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Like Peeling an Onion: An Examination of Cultural Identity Among Adult Learners

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Abstract: This paper describes the results of a study concerning the cultural identity of adult learners in graduate programs at the University of Georgia. Employing analytic induction research design the research team, itself a culturally diverse group of graduate students and professors, analyzes focus group transcript data. The conclusion is reached that verbal statements aside, cultural identity is complex and manifested situationally. Adult educators are advised to adopt sophisticated tools to assess learner identity issues in order to challenge learners to think more critically about their assumptions and biases toward those who are culturally different.

Introduction

This study is part of a larger research project related to addressing race, class, gender and other forms of structured cultural difference into adult graduate classes. While the central purpose was to establish baseline data and to refine the research team's operating assumptions about learners' beliefs and attitudes toward cultural diversity and multicultural education, research team members actually learned a great about themselves as well as how cultural identity is manifested in classroom as well as real life situations. Participants in the study included students enrolled in adult education and vocational studies graduate level programs. The study was initiated in the context of a College-wide multicultural initiative at the university where we work and study. This report constitutes an in-depth analysis of focus group interviews with students during the 1996-97 school year. Our view is that since graduate students are both the consumers and the creators of knowledge as they matriculate through their academic programs, its important to understand the ways in which they construct their cultural identity as a marker for understanding how to plan instruction while confronting social inequalities in the classroom. The quality and nature of students' learning, especially in the context of multicultural education, is significantly influenced by the attitudes, beliefs, and understandings about race, gender, nationality, homophobia etc, they carry into the classroom (Colin and Preciphs, 1991, Tisdell, 1993). Consequently, the goal of this research was to discover how students understand and think about multicultural education as gauged by their cultural identity.

Methodology

We have conducted this research using analytic induction strategies (Robinson, 1951; Znaniecki, 1934). Husband and Foster (1987) define this strategy as a "systematic attempt to code data while also generating a framework about the data being coded" (p. 56). Our primary research emphasis was on the identification of negative cases that refuted the preliminary assumptions of the investigator as well as on the identification and analysis of cases that are confirmatory. To do this we employed a cultural identity theoretical framework, adapted from Geneva Gay's synergetic model of ethnic identity (1987), in order to assess the beliefs, values, and assumptions that learners hold about their cultural identity and how they view cultural diversity. We used this information as a way to test our own assumptions about course educational course planning. We also looked for ways to refine our assumptions until all

examples were accounted for and explained (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). No analytic induction research is ever considered final. From this perspective, reality is viewed as incessant and constantly changing (Znaniecki, 1934).

According to Patton (1990) an inductive approach begins with experiences of each individual where the focus is on "full understanding of individual cases before those unique cases are combined or aggregated" (p.45). Therefore, patterns that emerged as a whole were examined following an initial analysis of individual cases.

The data were collected via focus group interviews. Six focus groups were held with from three to 12 persons in each group. The groups were diverse in terms ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, language, religion, and region of the country. The interviews lasted from an hour to an hour and half and were conducted by graduate student research assistants. Interviews were tape recorded and the data transcribed.

Analysis of the data was conducted in two rounds. An initial round of open-coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was performed to identify general categories and to gain an initial familiarity with the data. A second round of analysis was performed using a cultural identity grid (see below) to assess learner cultural identity. Inferences were made on the basis of how learners described their experiences with diversity in their lives, within the university community, and in their classrooms and programs of study.

Initial Assumptions. The research team developed the questions that were used during the focus group interviews. Those questions were based on assumptions that interact to form a framework for this study.

Exposure to culturally diverse groups enhances a multicultural perspective.

Learners believe that cultural diversity will have an impact on the quality of their lives and future careers.

Students generally hold strong views toward multicultural education.

Learners experience diversity issues within the wider university community.

Learners' attitudes about cultural diversity are manifested in classroom interactions.

Learners' attitudes about cultural diversity are manifested in life experiences.

