It Can Be Taught: Explorations into Teaching the Foundations for Multicultural Effectiveness

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Abstract

Connections are drawn between the development of intercultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking. A case is made that fostering particular critical thinking skills in courses enhances interpersonal skills, and that enhanced interpersonal skills facilitate movement along Bennett's (1993) proposed continuum of development of intercultural sensitivity. Discussion centers on how to integrate these qualities (e.g., critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills) and facilitate them in courses. Furthermore, it introduces a call for research on how to test these assumptions with experiences beyond the classroom.

In primary and secondary education, educators have begun to call for experiential learning that focuses on developmental issues (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Thomsen, 2002). The main argument is that education can and should foster skills in young people that best position them to interact successfully with others in the broader social world—a world that is becoming increasingly multi-cultural. Indeed, recent work demonstrates that fostering intercultural competence can enhance Anglo-Navajo relations (Debebe, 2008), that multiculturalism can be successfully measured (van de Vijver, Breugelmans, & Schalk-Soekar, 2008), and that identification with the broader group <u>can</u> be enhanced by actually valuing difference (Luijters, van der Zee, & Otten, 2008).

The main goal of this paper is to outline how, in the opinion of the authors, critical thinking, interpersonal and multicultural effectiveness skills can be fostered and enhanced in students. In order to draw these connections, however, it is important to outline for the reader what the authors mean by: (1) critical thinking, (2) interpersonal skills, and (3) multicultural effectiveness. While outlining each of these and, when possible, drawing connections to the literature, the authors make connections to an internet-based course on the politics and psychology of hatred that they use to foster and develop these skills. It is the belief of the authors that critical thinking skills are an essential precursor to interpersonal effectiveness, and that interpersonal skills are an essential prerequisite for multicultural effectiveness. Because of these assumptions, the authors first outline each of these elements before drawing conclusions. Details of relevant citations are provided when those resources have been used specifically to make particular decisions about how to structure the course and/or design specific assignments within the course.

Osborne and Kriese (2008) present a critical thinking model developed to assist students in articulating the relationships between their own views and the views of others. This is an important starting point in assisting students in developing the interpersonal skills that intercultural sensitivity requires. These researchers provide students with the following description of this four-step model:

1. "**<u>Recitation</u>** – state known facts or opinions. A critical component of this step is to acknowledge what aspect(s) of what is being stated is factual and what is based on opinion.
2. "**<u>Exploration</u>** – analyze the roots of those opinions or facts. This step requires digging below the surface of what is believed or known and working to discover the elements that have combined to result in that fact or that opinion.
3. "**<u>Understanding</u>** – involves an awareness of other views and a comprehension of the difference(s) between one's own opinion (and the facts or other opinions upon which that opinion is based) and the opinions of others.
4. "**<u>Appreciation</u>** – means a full awareness of the differences between our views and opinions and those of others. To truly appreciate differences, we must be aware of the nature of those differences. The active dialogue undertaken in the third step (understanding) should lead to an analysis of the opinion as recited by the other. The result should be a complete awareness of the similarities and differences between our own opinions (and the roots of those opinions) and those of the "other"." (Osborne & Kriese, 2008, pp. 45-46).

But do enhanced critical thinking skills lead to stronger interpersonal skills? Osborne and Kriese (2009) addressed this question in a research in which student's progress on employing the levels of critical thinking were assessed in relationship to student scores on course etiquette. The course etiquette involved course requirements centering on successful interpersonal skills. Naïve raters assessed student's use of the levels of critical thinking demonstrated through written responses to course assignments, and student use of the qualities of course etiquette (interpersonal skills) in course postings (the entire course was conducted online). There is a clear relationship between the two such that students assessed by naïve raters as demonstrating the most successful use of interpersonal skills were also assessed by other naïve raters as

demonstrating the highest levels of critical thinking in written course assignments (Osborne & Kriese, 2009). Although this is correlational and not causal, we use this finding as a first step in building a case for the importance of critical thinking in enhancing interpersonal skills. Further research is needed to determine if this relationship is causal and, if it is, the direction of that causality.

The connection between critical thinking and the development of interpersonal skills in such course, however, is further compounded by research showing that even providing students with training in interpersonal skills in online courses is not sufficient because these students lack "real world practice" with these skills (Doo, 2006). For this reason, Osborne and Kriese (2008) call for faculty to connect the growth of these skills to the real world via carefully constructed and guided civic engagement (service-learning) experiences. In other words, fostering these skills within the context of a structured classroom is an essential first step but should be followed with real-world experiences (still somewhat structured) via civic-engagement.

But as the research already outlined (and dozens of other studies) suggests, these intercultural sensitivity and multicultural competence skills do not, usually, occur without nurturing and must be considered in a developmental context (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Thomsen, 2002). A fundamental challenge to the educator, then, is to develop classroom experiences that "prepare" the student for cross cultural explorations beyond the classroom, and then to follow that training (preparation) with experiences beyond the classroom in which those skills can be practiced.

