Islands of Empowerment: Facilitating Multicultural Learning Communities in College

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Multiculturally congruent classroom learning environments have remained elusive in United States higher education as colleges strive to recruit, retain, and educate an increasingly diverse population. Frustrations run high amongst domestic and international students of color who find collegiate classrooms in the United States difficult to negotiate and often pedagogically incongruent with their own ways of learning and interacting. This article offers findings from a qualitative research study of four professors identified as multiculturally empowering by minority and international students in their college. Results are derived from three qualitative methods of data collection including faculty interviews, student interviews, and classroom observations. Findings suggest six elemental dynamics necessary for college professors to develop and facilitate empowering multicultural learning communities: (a) climate of safety, (b) spirit of risk taking, (c) congruence, (d) reciprocal relationships and roles, (e) multiplicity, and (f) reciprocity. Implications for teaching in cross-cultural collegiate environments are included.

You know, I would have thought that a university as diverse as this one, in a state known for its tri-cultural populations and bordering Mexico, would have provided me with an educational experience more in line with my Mexican American heritage. Finding a few professors who do create this kind of classroom experience for me is like finding *islands of empowerment* within a stormy and dangerous sea. I'm not sure that I would still be here without these rare opportunities to breathe more easily and find myself reflected in the curriculum, the classroom activities, the conversation styles, and to feel like the professor kind of gets me. What amazes me is that it has not always been just Latino professors or even professors of color who have created this for me. I have some White professors who do this too and so I know that others could if they wanted to. Don't they want to? -- Ramona, Mexican American teacher education student

This very articulate student highlights a continuing challenge for collegiate teaching faculty to develop cross-cultural pedagogies and classroom climate. Even within the broad racial, ethnic, cultural, and national diversity of the United States, college classroom environments and teaching strategies have changed little in the several hundred years that colleges have been in existence in this country (Ibarra, 2002; Johns & Kelley Sipp, 2004; Viernes Turner, 1994). Some theoretical models on developing effective multicultural teaching practices and classroom elements exist in the literature on adult learning and college teaching, yet these are almost entirely based on faculty experiences and observations and there is little empirical research available (Chávez, 2007).

The study summarized in this article contributes to the small body of existing research by reporting and illustrating findings from a semester-long qualitative study of classroom environments facilitated by four college professors identified by students of color as *multiculturally empowering teachers*. The study focuses on elemental classroom dynamics necessary to the creation of multiculturally empowering learning communities as defined by students of color taking classes with these professors. These dynamics are illustrated through faculty and student narrative as well as through descriptions from observations of classroom dynamics and techniques. For the purposes of this study, a multicultural learning community is defined by Strong (as cited in Barr & Strong, 1988) as one that is "sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive, and responsive environment, is working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its ongoing operations, and is authentic in its response to issues confronting it" (p. 85). The driving research question for this study was "What are the elements of an empowering multicultural collegiate learning community and how is it developed, facilitated, and maintained?"

Multicultural Education in U.S. Colleges and Universities

Today's classroom in U.S. higher education is made up of a wide variety of students with varying life experiences, cultural influences, learning styles, types of ability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, spiritual philosophy, values, and priorities. Each individual brings his/her own collection of traits, experiences, and knowledge into the classroom. Involving each individual as a whole being and as a constantly developing presence creates an empowering learning process within each classroom (Morey & Kitano, 1997; Rogers, 1961). Because every classroom learning community is a collective of diverse

individuals interacting with each other and with the topic, each must go through its own formation. Facilitating the learning process of any group is challenging; facilitating the learning process for a highly diverse group presents even more extensive challenges (Alfred, 2002).

Students of color, legally defined ethnic minority students including African American, Native American, Hispanic American, and Asian/Pacific Islander American, as well as some groups of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges continue to report experiencing few collegiate environments built on their own cultural rhythms. These students are graduating at much lower rates than those from other ethnic groups (Ibarra, 2002; Johns & Kelley Sipp, 2004; NEA, 2006). Ibarra (2002) found that students describe having to negotiate environments that are inconsistent with their own ways of learning, cultural norms, and personal priorities. This cultural norming, appropriate for a few ethnic groups, originated in Germany and England and was imported as a collegiate model to serve wealthy, Caucasian American, protestant, males in the U.S. (Rich, 1993). Strange (2000, p. 21) describes the basis for this phenomenon of educational environments remaining culturally incongruent to specific populations as follows:

An environment inhabited mostly by individuals of one characteristic or type is said to be highly differentiated and consistent. This would be the case with a class where all students share the same major or a residence hall where residents are of the same gender. An environment dominated by a single and consistent type accentuates its own characteristics over time (Astin 1985); attracting, satisfying, and retaining individuals who share the dominant features. The quality of anyone's experience is therefore a function of his or her congruence or degree of fit with the dominant group. An individual placed in an incompatible environment is less likely to be reinforced for preferred behaviors, values, attitudes, and expectations. The likelihood of that person's leaving the environment is increased.

Though much attention has been paid since the 1970s to the retention of students of color in colleges, little attention or study has been given to the ways in which different cultural groups learn as adults. Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004, p. 18) urge, "In the 4th decade of multiculturalism, one's ability to engage in deeply multicultural practices and pedagogies is no longer constrained to ones membership in the group served and is the daily responsibility of every educator." So why has cross-cultural collegiate pedagogy and classroom climate not received more attention by researchers?

Unlike K-12 educational realms where much research and cross-cultural theory on teaching strategies is available (see for example Banks, 1994; Banks & McGee Banks, 2004; Bennett, 2006; Nieto, 2002), almost no empirical research and very little theoretical work has been done in the U.S. on cross-cultural adult or collegiate classroom learning (Chávez, 2007; Ibarra, 2002; Johns & Kelley Sipp, 2004). Even with almost 50 years of cross culturally integrated colleges; the U.S. shows little deep reflection, pedagogical method development, or research of classroom dynamics to improve the learning and success rates of underrepresented and/or disenfranchised student populations. Most multicultural pedagogical practice and research has been left to those within cultural group faculty who show an interest in this area (Ibarra, 2002). Tenure and promotion systems for faculty usually don't reward and often discourage this type of research (Viernes Turner, 1994).

