

Black Professor, White Students: Reflecting on the Relevance of Culturally Responsive Teaching with Predominantly White Students in a Graduate Teacher Preparation Program

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Abstract

This paper is a self-analysis case study of an African American professor who uses critical reflection to examine the relevance of utilizing culturally responsive teaching methods with her predominantly White students enrolled in a graduate level teacher education program. The overall finding is that there is some implication of relevance for employing this method and invites several opportunities for additional research in this area.

Key Words: critical reflection, higher education, pre-service teachers, teacher education, culturally responsive teaching.

1. Introduction

The journey began with a looming question: *How relevant is it for an African American professor to employ culturally responsive practices with White students enrolled in a graduate teacher education program?* This question led to a series of other questions which in turn galvanized into a more systematic approach to analyzing my own teaching methods and the degree to which I have been effective in my interactions with students. The premise of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) is designed to address the cultural disparities among African American (and other traditionally marginalized) students and their white teachers. The cultural mismatch has been a long discussion that has resulted in research studies across many educational settings.

As a teacher educator and researcher, I have explored the topic of culturally responsive teaching for many years, developed courses on the topic, and facilitated professional development sessions with school districts in various states in the United States. The setting of the classrooms and workshops were the similar—a black educator is talking to a group of predominantly white participants about how they might consider the cultural lens of their students as an effective method for increasing overall achievement. Not once had I considered the cultural shift that I was making each time I entered this scenario. Was I in fact attending to the cultural realities of my participants/students as a means to effectively instruct them? This is the question that I asked myself and thus resulted in a singular case study highlighting a reflective process that revealed deeper truths than anticipated.

As a teacher educator, it's no surprise that I wholeheartedly believe in the reflective process. Not only is reflection an integral component of professional growth and development (Gibbs, 1998; Howard, 2006), in its most sincere efforts, it has the potential to open windows for transformation and refinement in personal and pedagogical ideologies. MacKay and Tymon (2013) highlight that "reflection has been defined as an active and deliberate process of exploration and discovery, involving a periodic stepping back to consider meaning and the connection between experience and learning (p.644)" (Gray 2007; Lynch 2000; Raelin 2007 as cited in MacKay and Tymon, 2013). MacKay and Tymon (2013) further highlight that reflection involves cognition and emotion that stimulates reflection by questions such as: *How did that go? What went well? What didn't? And why?*

These questions can guide reflective conversations in a search for new perspective which facilitate sense-making of individual experience (Schoen, 1983).

What differentiates critical reflection from mere speculative rumination is that it encourages deeper level learning, by questioning assumptions. A conversation to facilitate critical reflection could include additional questions such as: *How do I feel about that? What theory underpins this? And what are my future options?* (p. 644)

Reflection is important and modeling the reflective process is also a critical element for pre-service candidates. The old adage, “practice what you preach” could not be more prevalent, especially in a time of stringent accountability measures that dictate instructional sensitivity to the diverse needs of students. MacKay and Tymon (2012) reverberates this sentiment by coining the phrase “practice what you teach” (p. 552). So if you “teach” about it, you must “be” about it. Even one with two decades of teaching experience and a full bag of strategies to tote, I quickly realized that the journey of life-long learning is windy and engulfed with opportunities for pruning and growth. Along my own journey as a teacher educator at a private college in upstate New York, I had a rude awakening that has significantly transformed the way in which I approach instructional delivery and student interaction with my pre-service candidates. This candid account of a *jolt in awareness* catapulted me into the depths of understanding another dimension of cultural responsiveness that could have only been unleashed through the process of true reflection.

2. Theoretical Framework/Review of Literature

Culturally responsive teaching is an approach that promotes the utilization of cultural realities in order to make learning relevant and meaningful for culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching is a bridge that narrows the cultural mismatch between students of color and their white teachers. This pedagogical approach encourages teachers to pay attention to students’ cultural experiences as critical assets, adjust their instructional delivery, and thus authentically connect with them as a means to effectively transmit curricular content. Overall, culturally responsive teaching is concerned with cooperation, community, and connectedness in the instructional environment. Interdependence and reciprocity are integral components that challenge the notion of individualism and competition typical of mainstream classrooms (Powell, 2009). The tenants of culturally responsive teaching include: 1) comprehensive (e.g. collective approaches to learning) 2) validating (e.g. seeing the culture and valuing it) 3) empowering (e.g. support for believing success is imminent) 4) multidimensional (e.g. cross curricular approaches) 5) transformative (e.g. students as social critic and change agents) and 6) emancipatory (e.g. lifting the veil of authority; students are producers of knowledge too). Each component has unique yet interconnected qualities that collectively support the academic success of students. Teachers who are committed to these approaches promote high expectations and create environments that are conducive to quality learning experiences (Gay, 2000, Howard, 2006).

