Navigating the Cultural Landscape: A Strategy for Enhancing Self-Awareness in Information Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Preparing culturally competent information professionals requires experiential approaches that would challenge them to navigate their own cultural landscape though introspective lenses. However, for information professionals, the tricky business of investigating oneself remains largely unacknowledged and unstudied. This study demonstrates how information professionals discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them by navigating their own cultural identity. A qualitative content analysis of 33 personal identity exploration narratives reveals the importance of self-awareness in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset. This study addresses an approach to LIS education that calls for intentional efforts in cultivating self-reflexive information professionals for bringing sustainable change in a culturally diverse society.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS AND AUTHOR KEYWORDS

social justice; pedagogy; community engagement; specific populations; information literacy

INTRODUCTION

Cultural competence is the ability of individuals to use academic, experiential, and interpersonal skills to increase their understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups (Sue & Sue, 2008). Building cultural competence has received considerable attention in recent academic discourse that emphasizes the benefits of incorporating cultural competence into LIS curriculum (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Blackburn, 2015; Cooke, 2017; Jaeger & Franklin, 2007, Rivera, 2013; Jaeger et al., 2011; Mehra, Olson Hope, & Ahmad, 2011; Mestre, 2010; Montague, 2013). Furthermore, developing self-awareness through critical self-reflection is considered a crucial component in building cultural competence (Cooke & Jacob, 2018; Overall, 2009). However, the LIS scholarship remains limited on practical teaching assignments that incorporate experiential and introspective approaches (Cooke & Jacob, 2018; Villa-Nicholas, 2019). These serve to enhance LIS students' preparation and motivation for practicing culturally responsive services in global information environments and diverse workplace settings.

This article presents one such practical strategy, referred to as the Identity Exploration Assignment from two cultural competence courses taught during the Summer 2019 and 2020 semesters. The primary objective of this learning activity was to raise critical awareness on race, identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality in students by engaging them in critical introspection of their cultural identities. This study demonstrates that asking students to navigate their own cultural landscape through introspective lenses can be helpful in developing culturally competent information professionals who would thrive in a culturally diverse society. The overall goal of the study was to understand if asking students to navigate their own cultural identity helped them become more culturally sensitive towards people of other cultures. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

- How do information professionals discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them?
- What are the implications of critical self-reflection in cultivating cultural competence in information professionals?

Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the Identity Exploration assignment in engaging students in a process of self-exploration, discovery, and investment in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset (Bender, Negi, & Fowler, 2010; Negi, et al., 2010). With a focus on specific strategies for facilitating student self-awareness, this article discusses the building blocks of the conceptual framework utilized in navigating cultural identity, components of the Identity Exploration Assignment, and concludes with findings based on students' learning reflections.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Importance of Self-Awareness in Building Cultural Competency

A culturally competent information professional introspects his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal blind spots; attempts to understand the worldview of culturally diverse populations; and utilizes appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies and skills in working with culturally diverse populations (Sue & Sue, 2008). In a similar vein, Overall (2009) posits that cultural competence consists of three segments: self-awareness, education, and interaction. The first requires LIS students and professionals to take stock of their own identity; "knowledge of the culture of self is at the heart of understanding others and the surrounding world" (p. 192). Doing so allows individuals to look at the unconscious ways that culture has impacted their lives and enables them to have a greater appreciation of different cultures. An abstract cultural appreciation is not the only thing gained. An understanding of ones' identity "informs services to constituents…collection development, cataloging practices, program delivery…library assessment" (ACRL, 2012) and even colors workplace relationships.

Social work educators have developed a number of teaching models specifically to build cultural self-awareness. Sakina Mama (2001) stresses promoting diversity as the norm, in addition to recognition and acceptance of ones' own culture. The Newcastle Model works to incorporate personal experience and history into practice through experiential learning (Negi et al., 2010, p. 224). And the Self and Other Awareness Project (SOAP) focuses on the variety teaching exercises to be used, each centered around self-exploration (Colvin-Burque, Zugazaga,

& Davis-Maye, 2007). Pedagogical approaches to self-awareness run the gamut as well: class discussions, "diversity audits", family histories, group activities, guest speakers, journaling, reflections, and self-evaluations are just some of the methods used (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Desai, Dodor, & Carroll, 2020; Negi et al., 2010; Sakina Mama, 2001; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Thus, reflecting on ones' own beliefs and prejudices is a necessary precursor to empathizing and understanding those of different backgrounds, an imperative skill for any information professional.

Navigating Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the extent to which an individual perceives and understands the self in terms of the common attributes, characteristics, or values shared with those who belong to their native culture (Kosmitzki, 1996; Sussman, 2000). As such, cultural identity can be considered a specific type of collective identity that psychologically binds individuals together who belong to the same social group, while simultaneously differentiating them from members of other social groups (Tajfel, 1981). Experiencing cultural differences tends to challenge existing beliefs based on internalization of native cultural norms and serves as a catalyst for self-reflection on cultural identity. Therefore, cultural identity is an important factor to consider when predicting intercultural effectiveness in any diverse workplace settings. There are several layers to dissect that can make up cultural identity. However, in keeping with the research objectives, this study focuses on three aspects: race, privilege, and intersectionality.

