Cross-cultural Transformation of any School Psychology Course

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Introduction

In education, there are two responses to multiculturalism: the person(s) presenting the diversity and the educators handling the diversity. The belief is even truer with the cultural explosion that continues to proliferate throughout the United States creating public school systems with the minority becoming the majority in multiple classrooms. The American school system is based on a white, middle-class value system that supports uniqueness and individual characteristics over unity and interdependence (Oakland, 2005); therefore, in order to support all socioeconomic classes and races of students it is important to delve further into understanding the dynamics of multiculturalism (Tomes, in press). Further, the response to the browning of America’s classrooms has been threatened with federal policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and many high-stakes tests. In order to accommodate the needs of both students and educators, education has to become more inclusive of cultural diversity, cognitive styles, and educational assessment. James Banks and Geneva Gay have written extensively on multicultural education which deserves even more attention than it has garnered (Banks & Banks, 1997; Gay, 1994). Yet, there are numerous other ways to create more culturally sensitive classrooms, while meeting the challenges of high-stakes testing. Multicultural Learning Modules (MLM) offer reasonable and practical techniques to equalize diversity in the classroom with educational practice in order to better address tomorrow’s educational training needs (Tomes, 2004).

However, in order to address these concerns and others, universities and colleges must re-examine their teacher preparation programs and administrator/superintendent certification programs. Sometimes on-the-job training is not appropriate for the immediate concerns exhibited by students of color. Waiting until teachers and other school personnel enter the classroom or school environment is almost too late to be the most effective in managing cultural issues. Further, the training of educational faculty must include multiple aspects of cultural diversity: lesson plans, educational assessment, issues of sensitivity, learning, and competencies. It is incumbent, more than ever, for university faculty to facilitate not only healthy dialogues regarding cultural issues, but the teacher preparation programs must accurately reflect today’s society and dealing with educational training.

Defining Multiculturalism

The 2003 US Census revealed that over 80 million persons of color live in the United States and over 55 million students of color are in the over 92,000 public school systems (US Department of Education, 2004). Recent projections suggest that students of color will become the majority in public education by the year 2020 (Campbell, 1994). This infiltration of diversity forces the United States to change its mantra from the US being a melting pot to a toss salad. Years ago, many felt the United States reflected a society formed by immigrant cultures, religions, and ethnic
groups melding together into a new, stronger compound with great strength and other advantages. However, nestled in this description is the inherent loss of culture. In acknowledging the assimilationist perspective, one loses his/her cultural identity by melting in with the other and adopting the majority culture’s principles, beliefs, and practices. As a result, the toss salad belief has replaced the melting pot concept. According to the toss salad understanding, individuals presenting cultural diversity mix with the primary culture, but preserves significant portions of their cultural heritage. Moreover, through this integrationist perspective, the individual chooses what he/she decides to relinquish, possess, and adopt with the new culture. Accordingly, the United States is perceived throughout the world as a successful experiment in ethnic mixing; to many, it is considered the greatest melting pot or the most diverse toss salad.

As a result of subscribing to either the melting pot or toss salad philosophy, it is necessary to understand a couple of diversity terms. Culture derives from the Latin root *colere*, meaning to inhabit, cultivated, or honor (Hall, 2004). Culture is defined as the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and rites of a particular group (Tomes, 2004). Further, culture involves three components: what people think, what they do, and the products they produce. These three areas help to promulgate the beliefs of the culture, while transforming potentiality into action for the group. The diversity of cultures eventually leads to a pluralistic society.

Interesting to note that multiculturalism was introduced in the 1980s, mostly in the context of school reform (Erickson, 1992). Multiculturalism can be defined as demonstrating respect and acceptance toward racial minorities with regard to language, food, religion, and other cultural manifestations (Hall, 2004). This becomes more significant in education and educational training by having all groups included in institutions such as schools. No group should be left behind or out of the educational process.

