

1-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Fregeau, Laureen (2001) "Preparing Multicultural Educators: What Works According to Practicing and Future Teachers," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1211>

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Preparing Multicultural Educators: What Works According to Practicing and Future Teachers

by Laureen Fregeau

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I have been preparing teachers and pre-service teachers to be multicultural educators since 1990. Each year I ask my students what works best for them. My course activities and assignments evolve each year with the help of student suggestions. This article offers a theoretical framework for the assignments and activities students selected; summarizes what assignments and classroom activities students identified as most effective and enjoyable; and, shares specifics of each type of assignment.

The activities and assignments the students selected from are designed around a constructivist framework, including progressive (organic) and critical pedagogies. Student-centered and experiential learning are core approaches to the design of activities and assignments. Marietta Johnson (1997) believed in and developed a model for student-centered education in which students are guided through experiences that expand their world view and develop their sense of social justice. Johnson wrote, "Education is life, life is education" (1997:xiii). Activities and assignments are designed to follow Johnson's principles of experiential learning through mind, body and spirit. The Learning Pyramid ranks experiential learning¹ near the top of the hierarchy as a very effective teaching/learning approach (Gifford and Mullaney, 1997). Activities and assignments are also designed to develop a critical consciousness². Each activity or assignment raises critical multicultural issues of race, class, gender, or other sociopolitical determinants and is followed by discussion and meta-analysis connecting self, place and power³.

Activities and assignments are designed so that all learning styles will be accommodated and so that new styles will be developed. The activities and assignments incorporate Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. Gardner (1983) describes kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, logical/mathematical, spatial, linguistic intelligences (learning styles) and a new "naturalist" intelligence (Gardner, 1999). Individual students tend to prefer several of these intelligences over the others. Worthley connected cultural factors with learning style, thus confirming the importance of teachers understanding learning styles in order to be effective in their multicultural classrooms (Rokeach, 1969). Gregorc (1979) found that teachers teach most comfortably in their own learning styles, and thus usually their learning styles match their teaching styles. However, Dunn and Dunn (1993) found that students learn better when taught by their learning styles. If teachers are to understand the cultural connections to learning they must first gain an understanding of their own learning/teaching styles. The various activities of the course assist teachers in identifying their learning styles and making the connection between culture and teaching styles. I ask students to identify their preferred learning styles early in the semester and then review which of the assignments best fit their learning styles in their self-evaluation.

I collected student perspectives of assignment/activity effectiveness over a period of five years through three different formats. Formats were: student self-evaluations describing through which activities and assignments they learn best; course evaluations in "a letter to the instructor format" including descriptions of which activities and assignments they liked best and suggestions for modifications; and, oral discussions/informal interviews in class at the end of each term. More than two hundred fifty self-evaluations, five hundred letters to the instructor, and twenty class discussions/informal interviews have been used in this on-going research.

Students have identified a range of favorite activities and assignments by which they learn best. The most frequent response about the best-loved assignments and activities is "It was an eye-opening experience!" The most popular activities and assignments by far are those that involve learning by doing (active learning or discovery approaches). I have never had a student who did not include these activities in their list of favorites. This is true even when students identify themselves as primarily intrapersonal learners at the beginning of the semester while these assignments and activities are primarily interpersonal approaches to learning. These activities are often, although not always, described by the students as "fun."

Students who enjoy learning by doing, identified what I term "Experiential Cross-cultural Tasks" as effective for them. These tasks involve a series of experiences the students select from and then complete outside of class. Favorite experiences students selected included attending the service of a religion the student is not familiar with, participating in an event held in a language the student does not speak, and spending a day with a person they view as different (due to language, race, disability, etc.) Student comments about this assignment can be summed up as follows: "It is a wonderful way to learn about a culture." "Now I understand.", and, perhaps most importantly, "It was real!"

Classroom simulation activities were also identified as favorites. A frequent favorite among these activities is the non-English lecture. In this simulation students are taught a lesson through lecture in a language few are familiar with. They are then given a quiz on the lecture material in the same language the lecture was delivered. The activity ends with a discussion of the implications of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and its impact on students and teachers.

Disabilities Awareness Day (DAD) was another favorite classroom simulation. DAD activities consist of a series of simulations in through which the student "experiences" dyslexia, visual impairment, mobility impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment and several other disabilities. Visual impairment is simulated by a plastic wrap and paper scraps blindfold. Groups of blindfolded students are escorted by an unhelpful "guide" down corridors to the restroom, water fountain, and through closed doors. Students in wheelchairs or on crutches take a similar route. Throughout the route students must complete a set of tasks such as opening doors, locating rooms, and drinking water. Dyslexia is simulated as students copy and trace designs looking at them in a mirror. "Spotters" supervise all activities. A debriefing follows the activities. Students say, "It really made me stop and think (and feel) what those children have to go through." This is the classroom simulation most frequently "borrowed" by K-12 teachers to use in their own classrooms.