Of the literature addressing both U.S. college teaching and adult learning, most of it is philosophical or theoretical (Alfred, 2002; Bustamante Jones, 2004; Gardner, Dean & McKaig, 1989; Howell & Tuitt, 2003; Johns & Kelley Sipp, 2004; TuSmith & Reddy, 2002; Wise & Glowacki-Dudka, 2004; Wlodkowski, & Ginsberg, 1995; Ziegahn, 2001); focused on sensitivity and awareness practices (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003); suggests faculty characteristics necessary to work across cultures (Weinstein & Obear, 1992; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003), or reports the impact of ethnically diverse demographics on learning (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2006). Almost none of it provides results of empirical study of multicultural pedagogies or elements effective in college classrooms. The term multicultural education is typically defined in U.S. higher education as the development of sensitivity, awareness, and interpersonal skills necessary to live and work across differences (Goodstein, 1994).

In essence, researchers are focused mostly on studying how adult and college learners and faculty interact across cultures and on what knowledge is disseminated but not on evolving the ways we learn in congruence with a variety of cultural ways of being. Banks (1994) points out the need to go deeper than any one aspect to focus on five dimensions of multicultural education with children including the following elements. These dimensions are also important in collegiate environments and will benefit from empirical research; they include (a) content integration, (b) the knowledge construction process, (c) prejudice reduction, (d) equity pedagogy, and (e) an empowering school culture and social structure. Tisdell (1995) provides important theoretical groundings for developing more culturally relevant teaching and learning environments for adults. Unfortunately, most

of her citations related to these recommendations are theoretical or experiential rather than empirical in nature, including (a) integrate affective and experiential knowledge with theoretical concepts, (b) pay attention to the power relations inherent in knowledge production, (c) be aware that participants are positioned differently in relationship to each other and to the knowledge being acquired, (d) acknowledge the power disparity between the teacher/facilitator and the students, (e) consider the levels of inclusivity and the levels of contexts involved in the educational activity, (f) adopt emancipatory teaching strategies, (g) be conscious of the ways in which unconscious behavior contributes to challenging or reproducing unequal power relations, and (h) build a community based on both openness and intellectual rigor to create a democratic classroom. Bennett and Bennett (1994), in their research on multiculturalism in international education, provide a very helpful evolutionary description of moving toward multicultural pedagogy. They describe five strategy eras in cross-cultural education. These theorists point out that each of these strategies is essential yet not enough on its own and that it is necessary that faculty develop multicultural pedagogies on a widespread basis. Strategies include (a) greater diversity by numbers, (b) special services for diverse populations, (c) campus climate focus, (d) integration of the curriculum, and (e) multicultural pedagogy – a call for the cross-cultural adaptation of teaching methods in line with varying cultural norms, learning styles, cognitive processing, and social definitions of learning.

Teaching effectively across cultures continues to be a very real challenge for a nation that is home to individuals from every other country in the world, every language, every cultural practice, and every philosophy. It is no accident that graduation rates continue to remain lowest for those populations farthest culturally from the pedagogical practices currently the norm in U.S. colleges (NEA 2006). Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller (2004, p.6) suggest, "With our current demographics, continuing low rates of graduation of many student groups and the regular issues arising in all areas of college campuses – it is no longer defensible to rely solely on 'multicultural experts'." As teaching faculty we must continue to develop in our ability to teach effectively across cultures. Many of the cross-cultural dimensions proposed theoretically by Banks (1994), Bennett and Bennett (1994), and Tisdell (1995) are supported by the findings of this study.

The Study

Positionality

I became interested in conducting empirical research on cross cultural college teaching and learning after many years of working with students of color as a faculty member, campus leader, and seminar facilitator for faculty and staff on working effectively with diverse populations. When I began to realize that I was using teaching methods based in my own Native and Spanish American upbringing, both polychronic cultures that were different from most faculty colleagues (mostly from monochronic cultures), I became curious about the implications. Monochronic cultures utilize individualistic, linear, hierarchical, and task orientations as foundations for assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Polychronic cultures utilize collective, circular, collaborative, and relational orientations as foundations for assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors (Ibarra, 2002). Numerous graduate students of color from the U.S. and other countries expressed to me that I was the first college professor they had ever worked with who used methods and interactive classroom dynamics that were similar to those in their families and cultures. I was quite startled to hear this and realized over time that I had rarely experienced during my own studies, at different universities, the ways of teaching and learning that are common to my home area in northern New Mexico. Over time, it has become important to me to transition from the study of other aspects of diversity on college campuses to direct inquiry in the area of cross cultural college teaching. Because there is so little empirical research in this area and in order to gain a deep and complex understanding of multicultural dynamics in college teaching, I chose to use qualitative research design for this study.

Context of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted in the College of Education at a large research university in the southwestern United States. I chose a university other than my own that was also in a southwestern state and has a similar ethnic make up of students of color and faculty. This institution has a marked difference in ethnic make up between students and faculty. At the time of this study, demographics for this institution included a significant percentage of U.S. minority students (24.1%) from primarily Hispanic and Native American as well as some Black and Asian/Pacific Islander populations. International students also made up a significant percentage (7.3%) of students at this university and travel from 124 countries to seek undergraduate and graduate degrees. In contrast, the vast majority of faculty at this university originate primarily from Caucasian ethnic groups (86%) and are U.S. born (95%). The College of Education was chosen in part because, at that time, it had one of the most ethnically diverse student populations at this university and faculty had many international and minority students in their classes. In addition, I chose to conduct

this first research study on multicultural teaching in a college that is focused on teaching and learning as a discipline. My hope was that education faculty and students would be able to articulate educational concepts in a full and complex manner.

