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Abstract

This essay explores the experiences of a young female faculty member who transitions from being a K-12 classroom teacher to a teacher educator in an undergraduate program at a Christian university. She is initially apprehensive about teaching the diversity course due to fears regarding the sensitivity of the subject matter, personal competency, and classroom dynamics. However, she soon comes to embrace the opportunity she has to help build students' intercultural competence. The essay includes practical activities and strategies that professors can use in their courses to help students grow in their intercultural competence skills. This essay is based on a presentation given at the 2016 Teaching Professor Conference in Washington, D.C

Encourage, Enlighten, Engage: Using the Three E's to Build Students' Intercultural Competence

Tolulope Noah, Azusa Pacific University

Abstract

This essay explores the experiences of a young female faculty member who transitions from being a K-12 classroom teacher to a teacher educator in an undergraduate program at a Christian university. She is initially apprehensive about teaching the diversity course due to fears regarding the sensitivity of the subject matter, personal competency, and classroom dynamics. However, she soon comes to embrace the opportunity she has to help build students' intercultural competence. The essay includes practical activities and strategies that professors can use in their courses to help students grow in their intercultural competence skills. This essay is based on a presentation given at the 2016 Teaching Professor Conference in Washington, D.C

From the time children are able to walk and talk, they are asked to answer one of life's biggest questions: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Over time, their answers may shift from firefighter to doctor to lawyer. However, for me, the answer has always remained the same: "I want to be a teacher." I made this declaration in fourth grade and have not wavered since.

When I was 20 years old, I fulfilled my dream of becoming a teacher thorough joining Teach for America, the national corps of recent college graduates who commit two years to teach in urban and rural schools in an effort to close the achievement gap. For three years, I taught sixth grade English and social studies at a public, inner-city middle school in Los Angeles, CA. Then, for six additional years, I taught fifth and sixth grade language arts and social studies at an independent pre-K to sixth grade elementary school that mainstreamed students who were deaf and hard-of-hearing.

After completing my ninth year as a classroom teacher, I made the difficult decision to leave the K-12 class-

room and transition to higher education. This move was prompted by the recent completion of my doctorate, the pursuit of which spurred an ever-growing interest in and passion for teacher education.

My transition from classroom teacher to college professor happened within just a few short months. In June 2013, I said a teary goodbye to my final class of fifth and sixth grade students, and, in September 2013, I welcomed my first group of undergraduates to my courses. To say that I was anxious and intimidated would be an understatement! While I had some prior experience facilitating short-term teacher training and professional development workshops at my school site and for Teach for America, this was my first full-time teaching experience at the college level. It also did not help that on the first day of class, I was mistaken for a student instead of the professor.

The learning curve that first year was very steep. I had to adjust from teaching children to adults; become familiar with a host of new systems, structures, policies, and expectations that were not present at the K-12 level; create syllabi and lectures for my courses; determine appropriate expectations for student work; attempt to get a handle on grading; and explore ways to promote faith integration in my courses. However, one of the biggest challenges I faced that first year was my own fear of one of the courses that I was required to teach.

From Fear to Freedom

When I was hired as a professor, I was told that I would be teaching a variety of courses, such as Introduction to Teaching as a Profession and Diversity in the Classroom. The Introduction to Teaching course excited me. In this course, I would have the opportunity to teach students about the foundations of the teaching profession through addressing topics such as curriculum, assessment, classroom management, pedagogical strategies, and different philosophies of

education. In other words, I would be teaching students the nuts and bolts of the exact work that I had been doing for the past nine years. Piece. Of. Cake.

The Diversity in the Classroom course, by contrast, elicited dread in me. In this course, I would be teaching about how to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students through addressing a wide range of complex topics such as culture, bias, privilege, race, socioeconomic status, the achievement gap, school funding, English Language Learners, students with special needs, gender, sexual orientation, and religious diversity. Although I understood the importance of this course and had experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse students throughout my nine years as a classroom teacher, I was racked with fear at the prospect of teaching this course. In fact, I even considered asking my supervisor if I could delay teaching the course (or, dare I say, opt not teach it at all).

My fears about teaching the Diversity in the Classroom course included the following:

- I do not feel competent enough to teach this class! There are still things about diversity that I am grappling with and trying to figure out. I do not feel like enough of an expert yet.
- The topics this course addresses are deep, personal, complex, sensitive, and oftentimes, charged. What if my students get angry or shut down?
- What if a student says something offensive or completely off base? How should I respond? Worse yet, what if I inadvertently say something offensive or ill-informed?
- I have not had significant experience facilitating conversations and activities about these topics. Furthermore, my students are coming from various backgrounds, experiences, and levels of exposure to and comfort with these topics. How do I navigate all of these different dynamics in the room? Moreover, how do I facilitate conversations and activities in a way that leads to deeper understanding and real growth?
- What if students are resistant to explore or discuss these topics?
- I am much more comfortable teaching some course topics than others. How do I overcome my own resistance?
- How will my personal identity (as a young female African-American professor) influence how

my students respond to my teaching of this course? Will they think I'm just trying to push a particular agenda?

