

The Influence of “Accessibility Cues” on Student Engagement and Interactions with African American Faculty

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This phenomenological study examined the perceptions and experiences of 22 traditional aged students when their African American faculty used “accessibility cues” in the classroom. Examples of “cues” include; encouraging students to actively participate in class, evaluate an assignment, or share personal experiences related to the class topic. Students perceive this form of active pedagogy as an indicator that the faculty member is willing to engage outside the formal classroom environment (Wilson, Woods, & Gaff, 1974). Results of in depth interviews with the students in this study, reveals that when faculty use these “cues” in the classroom, students felt respected, valued, supported, and safe in the learning environment. Although this study occurred at a singular institution in the northeastern region of the United States, the findings of this study are beneficial to faculty and administrators across the globe. This study illuminates how pedagogy in the class can have a direct influence on student engagement.

"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" - bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Over six decades of empirical research conducted in the United States on college student development confirm the cognitive and social development of students is positively influenced by their interactions with faculty (Astin, 1993; Cole, 2007; Kuh & Huh 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Student-faculty interactions significantly enhance students' career outcomes, self-reported intellectual and affective growth, academic attainment (Astin, 1993), and academic self-confidence (Cokley, 2000). Faculty attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors play a role in the quality of these interactions and in creating an atmosphere that fosters student learning. Higher levels of student engagement and learning occur when faculty members interact with students, use active and collaborative learning techniques, challenge students academically, and value enriching educational experiences (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, Bell Hooks (1994) argues that using these types of instructional strategies creates a safe place for a student to learn and experience “freedom” in the classroom. As a child, amidst segregation and oppression in the southern part of the U.S., hooks attended school with all Black female teachers who employed such engaging pedagogy. It was within this learning environment that hooks experienced a sense of intellectual and emotional liberation. More recently, studies indicate these same instructional strategies also serve as “cues” to students regarding the extent to which faculty care (Eagan, Figueroa, Hurtado & Gasiewski, 2012; Neville & Parker, 2017; Olson & Carter, 2014) and are accessible

to students in- and outside of the formal classroom environment (Wilson et al., 1974). In other words, these “cues” in the classroom influence the quality and frequency of student-faculty interactions (Cole, 2007; Wilson et al., 1974).

While some studies have examined the interaction between students of color and faculty in general, few studies consider student interactions with faculty of color in particular and, more specifically, African American faculty. Research on faculty of color in the United States suggests that their experiences within colleges and universities differ from those of their White peers. It is important to recognize these differences as they may also impact faculty of color's interactions with students.

Faculty of color are more likely than their White colleagues to place a high level of importance on the affective, moral, and civic development of students, as well as value student experiences outside of the formal classroom (Antonio, 2002). This may be why they are also more likely to use instructional strategies, such as class discussions, cooperative learning activities, group projects, and student presentations in the classroom, that all invite student engagement (Hurtado, 2001; Milem, 1999; Umbach, 2006). In our study, we seek to understand how students respond to, and make meaning of, African American faculty's use of “accessibility cues” that empower students to be actively engaged and thereby create a learning environment that allows for their intellectual and emotional “freedom” to occur. Understanding what a student experiences from these “accessibility cues” (Wilson et al., 1974) enhances our knowledge regarding how African American faculty impact students' learning and perceptions of faculty. More specifically, this study enables us to explore and understand what happens when Black faculty use accessibility cues in the classroom.

Purpose of Study

Given previous research suggesting African American faculty, who represent no more than 5% of full-time tenure and tenure track faculty in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), are more likely than their White colleagues to use active teaching methods (Milem, 1999; Umbach, 2006) or accessibility cues, we chose to examine the experience of students in courses taught by African American faculty. The purpose of our phenomenological study was to explore and understand how students find meaning in African American faculty's use of accessibility cues within the classroom. This exploration allowed us to understand how these cues influence student-African American faculty interactions and student engagement in the classroom. The following research question was examined in this study:

- What meaning do students make from their interaction with faculty of color and their engagement in the classroom when faculty of color use accessibility cues?

For the purposes of this study, we define engagement as the degree of interest, curiosity, and passion students show in the classroom that extends to their level of motivation to learn (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).