It is important to include Learners in the process of multicultural curriculum reform.

Theoretical Framework. As the foregoing assumptions suggest, adults bring into the classroom perspectives on themselves as cultural beings and that of others who are culturally different. Recent reports from the literature suggest that classroom dynamics are affected by the preconceptions, biases, and perspectives that learners bring (Tisdell, 1993; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996, Humphrey-Brown, 1997; Guy & Milo, 1996). Cultural preconceptions that are bound up with learners cultural identity inevitably manifest themselves in classrooms and affect how learners value and treat others across the boundaries of race, gender, social class, sexual preference and so on. Our study is premised on a view of multicultural education that opens up the learning environment to examine and challenge monocultural, and therefore culturally oppressive, forms of interaction that affect the quality of the learning experience for some if not all learners. Darder (1991) argues that biculturalism should frame educational environments. She defines biculturalism as "a process wherein individuals learn to function in two distinct sociocultural environments: their primary culture, and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live (48)."

Biculturalism is based on a philosophy of cultural democracy (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974) which says that every individual has the right to maintain a bicultural identity, that is to maintain her or his home or individual culture as well as to become competent in the mainstream culture. This view of biculturalism is related to the "double consciousness" concept of Du Bois (1902) who wrote that African Americans maintained a double consciousness by

virtue of being both African and American. This double-consciousness could not be transcended but, du Bois argued, could be reconciled, given the right social circumstances. This concept of double consciousness of cultural identity is extended to other cultural groups in the concept of cultural democracy (Darder, 1991).

In order to assess learner cultural identity we developed a model of cultural identity adapted from Gay’s model of synergetic ethnic identity (1987). The model is structured in three stages: pre-encounter, encounter, and post-encounter. These stages are not necessarily developmental. In fact, depending on the aspect of cultural difference under consideration, an individual may find him or herself in different stages. The model is also organized along two dimensions—aspect of diversity and value orientation to cultural difference. From an analysis of interview data we identify where in the model best fit. Our purpose is to examine how students as a whole see themselves in order to validate, modify, or reject our assumptions.

Cultural Identity Model

General structure of the model	Dimensions of the model
<p>Pre-encounter-naïve awareness of cultural difference</p> <p>Encounter—struggling to understand cultural difference and to make sense of one’s own identity in light of experiences with cultural differences. Characterized by conflict, struggle, and searching for answers.</p> <p>Post Encounter— resolving conflicts having to do with cultural differences. Adopting an attitude of openness, tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Behaving in ways that manifest justice and inclusion.</p>	<p>Aspects of diversity, e.g., gender, race, etc.—what aspects of cultural d difference are exhibited or addressed by the learner.</p> <p>Value orientation to diversity (naïve awareness, stereotypes, uncertainty, r retrenchment, or acceptance, tolerance, openness)— in what ways does the lea learner describe his or her experiences with cultural difference? What is the quali diversity of the learner’s experience with cultural difference and with his or he own identified as well as ascribed cultural group?</p>

Our research questions, then, concerned the experiences of learners relative to cultural difference and how they described those experiences. The questions we asked them had to do with their experiences in life, within the university at large, and within their classes and individual programs of study.

Assessing identity: like peeling an onion. We were struck by the fact that most participants in the study were either at the pre-encounter or encounter stage. Only in a few instances did learners manifest any degree of resolution with respect to their own cultural identity. Many participants spoke of a general acceptance, if not support for multicultural programs, but this rhetorical acceptance was belied in the way they described their actual experiences. A case in point will help to illustrate the complexity, and often ambiguity that learners, experience in dealing with their cultural identity.

We present an excerpt from Alice (not her real name). Alice is a young mother who is pursuing a master’s degree in adult education. She is white and has spent almost all of her childhood overseas. Her father was a military man who traveled outside the country. Not until Alice is a young woman does she return to the United States We have selected Alice’s case for discussion because it produced a great deal of discussion within our research team as to how to understand her.

