

Cardboard Confessions: A Critical Starting Point for Culturally Responsive Teaching

Graciela Barajas
University of Kentucky

Brett Wasden
University of Kentucky

Dr. Stacy Vincent
University of Kentucky

Dr. Stacy Vincent
505 W. P. Garrigus Building
Lexington, KY 40508
(859-257-7588)
stacy.vincent@uky.edu

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Introduction

In the midst of today's political and social climate, effective multicultural education courses are increasingly necessary to develop culturally responsive teachers (Paris, 2012). The purpose of multicultural education is to "change the schools and other educational institutions so that students from all social class, gender, racial, and cultural groups will have an equal opportunity to learn" (Banks, 1997, p. 4). Researchers have outlined effective methods of teaching a multicultural education course for college students. Effective methods of teaching a multicultural education course include education on social issues and movements, discussion on biases, implementation of different cultural examples into the curriculum, and engagement with emotions (Gay, 2018). Wang (2008) highlighted the importance of emotions, empathy, and vulnerability in advancing our conversations on multicultural education to promote an equitable learning environment.

As such, the idea of the cardboard confession assignment was created for students to share their vulnerabilities and personal experiences otherwise unknown by the rest of the class. To genuinely engage with an empathic lens about the social issues being discussed, the students themselves revealed hard truths that fostered an open, safe, and accepting environment among the class (see Wang, 2008). Two purposes guided the cardboard confession assignment: (a) to encourage students to open up about personal hardships and vulnerabilities; and (b) to recognize the many components of multicultural education including racial, social, financial, religious, and familial issues experienced by their peers. The instructional staff started the course with the cardboard confession assignment to provide students with an "accurate understanding of the roles that many different cultural groups have played - and continue to play - in the life, structure, and institutions of our country" (Branch, 2005, p. 147).

How it Works

The multicultural education course at the [University] is required for all agricultural education undergraduates. The course targets juniors who are admitted into the teacher education program. In the Fall of 2019, 26 students were enrolled in the course and evenly split into two recitation groups. Two graduate teaching assistants were each responsible for a recitation group. The recitation met every Friday for 50 minutes, following two 50-minute lectures on Monday and Wednesday.

The cardboard confession was assigned at the beginning of the semester; teaching assistants demonstrated the exercise two weeks prior to the implantation; and students began the practice over the course of three weeks. Prior to the assignment, the students chose a song that enhanced the meaning of their, otherwise silent, cardboard confession. For the assignment, students stood at the front of their lab group and displayed five pieces of cardboard for 10-15 seconds so each classmate had a chance to read and reflect on what was being presented. Once all five pieces of cardboard were displayed, peers asked one to three questions to discuss the components of the presenter's identity. In total, the assignment can take approximately 10 minutes for each student to present—the students presented their cardboard confessions for approximately three minutes, the remaining time was used to answer questions from peers and teaching assistant. Heavy emphasis was placed prior to the presentations that reassure the student of their vulnerabilities without fear of judgement. Directions for the assignment were

purposefully vague to give the student freedom to create their own signs. Examples of cardboard confessions include the following:

- The date their mother passed away (ex. June 12, 2014),
- “My everyday struggle with anxiety,”
- “I want things to be different for my younger siblings,”
- “Always being labeled ‘the black one’,”
- “Insecurities about my weight, even after losing 60 pounds,”
- A drawing of a fish and a fishing pole, an activity done with their late grandfather.

Following the confession and following collegial inquiry, the presenter completed a self-reflection in order for immediate reflection and connection to impact could begin to occur, cognitively.

Results to Date/Implications

The cardboard confession assignment demonstrated various positive results since its implementation. Both previously outline purposes for the assignment were achieved. Instructional staff noticed growth in the students in sharing vulnerable experiences and students have a heightened awareness of the issues that make up multicultural education in its entirety, not only those concerned with race and ethnicity. Two additional positive results included (a) an increase in rapport among each of the lab groups that supported openness in student discussions of sensitive matters and (b) greater comfort addressing contemporary issues in education with not just the instructional staff but also with their peers. Participation from all students increased in both lectures and lab groups; students were more willing to share personal examples in large and small-group settings.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

If a teacher education program was interested in implementing a similar activity, they must consider implementing the cardboard confessions within a small intimate group setting instead of a lecture hall. In addition, it is recommended that the cardboard confessions occur in upper-level courses where professors and teaching assistants have a rapport with the students, and grading based on effort and student engagement rather than based on a rubric. Further, the nature of cardboard confessions may cause the presentations to become emotional for both the presenter and peers; instructional staff need to be trained to facilitate discussions that acknowledge the students’ reactions and lead the conversation to one of meaningful thought and action. In these situations, it is imperative to initiate the conversation of seeing multicultural education as more than race and ethnicity in order for students to build relevance to the material. Moreover, it is crucial that students can connect the “confessions” to the characteristics they will face in a classroom setting; therefore, listening to their peers is a wonderful educational tool.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are limited resources needed for the cardboard confession project, making it a cost-effective way to share vulnerabilities with the class, reveal hard truths, and learn about others’ backgrounds. Materials required include five pieces of cardboard per student, markers to construct the signs, and a device to play music. For the [University], students provided their own cardboard. A minimum of two graduate teaching assistants, highly educated in multicultural education and Culturally Responsive Teaching, are recommended to support an intimate lab setting with less than 15 students.

References

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