Literature Review

Because there is limited research on both the interaction between students and faculty of color and the ways Black faculty use pedagogy to create an engaged classroom environment, we explore three bodies of research on American higher education as a foundation to our study. First, we touch upon the literature on student-faculty interactions which helps us to understand how students benefit from their interaction with faculty in general. We then review the literature on "accessibility cues" to understand how pedagogy influences students' perceptions of faculty accessibility. Finally, we examine the literature on the influence of African American faculty in creating engaged pedagogy, which in fact are elements of "accessibility cues," in the classroom. These three bodies of literature help us to develop an understanding of the particular nuances found within the student-faculty interaction when accessibility cues are used in the classroom.

Student-faculty Interactions

As previously mentioned, the seminal research regarding student-faculty interactions indicates this experience has a significant and positive influence on student learning and development. The majority of this

literature is quantitative in nature and focused on White students and White faculty. In the past two decades; however, student learning, perceived gains in intellectual and self-development, and satisfaction with the undergraduate experience have been examined in relation to student race or ethnicity (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Cole, 2007, 2008; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). As the number of students of color continues to increase on college campuses and the faculty population remains predominantly White (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), more often than not, students of color interact with White faculty members. Thus, research examining the influence of student race on educational outcomes associated with student-faculty interaction has emerged. This relatively new body of literature affirms that the quality of a student's relationship with faculty significantly predicts learning for multiple racial and ethnic groups (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Mayo et al., 1995), and formal contact with faculty in the classroom and the development of a mentoring relationship is likely to positively influence the development of student intellectual self-concept (Cole, 2007, 2008; Mayo, et al., 1995; Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Although research regarding the influence of student-faculty interactions has considered student race, few studies explore how the race of the faculty member influences the students' collegiate experience and learning. In addition, this body of literature does not address what faculty do in the classroom to create opportunities for outcomes such as these to occur. The next section addresses what faculty do in the classroom and how that influences students' perceptions of their accessibility and level of caring.

Accessibility Cues

Wilson and associates (1974) determined that faculty attitudes and in-class teaching practices are the most important indicators for students to determine faculty accessibility outside the formal classroom environment. Faculty that relate to students on a personal basis and support an interactive learning environment demonstrate "cues" for a student to believe the faculty member is open to discussions outside of the classroom as well. Students want faculty to demonstrate a basic level of care, and when faculty learn students' names or ask how they are doing, they demonstrate care and openness (Eagan et al., 2012; Neville & Parker, 2017). These teaching practices also inform how students perceive the faculty member's openness and availability. When a faculty member actively engages students and encourages them to take ownership of their own learning, students perceive these as "cues" regarding the faculty member's willingness to engage outside the formal classroom

environment. Faculty, for instance, may invite students to give input on class plans or policy, ask students to evaluate an assignment or the overall course, encourage student participation in classroom discussions, connect course content to other fields of study and global issues, and encourage conversations about differing points of view. Cole (2007) argues these “cues” help to express value for student comments and link out-of-class activities and experiences with curriculum. Quaye and Chang (2012) further assert that when faculty employ these instructional strategies and demonstrate these “cues,” they create an inclusive classroom environment. In other words, “accessibility cues” in the classroom are taken as indicators about a faculty member’s desire to interact with students, thus influencing the quality and frequency of student-faculty interactions (Cole, 2007; Wilson et al., 1974).

Accessibility Cues used by African American Faculty

African American faculty and faculty of color make important contributions to the academy, due in part to their concern for the moral and civic development of students, use of engaged pedagogy, research on race and ethnicity, and curriculum development (Antonio, 2002; Milem, 2003; Umbach, 2006). These contributions create an exciting educational environment that bell hooks described as they encourage students to interact with new knowledge and perspectives. Moreover, African American faculty and their colleagues of color are more likely than White faculty to use instructional strategies such as class discussions, cooperative learning activities, group projects, and student presentations in class (Hurtado, 2001; Milem, 1999; Umbach, 2006) to engage students in the learning process and enhance perceptions of accessibility.

It is yet unclear, however, how teaching methods used by African American and other faculty of color shape students’ engagement in the classroom and perspective regarding faculty accessibility. In fact, extant research has not identified the educational outcomes students gain from their interactions specifically with African American faculty. The limited research on African American faculty experiences, however, reveals that White students and students of color perceive African American faculty differently (Guiffrida, 2005; Hendrix, 2007; Lee, 1999). While African American students are more likely to perceive African American faculty as caring (Guiffrida, 2005), White students are more likely to harshly judge and resist the teaching styles of Black faculty. White students often question the expertise of Black faculty, devalue course content particularly when race is included, and otherwise undermine their authority (Benjamin, 1997; Myers, 2002; Parker & Neville, 2019; Vargas, 2002).