In the United States, *race* is the trait that influences most of the aspects of one's cultural identity. Even though race remains at the epicenter of many discrimination and diversity conversations, the LIS scholarship demonstrates hesitation in using the term "race" in its professional discourse (Pawley, 2006). As a result, there remains a tendency to avoid "uncomfortable but critical conversations about race/ethnicity" (VanScoy & Bright, 2018; p. 295) in the information profession. Furthermore, the failure to name race minimizes its significance and results in insignificant progress. The LIS field also lacks an adequate framework for increasing diversity in libraries. Honma (2005) recommends that LIS education programs adapt the social justice lens used by ethnic studies fields "to successfully theorize oppression and bridge the gap between [themselves] and communities of color" (p. 18). As race plays a critical role in determining advantages/disadvantages of certain groups over others, the next step would be to understand and analyze the concept of privilege in order to navigate cultural identity.

As *privilege* is a multidimensional concept, this article discusses it from the perspective of societal and workplace privileges (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014). This perspective suggests that certain groups have more social benefits, power, advantages, and opportunities than other groups simply due to certain special and unearned characteristics they possess (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status). Such privileges generally remain unacknowledged (McIntosh, 1989) by the privileged groups and continue to perpetuate. White privilege, the most widely theorized type of privilege, is the notion that whites derive advantages simply by virtue of their skin color (Black & Stone, 2005; Leonardo, 2004; Lipsitz, 2008). This applies to practically every area of life, from education to healthcare (p. 6), and can blind otherwise sympathetic whites to the pervasive inequalities existing in the world around them. Given the overwhelmingly white makeup of the LIS profession, this is a major hurdle to overcome and

serves as a deterrent in increasing inclusivity in the information profession. An analytical framework to understand this juxtaposition approach is intersectionality.

Despite an increased analysis of *intersectionality* in other disciplines, the LIS scholarship remains quite limited in developing an understanding of intersectionality and its implications for the information profession (VanScoy & Bright, 2019; Villa-Nicholas, 2018). As a result, the concept of intersectionality remains vague at its best (Shaffner, Mills, & Mills, 2019). Crenshaw (1991) popularized the term intersectionality as that which concerns the processes or relations of marginalization and privilege and their connection to socially constructed categories of identity, such as gender, race or class. The idea behind intersectionality holds that forms of discrimination are interrelated variables and cannot be addressed individually. When panels focus on singular issues, for example gender in library technology, it does a disservice to those whose have other characteristics wrapped up in their identity (race, sexual orientation, etc.) that are ignored because they are seen as niche (Walker, 2013). Taking all variables into account is necessary to avoid continued marginalization of these groups who possess different characteristics and attributes. Jaeger et al (2011) call for the broadening of diversity needs to include all those who are *informationally* disadvantaged and experience library access issues due to age, language, or sexual orientation along with race, gender, and socio-economic status. Thus, a deeper understanding of intersectionality would be helpful for increasing inclusivity in libraries, since "in many academic institutions…most fields still view diversity in purely racial terms" (Jaegar et al., p. 170). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand, confront, and address the issues of intersectionality and its implications for increasing inclusivity in information organizations.

In keeping with the framework discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the Identity Exploration assignment challenged students to engage in a process of self-exploration and asked them to navigate their own cultural identities through self-reflexive lenses.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study presents a qualitative content analysis of 33 personal identity exploration papers from two online Cultural Competence for Information Professionals courses taught during the Summer 2019 and 2020 semesters. This assignment challenged students to navigate their cultural identities through a set of discussion prompts. With the exception of two male students, the course participants were all female and belonged to different races/ethnicities, including White ($n = 25$), Black ($n = 2$), Hispanic ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 2$), and Multiracial ($n = 2$). Furthermore, the students were primarily adult learners who were geographically dispersed throughout the U.S.

The primary objective of the identity exploration assignment was to raise awareness of identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality issues through a critical social justice framework (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Students were required to reflect on five of the ten types of identities: race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion, ability, language, nationality, sexual orientation and class. Furthermore, the students were asked to articulate their learning experiences from this assignment and whether this self-identity exploration exercise helped them gain better insights into their cultural identity. Finally, the students were asked how this cultural awareness made them more sensitive towards people of other cultures (if applicable). A

qualitative content analysis approach was utilized to explore the themes that emerged from the students' discussions and the lessons that they had learned, taken from their identity exploration papers.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the personal identity narrative papers reveal how the students' understanding of identity, race, privilege, oppression and intersectionality have evolved through an exploration of their individual cultural identity narratives. The discussions on the findings are arranged under the following three major themes: understanding of race and privilege, understanding of intersectionality, and lessons learned.

Understanding of Race and Privilege

The students' discussions revealed that a number of factors contributed to the development of their racial identities. Students of color began to understand the meaning of "whiteness" from a very early stage in their lives, whether they were born in the U.S. or from immigrant families. Due to their cultural backgrounds, they experienced racial discrimination, oppression, microaggressions and stereotyping as a part of their development. As a result, they experienced constant pressures and struggles to conform and assimilate in school, the workplace, and the broader society. In contrast, a majority of the White students did not have any personal experiences of racial discrimination or oppression.