As I dwelt on these fears, I realized that I had lost sight of the bigger picture. I had lost sight of the beauty of diversity and the unique opportunity that I had as a professor to help my students embrace that beauty as well. Hughes (2005) powerfully explains:

The truth is, we cannot serve Jesus without serving the diversity of peoples and cultures that abound in our world... The point is simply this: if we commit ourselves to following Jesus in service to those around us, we must take diversity seriously. This means that in the context of higher education, we must commit ourselves to teaching and learning about the diversity of peoples with whom we share this globe, and to do so in the name of Jesus— not in spite of our Christian calling, but precisely because of that calling. (pp. 35-36)

My fears were further challenged as I reflected on the link between diversity and reconciliation. Anderson (2013) states:

The servanthood of the Christian educator is part of the ministry of reconciliation to which God has called us: reconciliation with God, with other humans, and with creation itself. Basic to that ministry is education about the world and its people as created by God, about redemption through Christ, and about helping people (with or without disabilities) become whole. (p. 2)

Reorienting my mind to focus on the importance of diversity and reconciliation was only the first step in overcoming my fear of teaching the Diversity in the Classroom course. I also had to learn to exercise grace with myself instead of condemnation. As a brand new professor, I felt pressure to know it all and have it all together all of the time, and I was quick to condemn myself whenever I did not live up to those unrealistic expectations. Impostor syndrome was (and occasionally still is) a battle. However, I knew that, if I exercised patience with myself and embraced my own personal journey as a learner, I would develop greater knowledge, understanding, skill, and confidence in teaching the course.

I recently began my fourth year as a professor, and I am thankful to say that the fears and doubts that

initially clouded my vision have given way to freedom and joy. Through engaging in critical self-reflection, reading books and articles about diversity, talking with colleagues, participating in professional development, and embracing the trial and error process, I have come to a place where I not only feel more confident teaching the Diversity in the Classroom course, but I also enjoy it. I have come to embrace the unique and important opportunity that I have to help build students' intercultural competence. In the following sections, I will explain a popular conceptual model for intercultural competence and share some concrete activities and strategies that I have found most useful in my diversity course.

Intercultural Competence Model

Intercultural competence is defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247-248). The development of intercultural competence is an ongoing, lifelong process (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, pp. 1, 24, 47; Deardorff, 2011, p. 68).

Deardorff’s (2006) intercultural competence model has been the conceptual foundation for my approach to building students’ intercultural competence in my Diversity in the Classroom course. The model includes four main parts: (1) attitudes; (2) knowledge, comprehension, & skills; (3) internal outcomes; and (4) external outcomes. The first part focuses on individuals developing core attitudes such as “respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery” (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, p. 45). The second part focuses on individuals developing greater awareness of their own cultural identity and knowledge of other cultures and worldviews. This includes the development of essential skills such as “observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating” (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, p. 46). The third part of the intercultural competence model focuses on individuals experiencing an internal “frame of reference shift,” whereby they become more adaptable, flexible, and empathetic towards others. This includes shifting from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, p. 46). The fourth and final part of the intercultural competence model is where individuals are able to engage in “effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural situations” (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, p. 46).

The Three E’s: Strategies for Building Students’ Intercultural Competence

Deardorff’s (2006) intercultural competence model provides a useful conceptual framework for the strategies that I use to build students’ intercultural competence in my diversity course. I have organized these strategies into three main categories: encourage, enlighten, and engage.

Encourage

The encourage strategies focus on the first part of the intercultural competence model, attitudes, and they address the following questions:

- How can professors help students cultivate the attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery that are foundational for intercultural competence?
- How can professors create a safe classroom environment where students feel comfortable exploring and discussing complex topics and diverse perspectives?

1. Utilize introductory activities that allow students to build trust and rapport. Being able to engage in honest discussions about complex and sensitive topics like bias, privilege, and social class requires a foundation of safety, trust, and respect. Adams (2016) states,

Participants need to feel from the very beginning that the learning community will be inclusive, personalized, and experiential. They need to know that they will be challenged, but they will be safe as they engage with difficult issues on which many of them will have different experiences. (pp. 38-39)

As such, it is vital that students have the opportunity to get to know one another and build trust and rapport from the very start of the semester.

One introductory activity that I have found useful for this purpose is Mary F. Stearn’s “Me Bag” activity (as cited in Pearce, 1998, pp. 163-164). For this activity, each student finds a container (such as a paper bag, tote bag, or shoebox), and, inside the container, they place 5-7 items that represent who they are, where they have been, and where they are going. I provide time in class for students to share their Me Bags with the class, which provides helpful insight into each student’s unique background, experiences, hopes, and dreams.

