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A Multicultural Learning Community Seminar as a Site of Praxis

Carl A. Grant and Vonzell Agosto

Abstract: The Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) Seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison operates under the direction of the authors as faculty director and teaching assistant. The seminar offers the students and faculty the opportunity to act on Freire's and Leistyna's conceptions of praxis. A culturally relevant approach to assessment is employed to discuss the progress of the students and the seminar as a site of praxis. *Praxis is the relationship between theoretical understanding and critique of society (that is, its historical, ideological, sociopolitical, and economic influences and structures) and action that seeks to transform individuals and their environment* (Leistyna, 1999, p. 224).

Praxis: Reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1970, p. 36).

Introduction

A reading of Pepi Leistyna's definition, quoted above, suggests that to engage in praxis there must be a connected and integrated relationship between theory, critique and action in order to transform individuals and their environment. Paulo Freire's conception of praxis also includes reflection as a central component. In addition, theory and practice are intertwined and action takes into account what is understood through reflection and moral concern. Simply put, perhaps too simply, Freire's conception of praxis consists of action and reflection.

The Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) and Seminar

In 2001, an idea for a Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison was in the early stage of development. The MLC was to be a space on one or two floors in one of the dormitories on the campus. Those involved in the conceptual planning of the MLC contemplated that it would open in 2002 and house approximately 60 students, mostly freshmen. One of the authors [Carl] was invited to serve as faculty director of the MLC and a steering committee was organized to develop the idea and work out plan for the start up.

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The vision of the MLC was that it would be a space where culturally, ethnically, linguistically diverse groups of students, including students who were straight, gay, and bisexual could come together to have a multicultural experience. The multicultural experience was to include a range of *activities* (e.g., retreats, field trips to major cities, debates, plays dealing with social justice issues, collaboration with other learning communities on campus, socials), *assignments* (e.g., mini ethnographic studies of cultural interactions in malls, analyzing media for bias, reading and discussion of articles dealing with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, language and power), and living on the floor together.

Such an experience it was argued would not only enrich the student's personal lives, but their collegiate experience as well. The hope was that the impact of the MLC would remain with the students long after college and would serve to guide their professional lives and later social life. Also, it was hoped that while on campus the experience would give the students living in the MLC increased agency to promote social justice, giving attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, and power in the papers they write, and in the class presentations they do. In addition, it was hoped that MLC residents would advocate for equality and equity in all policies and practices that are part of the university. It was reasoned that the thinking and planning that guided the first years of the MLC would not be static. The faculty director, TA and other staff members would continually make curriculum changes and program adjustments in order to meet the needs of MLC students, and help them to deal with diversity issues on the floor where they lived, in the class they took, and on the campus generally.

The glue for the experience is a seminar, *Multiculturalism in Societal Places and our Personal Spaces*. The co-author, Vonzell, became the teaching assistant during the second year of the MLC which was the first year of the MLC seminar. The seminar is held during in both the fall and spring semester. Although, attending the seminar is not a requirement of being a resident in the MLC, the majority of students who live on the floor take the seminar. During the fall semester, students in the seminar are introduced to the foundation of multicultural education: terminology, history, theory, competing and complimentary ideas (English-only, critical Black feminism and critical Latina feminism, integration of concepts (e.g., race, class, and gender), etc. During the spring semester increased attention is given to personal *reflection* and *action*. The syllabus for spring 2006 semester read:

The purpose of this course is to discover and investigate multiculturalism in individual, societal, and institutional spaces. By multiculturalism, we are referring to a philosophical position and movement that assumes that the cultural diversity of a pluralistic society should be reflected in all aspects of its institutionalized structures and that people should become informed about how power and unearned privilege operates. Multicultural education is interdisciplinary in content, and draws upon the experiences of people from a diversity of backgrounds and ideologies. It is developed from, and thus reflects the plethora of communities that make up this country. Multiculturalism is useful

to developing theoretical lenses that historically situate and make visible the deeply embedded roots of prejudice, violence, discrimination and disempowerment. MLC students are invited to explore and act upon the relationship between these larger historic, economic, and social constructs and their connection to ideology, power and identity. Hopefully, such understandings will lead MLC students to develop into leaders that will act and encourage others to act in ways that that lead to fair and just outcomes.