**Learning Process**

While all students are capable of learning, they do so in considerably different methods and rates. When learning new material within a school context, students have to grasp complex concepts, understand meaning, make crucial comparisons and be able to master appropriate conditions under which to apply principles, facts, and rules (Frisby, 2004). This process may be complicated by the conventional models of human abilities that may appear similar from one culture to another, but in reality present striking contrasts to learning. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004) posit, “The performances that are valued in one culture may differ from those valued in another culture” (p. 453). Coupled with other cultural variables, contextual communication influences the development of differing approaches to learning (Morse, 2003). Learning behaviors reveal significant differences between those in low context and high context cultures. Of particular note is the emphasis of learning between a low context and a high context learner. A low context learner relies on specific and well-defined language to provide contextual definition to interpret the communication. Whereas, high context learners utilizes the environment within which communication takes place and clarifies the specific meaning of language. Given this relationship it is not alarming to find one cultural group preferring a low or high context to learn. The low or high context employed by the student maybe asynchronous to the low or high context of the teacher or expectations.

**Hemispheric Learning**

Learning is believed by many to be a predominantly left hemisphere function since it deals more with language development and acquisition; however, students demonstrating dominant right
hemisphere learning may possess more language skills than originally thought. Initially, researchers (Rushton & Jensen, 2005) felt that ethnic minority populations, especially African-Americans and Latinos, were intellectually inferior due to genetics. However, in the classroom, this has been disproven multiple times, and more evidence is being uncovered to highlight a culture-only model reducing the hereditarian approach to intelligence (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Most US classrooms are based on white, middle-class value systems. Couched in this philosophy is the strong belief that intelligence is based on verbal assessments and crystallized knowledge because traditional assessments were created on white standards and expectations of learning. In adopting this belief, students who learn differently are often not rewarded in the classroom. Therefore, creatively thinking students are often penalized for solving a problem in a “non-traditional” manner.

**Significance of Times**

Intellectual performance may vary based on time of day which could influence what and when teachers instruct to students. With respect to both school age and culture there appears to be some suggestion of differences in optimal time of day learning. May, Hasher, and Stoltzfus (1993), found there are differences for discrete age groups based on peak and off-peak times. Intellectual performances such as thinking, problem-solving, and debating are best in the afternoon for adolescents. For younger students, these types of performances may be best exhibited during the morning hours. Other aspects to recognize during the optimal level of learning by students are comprehension and memory. There is a negative correlation between comprehension and reading. Comprehension increases as the day progresses, but reading speeds decrease. This may be attributed to students utilizing more strategies to fully understand the material being presented and demonstrating mastery of the content. There also appears to be a difference between short and long term memory. Short term memory is best in the morning, whereas, long term memory is more reserved for the afternoon. In teaching rote memory skills or asking students to learn simple, discrete tasks in short time period, teachers should carefully consider when these skills should be best taught. Further, the optimization of a student’s ability can be maximized when adjoined to their preferred style of processing information.

**Cognitive Styles**

**Cultural Cognitive Styles**

It is obvious that human beings process information differently from each other and culture is considered to play a significant role in defining the style by which students learn. For instance, in every ethnic group, individuality is more common than any general pattern. However, many cultures and ethnic groups share common values and the experiences of children growing up with those shared values may be reflected in their classroom learning behavior from elementary to college. European-Americans have different preferences for learning environments than do their counterparts who belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds (Tomes, 2008). Many ethnic American minorities often possess similar characteristics that link their heritage and past experiences. The cognitive style literature is riddled with many similarities that associate African-Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and American Indians learning capabilities.

**African-Americans**
According to multiple research studies conducted (Hale-Benson, 1982, Dunn & Griggs, 1995, Fierro, 1998), African-American students were considered to be (a) field-dependent, (b) people-oriented, (c) view things in their ethnicity, and (d) value personal freedom. African-American students desire distinctiveness and novelty because majority of these students are not considered to be word-dependent. However, many are considered proficient in verbal and nonverbal communication, which is evidenced through their oral/aural modalities for learning and communicating (Tomes, 2004). Additionally, African-Americans have been described as using internal cues for problem solving while relying on situational context for interpreting meaning, which demonstrates the progress from low to high context communication. For instance, in understanding a math problem, African-American students may be more adept at adding and subtracting when they are faced with a mathematical problem involving the purchase of grocery items in a store instead of just reading a math problem on paper.