Philosophical Framework

This study was based on a theoretical philosophy of constructivism as useful to developing an emergent understanding of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Taking a constructivist approach to research acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and constantly changing (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; McMillan & Wergin, 2006). This framework is effective for capturing the evolving experiences of students in higher education across identity differences such as race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality. A constructivist approach opens the way to listen to multivocality of participants and then search systematically for thematic patterns (Chávez, 1998). In addition, it makes possible learning from the engagement of emergent research methods (Schram, 2006). Last, working from a constructivist framework urges partnering with participants to delve deeply into a particular phenomenon and suggests a hopeful stance toward the future.

Sites of Study

To select multicultural learning environments to study, I selected four college professors identified through an e-mail survey of all of the minority and international students in the College of Education. I chose to utilize minority and international students as identifiers because of the common experience of marginalization among minority and international students. These students are likely to feel culturally disempowering differences in their educational experiences in a predominately white U.S. university (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Adelman (1997) and others have found that U.S. minority students and international students studying in the U.S. overwhelmingly define multiculturalism in concrete applied ways such as the expansion of curriculum and changing of teaching methods while Caucasian American students define it in numerical, demographic terms such as numbers of students in an academic discipline. As an educator of Spanish and Native American origin with three years of early education in a country other than my own, I have learned through cross cultural and cross national experiences that education is constructed in very culturally determined ways. I believe that minority and international students are helpful informants in identifying whether and how a teacher is working multiculturally in the classroom.

In the e-mail survey, I requested that students identify professors in the College whom they felt were empowering multicultural educators. I asked the students themselves to define empowerment in their own way. I received 87 e-mail replies from students.

Participants

Students identified a variety of professors in both undergraduate and graduate education and, after doing some cross checking, I found six who had each been identified by at least ten minority and/or international students as empowering multicultural educators. Because of my own time constraints, I chose four professors (two male and two female; one professor self identified as Mexican American, one as East Indian raised in India, one as German and English American, and one as African American; one professor was in teacher education, one in sociocultural studies in education, one in special education, and one in educational leadership). I approached each to allow me to observe one of their classroom learning environments for the semester, interview them individually, and interview students in the class. All agreed to participate. From each class, I chose to interview five students (three students self-identified according to college records as U.S. ethnic minority status, one as an international student, and one student self-identified according to college records as Caucasian). I interviewed an equal number of male and female students. Student majors included sociocultural studies in education, higher education, teacher education, special education, educational leadership, and bilingual education. One class had 17 students, two classes had approximately 25 students, and one class had 60 students. Student and faculty participant motivation for choosing to be a part of the study ranged from "wanting to help make it clear what works for multicultural learning and teaching," "making a difference for my people," "to see what I can learn as a future teacher," and to "honor those professors who are making a difference in the lives of students of color." Participants are identified here by pseudonym.

Methods

In congruence with constructivist frameworks, I chose to utilize several forms of qualitative data collection methods to remain as open as possible to a full range of data, participant perspectives, and unexpected findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For this part of the study, I was interested in broad dynamics within the environments that served as underlying principles and manifested through specific pedagogical techniques, classroom dynamics, and teacher/student interactions. I utilized three methods

(Creswell, 2007) to collect data: (a) three semi-structured individual interviews of each of the four faculty - one prior to the start of the semester, one at midterm, and one after the semester ended; (b) individual semi-structured interviews with five students from each class conducted between midterm and the end of the semester; and (c) three observations of each classroom environment. I taped each individual interview and added notes afterwards to maximize my ability to focus my full attention on participants. I took extensive notes during each participant observation of classes as I was able to observe from the back of the class and minimize disruption. Within these semi-structured interviews and observations, the following topics served as my guide:

- How is a multiculturally empowering learning environment defined by individual students and faculty? How does it feel? How does it matter in the educational process?
- What specific elements of classroom facilitation and dynamics make it empowering multiculturally? How do these manifest in the classroom environment?
- What specific elements of classroom facilitation and dynamics disrupt or detract from a learning community being multiculturally empowering? How do these play out in the actual classroom environment?

Data Analysis

To develop "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and gain a deep sense of the classroom as a multicultural learning community, I first utilized thematic analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994). I categorized specific dynamics and components common to the four communities and/or common amongst teacher and/or student identification of aspects important within an empowering multicultural learning community. Surprisingly, the themes emerged quite strongly. I found that the minority and international students as well as the four professors interviewed were especially articulate in outlining what I refer to as elemental dynamics of empowering multicultural learning communities. Caucasian merican students provided vivid descriptions of the uncomfortable yet positive challenge of learning in environments with elements outside of their own educational experiences and cultural norms. Second, I developed a systematic coding method (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) to analyze and reduce data according to themes found, theoretical categories from the literature, and to search for outlying and more subtle themes.

Findings

The findings from this study suggest that these four professors, in partnership with students, created multiculturally empowering learning communities in which each individual was able to find ways of learning congruent or natural with their own cultural ways of being as well as be challenged by new ways of learning. In addition, these learning communities offered a place where individuals worked together to construct knowledge and question established norms. In the words of bell hooks (1994, p.147), these learning communities were involved in "education as the practice of freedom" across identity and background differences. During this study, each learning community ventured into places in which individuals moved between the intimate and the public across differences to explore subject areas with excellence and rigor; in which, they continually made commitments to stay engaged in the learning community through multiple perspectives and controversy (Rogers, personal communication, November 1997); and experienced the joy and pain of learning from each other as individuals and as a collective. These professors, in collaboration with their students, were able to create learning atmospheres where students as well as the teacher experienced an effective balance of challenge and support (Kegan, 1998).