Multicultural education advocates argue that people (e.g., students) interact within existing institutions and social practices in which the values, beliefs, bodies of knowledge, styles of communication, and biases of the dominant culture are imposed. People were/are often stripped of their power to articulate and realize, or are forced to rearticulate their own goals. Generally, we think of cultural diversity as based on race and ethnicity, but a person's cultural identity is based on traits and values learned as part of our ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic level, primary language, sexuality, geographical region, place of residence (e.g., rural or urban), dis/abilities, etc that continuously contend with influential factors and conditions (i.e., social, natural). Spaces, as used here include those that are intellectual, ideological, physical, social, psychological, and aesthetic. Throughout the semester we will seek to discover and analyze how socioeconomic class, gender, race, sexuality, ability, language, and religion are present, and how actors in these spaces are influenced and exercise power according to their perceptions, histories, experiences, assumptions, desires, etc.

The sixth semester of the seminar began in the spring of 2006. The seminar was created from our ideas as faculty director and teaching assistant and from the suggestions given to us by students who attended the seminar during the previous semester. The seminar changes each semester. As educators, we value the idea of curricula that is responsive to student participation and current events. A major change to the seminar during the spring semester was to admit students who were not living in the MLC community. A reoccurring suggestion made by students from previous semesters was that the seminar should be available to all students on campus. Therefore, interested students who lived outside of the MLC were allowed to enroll in the seminar after seeking permission from Carl. Our position, one that has been echoed by several students during the current and prior two years, is that the multicultural education should be accessible to all because multicultural education is for everyone. As a student noted in his spring 2006 final essay, "*For our goals to be accomplished we need larger networks to work together to stop the forces against us*" (MT).

The MLC seminar offered an opportunity for the faculty to act on Freire's and Leistyna's conception of praxis as they put into practice the theoretical concepts of multicultural education. Our teaching practice and facilitation of the seminar draws on both conceptions of praxis to include attention to theory, critique of society, action, and reflection with the hope that once each of us and our environments are transformed and that we each extend the effects of our praxis to cause the transformation of others and their surroundings who would then seek to facilitate such transformation, etc. As a student from the MLC seminar writes in a final essay, "*I loved the class so much and I will take what I have learned with me wherever I go and teach it in everyday situations to others who are less educated about the issues we discussed...*". AB Another

student writes, "I learned more this semester than last and I have so much knowledge that I will continue to take with me and share with others." LF

Facilitators' Theoretical Understanding

We knew that such action for transformation (which includes individual and sometimes collective reflection) demanded that the use of works of many who, practice, study and articulate a wide assortment of social justice ideas. The theoretical concept of multicultural education guiding the MLC and the seminar is found in these and the subsequent works of Giroux (1983), Gollnick and Chinn (1983), McLaren (1989), Nieto (1992), Banks (1997), Grant & Sleeter (1999), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Gay (2004). It can be argued that these scholars argue for an approach to multicultural education that is transformative and promotes social justice.

We include the following names, along with their area of practice and scholarship, not to name drop, but to argue that trying to transform students and/or have them engage in transformation demands a comprehensive and multi-layered approach to multiculturalism. The work of Lave & Wenger (communities of practice), Dewey (child-centered education), Apple (curriculum and ideology), Collins (integration of multiple oppressions) DuBois (double-consciousness); Delpit (culture of power); Foucault (knowledge and power), Eck (religion), Kumishiro (oppression), hooks (white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy), Freire (praxis), McIntosh (white privilege), McCarthy (non-synchrony), Gordon (inequitable power relations), Moll (funds of knowledge), Popkewitz (systems of reasoning), Valenzuela (subtractive education), and Wise (anti-racism) served to make a texturally rich theoretical framing lens and give guidance to the construction and re-construction of the vision for the MLC and the seminar.

Facilitators' Critique Of Society

For over the past five decades both the educational literature and popular media have reported college campuses as a site of racial, gender and sexual orientation unrest. While such unrest on college campuses is a microcosm of the United States' society in general, some common sense thinking is that (college) education will bring about a more liberal attitude toward those that are perceived as different, and toward diversity in general. Such was the thinking behind the *Grutter v. Bollinger* decision. Here, the United States Supreme Court upheld the rights of universities to consider race in admission procedures in order to achieve a diverse student body. When the President of Michigan, Mary Sue Collins, heard the decision, she said: "This is a tremendous victory for the University of Michigan, for all higher education..." Most colleges and universities value diversity. Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which struck down "separate and equal" integration and inclusiveness has been an overarching goal of national education policy, and several Civil Rights Movements e.g., women, gays and lesbians, disability.

