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Delores Rice

Petra A. Robinson

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Teaching Diversity and Social Justice in Adult and Higher Education Contexts

Delores Rice, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Texas A&M University – Commerce

Petra A Robinson, PhD
Assistant Professor
School of Human Resource Education and Workforce Development
College of Human Sciences and Education
Louisiana State University

Abstract: This presentation provides a synthesis of research that sought to identify best practices in teaching issues of diversity and social justice. The interactive discussion provides opportunities to share best practices on instructional techniques/ strategies to enhance equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education and other adult education settings.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding and promoting diversity and social justice is of paramount importance in today's ever changing society; racial, cultural, language and ethnic diversity is increasing all over the United States, much in part to worldwide immigration (Banks, 2008). In addition, there is increasing diversity of the college student population (Cora-Bramble, 2006). These changes in demographics of the student and national population, as well as the effects of globalization, increase the need for a more effective education system (Robinson, Rice, Stoddart, & Alfred, 2013). These demographic and societal shifts present teachers and other adult educators with an opportunity to try to assist students in learning about issues of diversity, social justice with the goal being achieving global citizenship.

There are a variety of instructional dimensions associated with teaching issues of diversity and social justice. Further, there are also a number of theoretical foundations for social justice education. Instructional design can provide an opportunity for transformation, especially among students of color (Robinson & Lewis, 2011), and this roundtable will take a practical approach by presenting best practices/strategies on how to enhance the teaching and learning experiences in the diversity and social justice classroom.

Theoretical Framework

With Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) as the theoretical framework, the research presents data from the perspective of students who report to have experienced transformational moments in their classes and from teachers who themselves report to have experienced transformational moments in their teaching these kinds of classes.

Research Design & Overview

The researchers selected a case study design to focus on one course, one graduate program, and students who took this specific course at a large, predominantly white, research institution. This institution was selected based on the researchers own personal experience and transformational learning that occurred as a result of this course, which became part of the reasoning for this research. Additionally, due to the researchers' positionality, there was experience with the content and the items that the researchers wanted to address with the participants for this study. This approach also allowed the researchers to control for variability due to the instructor since the same person taught the course during the selected time period.

Due to the case study approach, those who took the course during the time frame selected served as the population of students whom we emailed to explain the research study and determine their interest in participating. Individual interviews were conducted with the former students in the course and the instructor was also interviewed. There were seven participants: five students and two instructors.

Data analysis began during the data collection phase as initial themes emerged, because as Merriam (2009) pointed out, data analysis is not linear and it does not asynchronously occur after data collection. Upon further analysis, with multiple iterations of reviewing the data, the following key findings were presented: community of respect, purposeful diverse learning activities, college/departmental/leadership infused focus on diversity and social justice, course content timing, consciousness and transformations, literature and resources, and authenticity. These findings will be discussed during the roundtable as this is still in the preliminary research phase of the study.

The implications of this research will inform the adult education community and education community overall about diversity and social justice content from a teaching and learning perspective. Additionally, this research seeks to provide practitioner information for instructors.

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