THE CULTURALLY COMPETENT PROFESSOR: OUR ROLE IN CREATING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion that creating pluralistic classroom communities characterized by an atmosphere where students feel equally comfortable as learners is an essential goal for higher education. The role the professor plays in creating this type of community is seen as critical and linked to the process of becoming culturally competent. The culturally competent professor is one who has developed specific multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills competencies that enhance his or her ability to foster learning environments that promote an ethical responsibility for self and others, encourage meaningful discourse where multiple ways of knowing are seen as valid and where caring is modeled in the relationship between professor and student. As Roberts (2003) has reminded us, "Community must be one of higher education's primary goals. Not to commit to fostering community risks unhealthy environments that perpetuate disconnected and aloof learning, separated from the problems of a changing world" (p. 29).

1 Introduction

When I was an undergraduate, I often found myself in a large lecture hall filled with hundreds of students. Struggling to hear the professor as he or she stood behind a lectern on a stage that seemed miles away, I listened carefully, took copious notes and when the lecture was finished hurried back to my dorm room to check my notes with my textbook.

Although the professor would frequently write on a board to emphasize the main points of the lecture, the board was difficult to see so the notion of visual learning was completely lost in this type of learning environment. At times, depending on the size of the lecture, the professor was in a different room all together, broadcast on monitors that hung from the ceiling in the corners of the room. There was no mutual exchange of ideas, no multimedia enhanced teaching modalities and learning frequently involved the task of memorizing facts to be given back on an objective measure of assessment.

As it happens, I did very well as an undergraduate and although I never gave any thought to why I might have performed better than some of my classmates who struggled significantly in these classes, I now realize that my ability to perform better had very little to do with my particular intellectual ability and far more to do with the lecture as a teaching modality that matched, significantly well, my learning style. I am a highly auditory, well organized, processor of information who is not particularly visual so the lecture as a teaching modality was a great recipe for success for me. For others, however, it was a recipe for disaster.

Some of my classmates struggled significantly, became highly anxious at exam time, failed classes and some eventually dropped out of school. Their professors and advisors told them that they weren't studying "hard enough," and with more effort and by paying better attention they would be able to learn the material. The responsibility for learning always fell squarely on the shoulders of the student with little, if any, consideration given to the notion that learning and teaching is a two way street. The idea

that a professor ought to match teaching style to his/her students' learning style was foreign, at best, and academic failure was chalked up to intellectual inability or lack of effort on the part of the student.

Many years later, I find myself at the head of the college classroom seeking to find ways to engage students in a meaningful educational environment that fosters learning. I am acutely aware of my own preferred teaching style, realizing that it does not necessarily fit the needs of every learner in my classroom. I struggle to think of ways to change my teaching modality so all students will "get it" and refuse to consider that my preferred way is the only and best way to teach.

In the end, there are many questions to consider from this experience. These include, How does "who I am" inform my teaching practice? What do I bring to the classroom? What are my beliefs and values about learning? How do I view the "typical" learner? What is a learning community? Is there a link between emotion, cognition and learning? The answer to these questions lies in my ability to look beyond my own preferred worldview to develop a classroom community characterized by an "atmosphere in which differences are appreciated and shared and in which students feel equally comfortable as learners in school" (Ponterotto, 1991, p. 221).

2 Pluralism in Education

The notion that students should feel equally comfortable as learners in school suggests that the context within which education takes place has some influence on the learning process. This, in turn, causes us to consider the role the professor plays in actually creating this context as he or she orchestrates the dynamics of a learning environment, which either facilitates or hinders student success.   But, we might ask, what is all this fuss about? Why ponder the influence that environment has on the delivery of content? One only has to consider how colleges and universities across the country struggle with retention (Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Lau, 2003; Walters, 2003) to give credence to the notion that emphasis on creating community within the college setting has some degree of validity (Colosimo, 2004; Graff, 2003; Harriott & Martin, 2004; Obenchain, Abernathy & Lock, 2003; Scott, 1990; Summers et. al., 2005; Wolk, 2003). Simply stated, students who feel comfortable in a particular educational setting are more likely to remain in that setting because they feel a sense of belonging, both academically and socially.

Creating a sense of belonging in the college classroom, characterized by an atmosphere where students feel equally comfortable as learners and where differences are appreciated and shared is no small task, especially given changing demographics in this country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Hispanic Americans comprise 12.5 percent of the population, African Americans make up 12.9 percent of the population, Asian Americans comprise 4.2 percent of the population and Native Americans make up 2.3 percent of the population (Reid, 2001; Dhoooper & Moore, 2000). As colleges and universities are microcosms of the larger society, it follows, then, that changing demographics in this country are creating diverse educational environments that challenge professors to consider how they can best facilitate student learning. This, in turn, requires an emphasis on multicultural education and an understanding of the concept of pluralistic classroom communities.