Since I have spent close to a decade studying and unpacking this theoretical framework, culturally responsive teaching has become an integral part of who I am, how I think, and the way that I teach. Inherently, it has become “my way”. I have become a champion for raising awareness among teachers so that they understand how the presence and influence of culture impacts learning. Furthermore, I believe that when implemented with fidelity, teachers are transformed in their belief systems and as a result, students succeed. When teachers are culturally responsive they are 1) aware of their own biases to cultural and ethnic realities 2) cognizant of the role that culture plays in the learning environment and 3) equipped to use cultural knowledge as a bridge to teaching students effectively. Subsequently, culturally responsive teaching, in and of itself, opens avenues for reflection, opportunity and advancement for all those who experience it and respond in its call. As previously mentioned, the degree to which culturally responsive practices are implemented is closely tied with the degree to which educators are honest about their practice and possess the willingness to make the necessary shifts. This direct correctional relationship has powerful implications. Critical reflection is a pivotal component for moving one along the cultural consciousness spectrum. Educators have to be willing to dig deeper into their own practice and even face some unpleasant truths in order to make concerted efforts in a more refined direction. MacKay and Tymon (2013) point out that “critical reflection examines the theoretical frameworks that support perspective and belief of shifting perspective can lead towards a change in future action” (Gray 2007; Mezirow 1994; Rigg and Trehan 2008 as cited in MacKay & Tymon, p. 644).

MacKay and Tymon (2013) interested in digging deeper into their own attitudes toward student feedback, employed Larrivee's assessment (2008) tool. The assessment consists of four critical thinking levels:

(1) Pre-reflection (*Let's just get through this; this cohort will soon be moving on*), (2) surface reflection (*Let's improve our technique, let's do it again but better*), (3) pedagogical reflection (*Let's get authoritative research that back this; there's definitely more theory on this*) and (4) critical reflection (*Just want is our frame of reference? What do we believe? How does this condition our practice? Are we doing what we say students should do?*)

The early levels of reflection are more passive and tentative in nature while the latter levels promote deeper thought, authenticity, and transparency that fundamentally provide opportunity for sincere change to emerge. As a result of this reflective process, the researcher gained a deeper insight into their practice toward more refined instructional approaches and encouraged other researchers to explore this important process.

Similar to MacKay and Tymon (2008), Gibbs' (1998, as cited in Quinton & Smallbone, 2010) reflection framework outlines six questions critical questions that assists with the analysis of an instructional instance that has the potential to reveal a deeper set of realities. The questions include: 1) Description- what happened? 2) Feelings- what did I feel about it? 3) Evaluation- was it a positive or negative experience? 4) Analysis- what sense can I make of the experience, where does it fit within my personal development? 5) Conclusion- what else could I have done? 6) Action plan- in a similar situation what would I do now? Gibbs (1998) suggests the framework for experiential learning that sums up the process of reflective learning. This research process employed Gibb's model in that it provided basic yet powerful questions that could be utilized to examine an incidence. This paper examines the reflective process of one African American tenure-track faculty during a singular semester at a private college in up-state New York.

3. Research Question

How relevant is it for an African American professor to utilize culturally responsive teaching practices with her predominantly white graduate students enrolled in a teacher education program?

4. Methodology

This self-analysis case study utilized a qualitative approach to examine a set of interactions during one semester through the lens of Gibb's reflective questions and highlighting tenants of culturally responsive teaching with a tenure-track African American professor.

5. The Case Study

5.1 What happened?

During the fall semester of my fourth year as full time tenure-track faculty in the graduate education program, I had what I believed to be the toughest semester ever. I was teaching a very high load (14.5 credit hours including two new courses) running an on-campus afterschool program and had been given the responsibility to spearhead a new component of the department and advising for a new set of students. The operative word in my scenario is—new. My learning curve was steep to say the least and I was encountering all sorts of student complaints and challenges as I attempted to navigate all the *newness* in my role. It was tough on me and I was stressed. I found myself blaming the students for their lack of diligence. I complained about their petty concerns. I was so detached from them. I found myself just not liking them at all. So here, I was uncomfortable with my load, with no help in sight and blaming the very people that I was supposed to be training.

I found myself falling into the very patterns that I have admonished teachers about in the past. I was feeling overwhelmed and I resorted to blame—something was wrong with this. Toward the end of all the mayhem, a deeper epiphany occurred. In the midst of all this, I also realized “who” my students really are. For a long while, graduate students were primarily comprised of working students, perhaps families of their own, returning to school to obtain an advanced degree. On the contrary, I found that I teaching a group of students in a graduate program who range from 22-26 years old. Many of my students had limited scopes on professional and life experiences—many still living at home with their parents and even have their parents come in to advocate for them. The information was right under my nose but I did not realize it. I had not taken into account “who” my students really were, the generational gap between us and perhaps just how culturally *irresponsive* I might have been.