One critical focus of this beyond the classroom is in understanding how people develop relationship and other social skills (e.g., Jalongo, 2008; Mishra, 2006). Cultural factors play an important role in our expanded behavioral analysis of youth development relationships. Milton Bennett (1986, 1993) provides a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, for example, that assumes that increasing one's "experience" of cultural differences can lead to a more sophisticated view of difference, and that this more sophisticated view enhances one's intercultural competence.

Bennett (1993) outlines the following six developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity: (1) denial, (2) defense, (3) minimization, (4) acceptance, (5) adaptation, and (6) integration. As one can see from the levels of the model, movement along this continuum requires experience and practice within a somewhat protected environment. So, how does one provide students with practice in developing these skills? To answer this question, we focus on civic engagement in these contexts as our beginning point. Intercultural sensitivity, we believe, can be added with the tenets of positive youth development (Thomsen, 2002) and civic engagement (service-learning oriented work with the community), to accomplish the goal of nurturing, developing, and enhancing intercultural sensitivity and cross cultural competence.

Personal biases and values are likely to affect the students' interactions with others in the community. The bottom line is this – intercultural sensitivity skills will not develop in isolation and must be nurtured and practiced. To address this concern, we developed an internet course on the Politics and Psychology of Hatred specifically designed to assist students in uncovering, exploring, analyzing, and learning from their personal biases and values. We developed a four-step thought model to facilitate this uncovering process.

Raising issues without requiring students to explore their biases and values may reinforce prejudices by giving them voice without question. The themes in the course of: (1) social justice, (2) having a voice through vote, (3) condoning hatred through silence, (4) exploring image and stereotypical views of others, (5) environmental hatred, and (6) self-reference thinking assist students in exploring their role in the broader community.

According to Thomsen (2002), research shows that teaching students to cope effectively with their emotions frees up working memory and enhances learning. This is referred to as "positive youth development" (Thomsen, 2002). We glean from this assumption that it would be

important to teach students to deal effectively with their emotions <u>before</u> placing them into emotionally-charged community-based civic engagement experiences.

Connection includes connecting self to community. Clearly, this can be done with community placements. It might be wise, however, to have students reflect on their connection to the broader community <u>before</u> placing them into that community. **Confidence** involves believing that "real" problems can be addressed and that those problems can be resolved or that they could be a vital contributor to the resolution of any such problems. Students must have experience with problem-solving <u>before</u> they can have confidence that the community problems they will face can be resolved. **Competence** involves recognition on the part of the student that he/she has the actual skills or abilities needed to be an effective part of the solution to whatever problem is being confronted. Again, we would argue that students must be given experiences with this competence <u>before</u> being placed into the community.

With **compassion** students learn to care about others. This focus on what we consider to be the "others" (put in quotes to recognize that this is a generic person who may or may not be present in the current situation) is not automatic. But well-designed service-learning experiences can result in students becoming more externally focused (e.g., Osborne & Renick, 2006). **Character** traits must also be modeled, practiced, and reinforced. Character refers to qualities that promote an awareness of others rather than hinder it. Examples would be sensitivity, sociocentrism in contrast to egocentrism etc.

Connection means that students must connect with others who are different from them. In order to do this, we require them to reach consensus on how to define "middle class mentality." They must post that definition to the course site. They are required, in their responses to the course site, to be sure and include answers to the following questions: (1) can anyone "become" middle class?, (2) why or why not?, (3) what all different aspects of society does the middle class mentality permeate?, (4) how is the concept of middle class mentality linked to legal issues such as immigration laws, welfare policies, and access to resources for higher education? This assignment was designed to assist the students in getting outside of themselves and truly connecting with the other students in the class and others in the world who are coming from a different place (both physically and psychologically) than they are.

Confidence comes through experience. How can we expect students to be confident in their ability to interact with culturally diverse others, when they have very little experience in doing so. As Robert Zajonc (1965) suggested long ago, people confronted with unfamiliar situations will revert to dominant ways of responding. If those dominant ways of responding are beneficial to the interaction, success in that interaction will be enhanced. If, however, the dominant response is not beneficial or is in direct conflict with the cultural behavior or value of the other, conflict will result. Students cannot have confidence in the real world with a skill that has not been reinforced in the more "secure" environment of the classroom. By struggling through these assignments (and many students contact us and claim "we cannot do this, we cannot reach agreement, we cannot build consensus in this group") students gain confidence that they can work with others in ways that they never thought possible.