Through current research, African-American students tend to resemble more of their white counterparts, in education (Tomes, 2004). In a study using the Gregorc Style Delineator to determine if ethnically diverse populations demonstrated either concrete or abstract cognitive style, results yielded that African-Americans had an affinity for concrete, linear, product-based, hands-on learning (Tomes, 2004). This gradual change to a more traditional approach to learning may be attributed to how teachers are instructing in the classroom that supports the concrete style of learning. However, if teachers are instructing in this manner, but the student is not maximizing his/her potential, it is incumbent that the teacher helps the student by facilitating learning in a style more congruent with the student’s learning ability.

Latinos/Hispanics

Slightly juxtaposed to African-Americans, Latinos are considered more diverse in their learning process. While it appears that many Latinos are global/field dependent learners, there is diversity in the approach. Moreover, it appears that female and males tend to demonstrate different processing of information. Males process information easier when allowed to touch and manipulate material that facilitates knowledge enhancement. A cultural aspect sometimes not mentioned in the learning process, Latino students are family/parent motivated. While some teachers may feel that Latino parents are uninspired about their children’s education, this is usually not the case. Parents of Latino students are dedicated to having the best for their children, but in a linguistically challenging situation do not how to navigate certain systems. Also, Latino students have demonstrated an affinity for learning challenging material in the afternoon.

Asian-American

Asian-American students have a more traditional educational approach, but allows for inter-dependence. These students use auditory abilities to maximize the learning process. Moreover, they prefer subtle distractions while working to increase concentration. The mild distractions heighten the learning experiences while promoting a sense of novelty of learning. Through research, it is suggested that Asian-Americans prefer to learn difficulty material in the afternoon.

American Indians

One of the less known groups in the educational process, yet, many of these students present some unique characteristics of learning. Many American Indian parents, at early ages, encourage their children to explore and experiment with the land and surroundings (Tomes, 2004).
This aspect of exploration heightens the visual acuity of many American Indian students and they tend to pick up visual patterns fairly quickly. Additionally, they use observational learning to lessen the likelihood of making mistakes. Therefore, numerous American Indian students desire to see the activity performed first, after which, they will attempt to replicate the action or the learned material.

**European Americans**

It appears that previous research supports a traditional style of learning (Dunn & Griggs, 1995). Many European-Americans present an affinity for auditory and visual learning. This allows for mastery of the material in the simplest and most traditional form of learning. An additional aspect to the learning environment for European-Americans is the spirit of competition. A healthy comparison between students possibly leads to indirectly inspiring another student to perform better. Highlighting the accomplishments of one student, at times, provokes other students to capitalize on different techniques that facilitate an easier method to demonstrate mastery of the material. Further, many European American students tend to over analyze information.

**Multicultural Learning Modules**

**Definition**

Is there a true science regarding how to teach a student in elementary, secondary school or even college? Further, is there an art to how a professor works with student-teachers in preparing them for positions in browning classrooms across the country? While these appear as nebulous questions, an understanding is needed to address the future direction of learning within a multicultural framework both inside and outside the classroom.

Multicultural Learning Modules (MLMs) are designed to capture simple and complex multicultural concepts and allow students to dissect appropriate responses to a variety of learning situations; therefore, MLMs are generalizable across subjects and classrooms. These models include five distinct areas: objective(s), task, process, evaluation, and conclusion. Education is completed through activities such as critical incidents, usage of cognitive style, multiple intelligences, case studies, and experiential projects. According to Sue and Sue (1990), critical incidents have been shown to be effective means of highlighting and illustrating crucial issues, concerns, and decisions points likely to arise in certain characteristic situations. More importantly, learning becomes authentic and real for both the pupil and teacher. MLMs should be included in teacher preparation programs to further advance pluralistic curricula and goals.