Another introductory activity that I use is the biopoem. For this activity, each student writes a poem about him/herself that follows a specific structure. For example, the first line of the poem is the person's first name, the second line of the poem is four adjectives that describe the person, the third line of the poem describes an important relationship (e.g., daughter/son of...), the fourth line of the poem describes three things the person loves, and so on. Biopoems have different formats and can easily be adapted to fit the professor's preferences. Through writing and sharing their biopoems with the class, students have the opportunity to get to know each other better and find common ground.

2. Encourage disturbance. In order to encourage the attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery that are foundational for intercultural competence, I aim to create a classroom environment in which students can feel safe taking risks. To facilitate this, I have students read and discuss the essay, "Willing to be Disturbed," by Margaret J. Wheatley. In this essay, Wheatley (2009) discusses the value of listening to diverse perspectives, being curious about others, embracing confusion, and being willing to have one's views challenged. The essay also reinforces the idea that being disturbed or discomfited can ultimately lead to growth (Bell, Goodman, & Ouellett, 2016, p. 74).

The ideas in Wheatley's essay align well with a Christian worldview. Hughes (2005) explains,

The plain truth is that Christians are called to take other human beings seriously. In the context of the academy, this means that we must listen carefully to their points of view, always asking what we might learn from those who come from cultural, political, and religious traditions that are different from our own. Listening does not necessarily mean agreement. But listen we must. As Christian scholars, we can do no less. (p. 31)

Through reading and discussing Wheatley's "Willing to be Disturbed" essay at the beginning of the course, I have found that my students are more open to pushing themselves out of their comfort zones and engaging with new and challenging ideas.

3. Establish group agreements. Berardo and Dear-dorff (2012) note that establishing ground rules "is a good way for each group of participants to develop trust and rapport" (p. 34). To do so, I begin by asking students, "What is necessary in order to create a safe environment in this class where people can risk being disturbed?" From there, we discuss a set of agreements for the class, such as "Operate with respect for each other," "Participate to your fullest ability; step forward, step back," "Stay engaged without distractions," and "Respectfully challenge the idea, not the person." These group agreements provide helpful guidelines by which students can hold themselves and each other accountable throughout the semester (Adams, 2016, p. 40).

4. Model vulnerability. Modeling vulnerability as a professor can help students feel more comfortable being vulnerable as well. This can include sharing some of your story (e.g., successes, challenges, and lessons learned), operating with humility (by emphasizing that you are a co-learner and that intercultural competence is a lifelong process), and creating a climate where vulnerability matters more than perfection (through emphasizing the value of students' voices and encouraging them to share without fear of ridicule or needing to have all the right answers).

Enlighten

The enlighten strategies focus on the second and third parts of the intercultural competence model: (a) knowledge, understanding, & skills and (b) internal outcome. These strategies address the following questions:

- How can professors help students reflect on their personal cultural identities and become more aware of their deep-seated beliefs, biases, and assumptions about others?
- How can professors help students develop greater awareness and understanding of others' worldviews?

1. Include self-reflection exercises. In order to help students develop a greater understanding of their personal cultural identity and beliefs, I have them do a variety of self-reflection exercises. These exercises are aimed at helping students become aware of "how their social identities and cultural backgrounds inform their worldviews and lived realities" (Adams, 2016, p. 40).

One self-reflection activity I have students complete is an Identity Puzzle. Students are given a handout that contains outlines of 16 puzzle pieces. Each puzzle piece is labeled with a topic such as social class, language, religion, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, etc. Students first complete the puzzle by writing how they personally identify for each category. This helps them see that their cultural identity is multifaceted. For the second part of the activity, students do a coding exercise developed by Dr. Sarah Visser. In this activity, students are given directions for how to code their puzzle pieces, such as, “Draw a star next to the descriptors with which you identify most strongly,” “Draw a triangle next to the descriptors that you believe affect how you view or treat others,” or “Draw an up arrow next to the descriptors that have worked to your advantage, either in your educational experience or in other areas of your life” (Visser, 2012; School Reform Initiative, 2001). The coding exercise helps students think about themselves at a deeper level by examining how their identity affects their views, actions, experiences, and privileges (or lack thereof).

Another self-reflection activity that students complete is a bias exercise developed by Dr. Robyn Brammer. For this exercise, students write down their honest biases, assumptions, and stereotypes about specific groups of people (e.g., people with disabilities, people who identify as LGBT, people from a specific race, etc.) (Brammer, 2008). They also reflect on the “messages” they received from others (e.g., parents, relatives, peers, media, etc.) throughout their socialization (Adams & Zuniga, 2016, p. 106). While writing one’s biases on paper can be an uncomfortable activity, I remind students that “the goal of exploring biases is not to make ourselves feel guilty, ashamed, proud, blamed, pleased or angry. Rather, we are working to discover internal influences that threaten to lower our expectations of students” (Teach for America, 2011, p. 60). In other words, since our beliefs impact our actions, we must become self-aware of our implicit biases in order to prevent negative assumptions, lowered expectations, and harmful interactions with people from different backgrounds.

