

**The Realizations through Reflections: Understanding the Importance of Reflecting in  
Multicultural Education**

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### **Introduction**

John Dewey (1933) terms reflection as a meaning-making process in which the learner transitions between old experiences to new experiences by making connections between the two experiences. In multicultural education, reflection plays an integral role in understanding complex concepts (Marx & Moss, 2011). Meder et al. (2018) explain how the process of reflecting is a valuable tool that improves teaching approaches, but many first-year agricultural science educators do not reflect on their teaching. Therefore, each student enrolled in the multicultural agricultural education course at the University of Kentucky participated in an anonymous reflection after each lab session.

Reflection is a common expectation for learners in higher education, both informally and formally, hoping that learners will reflect and act upon feedback provided by the instructor(s) of a course (Ryan, 2013).

By having undergraduate agricultural science preservice teachers understand this process, the instructor and teaching assistants are optimistic that the undergraduate students will continue this practice once they are licensed teachers.

### **How it Works**

Students analyze personal values and beliefs in the multicultural agricultural education course at the University of Kentucky, synthesize how personal values and beliefs influence the student/teacher interaction, and explain the psychological and biological theories associated with human learning and identity. The course consists of two weekly lectures and a lab component. The students meet with their professor on Monday and Wednesday for an hour-long lecture, and on Fridays, they meet with two graduate teaching assistants for an hour. The teaching assistants are educated in multicultural education.

Each week words such as bias, implicitness, and privilege are used frequently to educate and inform the students of the disparities, unfortunate circumstances, harsh realities, and common issues faced by students in their classrooms. Bringing this information to light in a classroom setting can break down the barrier students may have when receiving harsh truths regarding certain parts of history.

Throughout the semester, students have listened to podcasts, read articles, taught lessons, and completed presentations that relate to the various backgrounds of students that they will soon encounter in their future careers as agriculture educators. On Friday's students are expected to engage in the discussions, and at the end, they are given note cards to reflect and leave any comments, questions, or feedback they want to share with the teaching assistants. These discussions create psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) among the students in the class to ask questions and gain some insight into cultures and backgrounds that are unfamiliar to them.

Students were separated into groups of five to seven throughout the semester to create an intimate safe environment that encouraged reflection. Through this process, the instructor and teaching assistants can facilitate discussion surrounding multiculturalism. Concurrently, the instructor is not present during the labs for the teaching assistants to build rapport with the undergraduate students.

### **Implications**

Over the course of the semester, the students have completed multiple assignments that brought them out of their comfort zones. Cardboard confessions, lessons at Leestown Middle

School, and listening to the 1619 Podcast were all assigned to enhance psychological safety in the classroom, expose them to different perspectives, and finally test their engagement and adaptability in the classroom setting. For cardboard confessions, students were tasked with writing five words or phrases, each on a piece of cardboard, and sharing the story behind each word or phrase with the class. When presenting their cardboard confessions, each student can pick one song that describes them. The lessons at Leestown were a chance for each student to get classroom exposure. Each student taught a forty-minute lesson to a class of seventh graders from multicultural backgrounds. The 1619 Podcast has six episodes, and students were assigned to listen to the first three one week and the last three the following week. Each episode discussed time periods in African American history related to different industries such as health care, agriculture, music, and banking.

Reflections allow students to pause and give feedback about the lecture and their assignments each week. Projects such as these have pushed students to think outside their comfort zones and reflect on their actions and the actions of those around them; as weeks progressed, students' reflections adjusted from surface-level comments to more of an extension of thoughts they had about the discussion. One student stated, "I feel like I've been lied to; thank you for teaching us true history". Another student commented, "We must listen and pay attention to others. The complacency is not helping where we are". The reflections provided raw emotion for what the students were feeling in the class. There was a deduction that students needed to discuss uncomfortable topics to bring awareness to the many issues affecting students in the classroom.

Sequentially, students stated that participating in reflection allows them to understand the importance of self-identifying problem areas in their pedagogical practices. One student responded, "The reflections allow me to see what I need to work on in my next lesson". Through this practice, students are given time to reflect on their teaching and improve for further classroom experiences.

### **Future Plans / Advice for Others**

Experiences like these have caused the students to reflect and show progression in their multicultural perspectives throughout the semester. Current educators in the collegiate or high school classrooms can mimic ideas such as these to shift the perceptions of their students and allow students to analyze their own beliefs and values, which will improve the relationships between teachers and their multicultural students.

The instructor and teaching assistants encourage educators to create a welcoming environment for learning multicultural education through verbal and writing communication. Students will make mistakes when discussing minority struggles and varying identities (Tatum, 1992). Creating an inclusive environment allows students to express any questions, comments, or misunderstandings about certain concepts or cultural norms (Watson, 2017).

### **Costs / Resources Needed**

Materials needed for the course include the 1619 podcast link (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>), teaching materials to educate middle school students, five pieces of cardboard, markers to write the messages on the pieces of cardboard, and a device to play music. Two graduate teaching assistants educated in multicultural concepts are recommended to support an intimate lab setting.

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