The findings revealed that a majority of students ($n = 29$) were aware of the pros and cons of their race, ethnicity and background and the implications of those qualities for their professional careers. However, they had not engaged in any analysis of the privileges derived from their race, ethnicity, schooling or family background prior to working on this assignment. In particular, many White students felt that their understanding about their privileges and related benefits remained at surface level. While a small number of White students ($n = 4$) demonstrated a blissful ignorance of their privileges, some chose to downplay their privileges or feigned ignorance at times.

It was also interesting to note that almost every White student appeared to be discovering the meaning of privilege through the lens of "ableism" (i.e., their lives have not been without struggles, and they have worked hard to accomplish everything). At the same time, some of them also acknowledged that they understood that their lives had not been made more difficult due to their skin color. A few of them also reflected that it is impossible for them to imagine the struggles of people of color. Moreover, they also acknowledged that they are still grappling with the disparities in social and economic privilege.

A few White students found it challenging to comprehend and recognize the benefits of their privileges due to the homogenous cultural bubble in which they had grown up. Their White privilege kept them insulated from any racial discrimination, inequities and oppression. As a result, their exposure to multicultural environments and multicultural education remained limited until they began higher education. Furthermore, their reflections also highlighted their feelings of White guilt, their struggles with implicit bias, their discomfort towards race conversations, and

their views on how their mistaken beliefs in equality had led to the development of colorblind ideologies.

Overall, the findings indicated that race and privilege are two sides of the same coin and play a critical role in determining an individual's social power, oppression and opportunities throughout their careers and lives.

Understanding of Intersectionality

The students found learning about intersectionality and its implications to be one of the most profound and enlightening experiences of the course. They made efforts to navigate through their own cultural identities while looking through the lenses of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, and more, and discovered an intersectionality between them. Their discussions revealed three major themes: *evolving worldviews, feelings of inadequacy and battling identity crisis.*

While "evolving worldviews" was the consistent intersectional theme among the White students, students of color expressed "feelings of inadequacy," and "battling identity crisis" as part of their cultural identities as they discovered the meaning of race, privilege and their intersectionality, and the implications of these for their careers and lives.

Lessons Learned

As developing cultural competence is a lifelong journey, students were asked to reflect on three action steps to further develop their cultural competence skills in their identity exploration narratives. Although their discussions highlighted a number of approaches toward developing their cultural competence skills, they could be organized into following four subthemes: *the role of self-reflection in developing cultural competence, continuing education and professional development, practicing cultural humility, and leveraging advocacy and social justice tool-kit.*

Overall, the students' appeared to be more empathetic and sensitive towards people of other cultures as a result of their self-introspection. The findings indicated that providing opportunities for self-reflection and introspection in a safe and non-threatening forum provided several benefits to the participants. First, this reflective assignment challenged the students to discover the meaning of race, privilege, oppression and intersectionality among themselves through a self-introspective lens. Second, this self-reflective exercise helped them understand the relevance of cultural competence and its implications for the LIS profession. Finally, and most importantly, the students' overall comments indicated how such introspection helped increase sensitivity towards other cultures and fostered a sense of cultural humility.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The overall goal of the present study was to understand if asking students to navigate through their own cultural identity helped them become more culturally sensitive towards people of other cultures. In particular, this study attempted to understand how students discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them. Findings

reveal how students' understanding of identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality evolved by self-exploring their own cultural identity narratives. The findings also indicate that students who examine their own cultural identity will likely act with more cultural sensitivity towards people of other cultures.

This study indicated that a majority of students were aware of the pros and cons of their privileges and the implications of these privileges for their careers and lives. However, they did not engage in an in-depth analysis of their privileges. The majority of the White students primarily grew up in a homogenous cultural bubble. While their upbringing and White privilege shielded them from any racial inequities and oppression, it also posed challenges in cultural intermingling and served as barrier in their exposure to multicultural environments. In contrast, students of color personally experienced marginalization, discrimination and stereotyping throughout their careers and lives. As a result, the students' worldviews differed due to their varying contexts, particularly when they attempted to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality. Their discussions revealed the need to redress power imbalances in libraries and develop mutually beneficial partnerships with underserved communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations. Their discussions also emphasized the importance of continuing education and professional development though reading, training programs, seminars and webinars. Additionally, their reflections highlighted their intentions, plans and approaches to work with diverse communities and people with different cultural backgrounds.

Given the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader population. However, the overall goal was to create awareness about the benefits of using self-reflective learning activities in teaching cultural competence courses. The findings clearly demonstrated the benefits gained from a social justice-based approach, including improving critical self-awareness, appreciating the advantages of continuing critical self-reflection in practicing cultural humility, and incorporating an antiracist component in teaching multicultural education courses. This study demonstrates how a learning experience involving personal identity exploration narratives can be utilized to foster cultural humility (Chang, Simon & Dong, 2012; Hodge, 2019; Lund & Lee, 2015) in LIS programs for future information professionals.

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