A third self-reflection activity that students complete is a Personal Culture Study paper. This assignment is based on the premise that to effectively educate students from diverse backgrounds, the teacher must first of all come to terms with his or her humanity and

cultural identity, and then go the next step of affirming the humanity of the students in his or her classrooms, as well as affirming their individual cultural identities. (DomNwachukwu, 2010, p. 7)

The Personal Culture Study paper consists of four main sections: cultural background, cultural values, education, and discussion. In the first section of the paper, students describe their cultural background (e.g., ethnic background, family history, socioeconomic status, linguistic background, cultural/family traditions, etc.). They also discuss any key life events/experiences that have shaped who they are. The second section of the paper requires students to read the book, *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, by Lingenfelter and Mayers (2016). In this book, Lingenfelter and Mayers (2016) present a “Model of Basic Values” that helps the reader to identify where he/she aligns in terms of six tensions: time, judgment, handling crises, goals, self-worth, and vulnerability. In this second section of the paper, students discuss their cultural values using this framework. In the third section of the paper, students describe their K-12 schooling experiences in regards to diversity. In the final section of the paper, students discuss the implications of their cultural background, cultural values, and educational experiences for their future work as a teacher. Through writing their Personal Culture Study papers, students have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection on who they are and how that may impact what they become. Chang (2005) explains that “self-knowledge gained through cultural autobiography then becomes a foundation of self-adjustment or self-transformation.”

2. Utilize critical materials from diverse perspectives. In order to develop greater awareness and understanding of others’ worldview, students must be exposed to diverse perspectives. As such, it is essential to incorporate critical readings, case studies/scenarios, data analysis exercises, videos, and other content that challenges students to examine topics from different perspectives/worldviews. For example, students in my diversity course read insightful books like Gorski’s (2013) *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*, and they watch thought-provoking videos such as Chimamanda Adichie’s (2009) TEDTalk about stereotypes, entitled “The Danger of a Single Story.”

Engage

The engage strategies focus on the last part of the intercultural competence model, external outcome, and they address the following question:

- How can professors help students effectively and appropriately engage with people whose backgrounds and/or perspectives differ from their own?

1. **Incorporate service-learning opportunities.** Service-learning involves students “[engaging] in community service activities with intentional academic goals and opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines” (Cress, 2005, p. 7). In my Diversity in the Classroom course, students complete a 15-hour service-learning experience called C.H.A.M.P., which stands for College Headed and Mighty Proud. For C.H.A.M.P., each student works with a small group of fourth-grade students at a local, low-income elementary school each week, with the goal of teaching them about college. In turn, students in my course have the opportunity to experience issues of diversity in the educational setting firsthand. During the first week of C.H.A.M.P, students focus on getting to know their fourth-grade students and building rapport with them. They spend the remaining weeks teaching their students about college life, possible careers, college majors, financial aid, and the college application process. They also act as tour guides for their fourth-grade students during their field trip to the university. The program culminates with a C.H.A.M.P. graduation, during which each fourth-grade student crosses the stage and receives a diploma with their future career and college major. Through the C.H.A.M.P. service-learning experience, the students in my diversity course have the opportunity to engage with diverse children in a way that is mutually-beneficial and authentic.

2. **Design critical reflection activities.** Ongoing reflection is a critical component of effective service-learning (Collier & Williams, 2005, pp. 83-84). One model of reflection that I have found particularly helpful for the C.H.A.M.P. service learning project is Ash and Clayton’s (2009) DEAL model, which consists of three main parts: describe, examine, and articulate learning. First, students describe the experience in an objective manner (e.g., who, what, where, when, etc.). Secondly, students examine how the experience connects with the learning goals of the course. Finally, students articulate what they learned from the experience, and

they set goals for the future (Ash & Clayton, 2009, pp. 41-46). This three-part reflection model challenges students to connect theory and practice throughout the service learning experience, and to reflect on the effectiveness and appropriateness of their interactions with the fourth-grade students.

Conclusion

Despite my initial qualms about teaching the Diversity in the Classroom course, I now understand and appreciate the incredible opportunity I have as a teacher educator to help build students’ intercultural competence. It has been a blessing and a privilege to create a space in my classroom where students can engage in honest discussions about topics that really matter, and where they can be challenged to rethink how they view and interact with the people who differ from themselves. It is my hope that the strategies presented in this essay will provide other professors with useful ideas for how they can encourage, enlighten, and engage students as they continue their lifelong journeys towards intercultural competence.

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