Six Elemental Dynamics of Empowering Multicultural Learning Communities

The findings of this study suggest six elemental dynamics critical to empowering or liberating individual learning communities in higher education: (a) climate of safety, (b) spirit of risk taking, (c) congruence, (d) proactivity, (e) multiplicity, and (f) reciprocity. To varying extents, these elements were apparent in the learning communities studied. In these learning communities,teachers worked with all students to create collective, empowering learning experiences that utilized and honored multicultural realities within a shared and rigorous academic experience. One participated explained,

> For my parents who emigrated here from China, traditional education was very hierarchical and competitive with much rote memorization. I grew up in that kind of family and yet my folks were very kind and went to great lengths to allow me to save face while I was learning. My own educational experience here in the U.S. has also been very hierarchical, competitive, and filled with rote memorization but it is often without the

FIGURE 1
Elements of an Empowering Multicultural Leaning Environment
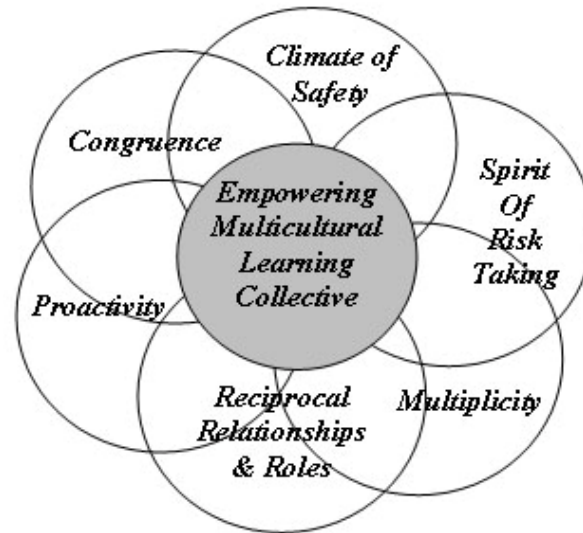
kindness or avenues for maintaining my dignity. I notice that most professors don't seem to acknowledge my ideas. I say something and they pass right over it onto another student as though I never spoke. Learning even now in graduate school seems mostly rote, perhaps more complex but still, most professors don't care about what I think, my critique or my interpretations. This is really debilitating. But with two of my professors who are both in this study, my experience has been really different. It is as though they see me when others don't. -- Amy Pan, Chinese American educational leadership graduate student

In an empowering multicultural learning community, students are believed to be fully capable of learning in their own ways and stretching into other ways as well (Leaver, 1997). The remainder of this article will consist of an overview of the six emergent elements (see Figure 1) for empowering individual learning communities in a higher education setting. Throughout this article, I provide theoretical insight, observations, and respondent narrative to illustrate ideas and concepts for each of the six elemental dynamics.

Climate of Safety

Two professors in this study, Dr. Ross and Dr. Torres, have really inspired me by showing me a different way of working with students. They both create safe classes by developing guidelines for respectful interaction and then actually holding us to those guidelines….because you know it is often comments from other students that are the worst.

One thing I really notice, that is similar to my own culture, is how these professors invite students into discussions. It's not a dog-eat-dog scramble to speak. They each invite me to add my insights. If I've been quiet for awhile, Dr. Torres asks me if I have anything to add and Dr. Ross actually gives out three cards to students at the beginning of some classes and laughingly challenges us to make sure that everyone uses their three cards! What fun that is, and what a shock! The students who usually talk too much have to make room for us introverts and we are all responsible for making it happen. – Reva, Navajo special education student –

All of the teachers and students interviewed emphasized the need for a feeling of safety as essential to any empowering environment. Support, trust, respect, individual dignity, respectful confrontation, an absence of judgment, power with each other rather than over each other, and minimization of the effects of hierarchy were all expressed as essential to creating a culture of safety. Over time, a culture of safety can be developed and maintained within a variety of environments. Dr. Nair described this as "A place that is supportive, not necessarily without question, but appreciates one's own talent so that you can move forward." George, an African American student studying special education noted that "students are important and deserve respect, attention, and assistance. We are not helpless and we have much to contribute." People need to be able to feel safe enough to take risks, to share their ideas, and learn from each other. Several persons interviewed shared that one indicator of a safe environment is the willingness of students to challenge the person with titled authority. I noticed in my

observations that these teachers encouraged, welcomed, and incorporated respectful challenge of readings, peers, and themselves. Felicia, a Mexican American student in teacher education, described the ripple effect of a safe, empowering learning environment, "people start changing and that changes not only their lives, it changes the system because they stop participating in the way the system is made. They stop following the rules and begin assisting in creating them."

The role of the teacher then is to facilitate the development of "safety" guidelines by the collective, to facilitate accountability for those guidelines, and to nurture the healing process when those guidelines are crossed over. In each of these four learning communities, individuals were encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their own safety and for the safety of others. In this way, students learn to be full participants in the collective. During my observations of their teaching, these four professors often showed the following behaviors and encouraged them in students: (a) speak from personal experience and insights, (b) allow for reflection and some choice in what to share, (c) listen intently to others, (d) show with positive nonverbal such as nodding and comments that any experience or viewpoint of a subject is an OK point of exploration and critique, yet putting down others is not acceptable, (e) acknowledge that each person is in a different place with the subject and still learning, and (f) encourage students to challenge ideas and assumptions. Versions of the behaviors noted above were included in written guidelines commonly agreed upon in three of the four learning communities. Dr. Ross and Dr. Torres actually brought a poster each week of guidelines that the class had agreed upon in their first session. In Dr. Carlisle's class, most of these were referred to or played out during the class through similar actions. In all of my observations, I noticed that professors didn't hesitate to facilitate through disrespectful behavior of students in ways that reengaged students in discussions after difficult situations arose. As Dr. Carlisle insisted in one of our interviews,

> You have to call people on things...you have to tell people that some part [of their behavior] is unacceptable within the guidelines that the group has negotiated. I have had people who have said sexist, racist, homophobic things and I think you have to have a strategy for how you deal with that. If other students react within the classroom setting, then you can deal with it right then; if not, perhaps dealing with the student at first in a one-on-one discussion will be most helpful and then later addressing the issue more generally with the class.