According to Ponterotto (1991), "Multicultural and non-sexist education, from the preschool years through the college years, is a prerequisite to the establishment of a culturally tolerant and accepting society" (p. 220). This concept begs us to consider whether or not today's college professors can simply deliver content material without also considering the larger context of educating the whole student within a classroom environment that is also culturally tolerant and accepting. Those professors who have become culturally competent educators perhaps best facilitate the process of creating this type of

pluralistic community within the classroom. But, what exactly do we mean by culturally competent professors? And, in the end, does it really matter whether or not today's college educators attend to the notion of pluralistic environments characterized by an atmosphere where students feel equally comfortable as learners? These are important questions for all of us to consider as we examine our own pedagogical styles in an ever-changing campus climate.

3 A Comfortable Learning Environment

The idea of creating a comfortable environment that facilitates learning is an interesting notion in and of itself. Perhaps the term "comfortable" is a bit misleading as it often conjures up a picture of an environment in which there is no conflict and where all must "get along." This is not, however, what the term means when we use it in conjunction with the term pluralistic classroom environment. When used in that frame of reference, the term "comfortable" means an environment that fosters a mutual exchange of ideas where each student feels safe in expressing his or her worldview, while realizing that not everyone holds the same values and beliefs that he or she holds. In this regard the term "comfortable" means an environment where conflict inevitably develops, but where it is handled appropriately, characterized by dignity and respect for one another as individuals who ultimately can agree to disagree. It is perhaps the safety aspect of the word "comfortable" that demands our attention as we consider the importance of creating this type of environment or community of learners. If students do not feel safe in the classroom, they are less likely to engage in the learning process (Vare & Miller, 2000).

When engaged, however, students in the pluralistic classroom environment can contribute meaningfully to both context and content of the lesson, which, in turn, facilitates an atmosphere where students feel equally comfortable as learners. Vare and Miller (2000) suggested that this type of caring environment is characterized by a moral approach to relationships that provides an ethical basis for actions towards others. This action towards others is grounded in appropriate affective response to one another and emphasizes an ethic of responsibility to self and others. Simply stated, when the classroom is one in which students have an ethical responsibility to care for one another in a way that reflects dignity and respect, safety is created. This, in turn, promotes the student "voice," where differences are appreciated and shared even in the face of conflict.

4 Brain Based Research

Although Vare and Miller (2000) provide extensive evidence to support the notion that learning is best facilitated in a safe and caring environment, we can also draw on brain based research to justify the importance of creating a safe, caring classroom community in order to facilitate learning. In unsafe classroom environment students are likely to feel stressed. When stressed, they cannot learn the academic content being offered because their limbic system is pulling the blood and oxygen away from their neocortex. Their heart rate increases, and the adrenal glands secrete the stress hormone cortisol into the blood. "It is clear that if a student is stressed, he or she will not be able to learn efficiently, and perhaps not at all" (Connell, p.36). Goleman (1995) noted, "Cortisol steals energy resources from the working memory. When cortisol levels are high, people make more errors, are more distracted, and can't remember as well. Irrelevant thoughts intrude, and processing information becomes more difficult" (p.76).

Armed with this information, we can view Ponterotto's (1991) and Vare and Miller's (2000) assertions that a comfortable atmosphere that promotes the opportunity for meaningful discourse where differences can be appreciated and shared and where students have an ethical responsibility for how they

treat one another as particularly noteworthy. It would follow, then, that the creation of this type of pluralistic learning environment falls on the shoulders of college/university professors as they seek to facilitate student learning in an effective, meaningful way.

5 Ideas on Creating a Pluralistic Educational Environment

Vare and Miller (2000) noted several ways for educators to create communities of caring and learning that foster students' ethical responsibility toward one another. Interestingly, the relationship between student and teacher is emphasized as a way to model the type of caring that creates safety within the classroom. They noted that the teacher should model caring, engage in caring dialogue with students, arrange opportunities for students to practice caring and confirm each student's best ethical self. Thus, the college professor needs to establish a meaningful relationship with his or her students in order to create a pluralistic classroom environment. Vare and Miller (2000) also placed emphasis on faculty and students experiencing a continuity of purpose while building communities that emphasize themes of care, characterized by concern and responsible behavior, noting that these become fundamental themes of study seen as inherently as important as other content material. Roberts (2003) has also echoed these sentiments as he calls our attention to Parker Palmer's description of education as "a process that can be responsible for forming or deforming the human soul" (p. 29). He stated that this "is a chilling warning that community must be one of higher education's primary goals. Not to commit to fostering community risks unhealthy environments that perpetuate disconnected and aloof learning, separated from the problems of a changing world" (p. 29).

6 The Culturally Competent Professor

In order to acknowledge that an emphasis on community, themes of care and pluralistic classroom environments are concepts relevant to today's colleges and universities, professors must first consider their own values and beliefs especially with regard to how these factors inform their teaching practice. We must consider the questions, "Who am I?" and "What do I bring to this classroom?" before we can pay credence to the notion that one of higher education's primary goals is to promote pluralism and community building. Clearly collaborative in nature, a move toward pluralism and community building makes room for more than one way to learn, recognizing that various ways of knowing are valid despite being different.