In 1976, a decade after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, 15.4% of U. S. college students were racial or ethnic minorities; this increased to 26.1%

in 1996 (Intelligence Report, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001). More specifically, from the late 1980s to 1996, the number of African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian students enrolled in college increased by 2.7 % to an all-time high of nearly 3.6 million (ACE net 2003). The number of full-time faculty members of color increased 47.7 % from 1985-1995, compared to 9.9 % among Whites. However, faculty of color represented only 12.9 % of full-time faculty in 1995 (ACE net, 2003).

In addition to the increase in ethnic group enrollment on college campuses, Shireman (2003) observes that over the past decades colleges and universities have initiated a variety of approaches to assist campuses to become more multicultural and accepting of increases in diversity (e.g., forming diversity councils, adding new courses; recruiting, hiring, and maintaining racially and ethnically diverse staff; providing diversity workshops and informal meetings for administrators, staff and students to increase their knowledge of diversity). These approaches and others were in keeping with the increases in faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds.

Increased number of people of color, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and people with different religious beliefs on campuses, notwithstanding, living and/or working in a diverse setting is often a unique experience for the people involved. Individuals in urban areas often grow-up in racially, and socio-economically segregated communities and attend equally segregated elementary schools (Martin, 2004). This may also be the case for those who grow-up in suburban and rural areas. With such narrow backgrounds, their culturally informed differences (including ways of thinking) tend to produce problems and issues related to race, sexual orientation, dis/ability, gender, class, and religion on the college campus as they interact with culturally diverse individuals and groups, which then affects the overall climate of the university.

Facilitators' Actions To Transform

The five goals of the seminar as listed on the syllabus are as follows.

Students will be able to...

1. Examine own beliefs, ideas, behaviors and involvement in the issues presented
2. Discuss the intersections among aspects of identity and systems of oppression
3. Identify the dynamics of power relations and the resulting material effects
4. Examine how life experiences are shaped by factors at the individual, societal, and institutional levels
5. Consider overt and covert practices at work to support the –isms (i.e., racism/sexism) and –phobias (i.e., homophobia, xenophobia).

A requirement of the class asked that student demonstrate cognitive affective engagement with ideas in the attempt to meet these goals. This requirement was added to encourage students to think of learning as being

informed by thought and emotion and bridging them into a unified condition for understanding. As facilitators, we wanted the students to be able to express their personal experiences. We also knew that the sharing of such experiences can be stifled in secondary and post-secondary classrooms where emotional responses tend to be marginalized while intellectualized responses are privileged.

In facilitating the seminar we used experiential, interactive, creative, and critical pedagogical approaches. We also encouraged students to take leadership roles in facilitating the seminar. This was the first semester that students (two individuals, a group) facilitated the seminar. We offered students opportunities to engage in campus and community-based events using a variety of pedagogical approaches and tools. Some attended an on-campus retreat on using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques (based on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) to facilitate dialogues on racism and antiracism; a Pulitzer winning play by Doug Wright, *I am my Own Wife*, about a transgendered person living in Germany during the rise and fall of the Nazi regime; a discussion on multicultural politics with a local politician; and the film *The Times of Harvey Milk*. These opportunities were enriched by classroom activities, large and small group discussions, electronic discussions, and readings.

While we have individual written responses in which students communicate their understanding of multiculturalism and social justice, we do not have a record of the discussions that occurred among them once they left the seminar. However, we know from their comments in class and in writing that many issues raised in the seminar were discussed late into the night or over dinner after the seminar ended. According to one student's comment from the final essay of the spring semester, "*The people in class keep the conversations going throughout the night and sometimes even longer than that*". AB

According to Pope-Davis, Coleman, Liu, & Toporek (2003), "multicultural praxis works with the understanding that, as actions are made, contexts change and bring in new challenges that need to be assessed" (p. 99). As facilitators of the seminar, we (the authors) have reflected individually and collectively through dialogue with one another throughout the semester. Our reflections on our students' reflections involve evaluating our performance (what we have provided through the seminar) and contemplating (through our theoretically informed lenses) how we might act in the future.

Reflection In The Assessment Of Multicultural Praxis

A culturally relevant approach to assessment allows us to consider how relevant the seminar is to the students' and the various cultural enclaves, enclaves that are created and influenced by the cultures of the students', the programming for the MLC, the curriculum of the MLC seminar, and the instructors. All of these come together under the larger social space that is the campus climate and the culture of academia at a Research I university. Teacher educator Gloria Ladson-Billings argues, in *Rethinking Schools Online* (2000), that in order for the assessment of teacher performance to be more culturally relevant, it should include "looking at teachers' abilities to engender success among their students

in three key areas: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.” We use these areas not only to assess our performance, but to assess the seminar as a site of (multicultural, culturally relevant) praxis as well. We will share comments that were written by students in their final essays for the MLC seminar at the end of the spring 2006 semester, comments that speak to these three areas.