Compassion is illustrated through a nuclear shelter assignment. Students work in groups and are told that warheads have been launched toward the United States. They are responsible for a particular nuclear shelter that will hold eight people. Students are given a list of 12 people. They are required to decide who will get into the shelter and state the reason why they have chosen those eight individuals. Furthermore, they must explain why they are leaving out each individual they have not chosen. Students note that the assignment is not "fair" because it forces them to discriminate. We remind them that one definition of discrimination is, "to distinguish accurately," while another is, "to make a distinction in favor of or against a person or thing on the basis of prejudice" (Webster, 1990). The key, of course, is to determine when that discrimination is accurate from the times in which it is based on prejudice. Students must describe the selection process they are using (what is the "goal" of the choices they are making?). Although excluding people from survival (access to the shelter) may not strike the reader as developing compassion, it is, nevertheless, achieved through the struggle, not necessarily

through the exact decisions that are made. By forcing students to confront the assumptions and judgments they make, it shines light on the relationship (often unprocessed) between decision-making and value judgments about others. Although this, initially, creates discomfort, compassion can only be created and reinforced when people care about others. The faculty guides this discussion very carefully and, when necessary, assists the groups in reaching consensus. Part of the discovery process is that everyone has something to offer, everyone has value. Compassion is fostered more readily (in our opinion) when the students actually disagree. As students cite their reasons for including the individuals they have, they expose the value they see in that individual. This brings compassion to the forefront even if briefly.

After students have chosen eight of the twelve persons, they are told that part of the shelter has now been contaminated and they must "go back" and decide which two individuals who were originally allowed into the shelter will now be eliminated. They are asked to consider: (1) who is being excluded and why, as well as (2) why they are now being excluded when they were included in the first place.

Character is demonstrated through an assignment we call The Diversity Philosophy. Using a survey developed by Thomas and Butler (2000), students must assess their philosophy about the concept of diversity. Questions include issues of socioeconomics, race, and religion. Student responses categorize their diversity philosophy on a continuum from assimilation to multiculturalism. Students have to categorize their responses by placing them into one of these four categories: (1) assimilation, (2) tolerance, (3) multiculturalism, and (4) inclusiveness. They are then asked to reflect on those placements, what those placements say about them, and why they think they might have given the answer they did. It is important that students understand the definitions of each of these categories, so we provide Thomas and Butler's (2000, p.3) definitions:

> "**Essentialism/Assimilation** = the practice of categorizing a group based on artificial social constructions that impart an "essence" of that group, which homogenizes the group and effaces individuality and differences. The word implies that we are forming conclusions, relationships, and other cultural ties based only on the essential elements, as determined by "us." It also implies that there is some minimal level of understanding that applies to groups.

> "**Tolerance** = acceptance and open-mindedness of different practices, attitudes, and cultures; does not necessarily mean agreement with the differences. Implies an acknowledgement, or an acceptance or respect. Not necessarily an appreciation and usually consists of only surface level information.

> "**Multiculturalism** = the practice of acknowledging and respecting the various cultures, religions, races, ethnicities, attitudes and opinions within an environment. The word does not imply that there is any intentionality occurring and primarily works from a group, versus individual, orientation.

> "**Inclusiveness** = the practice of emphasizing our uniqueness in promoting the reality that each voice, when, valued, respected and expected to, will provide positive contribution to the community."

It is important to note that the exploration of the assignments in the course and the qualities of positive youth development, intercultural sensitivity, and multicultural effectiveness are, at this point, anecdotal. The authors are not claiming that the course and assignments, as described, create or enhance these skills. More research is needed with pre-post assessments of these skills in order to gain confidence that the course and the assignments aid in the development of these competencies. The purpose of this chapter was to outline the possibilities, explain how the course was structured and why, and to lay the foundation for future efforts to assess the causal relationships.

At the core of this chapter is the notion that cross-cultural competency or intercultural sensitivity is not something that most students "bring" with them to the university. This is not

due to anything purposeful or nefarious. It is due to the developmental nature of these skills (e.g., Bennett, 1993). Before expecting students, then, to leave the university with the ability to engage successfully in cross-cultural interactions or to demonstrate intercultural sensitivity, they <u>must</u> be given opportunities to learn AND practice these skills. These levels – (1) denial, (2) defense, (3) minimization, (4) acceptance, (5) adaptation, and (6) integration – are similar to the kind of adjustment that most people make to any identity-altering event such as the loss of a loved one (e.g., Kubler-Ross, 2005). They are also similar to the adaptations that immigrants and refugees must make to host countries (Berry, 1997) and that international students make (Zeynep & Falbo, 2008).

Of course, research is needed to determine: (1) if the assumptions we make about what students do or do not "bring" with them to the university in terms of cross-cultural competency and intercultural sensitivity are valid, (2) if progress can be made on the developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity as outlined by Bennett, (3) what types of course assignments (such as those outlined above) promote movement along the intercultural sensitivity developmental continuum, (4) the degree to which developmental progress in intercultural sensitivity demonstrated in the classroom "transfers" to the real world, and (5) whether progress in intercultural sensitivity, brought about through higher education, persists across time as individuals connect with the broader world outside academia.

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