**Structure**

Banks (1997) describes a mainstream-centric curriculum as a perpetrator of racism and ethnocentrism in many school systems throughout the country. Further, this type of curriculum is set up to deny mainstream American students the wherewithal to understand their culture through the eyes of other cultural groups. Attempting to integrate multicultural concepts in the classroom is easier stated than performed. Further, MLMs go beyond a traditional lesson plan by requiring not only a connection with the information being presented, but also the emotional intelligence behind the learning process. Through MLMs, the student is allowed to experience their culture as well as process information in a cognitive style more familiar to them. The five levels of MLM are: objectives, tasks, process, evaluation, and conclusion. In a preservice program, a teacher could be instructed in the five areas and transfer the knowledge learned to working with students before and during student teaching.
Objectives

Just as with any lesson plan, the instructor must present what students are expected to learn by completing the assignment. However, for MLMs the objectives are specifically oriented toward at least two areas: multiculturalism and cognitive styles. Additionally, learning objectives are viewed very importantly in this process because it directly orient the student to the end result of cultural sensitivity and increased knowledge. Below is a list of objectives incorporating multicultural concepts and cognitive styles a teacher may use with students. The objectives establish an authentic cultural context to learning.

Learning objectives are statements describing what the student or learner will be able to accomplish upon completion of the module. Moreover, learning objectives are essential in designing instruction of any kind (Mager, 1997). They succinctly define the scope of an instructional lesson and guide the student through the development of the content (Acito, 2004). In the writing of learning objectives for MLMs it is important to review performance, condition, and criteria. More specifically and from a multicultural perspective, this entails stating what the student will learn, understand, and perform after completing the module. Further, the performance portion of the objective carefully communicates through clear action verbs how multiculturalism is to be approached and made meaningful to daily life experiences. For example, after completing this MLM, students will be able to identify and compare common characteristics of African American culture with their own culture. The second aspect, condition, highlights the condition under which the student should demonstrate a particular skill. With this, the condition may specify resource materials needed to help control complexity of the task. Clear examples of a condition is giving a list of 5 tenets of religious holidays and require the student to identify which tenets belong to a specific faith (i.e., Muslim, etc.). The final area, criteria, defines the acceptable performance. For example, the student will be able to say “hello” and “goodbye” in a foreign language by the end of the first week.

MLM learning objectives should always be written in terms of the learner instead of in terms of the information being presented. This perspective targets the individual student and what he/she is expected to gain from the multicultural learning module.

Tasks

For the teacher, this section is the actual “lesson plan” of MLMs. While it is the most succinct of the five areas, the task clearly needs to be defined by what the student is expected to do in relation to learning a multicultural concept. Further, the task should always be engaging with another individual and/or material that supports learning of a different culture other than their own. A good example of creating a 4th grade task for a student studying the Chinese culture is as follows:

As an aspiring reporter you are looking for a big break. Having stumbled upon a rich collection of Chinese artifacts you are determined to accurately tell a story from the history of Chinese immigration to the United States.

• Why do so many people of Chinese roots live in the United States?
• What was it like coming to the US from so far away?
• Did the Chinese people feel accepted in the US?

Tasks are the deliberate activities that organize the entire learning process. Most educators are familiar with cognitive mapping (Lee & Baylor, 2004). This may be employed in using MLMs. To infuse cognitive mapping the student understands the overall structure of the learning content represented in the form of a global map (Figure 2). In completing global mapping students are
able to plan for studying and setting priorities regarding the assignment. The planning and monitoring throughout the task phase helps to determine the amount of attention that will be given toward the multicultural assignment.

**Process**

With objectives and procedures outlined, the next step in MLMs is the actual completion of the module. This stage examines the process of a student becoming more sensitive to cultural diversity. Through this stage, the educator empowers students to take initiative in his/her learning process with appropriate guidance, almost viewed as a form of scaffolding. The learning process is negotiated, with leadership by the teacher, and allows for mutual teacher-student authority, especially if the process is specifically indicative of the student’s cognitive style. According to Shor (1992), it is through empowering educational practices that ease student–teacher alienation and promote a critical learning process. Further, the teacher should be aware of the student’s cognitive style and have previously worked with the student in his/her style.

MLMs must connect to the overall learning of the student and not in isolation of what is being taught in the classroom. Therefore, educators, in the process stage must design and sequence effective interventions that will yield positive multicultural learning outcomes. This includes, but not limited to, connecting topics and purposes to an overall theory or some pre-defined structure. “The structuring of topics and learning experiences along a process framework fosters environmental congruence between students’ level of understanding and the course content and pedagogy” (McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 5). It is this belief and the integration of cognitive styles in the learning process that facilitates cultural understanding and sensitivity. For example, an educator would recognize the cognitive style of the student and help structure a learning process about an unfamiliar or less familiar cultural group that is affiliated with the current subject matter. A tenth grade teacher discussing the Civil War provides a great opportunity to practice further this technique. This example illustrates the first three steps in MLMs by addressing objectives, task, and process.

