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Inclusive Teaching: A Workshop On Cultural Diversity

Emily C. Wadsworth

McHenry County College, Crystal Lake, IL

Although higher education has become more accessible for non-traditional students over the last two decades, it has not necessarily become friendlier. In fact, culturally diverse students frequently find that the most difficult thing about college is learning how to learn in the dominant U.S. way. This article presents ideas for a workshop designed to address the issue of cultural diversity among students. With a greater awareness of cultural differences, faculty can teach in more culturally sensitive ways.

Nevitt Sanford (1956) suggests that students learn best when they are both challenged and supported. I argue that students should be challenged by learning course content and new skills while they are supported by the classroom environment, teaching strategies that provide opportunities for them to learn in their preferred learning style, and content that includes the perspectives of people from their own ethnic, class, and gender groups.

Although many college faculty have traveled in other countries and although many college classrooms contain a diversity of students, most college faculty know little about the effects of culture or about communicating across cultures. Students in our colleges and universities come from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds. Because culture is ingrained in every aspect of human life from what we consider edible to how close we stand to one another in conversation to how we construct arguments, it is important for faculty to become more knowledgeable about culture and ways to communicate across cultural differences.

American college classrooms rely on the lecture as the preferred method of teaching. Students are universally evaluated as individuals rather than as

members of groups. Our colleges and universities themselves are grounded in the dominant U.S. culture built upon notions of individual responsibility, hard work, and unemotional objectivity.

What follows is a design for a workshop in which faculty become more aware of the role of culture in human life, become more aware of the values of the dominant U.S. culture, and acquire some basic information about theories of cultural variability. The workshop concludes with exercises in which the faculty apply this information to improve their teaching.

Setting Workshop Goals

The session described here is really a consciousness-raising workshop designed to acquaint faculty with information on culture and then have them apply that information to their own teaching. Faculty will need background information on what a culturally sensitive perspective is, awareness of the cultural values of their institution (dominant U.S. values), and background information on theories of cultural variability. With this information in hand, the participants will be able to generate ways in which they can alter their teaching so that it is more sensitive to the cultural differences of their students.

Opening the Workshop

To get faculty thinking about culture and also identifying their own cultural background, the facilitator can ask workshop participants to introduce themselves in dyads by sharing information about their cultural backgrounds. A show of hands for the most common countries of origin in each of the broad sub-groups of population in the U.S. (African American, European American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American) will give the participants a visual sense of the cultural composition of the group.

Next, the facilitator can use an overhead or handouts to show the percentages represented by each of the above groups in the current U.S. population, the makeup of the U.S. population in 1790, and changes in immigration patterns from 1790 to the present.¹ The participants then have some sense of how the ethnicity of the United States has changed over the years and how representative they are of the distribution within the overall population.

¹These statistics are readily available in the latest documents from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Developing a Culturally Sensitive Perspective

A culturally sensitive communication perspective is really thoughtful communication with other persons as individuals. Of course, people often do not communicate thoughtfully, but they know how to do it if they must. The difficult part of culturally sensitive communication is for persons to know when their own cultural values/assumptions interfere with their understanding of the message coming from the culturally different other.

People who have developed a culturally sensitive perspective:

- know their own cultural assumptions;
- avoid value judgments about culture in others;
- respect others' differences;
- ask explicit questions;
- listen actively until the other person finishes;
- allow extra time in communication;
- negotiate culture individually.

The first step in developing cultural awareness is for individuals to become aware of the values and assumptions of their own culture. In this case, because of the strong influence of dominant U.S. cultural values in U.S. college classrooms, the workshop should begin by making conscious the dominant U.S. cultural values. In dyads participants can identify the assumptions underlying common proverbs and quotations drawn from U.S. literature and rhetoric. In the large group the dyads can read aloud their quotation/proverb and identify the cultural values/assumptions on which it is based. At the end of the sharing, the list participants have generated can be compared with a list of dominant U.S. cultural values adapted from Stewart and Bennett (1991):

- It is important to be doing something;
- Money and things are important;
- It is possible and desirable to control—the environment, one's life etc.;
- Hard work is important;
- The individual is important;
- Time is a linear and valued commodity.

In a follow-up exercise, participants can form small groups of three to six participants and list ways in which their institutions exemplify the dominant U.S. values. Participants should be encouraged to cover as many aspects of the institution as possible including such areas as financial aid, student disciplinary policies, institutional communication with students, general education requirements, classroom teaching strategies, and grading.

A general discussion in the large group will generate a rich picture of the values and assumptions on which U.S. higher education is based.

Explaining Theories of Cultural Variability

Participants now should have a heightened awareness of their own and the dominant U.S. cultural values. At this point they require some grounding in theories of cultural variability. Participants need to understand that people from other cultures are different in critical ways that are more significant than dress or diet. Many theorists have described the ways in which people relate to each other within broad cultural groups that differ from people in other broad cultural groups. Two theories that are useful here are drawn from the work of Hall (1976) and Triandis, Brislin, and Hui (1988).

Hall (1976) suggests that cultures can be placed on a continuum from high to low context. In terms of communication, Hall's theory suggests that people from low context cultures convey the message in the words of the communication. People in high context cultures convey the message through the setting and nonverbal cues. Females in the U.S. and people from communities that retain a strong ethnic identity tend to be more high context than the dominant U.S. culture. This difference means that students from these groups will pay as much attention to nonverbal communication and the setting as to the words of the communication.