Nieto (1992) suggested that learning to develop a pluralistic perspective is not an easy process. Indeed, it requires we develop the ability to look beyond our preferred teaching and learning styles to see that other ways of knowing are valid. She noted that in order to develop a pluralistic perspective, educators must first become multicultural in context. "Becoming a multicultural teacher, therefore, first means becoming a multicultural person. Without this transformation of ourselves, any attempts at developing a multicultural perspective will be shallow and superficial" (p. 275). Nieto defines developing a multicultural perspective as moving away from monoculturalism and its accompanying worldview that there is only one way to interpret reality and moving towards a pluralistic worldview, which recognizes that reality can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. With this in mind, the creation of a classroom environment that is safe and caring, emphasizes responsibility of care toward one another and recognizes the inherent conflict that ensues when voicing differing views, requires that the professor first knows "self" so that any tendency to focus solely on his or her preferred way of knowing is diminished.

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The idea that educators must become multicultural in context before they can emphasize pluralism and communities of care in the classroom is interesting because it implies that individuals are actually capable of becoming multicultural. Perdersen (1988), Wurzel (1988), Ramirez (1991) and Langelier (1996) not only agree with Nieto's (1992) assumption that one is capable of becoming multicultural but they each suggested that this process is made possible through learning. Although each of these theorists envisions the process of multicultural identity development somewhat differently from the others, it is clear that the model each proposes assumes that one can actually become multicultural, which, in turn, enables the teacher to create pluralistic classroom environments. The process of multicultural identity development, in essence, is a process of becoming a culturally competent educator who recognizes the inherent impact that culture has on learning, community and human interaction.

7 The Process of Becoming Culturally Competent

This link between developing cultural competence and the idea that creating community should be one of higher education's primary goals is one that demands our attention and offers hope as we seek ways to better attend to the context within which the delivery of content takes place. Acknowledging that our ability to view the classroom from a different perspective in order to create an atmosphere where students feel safe and where differences are appreciated and shared might be limited due to our own inherent biases and prejudices, especially with regard to how we teach, is not only essential but it is the first step out of an ethnocentric perspective that only serves to perpetuate the very types of environments that Roberts (2003) warns us about; environments "that perpetuate disconnected and aloof learning, separated from the problems of a changing world" (p. 29).

As we acknowledge that we might, in fact, be more ethnocentric than we would perhaps like to admit, the question arises as to how we can learn to move beyond this worldview in order to better facilitate student learning. Multicultural identity develop, the process of becoming culturally competent, is the key to this process. Described as a continuum of worldviews (Langelier, 1996), multicultural identity development is seen as a developmental process, intentional in nature, which results in identity change over time, which, in turn, leads to cultural competence. It is described as a three-stage process (Pedersen, 1988; Wurzel, 1988; Ramirez, 1991; Langelier, 1996), which emphasizes awareness, knowledge and skills competencies as key components to the learning process. Thus, the culturally competent professor engages in the process of developing awareness of self and others, gaining specific knowledge about self and others and employing effective skills in teaching that reflect a pluralistic worldview.

The awareness, knowledge and skills competencies listed below have been adapted from the American Counseling Association's multicultural competencies and provide us with information that is worthy of our consideration.

Awareness Competencies:

1. The culturally competent professor is one who has moved from being culturally unaware to being aware of his/her own cultural heritage and to valuing and respecting differences.

2. The culturally competent professor is aware of his or her own values and biases and how these may affect students.

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3. The culturally competent professor is one who is comfortable with differences that exist between himself or herself and student in terms of culture and beliefs.

Knowledge Competencies:

1. The culturally competent professor will have a good understanding of the sociopolitical system's operation in the United States with respect to its treatment of minorities.

2. The culturally competent professor must possess specific knowledge and information about himself and herself as well as the particular students with whom he or she is working.

Skills Competencies:

1. The culturally competent professor must be able to generate a wide variety of verbal and non-verbal responses during cross cultural interactions.

2. The culturally competent professor must be able to send and receive verbal and non-verbal messages accurately and appropriately.

3. The culturally competent professor is able to exercise institutional interventions on behalf of his or her students when appropriate.

This list, although by no means exhaustive, gives us a starting point as we engage in meaningful dialogue about pluralistic educational classrooms which must be created by professors who have the ability to look beyond their own preferred style in order to create communities of caring that foster responsibility for self and others, ultimately enhancing the learning process because these classrooms provide a forum for discourse that is safe, where differences can be expressed openly in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. Perhaps Saunders says it best as she reminds us that it is our responsibility to "develop communities where one can make authentic connections, where learning is a collective venture and where students grow in identity and integrity" (p. 267).

8 References

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