She continued by stating that she also needed to be willing to admit when she had made mistakes,

apologize, and learn. A multicultural learning community is not one that is mistake free but rather one in which individuals constantly commit themselves to stay engaged and work through difficulties. As groups become empowered, students begin to call each other on destructive behaviors as well. It is a learning process, learning to become comfortable in an environment where respectful conflict can and should take place. In the words of Maslow (1968, p. 204), "growth forward...requires courage, will, choice, and strength in the individual as well as protection, permission, and encouragement in the environment."

Spirit of Risk Taking

> It was really fascinating. As Professor Nair encouraged us to question everything, we sometimes offended or hurt others. Unlike most classes I've been in where either the 'prof' didn't brook any questioning or where they did but conversations quickly deteriorated into arguments and then silence; this professor just gets us through that risky stage. How? Well, he stays calm and nods at every idea yet gets us to expand on what we say. He also helps us to process emotions. I can tell you, I've almost never seen that in a class. It's like we start off in our respective corners all defensive and once everyone knows their ideas won't be dismissed or overlooked, everyone calms down and starts to listen and at least consider other perspectives. This has really made me reflect on what I want to be like as a teacher of high school students. How can I encourage this risk taking in my students? I plan to take another class with Professor Nair just so I can observe his technique. He has been an incredible role model for me as an educator. -- William, African American bilingual education student

Safety within an empowered learning collective does not mean a lack of discomfort. In fact, some discomfort at appropriate levels is a sign that risk taking and safety are being balanced well. Within a group of people, discomfort is inevitable because of different styles, perspectives, and needs. Discomfort feels risky and it's important to remind students and colleagues that discomfort and uncomfortable situations do not necessarily translate into harm. Suzanne, a Korean American sociocultural studies student shared her experience of being challenged in the classroom:

> I am usually a student who stays very quiet in my classes and Dr. Ross kept asking us to share from our personal experiences in relation to educational issues, first in pairs or small groups and then with the whole class. At first this was very uncomfortable for me and then I found that I was

really learning how to discuss and problem solve through tough educational issues. I was reassured by her supportive reactions to my comments and by the other students sometimes having similar feelings or experiences. I grew from seeing issues as abstract concepts to practicing how to deal with them as an educator.

Engaged learning can affect people in ways that are deeply unsettling and issues may not be resolved within a session or even within the period of the course (hooks, 1994). Negotiating and supporting each other through the uncomfortable process of bringing issues and ideas out into the realm of respectful dialogue distinguishes an empowering learning community. The beginning of deep learning is when students first test the traditional boundaries of classroom learning such as "never get personal or never question the teacher." In my observations, I saw that all four professors deeply engaged with students emotionally as well as through knowledge. Each had their own way of making sure students were engaged and not drawing into themselves or away from the group. I noticed that Dr. Nair used humor to disarm tension when it arose; Dr. Carlisle often asked students how they were throughout class sessions; Dr. Torres posed problem solving questions, encouraging half-formed thoughts; and Dr. Ross quietly moved through her classroom offering encouragement during group discussions.

The role of the teacher is to facilitate and reward an atmosphere of risk taking from the outset. Risk taking and the encouragement to take risks are elements of an empowering environment that bring the power of the self irrevocably into the picture. The process of empowerment and freedom, in the spirit of Freire (1970/1997), necessitates at some point, an individual taking tangible risks and the facilitator acting as a sort of "midwife" in the process. This risk taking dynamic of a classroom was described by Dr. Torres:

> It's so volatile, the classroom itself...it needs constant reevaluation and constant rethinking about learning and the reality of learning for each person. As the teacher I have to facilitate the situation on a minute-by-minute basis, checking in with students not only about their knowledge but more importantly about how they are doing and feeling.

For a student, risk taking is possible when it is encouraged by others and not so much of a risk that it becomes debilitating. Dr. Ross pointed out,

> I find that with certain students, shyness, introverted style and/or cultural norms to wait for an invitation to speak; all mean that it is my

responsibility to draw students into risk taking and to also teach them to encourage each other.

Persons in groups watch as others take risks and if they see others pay a price for their risk taking, they are unlikely to venture out themselves. As Tamika, a shy African American teacher education student observed,

> I have been in a few classes where the teacher made it clear that risk taking and sharing were essential and desired in the classroom. After awhile, I began to see that others were taking pretty heavy risks with what they said and the teacher remained supportive. That was when I began to share my ideas.

Congruence

> I find it pretty obvious when a teacher isn't practicing what they profess. Ever since I was a kid, I've had to be able to read people in order to negotiate hostile systems. I was raised in Malaysia in a religion that is much persecuted. Since my skin is black and I clearly look and speak as an outsider, I'm pretty visible here on campus. There is lots of talk about diversity on this campus, but I find that there is actually little practice that supports the rhetoric. When I find a professor who does what they say, like Dr. Carlisle, I'm really relieved. I don't have to work so hard to avoid tripping up in another culture because she gives me the benefit of the doubt and she seems to love that we are each different. She does what she says as an educator and that makes all the difference. Most of my education professors want to talk about things like transformative, empowering, or multicultural education, but they don't practice it in their own classrooms. What do I mean? Well, Dr. Carlisle really pays attention to a variety of ways that students learn, she shows her support of varying perspectives and interpretations from students, and she asks for our input and actually changes things in the class based on that input. Most of my professors just say these things and then they are very rigid; using one way of teaching, dismissing student perspective, and asking for but not doing anything with our feedback. It seems pretty hypocritical to me and I have to really be on guard in those classes because teachers invite me in and then slam the door once I try to step over the threshold. – Balan, Malaysian international student in educational leadership

Congruence between behavior, beliefs, and dialogue is also critical to an empowering environment. Individuals from marginalized groups are often adept at identifying

incongruent behavior because of their own need to negotiate through cultures not their own (Thomas, 1991). Because of this dynamic, persons in positions of authority such as teachers must work to maintain congruency in their behavior in order to be trusted and effective across cultures. Incongruent behavior confuses students and undermines empowerment: "it reinforces the impression that despite what we read, despite what this guy says, if we really just look carefully at the way he's saying it, who he rewards, how he approaches people, there is no real difference" (hooks, 1994, p. 147). In her interviews, Dr. Carlisle explained, "If I talk about minimizing hierarchy, yet require my students to call me 'doctor' I am not creating the egalitarian environment that I try to promote."

