

Using Cultural Proficiency Education to Impact Students' 21st Century Skills Through Service Learning

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Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that secondary school enrollment by race/ethnicity in 1999 was 65.1% white; 2012 enrollment reported a decrease in white student population to 53.2%, with a projected decrease in white student population to reach 45.5% in the year 2024. Similar trends are occurring in the civilian labor force as well, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015). These workforce and educational trends, indicate that individuals have higher expectations for working with a diverse 21st century, global citizenry.

Current undergraduate students are the future leaders and active members of our increasingly diverse citizenry. Hopkins and Hopkins (1998) emphasized the need for diversity leadership in which leaders of organizations or companies could find strategies for guiding individuals of diverse backgrounds to effectively and respectfully work together. In addition, Rateau, Kaufman, and Cletzer (2015), noted that current undergraduate students lacked the necessary skills to enter the workforce, including interpersonal and diversity skills needed for success in 21st century, global, work environments. Therefore, a need is rapidly being created for cultural proficiency education at the post-secondary level.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Cross's Cultural Proficiency Continuum (CPC) (Cross et al., 1989). Cross's continuum theorizes that citizens can demonstrate cultural proficiency in communication and interpersonal skills. Cross's continuum encompasses six stages of cultural proficiency ranging from destructiveness, when one sees a difference in the cultures of others and tries to extinguish those differences, to proficiency, when one sees the differences between cultures and responds positively and affirmingly. For the purpose of this study, cultural proficiency is defined as a way of being that enables both individuals and organizations to respond effectively to people and cultures who differ from themselves (Marsh, Marsh, & Whittington, 2012).

Additionally, Friere's theory on critical consciousness contributes to the theoretical framework for this study. When students engage in critical consciousness, their actions contribute in developing their critical thinking skills (Freire, 1993; Lewis & Lee, 2009). Critical consciousness is theorized to reduce stereotypical behaviors. A benefit of critical consciousness includes, the ability to be aware of one's own biases, which leads to preventing imposing one's beliefs on others.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe undergraduate students' movement along Cross's Cultural Proficiency Continuum (CPC), using evidence provided through service-learning experiences, weekly journal entries, and in-class written reflection essays associated with a 14-week general education course. The researchers used two objectives to guide the study: a. describe student movement along Cross's CPC as evidenced through student-provided written and oral statements related to service-learning; b. describe student movement along Cross's CPC as evidenced through weekly journal entries, and in-class written reflection essays.

The research design for this exploratory descriptive study was qualitative methodology using the focus group interview method. Ninety students enrolled across two years (43 in 2015;

47 in 2016), in a 14-week, university general education course on cultures and ideas, served as the target population for the study. From the target population, random sampling was used to identify an unbiased pool of student participants in the focus groups, and then criterion sampling was used to identify participants that were engaged in as many types of service-learning opportunities and experiences as were represented across the class as a whole.

A unique strength of the focus group interview design is the use of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). Transcribed focus group interviews were used as the primary source of data for this study, while weekly journal entries, in-class written reflection essays, and student-provided written evidence of meeting their standards and benchmarks for cultural proficiency were analyzed as secondary sources of data.

Results

Over two years, 13 of the 24 students contacted agreed to participate in the focus group interview. When asked to self-identify their position on the CPC at the beginning of the course, and then to identify their position at the time of the focus group, all participants reported movement towards cultural proficiency. At the time of the focus group, all participants self-reported themselves into the final three stages of the continuum, including pre-competence, competence, and proficiency. When asked specifically about their service-learning experiences, all participants reported personal experiences related to their service-learning projects that contributed to their movement on Cross's CPC. Several participants discussed the idea of the service-learning experiences providing them an opportunity to be immersed in cultures that they would not have sought on their own. Cross's Cultural Proficiency Continuum (CPC) was used to guide the coding of data associated with each participant. In total, 133 statements made by participants were identified along the CPC. Statements made by participants on all sources of data were coded under the following categories: destructiveness (n=0), incapacity (n=6), blindness (n=9), pre-competence (n=12), competence (n=79), and proficiency (n=27).

Conclusions

The service-learning component of the course provided participants with experiences that enhanced their movement along the CPC. Participants were acquiring rich, hands-on experiences through their service-learning projects that would be difficult to simulate in class. Along with the service-learning course component, weekly journal entries and in-class written reflection essays provided valuable insight into each participant's progression along the CPC. Gay (2002) stated that cultural proficiency skills must be taught. The researcher concurs that cultural proficiency skills can be taught, but the researcher cannot claim that such skills do not occur automatically as Gay also indicated. This raises two questions: To what extent must these skills be taught? Can similar results occur through observing culturally proficient skills in action?

Recommendations & Implications

Through continued research in cultural proficiency education, additional trends may surface to help create a more concise and beneficial model of reflective and reciprocal practices conducted through service-learning courses. The researcher recommends that future research be conducted through longitudinal approaches, to help track students' retention of their cultural proficiency education upon completion of the 14-week course. If continued research is conducted in cultural proficiency education, students' critical consciousness related to cultural proficiency could be enhanced.

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