the perpetuation of White social dominance and to engage in self-examination to understand where we have benefited from privilege, preference, and power. His charge was to accept the challenge that true social change is possible once students identify and address the social realities of their society and undergo a deep healing process. Reading about Howard's own journey of racial identity development as a White male in this society, and getting the firsthand experience with the textbook author, were an effective means of developing student racial identities and confronting biases. Further, he served as a role model and an inspiration to the students by becoming allies and change agents in multicultural work.

Another measure of MCC growth came from writing an identity paper (see Figure 2). Many scholars have agreed that gaining competency as a multicultural therapist means not only studying the various cultural differences, but also viewing self-attitudes, self-beliefs and White identity (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Burkard, Ponterotto, Reynolds & Alfonso, 1999; Howard, 1999; Sue et al., 1998b; Sue & Sue, 1999; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000). The first competency, as described in the MCCs, is counselor awareness of one's own cultural values and biases. In answer to the questions of “who am I” and “what are the factors that made me this person,” students explored their own cultural backgrounds to gain understanding of themselves before moving on to understanding others. Counselors-in-training may not realize that their attitudes and beliefs that make up their value systems may be biased (Evans & Larrabee, 2002). Telling their personal stories brought insights into the origins of personal value systems. In her identity paper, Aysta wrote:

My exposure to other races was almost non-existent until we moved a few doors down from the only Black family in the neighborhood. I loved playing with their little girl and did not even realize they were different. That is, until I asked my mother if I could spend the night at their house and her quick response was negative, "Why?" I wondered. "Because they are . . . (racial slur)", my mother said, "and she has several older brothers." My first exposure to a minority became one of division, superiority, and even fear.

In order to understand other cultures, students must understand themselves as racial beings. Many counselor trainees do not see themselves as racial beings and, therefore, may not know what it means to be White (Parker, Moore, & Neimeyer, 1998). Throughout this course, students were surprised to discover their own White racial identity. Molitor wrote:

I never thought much about my White identity. I did not realize that there was White identity. I believe that a person, needs to know himself or herself before he/she can truly know another person, and it never occurred to me to apply the same principle to multiculturalism. It was a revelation that turned my thinking and subsequent multicultural beliefs around. I understood and accepted my prejudices, biases, and covert racism. Once I did that, I felt free, and my personal growth advanced.

Multicultural counseling courses will expose students to information that will help them better understand themselves as racial and cultural beings, in order to appreciate cultural similarities and differences (Constantine, 2002). The counselor's ability to empathize and show concern facilitates positive client change (Constantine, 2001). In reflecting on her painful childhood memories, Turk could better relate to her clients’ experiences when she wrote:

As a child, I was never sure what we were going to eat, except on payday when we always had something spectacular to eat. I remember my mom pulling my sister and me in a sled to the local grocery store. My mother only had enough money for milk and, then, would dig through the garbage out back. We could survive without heat, electricity, and hot water; all that mattered to me was that we had food. Only when we discussed the meaning of poverty in class did I understand that my family was functioning at a poverty level, the same level as some of my future clients may be functioning.

Identifying one's own White privilege was another significant step towards multicultural competence. According to Arminio (2001), exploring feelings of race-related guilt and White privilege could be turned into positive actions. In discussing her privileges, Engebloom wrote:

I am also privileged for many other reasons. One of these privileges is the ability to be a student, continuing my education. Oftentimes, I take this privilege for granted because it is something that I have always done. Continuing education is sometimes difficult for minority groups because of discrimination and not having equal opportunities. Other privileges are that I can speak and understand the language, I can read directions, I understand our money system, I can eat the food that I am accustomed to eating, I can feel safe in the environment in which I live, and I can live anywhere free of discrimination. I am privileged to not have discrimination rule my life.

The various classroom learning opportunities, self-exploration, and site visits made the service learning project an even more meaningful and growth producing experience. Diaz-Lazar and Cohen (2001) state that a multicultural course with a strong cross-cultural contact component is effective in developing counselor trainees’ overall multicultural counseling competencies. It changes students’ content knowledge about cultures different from their own and provides confidence in their ability to become culturally sensitive. This cross-cultural contact is more important for the development of multicultural knowledge and skills rather than awareness.