As part of their course requirements, the students were asked to write a 3-5 page essay on their progress toward the goals of the seminar. The essay was their last assignment. It counted as 10% of their assignments. In total, the assignments constituted 40% of their final grade while their final presentation (40%) and participation (20%) counted for 60% of their final grade. In other words, their essays were not graded and therefore the students’ grades were not negatively or positively affected by the content of the essay. The students were asked to discuss what, if any, opportunities were provided during the semester to help them reach the goals of the seminar and to name the grade they believe they deserved. They were also asked to include suggestions on how to improve the seminar for the fall semester. Many of the sentiments expressed in their comments were also evident in the electronic discussions and in their conversations and interactions with the teaching assistant and one another in dialogue during the seminar.

While students were not asked directly to comment on their progress in the areas of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, we believe that excerpts from their essays tell us something about their development in these areas as well as the students’ ability to use reflection as a tool for learning that they can use before continuing on as educators, learners, and/or facilitators of social change. As one student describes, the seminar promoted discussion and introspection. *“I viewed it as more of an internal thought spark plug...”* ZG. Additionally, students expressed their feelings (such as the feeling of empowerment) as they assessed their learning and the learning experience provided by the seminar.

Academic Achievement

Ladson-Billings (2000) provides a question to help us think about the assessment of students’ academic learning qualitatively. She suggests that we ask, “Are they able to formulate questions, propose solutions, [and/or] apply knowledge to new and different situations?”

“Because I have become so hyperaware of multicultural issues, I find myself applying themes of social justice to issues that I am charged to think about in other places around campus, from my political science classes to casual conversations with my friends...To be honest, this class was not the hardest class that I had as far as academics, and it wasn’t designed to be, but it did end up being the hardest in terms of emotional and mental challenges. I was many times pushed and forced to grow.” RH

One student informed us through the final essay of their experience writing a paper for an English class based on what this student had come to question through the seminar about hate crimes and the freedom of speech.

“Most of my oppression argument was based on facts that we examined in the seminar, so I was excited to share that knowledge with others.” LF

Discussions about student achievement tend to center on grades as markers of achievement. Although we asked students to discuss their progress as well as the grade they believed they deserved, many of them did not provide us with a letter grade after discussing their progress. Some avoided the topic altogether, wrote that they would leave it up to us, or expressed difficulty in quantifying their progress with a grade equivalent.

“As far as a letter grade goes, I can’t really pinpoint a letter grade on my progress as a person. The results of numerous discussions and new and unique perspectives and experiences I’ve gained this year are immeasurable on a grading scale.” ZG

Cultural Competence

According to Ladson-Billings (2000), cultural competence involves supporting both the “home and community cultures of students, while helping students become proficient in the cultures of schooling and education”. The following excerpts reveal some of the students’ reaction to the cultural component and cultural diversity of the seminar.

“It [culture] is something that I normally don’t think about and I found myself analyzing it a little bit since some things I were [sic] reluctant to write down.” LF

“Learning about others was my favorite part of the class (besides the debates) because that way you learn the truth about a certain people and you can teach the truth about your own culture(s)”. AB

“Considering the class was so diverse, I got a lot of insight and perspective that helped me understand relationships among us and the way we interact. I grew as a person and gained power through my experience.” CP

In addition to helping students become proficient in the cultures of schooling and education as Ladson-Billings suggests, we also hope that students challenge the culture of schooling and education that perpetuates inequity and injustice and stifles criticality, sociopolitical awareness, and praxis. We see the following statements as examples of students beginning to think about the education they receive and the education they want.

“Unlike other classes where the agenda is information our agenda is to make change.” MT

"I wish I could have a class this thought provoking my entire college career."
JC

The students in the seminar also learn about their peers' identities, positions, and cultural backgrounds. Some revealed their intentions to use their knowledge to challenge and support their home and community cultures.

"I feel as if I have opened myself up to other people and their views. An example would be about my views about homosexuality. Back home, I was not opposed [to] it, I accepted it, but now I have learned to embrace and support the idea of homosexuality. I have learned to take those ideas back with me to my environment outside of the seminar (esp. when I go back home) and share my views with others." AK

"I will surely pass the knowledge I have obtained from the seminar and people of the MLC to my family, friends, and leaders at my Milwaukee community center so that they too can be a part of the change needed to reduce injustice."
DH

Aside from fostering students' home language/dialect, Ladson-Billings argues that the assessment of teachers' ability to increase students' cultural competence "requires teachers to help raise students' awareness of prejudice and discrimination as well as their ability to react to and constructively cope with these negative social realities".