Teachers who ask students to contribute in and out of the classroom must be aware of how they receive contributions. Reva explained,

> I've had way too many teachers who encourage us to share our ideas but then scoff at or dismiss what we say. Sometimes it's their nonverbal - an impatient sigh, a negative shake of their head or a disappointed look. It's enough to freeze any additional sharing by students.

Incongruence can take the form of other indicators as well. Readings and other class materials must match the espoused values of a particular course, instructor, or department in order to avoid being incongruent and giving mixed signals to students. Students must be able to find their reality and voices in the classroom readings, dialogue, case studies, tests, assignments, values, and guidelines. Teachers must role model this inclusiveness. Maria, a Spanish American educational leadership student, described contrasting experiences with issues of congruence in two of her classes:

> I come from a family of farm workers and brought up issues of being working class in my women's studies course on gender and power. I was really frustrated and felt very alone with the objectification of social class in readings and discussions. I offered my experience as a working class, woman of color and was faced with silence from both students and professor. As I continued to share during other class sessions, the issue of class was finally dismissed as "my issue." In real contrast, Dr. Nair really listened and then challenged us to relate social class directly to that week's readings, to their own experiences, and to education. I was kind of stunned after my experience in a women's studies class that I thought would be a place where any identity would be treated with respect. Dr. Nair made me feel more welcome in that moment than I've felt in my entire three years on this campus.

By minimizing the reality of the experiences that a student brings to the learning collective, this women's studies teacher undermined the empowerment process that she was attempting through dissemination of knowledge about power. Dr. Nair, on the other hand, accepted and supported Maria's experiences as real and as important to the topic at hand. Role modeling congruence can also take a more subtle form. Paulo, a teacher education student from Brazil related,

> Where I come from it is inappropriate for women to speak up in a group. At first in this class, I was horrified at how much the women would share. During the semester though, I noticed that Dr. Torres was listening respectfully to the women and so I began to listen with more attentiveness. I learned so much from both the women's and men's comments that will help me be a better educator.

It is a fundamental responsibility of the teacher to show, by example, the ability to listen to others seriously; even if their voices and stories create another type of discourse than is intended. We cannot be willing to listen to a student speak even as we turn away and erase the impact of their words. Maher and Tetrault (1994) clarify, "Liberatory pedagogies aim to encourage the students...to gain an education that would be relevant to their concerns, to create their own meanings, and to find their own voices in relation to the material" (p. 57).

Proactivity

> I realized a few years ago after attending a conference on race and ethnicity in higher education that it wasn't enough for me to just teach about multiculturalism or even enough to be more sensitive to students. I needed to purposefully change the way I thought and practiced as a teacher. I was still using what was comfortable for me in the classroom: my ways of learning, my comfortable ways of relating to students, and the knowledge I found in my own intellectual travels. Since I was getting good evaluations, I really didn't think much about it. But something at that conference really triggered my thinking and I began to look into different learning styles, experiment with being more personal in the classroom, and facilitate new assignments and classroom activities for students to learn from each other. It has made all the difference and I am humbled daily at the wisdom of my students. – Dr. Torres, Mexican American Professor –

Teachers must go beyond the knowledge of multicultural empowerment into its practice. We, as facilitators, have the responsibility to establish that the

purpose of the empowered classroom is to be a community of learners together. Awareness, knowledge, education, skills, and action are five levels of proactiveness needed in a multicultural learning community (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Visible action based on the first four is essential to the empowered classroom: "Action is the only way that we can affect change in the society as a whole; for, if we keep our awareness, knowledge, and skills to ourselves, we deprive the rest of the world of what we have learned." (Evans & Wall, 1991, p. 34). Individuals can be proactive in classroom settings by taking risks, facilitating respectful conflict, acting as allies for each other, and showing personal vulnerability. Proactivity also means taking a diversity of ideas and turning them into practice. Dr. Carlisle stated,

> Ideas that emanate from students must be appreciated and put into practice so they feel a sense of empowerment. They can and do make a difference in terms of the structure of the classroom. In fact, their ideas often make more of a difference than my own.

Dr. Ross stressed the importance of partnering with students to transform teaching practices:

> The individual teacher who isn't actively engaged in learning, especially from students, isn't quite there yet as an empowering force. We must partner with our students in very real ways if we are to have any hope of creating multicultural learning. I bring only one set of identities to the classroom and how am I to serve students from other identities if I don't collaborate with them all the time?

Multiplicity

> It's funny. I've noticed that when some of my own ways of learning and interacting are present in a college classroom, I'm also more able to learn in ways that are not my own But when my ways of learning are completely absent like in most of my classes, I feel off balance like I'm hanging upside down trying to make sense of my surroundings. An example? Oh yeah, like when I am in my history class and the professor never tells us anything about herself and never helps us place historical events in our own context. You know, I feel unbalanced because growing up on the 'rez' all things are taught in relation to the world and all things are personal, deeply personal. Then, I feel off balance like I can't take it in. I've learned to try to personalize it and place it in relation to the world myself but then I get distracted in class and I'm off balance again. I feel like I'm always two

steps behind and it is such a relief when I have someone like Dr. Carlisle who shares herself with us as a person and not just an expert in the subject. She's always telling us funny stories about her kids and her dog. She also uses teaching methods that are familiar from home and not present in my other classes. She likes to have us reflect for a moment in silence before asking us to discuss things. That is what we do a lot at home and I need that time to collect my ideas before I can share them in a group. – Bonnie, a Hopi, sociocultural studies student