Dialogue journals are a favorite assignment of students who love to read and to express themselves through the written word. This assignment is designed to offer the "quiet writer" individualized attention from the instructor¹, the opportunity to relate text material to their life experiences, and feedback on their ideas from the instructor. One word of caution: give these back at the end of class! Upon receiving the journal back, students immediately become engrossed in reading responses from the instructor. Students frequently report, "I can't wait to read what you have written back to me!", "It helped me pay more attention to what is going on in the schools I work in.", and "I found myself at the computer with light bulbs going off in my head."

Group work and class discussions were popular, particularly among interpersonal learners. Students learned well from interaction and sharing of experiences and ideas of others. Students wrote for example, "I learned a lot just from listening to everyone share their experiences." Students are regularly invited to share their experiential assignments as well as personal experiences that shed light on our understanding of the issues on the table for discussion. Most students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to freely express their opinion. One class rule is that we must all respect each other's opinion even if we disagree. Interpersonal learner enjoyment also included guest speakers who "broaden perspectives and enhanced class discussion."

Students ranked term projects high as "valuable learning experiences." Students wrote, for example, "I learned more through this project than through any other course assignments." These projects offer an in-depth look at a culture, identification, investigation and reform of a multicultural problem in the student's (currently employed teachers) school⁴, or examination of a school's multicultural issues from various perspectives (community members, teachers, students, parents). Topic and approach are selected according to the student's interests. Term projects are popular because they are student centered, include experiential as well as reflective components, develop a critical consciousness, can address all learning styles, and promote an understanding of the student's power to reach diverse students and make a difference in society.

Finally, students enjoyed what one of my students describes as "flip-flop activities." These activities are designed to not necessarily shock, but to "flip-flop" a student's perspective. Some student favorites include a historical bias history test and a cartoon showing the Cleveland Indians hat. The historical bias test lists seven Americans whose accomplishments most students can readily identify (e.g. Paul Revere and Benjamin Franklin), followed by seven Americans whose accomplishments were similar, but whose names are generally unknown by students. The "flip-flop" in student perspective happens when students realize all the individuals contributed equally to the USA, and while the names they know are all of whites, those they do not know are all African Americans. The cartoon asks the students if the labeling is problematic. Caricatures of different groups are shown as "team symbols" beginning with the Cleveland Indians caricature, proceeding to the "Juneau Jews," and finally to the "Niagara Negroes." Students do not have a problem with the Cleveland Indians until the "flip-flop" when they consider how they would feel about "Niagara Negroes."

In summary, the various activities of the course assist teachers to:

1) develop a deep understanding of cross-cultural and multicultural issues that can affect

education;

2) understand educational system barriers associated with culture and develop the desire to eliminate them⁵;

3) realize the importance of educating from the "language [or culture] of the educands" rather than the "language [or culture]⁶ of the educators" (Freire, 1995);

4) identify their learning styles and making the connection between culture and teaching styles; and,

5) experience approaches through which teachers can effectively reach students of diverse cultures⁷.

There is little argument that teachers need to be prepared to deal with a multicultural classroom. They need to be able to prepare students to live in an increasingly multicultural society and global community. They need to be able to understand all their students' diverse backgrounds and use this understanding to create a classroom in which all students feel welcome and empowered. Activities and assignments that draw practicing and future teachers into a deeper understanding of the need for multicultural understanding contribute to a positive future for America's schools.

Notes

1. 1. The experiential model used fits Wolsk's (1974) Four Stages model and incorporates elements of Marietta Johnson's (1997) progressive organic pedagogy.
2. 2. Critical consciousness involves awareness of oneself, one's and others' place in the sociopolitical structure, and how that place is tied to race, social class, gender, and other sociological determinants. See Freire (1972, 1985) and Giroux (1988).
3. 3. A central tenet of the interactive/experiential model is that talking and writing are means to learning (Brunetti, 1977).
4. 4. For more on this reform project approach see Fregeau and Leier (1997)
5. 5. For additional explanation of the root of this concept see Freire (1995) p. 205.
6. 6. [or culture] added by the author for clarification.
7. 7. These match the suggestions Shade (1989) found common to most research on promoting academic success culturally different students.

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