"I felt this class has educated us throughout the year to stand up for what we believe and take action when these negative -isms and phobias occur...This course has reinforced the reason I volunteer and help out with groups that deal with bettering the world, such as the Human Rights group I am with." JC

Sociopolitical Consciousness

For Ladson-Billings (2000), sociopolitical consciousness (or activist civic and social awareness) involves critical thinking. The following excerpts from the students' essays reveal their growing sociopolitical consciousness and, as an aspect of critical thinking, their criticality in the form of social critique.

"This class really does make students view the world differently...Its fantastic[.] [M]any of these students are forced to see these things because if these things weren't brought to their attention, they would just be the same as many other people in the world who turn a blind eye to matters such as these."
JC

"Sometimes we live our lives so concerned with certain tasks at hand, that often we forget the values that need to be reinforced in our society...Before the class had begun, I never thought of a lot of things being unjust because they had become so normal to me." CP

"I realize that I am aware of many of the problems in society, but am not as positively active as I could be." DH

Aside from the informational content that students have to grapple with, there is the emotional aspect which can further draw students into modes of caring. Feelings, such as empathy, are generally regarded as precursors to the internalization of a struggle that may not initially resonate as one's personal struggle. Empathy allows us to feel how our struggles are linked or are analogous. Freire (1970) gives attention to emotion (e.g., love, humility) in his discussion of *conscientização*, a critical social consciousness that is replete with a sense of power to transform. The following excerpts are examples of how students are noticing the importance of emotion in multicultural education and its connection to social consciousness and action.

"The discussions in our class are filled with as much emotion as knowledge..."
DH

"I tell myself that I am non-confrontational, that things aren't that big a deal, that it isn't my problem and I shouldn't get involved. But I know it's a lie. I know the real reason that I don't push the edge is because I am scared. I am scared to admit what I believe and I'm afraid to say that sometimes I don't know what I believe... I chose to be oblivious. I refused to see racism around me because I was afraid that if I acknowledged racism, racism would be all that I would be able to see." KB

In the future we might explicitly ask students to assess their learning in the areas of academic achievement, cultural competency, and sociopolitical consciousness and to assess their praxis or ability to reflect, theorize, critique society, and act to transform society.

Conclusion

Considering the changes and adaptations we made through our reflections and the students' reflections, we see the MLC seminar as site of praxis. However, we wonder to what extent we would have had the positive reaction we had if the students did not live in a community together, or if we had not been able to escape the confines of a classroom, or if the group of students in the seminar was not culturally diverse. We admit that we work with a group of student who self selected to participate in the MLC and the seminar and that these conditions are perhaps more conducive to multicultural praxis and the emergence of academic achievement, cultural competence, sociopolitical awareness, and.

According to Trimble (2003), "to achieve multicultural competence, one must be consciously willing to learn and explore other cultural groups; without a conscious intent and desire, the achievement and realization of multicultural competence is not likely to occur" (cited in Pope-Davis, Coleman, Liu, & Toporek, x, 2003). We can not estimate how long would it have taken us to engender the academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness without the kinds of unmeasured conditions (staying of late talking to one another, supporting one another emotionally and intellectually, sharing meals, etc.) afforded to our students through their residency in the MLC.

While there were students in the seminar who did not reside on the floor this semester or previously, they were few in numbers. Yet, there comments are not unlike those echoed by the students who were current or former residents of the MLC. Thus, we can only wonder if there is a critical mass of students with the predisposition toward advancing multicultural education that can be replicated when possible to engender the elements of multicultural praxis. Furthermore, we are still left with the question of whether the students from the MLC, as a critical mass of students, were influential enough to further engender the elements of multicultural praxis in the students who enrolled without having had lived in the MLC and to reduce the resistance to the ideas associated with multiculturalism that advances social justice. Another question that we are left contemplating is whether the transformation of people and environments calls for something very different than what typically occurs in classrooms (e.g., rote memorization, testing, hierarchical power relationships of great disparity).

While we have no conclusive evidence of what combinations of factors most contributed to the MLC seminar being a site of praxis, we do believe that the elements of praxis as discussed by Leistyna and Freire and facilitated through the seminar, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the framework of multicultural education that advances social justice were crucial.