Service learning has been shown to (a) increase student's interests and skills in working with minority communities; (b) increase students' understanding of cultural, community values, traditions and customs; and (c) teach students to develop appropriate interventions and programs that incorporate culture and build on strengths. It provides experiential learning where students can learn in a multicultural community instead of exclusively learning in a classroom with others similar to themselves (Salazar & Valdez, 2000). In this course, the service learning/action project (Figure 1) was student-designed based on individual interests. Students were required to engage in 6-7 hours of service learning or other learning opportunities in the community before reporting in a paper.
The service learning/action project gave students hands-on opportunities to work with diverse populations. For some, the project was exhilarating because of the fun and learning opportunities presented by working with diverse groups; however, also painful, because cultural mistakes were made along the way. For many of the students, it was their first time working with people who were not like themselves. Molitor, whose unsuccessful attempt to tutor English to Spanish-speaking immigrants in a trailer park, was followed by a more successful experience of teaching English to a well-to-do Colombian woman, the experience was at times painful and embarrassing. In her paper Molitor wrote:

I assumed that beginning English skills also meant low literacy in Spanish . . . I realize the importance of understanding the cultural background and any particular hardships, such as immigration and experiences the person brings with them.

Engblom, who initially set out to do the minimum requirements of the service learning project, ended up becoming more involved in another culture than she ever thought possible. Her project, which involved working with Spanish-speaking women in a battered women's shelter, allowed her the opportunity to attend two church masses held in Spanish, learn about their experiences in their own voice with the help of an interpreter, and help organize a Mexican American night at the shelter. As a result of this experience, Engblom felt empowered to share her learning with the shelter staff and board members. Based on her suggestions, specific changes were made; for example, having an interpreter present at resident meetings, having regular cultural nights and revising the chore schedule to better meet the needs of the residents.

The many skills Engblom used were described in her paper, as follows:

I used observational skills, I used some counseling skills in interaction with the women, I used listening skills more than anything, and I used my leadership skills to create change within the shelter . . . I learned that I take so many things for granted. I learned that the things I read about, really do apply to me as a Caucasian, and unless I do something to create change, I am contributing to the problem.

Turk, on the other hand, chose to do her project on the role of counselors as advocates and interviewed four advocates/counselors in the community. As a result of this experience Turk wrote that

...it takes certain personal strength to be an advocate. . . . this involvement is also a life style change. Working to make the world better and safer for people is draining and time consuming work. It is also fulfilling, but people need to be prepared to alter their lives if this is what they want to do and to do it well. I have already begun to imagine my future as a counselor and an advocate.

Aysta found that the service learning action project provided an excellent opportunity for integrating community service with the application of concepts in the class. Working with a group of chemically-dependent women (who had been homeless) in a transitional living center, promoted her understanding of such diverse variables as race, culture, gender, social class, age, and spirituality. Aysta summarized:

This experience led me to appreciate the attitudes, values, beliefs, culture, and worldviews of various cultural groups. It forced me to examine and evaluate my own beliefs and biases. It motivated me to improve my counseling strategies and techniques in order to become a culturally competent counselor.

In the end, it made me a different person than the one that entered the classroom weeks earlier.

The Multicultural Counseling course gave students the key to unlocking the new and challenging world of multiculturalism and moved them further along in the journey of becoming multiculturally competent counselors. Learning about the multicultural counseling competencies and integrating the competencies during self-exploration and hands-on experiences brought about changes in the way students thought of themselves and improved their abilities to provide counseling services to the culturally different.

The students agreed that self-exploration and service learning were important aspects of their multicultural training. Turk wrote in her service learning paper that understanding her personal story was helpful in her multicultural development. She concluded by writing, “Through this process of understanding myself, I feel it leaves me open to the experiences of others and the ability to be empathic to my clients.” Engblom acknowledged her privileged status and the need for change from within by writing, “I realized during this course that I am privileged and, as a privileged person, change begins with me.”

The opportunities to spend time with people who were different from them and applying the skills learned during the course caused students to reflect at a deeper level on what it meant to become multiculturally competent. Upon completing the course, Ayata wrote that she appreciated the opportunity to work with the women in the transitional house, and that “The course helped me become more comfortable with minority groups as I gained the skills and knowledge to become a multicultural competent counselor.” Similarly, Molitor wrote:

When I completed this course, I knew that I still had much to learn about multiculturalism. After working with people who were different from me, I feel confident that I have the tools and the resources I will need to understand and help my future clients.

Summary

The graduate students learned and lived the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) during a course on multicultural counseling. Besides traditional classroom learning of discussion, textbooks and lectures the students wrote identity papers of self-exploration; actively worked with and observed multicultural groups and participated in group projects. Through the course work and the various activities they grew to understand themselves and other multicultural groups better. The students will take what they learned in the course and apply it to all aspects of their professional and personal lives to affect multicultural change. The realization that the key to becoming culturally competent was truly within each of them was a powerful and empowering one.


Wah, Lee Mun (Director). (1994). The color of fear [Film]. (Available from Stir-Fry Productions, 470 3rd St., Oakland, CA 94607)

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