Since culture is not restricted to race but includes ways of knowing, environmental factors, experiences and language and family, community and economic resources, it was (and continues to be) important for me to recognize the cultural realities of my students that impact the way they engage with learning in a college setting. Who are they? What do they need from me in order to be successful? These are the questions I began to ask myself.

5.2 What did I feel about it?

The reality of my dilemma generated feelings of disappointment in myself and my practice. I missed key information. I had not been paying close attention to “who” I was teaching—I was just teaching. In retrospect, I felt very ineffective to some degree. I felt like I was failing to model attentiveness to my students because I was not really using what I know as “best practices” of culturally responsive teaching with them. I did not really “know” my students but rather I was assuming things about them. Even though I was implementing good instruction with strong openings, movement, interactive activities, discussion, laughter, and coherent wrap-ups, I was still missing key elements in my practice. Perhaps, I may not have been relating to my students as much as I could. I did not feel good about this at all—in fact, I felt sick to my stomach many days after the semester ended. I felt like I lost the battle (the semester) but was determined to win the war (my teaching career). Of course, there were other factors that contributed to my experience—a very high teaching load and other outside responsibilities, both of which made it extremely challenges to effectively “see” my students. While there were outside mitigating factors affecting my attention, I still had an obligation to my students, right?

5.3 Was it a positive or negative experience?

At first glance, I would say this was a negative experience because I battled internal conflict. As much as I’d like to pin this experience as all negative, I have to own the other side of this coin. This experience opened my eyes. Not only did this experience nudge me to consider the significant impact that scheduling has on faculty efficacy, it also invited me to take a deep look at the way that I manage administrative responsibilities that impact instructional delivery. I began to question the ways that I respond to the “cultural realities” of my students. Do I know enough about my students to teach/interact with them effectively? Am I “validating” them and “empowering” them to see their place in the realm of education (Gay, 2000)? Am I lifting the veil of authority and modeling “emancipatory” experiences (Gay, 2000) so that they see that the knowledge does not lie with me exclusively? Am I providing opportunities for students to bring who they are to the learning environment through effective means? If I am honest with myself, I’d have to respond with a resounding “not exactly”. I had not done this for my students—not well and not this semester anyway. So while this experience was painful in many ways, I’d have to say that the disequilibrium catapulted me into a realm of change—change for the good, change that invites me to really consider what it means to be a “culturally responsive” teacher with students who do not share my cultural realities. Is this possible? It has to be or I have been teaching a lie for the past 10 years. If my White students can make a shift to meet the cultural needs of their ethnically diverse students, then I as an African American professor, should be able to meet them where they are as well.

5.4 What sense can I make of this experience, where does it fit within my personal development?

This experience highlights many important aspects of teaching and learning. I have committed myself to teaching—I absolutely love it! Even though I have been an educator for 20 years, this experience supports the notion of “life-long learning” in general and around the theory of “culturally responsive teaching”. While I know the theory thoroughly, I was looking at it only from the perspective of how current and future teachers are using this framework to effectively connect with their culturally and ethnically diverse K-12 students. I clearly saw the importance of communicating this information as tenants of effective instruction, but I missed how “I” might employ these same practices with my predominantly white graduate students. What does this mean? How does it look? Because I firmly support reflective practices as integral to teacher effectiveness, it makes sense that I am reflecting on my own practice, asking questions and was (and continue to be) prepared to make the necessary adjustment for effective change. Failure to do so implies that I am not “practicing what I teach” (MacKay & Tymon, 2013).

5.5 What else could I have done?

After my enlightening experience, I could have decided to reject my observations and maintain my status quo by doing nothing different thereby supporting Larrivee's (2008) initial level of reflection as "pre reflection" (they will get over it; let's move them along).

While this may not be the best choice, it would still align with some level of reflective practice. In my case, what I was doing was not as effective as I desired so change was necessary. Because I believe in culturally responsive teaching, I wonder what it really means to "validate" my students' cultural realities (ways of doing, being, expression, etc.). Perhaps by attending to the concerns that they present, I am intentionally being "responsive" and modeling effective practices. The "validating" component speaks to the legitimacy of culture (Gay, 2000) keeping in line with the broader understanding of culture to include: ways of knowing/doing, experiences, realities, etc. I realized that it would be important for me to make additional time to speak directly to my students and try to really get to know them better. In addition, creating assignments that tap into their beliefs and ideologies can also provide opportunities for insight and responsiveness. I believe in making this shift, I will gain insight into "who" they are so that I can consider how to infuse their perspectives into the learning experiences provided.