The need for multiplicity in various forms was referred to in different ways by each of the interviewees and throughout the literature. Marco, a Puerto Rican American student in sociocultural studies, expressed, "I need to learn and work in a variety of ways. Life is complex and so should learning be complex." Challenging one dimensional perception and introducing contrasting ideas, knowledge, and experiences is critical in an empowering multicultural learning community. This brings with it a need to utilize a diversity of knowledge, methods, styles, and relationships in various processes. bell hooks (1994) urges that learning needs to be multifaceted to be effective and that "there can never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices" (p. 7). In my observations, I saw many different pedagogical techniques in each of these classes. Lecture was used only in small amounts and discussion, media, drawing, case study processing, even music were present. Mikayla, a student from Guatemala who studies bilingual education shared, "I need people to see me and treat me as an individual yet entertain the possibility that I am also shaped by and bring strengths from my cultural ways of doing things." Flexible agendas, multiple realities in knowledge, sharing of personal experience and spontaneous shifts in direction are common themes in the discussion of empowering learning communities by the students and professors in this study. Multiplicity means in part that the full mind, heart, body, and spirit of the students must be brought out in relation to the academic course subject. The traditional U.S. classroom defines true intellectualism as emotionless (Gilliland, 1999; hooks, 1994). To realize the full extent of multicultural learning community, students and teachers must engage in a multiplicity of ways of knowing, knowledge sources, realities, relationships, and experiences. Tom, an Italian-Irish American in educational leadership shared,

> At first I was really ticked off that I had to learn in ways that were uncomfortable and foreign to me. I thought the teacher was just being politically correct or something. After about the middle of the class, something clicked in for me. I began to

realize from some of the deeper conversations about the subject with fellow students that this experience would give me a leg up when I went out to work as a principal in schools. I'd be more used to working with people who are different from me.

Negotiability is an aspect of multiplicity that is especially relevant to empower a multicultural learning community. Negotiability of grading methods, priorities, reading materials, assignments, relationships, and roles are essential. As Dr. Torres described, "I don't force my students into anything, I try to work with the class to create the learning process. Some students are more 'ready' for a particular learning phase than others, so I usually offer assignment and activity choices." Tamika, who supervises other students in her campus job, discussed the relative nature of time:

I am not really rigid about time. I don't care about time. There are tasks that I want people to do, but I don't tie this to the concept of time. Other people, who are much more western about time, are very critical of me and say that I don't control the people who work for me. I say, "You are right; they don't have to be controlled. They are responsible; they are doing their jobs and I am not watching the clock to measure them. I'm interested in the quality of their work and I want professors to be interested in the quality of mine."

Roosevelt Thomas (1991) posits that persons concerned with outcomes in a diverse environment should look at the actual outcomes to measure results because a group of ten people will have ten different ways to maximize their own output. Those trying to control the process are not harnessing the full ability of individuals because each individual has their own way in which to get things done. An empowering teacher needs to be open to and balance different cultural ways of doing things to create an effective multicultural learning community (Ibarra, 2002).

Reciprocal Relationships and Roles

I have to admit that I was really startled when Dr. Ross first required us to read each other's papers, offer detailed feedback, and even suggest a grade! I was so uncomfortable and even felt angry that she wasn't taking this full responsibility. But after reading several papers and getting feedback from other students, I was surprised at how much I learned. I realized that usually the only two people who learn from these papers are the individual student and the teacher. This way, we learn more from each other and I'm kind of amazed at how much I'm able to learn from other students. It was

helpful that Dr. Ross explained this was one way that she was empowering students to be educators as well as learners. I thought this took a great deal of courage because students gave her a lot of flack. – Marco, Puerto Rican sociocultural studies student

Reciprocity or parity among groups of people in relationships involves power and idea sharing as well as reciprocal validation of each other's ideas. Reciprocity assists in the creation of an empowered environment and creates equal but different participatory roles for each person within the collective. During classroom observations, I noticed that one student might take on the role of bringing others into the conversation, while another added levity when things were tense. Still another might offer regular analysis while someone else served as emotional monitor, letting the group know when feelings need attention (Bensimon & Neumann, 1994). In this way, teachers create an environment where the diverse strengths of students are each incorporated and valued. Students don't have to participate in the same ways, yet they do participate. Having students teach each other, provide regular feedback, and learn from each other's assignments can also have a profound effect on learning. Dr. Ross reflected,

When I first began to teach, I felt oddly uncomfortable about having set up a typical syllabus where students did large papers and projects where other than brief presentations, no one was learning from these assignments except me and each individual student. I pondered this for awhile and then decided to try several techniques that assigned students to read each others papers, review and critique student research, and apply theory or research developed by students to professional scenarios. I am much more comfortable with these pedagogically collaborative techniques especially because now everyone in the classroom is learning deeply from a wider variety of teachers; each from a different identity and experiential background, each with different priorities and values, each bringing their own wisdom into our learning community.

Individuals gain freedom and empowerment through reciprocal processes. Freire (1970/1997) supports the concept of reciprocity, "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; [sic.] it is a radical posture" (p. 31). Dr. Nair reinforced this concept in his reflections during an interview:

Empowerment means to be appreciated as who we are. I also expect that I would try to create this same kind of atmosphere for students and

colleagues that work with me because I think that it is a two way street. I want to make people around me feel empowered as opposed to feeling oppressed. The challenge is that what makes me feel empowered is not necessarily what makes each of my students feel that way. So it is essential that we share teaching and learning roles in the classroom to figure it out together.

By actively nurturing reciprocal relationships in the classroom, teachers increase students' ability to empower themselves. Dr. Carlisle shared that she had drastically altered her teaching as a result of negotiations with students on concepts of knowledge, assignments, grading, and even time within the classroom. Expecting persons to teach as well as learn is a factor that seems especially rare in college classrooms but was evident in each discussion of multicultural empowerment that I encountered. Ramona shared,

> I always felt that I had nothing to offer in the classroom...that the teacher had all the knowledge and I was just there to soak it up. But after working with Dr. Torres, I have found my voice and a feeling of responsibility for teaching others, including the teacher. I've already tried this out in one of my other classes and the professor frowned at first but then kind of went, "Hmm, that's not a bad idea." So maybe we as students have to take the responsibility too.