Alice:

Although, you know, and they're just "I don't believe I've ever seen a black face in Alto, Georgia" and my mother-in-law, a lot of times would like to get me riled up by talking about black people...cuz she knew I couldn't stand that, I couldn't stand hearing anything about...you know, negative, and so she would get a kick out of doin' that...and now that I'm divorced, and my child doesn't see them that often, but she sees them, and I know how my mother-in-law likes to play that game...and I'm afraid she's gonna try that with my child...so I'm...I was more concerned for her... I'd... you know I'm stuck here for awhile...and I would like to take her back overseas so that she would have the benefit of growing up the way I did, just kind of...you know, without all this, this baggage...um, so, I signed her up for the East Athens dance program...I forget what it's called, and she just got a flyer from school, I didn't know what it was, and um, when she went the first time, she was the only white student n the class...and all the other little girls were African American, and that...um, I just, that's what she needed...she needed to interact, not just in the school setting, but you know, in a play setting, with a lot of different cultures, and then we also live in family housing so there's...all, her friends are like a rainbow...and that's good too, but that's my main concern that she does not pick up some of the attitudes that I was seeing in her around here...

In this passage Alice chooses to talk about her beliefs about race in the context of her daughter. Evidently, she married into a family in which her husband's mother is openly racist. Elsewhere Alice describes how she doesn't understand the emphasis that is placed by whites on race since, in the countries where she was raised, there was much less emphasis on racial difference than on other kinds of cultural differences. As a matter of fact she says that she didn't really appreciate that she was "white" until she came to live the United States. She never says that she confronted her mother-in-law (and elsewhere in the transcript we're led to believe that her mother-in-law's attitudes are typical of other members of her example-husband's family as well as her ex-husband). However, she clearly wants her daughter to be sheltered from these views and approvingly allows her daughter to enroll in a dance school which is run by an African American dance instructor and is attended by mostly African American young women.

In examining this passage, we clearly saw her struggle to combat the racist perspectives of her in-laws which she was forced to deal because of her daughter. On the other hand, she has not taken any steps to confront them. We see this as possibly intersecting with her view of herself as a woman, a southern woman at that, who is struggling to maintain family relationships in the context of clearly objectionable racist feelings. What she wants for her daughter, that is an avoidance of exposure to white racist beliefs, reflects her own values about black/white differences. But she does not bring herself to act on these beliefs in a direct way relative to her mother-in-law. What, then, are we to make of this narrative. As a diverse research team, we struggled ourselves to interpret this data. We clearly saw that she was at in the encounter stage, *with respect to race*. But was she in the post-encounter stage?

This passage and our analysis points to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of cultural identity. Elsewhere in the transcript Alice had made the general statement that she was not prejudiced against anyone. Yet as our analysis suggests, this general statement translated into action in very considered ways, depending on the issues at stake. Furthermore, our assessment is that her identity as a white person, struggling to resolve how she should handle situations with which she was uncomfortable (e.g., her mother-in-law's racist attitudes) must be understood in the context of her role as a divorced wife of a southern family living in a part of the state where very few African Americans live or work and where openly racist attitudes are manifest.

Implications and Conclusion

This presentation presents only a thumbnail sketch of the complex issues involved in understanding learners past experiences and their cultural identity. Representations by learners that they are unbiased must be taken with caution. How learners construct their identity in learning environments depends on their cultural identity but also on what's at stake in the context of that environment (Sleeter, 1990). Simplistic representations of learners as black or white, as male or female, and so on do injustice to educators who want to seriously confront race, class, or gender issues in the classroom and further create problems by reinforcing prejudicial and stereotypical thinking (Ahlquist,

1991; Ellsworth, 1989). We regard the cultural identity model as one important way to assess learners as a preliminary step to challenging them to examine the assumptions they have about themselves and about cultural different individuals.

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