5.6 In a similar situation what would I do now?

As I approach each new teaching encounter, I am cognizant of taking time each class session to get to learn something new about my students. I am intentionally looking for opportunities to connect with them in authentic ways. I talk with them before and after class about non-related topics, just to get to know them better. I share things about my own personal life that links with the topics that I'm discussing and I am intentional about listening to their reactions. Additionally, I have learned how important it is that I respond to my students in a timely fashion with quality feedback—this has been an expressed concern from my students. Therefore, I have instituted a response window and strive to strictly adhere to this parameter. This standard has benefits for my students because they know what to expect, thus validating their performance during the course and it's beneficial for me because it assists me with time management. I am becoming increasingly aware that my students are conditioned to get immediate responses. So while I may not be able to deliver on immediate turn-around times, I believe that if I adhere to a standard for responding, this will decrease any anxiety and model *responsiveness* to their needs. In retrospect, I have a deeper appreciation for what "culture" really depicts. I am an African American woman from an urban environment, teaching a group of predominantly White students who have primarily grown up in middle class suburban or rural environments. I do not share the cultural realities of my students. In most cases, they do not look like me and in even deeper instances, I may be the first person of color they've had as an instructor. There are a lot of firsts for both sides. Despite the circumstances, I have the responsibility to do my best to model "responsive" practices with my students—not only because this is a concept I teach but just because attending to "who" they are is just good teaching (Powell, 2009).

6. External Factor/Competing Factors

Just as the K-12 environment is changing, teacher preparation programs are also changing. Heightened accountability, reduced enrollment, collapsed courses and limited faculty all inevitably foster the need to shift in the ways that we think and operate. Teacher preparation programs across the nation are under scrutiny, now more than ever, and there is a critical concern that we produce practitioners that are highly competent and highly qualified to enter the classrooms ready to teach all students—no exceptions (CAEP, 2015). Alongside the increase in accountability in teacher preparation programs, there is often a reduction in the supportive measures necessary to undergird junior faculty along their professional trajectory. My reflective journey, while focused on my personal experiences and intrinsic drive to continually improve my practice, was not fostered through a system that is proactively engaging faculty in practices that mirror those expected of our pre-service candidates. MacKay and Tymon (2013) posit that "specific developmental activities that explore tacit assumptions can reveal underlying contradictions in theoretical positions. A practice implication is that this iterative process requires time and space in a teaching programme to allow for the challenges of reflective practice" (p.652). Department meetings are laden with tasks, reports, and institutional requirements as opposed to discussions around publication ideas, conference presentations, student concerns, and collegial interactions. A focus on the latter would align with the set of instructional, environmental, and professional responsibilities that we, in teacher preparation, decree as critical to the development of teachers. It is not enough that we just teach about these elements, we have to embody these qualities as well.

7. Implications for future research

The research question, *how relevant is it for an African American professor to utilize culturally responsive teaching practices with her predominantly white graduate students enrolled in a teacher education program* still has elements that are left unanswered.

While I wholeheartedly ascribe to culturally responsive teaching as an effective method for infusing the cultural realities of ethnically diverse students, I am not certain if this paradigm is always appropriate when the roles are reversed. I do believe that because culturally responsive practices are founded on solid teaching methodology, it will of course, have elements that can be applied to any population. The most insightful part of this journey was that I lost sight of “who” I was teaching. I had the “what” but losing sight of the people that you are teaching and their needs is a serious concern. Of all the components of culturally responsive teaching, I believe that this aspect of attending to the realities of my students rang the loudest.

It is this truth that emerged from the reflective practice that would lead me to say that it is relevant for an African American professor to utilize culturally responsive teaching practices. As a means for additional research, I believe that it would be beneficial to explore the other components and examine the degree to which these are relevant. Furthermore, perhaps such research will lead to a different paradigm that encapsulates the cultural mismatch while attending to the authenticity of quality instructional practices.

8. Conclusion

Utilizing Gibb’s (1998) reflective questions to examine this self-analysis case study during one identified semester in the life of an African American tenure-track professor was quite enlightening. The questions provided an opportunity to unpack the experiences in a systematic fashion and gave way for my personal voice to be presented. Although this research endeavor did not result in a definitive answer to the research question, it did generate a reflective journey that has several positive implications. In line with the nature of research, one question opens the door to other questions. I suspect that the research will continue. My reflective journey may mirror that of other educators on a variety of levels—principals, district administrators, department chairs, deans, college presidents and beyond. This account is honest and sincere and offers a platform for the systemic realities that encompass what it means to be a reflective practitioner, researcher, and teacher educator. The marrying of theory and practice is the cornerstone of what we do in education but if we, as educators across the spectrum are not willing to take a long stare at our areas of “in need of improvement”, how then can we effectively be change agents for emergent educators? We must be willing to do the hard work and be a “responsive” model for those who are looking to us for guidance.

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