The teacher must genuinely value, seek out, and reinforce the contributions of every member in the classroom; often this means those who make us most uncomfortable because they are unlike us in key ways. We must continuously resist the traditional notion that the professor is the only one responsible for classroom dynamics, knowledge, and insight. bell hooks describes, " As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (1994, p. 8). Some of the barriers of reciprocity as Rogers (1961) describes are the natural tendencies to judge, to evaluate, and to approve or disapprove the statement of the other person or the other group. By traditional U.S. academic standards, a professor is there to guard and disseminate the knowledge and standards of society (Elbow, 1986). This value which seems common among faculty is one that carries barriers to empowering learning community. It can result in rigidity and a failure to teach effectively across differences in the classroom.

Discussion

Creating an empowering multicultural learning community seems to be a rare and challenging endeavor within postsecondary education. Yet even with this challenge, there are persons who are making substantial progress toward creating spaces in which a diversity of people feel valued and able to contribute and grow. At some point in the lives of these individuals, they have become and continue to develop as facilitators of empowering communities. What is it that influences a person to take this challenging road? An interesting element that emerged in interviews with these professors was the value that they expressed about harnessing the strength of difference within the collective. As Dr. Nair discussed,

> The breadth of knowledge is so rich when we look at something through many different lenses. Having students from many different backgrounds and creating an environment where they will teach each other is a very powerful learning experience. It is daunting yet exciting, to challenge my own concepts of knowledge and of teaching.

Each of the four teachers interviewed had at some point in their lives realized the benefits of drawing from the power of differences. Regardless of background, each had been through life experiences that had changed their perspectives on their relation to others. For some, personal marginalization acted as a catalyst. For others, the need to resolve contrasting realities in their own lives or the lives of those close to them formed a bridge for them to see that reality was different for various individuals and groups. In all cases, these individuals have turned their awareness into action and continue to struggle with the challenge of facilitating empowering multicultural learning environments.

Organic Teaching

An important implication from this study is that specific pedagogical techniques are less important to the development and facilitation of an empowering multicultural learning community than utilizing a variety of evolving techniques to strive toward critical elemental dynamics. I found that students and teachers in this study reached similar effective classroom dynamics through a very wide diversity of techniques. In most instances, pedagogical choices seemed balanced between the style and personality of the professor and the diverse needs, perspectives, and abilities of the students. True to excellence in teaching

concepts, facilitating multicultural learning communities is an art form. Professors must partner with students to facilitate this environment; organically readjusting, tweaking, and providing what is needed as the class progresses.

Challenges to Facilitating an Empowered Multicultural Learning Environment

The challenges faced by persons who facilitate empowering environments can be glimpsed in some of the dialogue above. Anger and retaliation from students who do not wish to be actively engaged with learning, a lack of reward and sometimes reprimand for working at the art of teaching in communities that value research, the constant challenge to personal self-concept as students learn to challenge the teacher, and the pain of hearing the personal hardships of others all serve to make this endeavor a difficult one. When asked why she continues to be a facilitator of empowered multicultural learning communities, Dr. Ross explained, "It would be unnatural for me to do otherwise." For many, it became a necessity to teach differently when their own awareness of the importance of creating empowering environments reached a critical stage: "Once you are aware of the possibilities within a libratory multicultural pedagogy; it is difficult if not impossible to be satisfied with anything less" (hooks, 1994, p. 157). Dr. Nair expressed, "I just can't go back to being unaware that my students learn best in these more empowering ways. I have been challenged in the tenure process, by my colleagues in the department, and by students to return to more "academic" styles, but the results speak for themselves and I am always hopeful that the University will someday begin to value what is important to student learning."

Teaching and Learning through the Authentic Self

Conscious reflection on elemental dynamics, pedagogy, and the impact of the self are important to professors in their development as empowering multicultural educators. Perhaps more than anything, professors spoke of the intense contemplative work inherent in teaching well in a multicultural context. Dr. Torres explained,

I have to keep learning about myself, sometimes painfully, to work effectively in this kind of classroom. I spend important time while I'm teaching and when I'm not teaching reflecting on who I am, what I believe, and challenging my own values and assumptions. I find that critical self reflection is essential to my work as an educator. Students often bring me up short with their profound observations, their worries, and

sometimes with their intolerance. I find that I do best when I pause, take a deep breath and reflect for a moment on how I can facilitate through, especially when my own emotions are roaring in my heart.

Students spoke as well of the power of becoming more conscious and so more authentic as human beings. Tom shared,

You know, I really didn't want to go there -- to learn more about myself. I grew up in a family in which going below the surface was discouraged and even considered dangerous. Now that I know more about how I learn, what I can offer in a group discussion, and what some of my limitations are; I am better able to handle situations in my other classes and in my personal life. I feel like I have some new things to use as an educator and leader and knowing myself better is the strongest one.

The six elemental dynamics outlined here create a foundation for collegiate teachers to begin self discovery, influence the lives of others, and be influenced by them. Creating learning contexts and communities that embody safety, spirit of risk taking, proactivity, congruence, multiplicity, and reciprocity requires grounding within our selves. We must know who we are so that we are able to facilitate the continued development of the powerful 'self' in others. Creating and facilitating an empowering learning community requires courage, inner strength, an eagerness to keep learning, and a belief that others have much to contribute. This study into empowering multicultural learning communities is offered as a tribute to those who carry on with the daily challenge. Each is creating ripples that will reach out through individuals they touch and affect our global society.

No one is free of prejudice yet each of us has the capacity to provide principled, competent, cross cultural, and multicultural learning environments.
- Harold Cheatham

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