Triandis, Brislin and Hui (1988) suggest that cultures can be placed on an individualism/collectivism continuum. The dominant U.S. culture tends toward the individualism pole of the continuum, while females and many ethnic-identified groups in the U.S. tend toward the collectivism pole of the continuum. The following is an adaptation of the authors' collectivist culture characteristics:

- There is no distinction between group and personal goals;
- The self is defined as part of a group, e.g., daughter, part of a clan;
- Individuals assume that if they know the group, they already know the individual;
- The person behaves the way the group expects so as not to bring shame on the group;
- Often the family name comes before the personal name;
- People are very powerfully involved in a very few groups;
- Individuals care a great deal about events that take place within the group, e.g., weddings;
- Individuals are most comfortable with vertical relationships, e.g., mother/daughter, not peer/peer;
- There is competition among groups but not within groups;

- Individuals value harmony, face saving, filial piety, modesty, moderation, thrift;
- Rewards are distributed equally among group members;
- Status is ascribed by age, sex, family name, birth place, place of residence;
- There is a high level of support within the group;
- There is a high level of suspicion toward the outgroup.

To begin to get a concrete sense of differences in values, participants need to connect these two theories of cultural variability with the U.S. dominant culture values.

Comparing U.S. Values with Collectivist/High Context Values

To begin the comparison, the facilitator can ask dyads to rewrite their U.S. proverb used in the earlier exercise from a high context or collectivist culture viewpoint. The dyads can share the rewrites with the large group. Another way to accomplish the same goal is for the facilitator to take proverbs and quotations from other cultures and ask participants to identify the assumptions and values upon which they are based.

Creating an Inclusive Classroom

By now, participants should begin to sense that some of the ways in which they teach grow directly out of the cultural assumptions of the dominant U.S. culture and may make learning more difficult or, at least, uncomfortable for students who come from high context or collectivist cultures. For example, because collectivist students are likely to feel uncomfortable with the dominant U.S. emphasis on the individual, they may be more comfortable learning in groups and even being graded as a member of a group.

The next exercise connects participants' cross-cultural knowledge with teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. Here the assumption is that virtually all college classrooms have students who are more comfortable learning in ways that would be comfortable for people from high context or collectivist cultures.² Therefore, participants need to begin to think about ways to create inclusive classrooms. The facilitator can divide participants into groups of three to six and ask them to design activities that would make their classrooms more comfortable for students from high context or collectivist cultures.

Participants can be jogged in their thinking by asking them to create activities for the first day of class, out-of-class homework assignments, in-class work, examinations, and the syllabus. As participants share the ideas in the large group, they generate a list of culturally sensitive teaching techniques.

Applying Cultural Knowledge

The participants now should have enough information about cross-cultural differences to work through some of the serious issues that emerge when they consider culture and the classroom. One way to get participants to think about the issues is to provide them with case studies that illustrate complications resulting from differences in cultural values among students, between students and the institution, between students and the particular teaching technique. There are, of course, no easy solutions to the cases. The central issue is to what extent should the institution adjust to the cultural assumptions of the students and to what extent should the institution teach the culturally different students to perform in the manner expected by the dominant U.S. culture. To put it another way, to what extent are we obligated to prepare our diverse students to adapt to, blend into, the dominant U.S. culture. Two sample cases (see Appendix) are provided at the conclusion of this article for those who would like to use cases as catalysts for such discussion.

Conclusion

Because college and university students come from increasingly diverse cultures, it is important for faculty to become aware of the possible effects of culture on all aspects of student learning. Faculty can then provide variety in the teaching and learning environment. Variety, of course, means that any individual student will sometimes find the activities a match for his/her cultural preference and sometimes will need to become more adept at activities that are not a match. So, for example, some examinations might be taken on an individual basis while others are group projects with all group participants earning the same grade. In this way the teaching will reflect an inclusiveness that allows students, regardless of cultural background, to feel both comfortable and challenged.

²I have given cultural awareness workshops for many college and university faculty. After I have described high and low context cultures and collectivist/individualist cultures, I am inevitably asked if these variables apply to U.S. females. The answer, of course, is that they do. See especially Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule (1986) and Gilligan (1982).

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Appendix

The Case of the Irate Students

Professor B. Ross recently attended a conference on multicultural education. As a result of the conference, she has designed a number of collaborative learning assignments. Additionally, she requires that the students take three quizzes in which each student gets the average score of the entire group for a grade instead of a score based on individual performance. All has worked very well until close to the end of the term. Two of Dr. Ross' best students were in groups in which the average score on the quizzes was well below these students' usual work. They are concerned that the three group quiz grades will lower their grade for the term.

What should Dr. Ross tell the two students? What issues are involved?

The Case of the Silent Students

Professor John Winthrop teaches Introduction to Management. He has a number of Japanese-American students in his class this term. Professor Winthrop includes class participation as 20% of the final grade in the course. He is concerned because none of the Japanese-American students participate in class discussions. If he includes the 20% for class participation in figuring the final grades for his Japanese-American students, they will earn B's in the course, even though they have earned A's on all of their exams and papers.

What should Professor Winthrop do? What are the issues involved?