**Evaluation**

In order to assess the effectiveness of this approach, evaluative measures must be included, both formative and summative (depending on the timeline of the activity). Since MLMs deal with students’ independent processing of the material, the evaluation may present a challenge for educators to appropriately apply. More specifically, the evaluation technique and/or procedure may vary from student to student or assignment to assignment, yet there are trademarks that may still exist. The overall evaluation chart includes the following areas: not yet meeting, meets, fully meets, and exceeds. These areas fully encompass the developmental process that a student encounters through learning more of another cultural group as well as his/her own group (Chart 2). The main area to evaluate is “did learning occur” and subsequent quality of the information learned.

The final “learning” step of MLMs is arriving at an appropriate conclusion on the subject area/group being discussed. The conclusion should align with the objectives discussed at the beginning of the lesson or project. It is the goal of the student to have achieved either “fully met” or “exceeded” status on every project that is being graded for multicultural awareness. Moreover, the student, by project’s end, should be capable of clearly sharing and explaining concepts learned about another culture with a level of comfort and confidence.
Teacher Preparation Programs

Bennett (1993) feels that in order for teachers to be effective in instructing students of color, it is imperative that he/she recognize and understand their own worldviews; only then will they be in a better situation to understand the worldviews of their students. Teacher preparation programs are the breeding ground for cultural sensitivity or insensitivity in the classroom. Moreover, preservice teachers and programs need to take a transformative position to highlight the significance of a pluralistic society in a school setting. This can only be accomplished before a teacher-in-training enters the classroom and forced to adjust to the on-site demands as they are presented. McNiff (1993) clearly articulates a “living educational theory” as she describes teachers in their own learning process. More explicitly, she states the learning process as a cycle: 1) the teacher experienced a problem with their own educational value which has been denied in their practice; 2) the teacher imagined a solution of the problem; 3) the teacher acted in the direction of the solution; 4) the teacher evaluated the solution; and 5) the teacher modified the ideas and practices in light of the evaluation. These steps suggest the growth and transition a teacher makes as he/she grapples with issues of diversity.

Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton (1999) conducted a study to further analyze the aforementioned cycle. Their study revealed that preservice teachers “hold different, sometimes opposing positions on multiculturalism, based on personal experience, political ideologies, and beliefs about the roles of schools and teachers” (Cockrell, et al., 1999, p. 362). While in some instances, the beliefs that are held align nicely to expectations teachers have of students in their respective classroom, but this is not always the case. The asynchronous moments presents opportunities to work with teachers on articulating transformative thought regarding students of color. More specifically, utilizing process models suggested by McAllister and Irvine (2000) may assist in teacher sensitivity to culturally diverse students. The process model would entail helping to situate teachers’ behaviors, attitudes, and interactions with students while providing structure for designing and sequencing effective course and program interventions. The final advantage to this approach involves instructional and pedagogical strategies to create conducive learning environments for students. Through this advantage the teachers are able to increase personal understanding with cultural awareness and provide a better outlook for their students.

Conclusion

Even in the year 2005, the United States is sharply divided along racial, gender, and social-class lines. These divisions can be felt more severely in the US educational system, as white, American cultural hegemony is challenged daily. In order to assist marginalized groups and educate majority groups, multicultural education provides a transformative spirit for those that engage in activities that support cultural development. Teachers, facing increasing challenges in providing an appropriate classroom environment and high standards of instruction, must be trained in cultural diversity areas to better address students’ educational issues. Multicultural Learning Modules offer teacher preparation programs, school personnel, and administrators avenues to appropriately instruct students in multicultural areas through his/her cognitive style. Moreover, the detailed five step process further supports how a student evolves over time in becoming sensitive to multiculturalism. To transform the schools, pre-service teachers and current educators must be knowledgeable about the influence of particular groups on student behavior. Teaching Multicultural Learning Modules empowers teachers to work more effectively with students in a collaborative approach to learning. As these principles are adhered to, the multicultural educational process of students are more meaningful for both teachers and students.
References