Little is known about how these behaviors and interactions shape the way students perceive faculty accessibility cues. Understanding what a student experiences when an African American faculty member employs instructional strategies and “accessibility cues” also enhances our knowledge regarding the contributions African American faculty make to students’ overall educational experience. More specifically, this study enables us to explore and understand how the use of accessibility cues enhance student interactions with faculty and their engagement in the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks described how her elementary school teachers, all Black women at an all-Black school in the South, were “on a mission” to nurture the intellect of children. To develop children into “scholars, thinkers and cultural workers,” teachers promoted a pedagogy that created a safe and stimulating place to learn, so children could reinvent themselves. This type of caring and teaching created an education that was, in fact, “the practice of freedom.” We apply this concept of teaching to transgress to the college classroom as we consider the ways students perceive faculty’s accessibility cues.

While hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* is guided in part by Freire’s work in critical pedagogy that presented education as liberatory, she extends Freire’s work by arguing pedagogy that promotes freedom in the classroom is based upon the premise that the classroom should be an exciting, even fun, place to learn. To demonstrate excitement in the classroom is to “transgress” beyond the boundaries of the traditional model of providing knowledge in a one-way flow of information from teacher to student (Hooks, 1994). Hooks tells us faculty must meet the needs of students through the use of more flexible agendas and spontaneous shifts in the direction of the class, something that challenges the too often “seriousness” of higher education teaching and learning. Excitement in itself, however, is not enough to transgress from a more traditional learning environment. Indeed, hooks argues that we, as faculty and students, must also be genuinely interested in one another. The professor must authentically know and value each individual member of the classroom community and their contributions to discussions and learning. Excitement, then, is created via “collective effort” with all members of the classroom serving as salient resources to each other. Creating this dynamic learning experience further promotes “freedom” through students’ active engagement and sharing of experiences. These acts of transgression mirror faculty’s use of accessibility cues that engage students in the learning process and enhance student-faculty interactions (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Wilson et al., 1974).

Method of Inquiry

This study was designed to examine how students describe, and make meaning of, African American faculty members' use of accessibility cues (Cole, 2010; Wilson et al, 1974) in the classroom. Descriptive phenomenology was selected as the methodology for this study as it focuses on "what [students] experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 107). This approach seeks to understand the meanings students make from the "cues" faculty use in the classroom.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

The institution chosen for this study is a public baccalaureate degree granting university in the Northeast region of the United States. Undergraduate enrollment approximated 6000, and 20% of the students self-identified as students of color. While 90% of the full-time faculty were White, just 2% of the faculty self-identified as African American. The lead researcher (Neville) contacted faculty that self-identified as African American on this particular campus and asked for permission to observe and interview students in their classrooms. Ultimately, Neville visited five classes taught by African American faculty to recruit student participants. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the confidentiality of all faculty and student participants.

One hundred students were observed in these classrooms which consisted of one course in professional studies and two courses in human services. During each classroom visit, Neville informed students of the purpose of our study and that interviews would be scheduled at the end of the semester, after all assignments and exams were completed. Students were also told their professor would not know if they participated.

We used a semi-structured interview protocol, and each interview lasted for 45 to 60 minutes. Interview questions were designed to gather data leading to an understanding of what students experienced and how students perceived the "accessibility cues" used by African American faculty (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were imported into the qualitative research software program NVivo for data storage, management, and analysis.

Data Analysis

We used a three-step data analysis process of epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) to code data and develop

themes. This entire process began with us engaging in "epoche," where we "bracketed" our preconceived notions and experiences but did not discard them (Moustakas, 1994). We did this by writing memos throughout stages of data collection and analysis so we could examine what participants stated from a fresh and open perspective. Next, we read each participant transcript and gathered significant and "non-repetitive" statements from each student participant and grouped them into "meaning units" (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This process of phenomenological reduction allowed us to develop clusters of "meanings," which established themes for each participant. When compiled, these themes created a composite of the students' collective experience (Creswell, 2007). Finally, through the process of imaginative variation we explored the participants' conflicting perspectives to develop an accurate depiction of how the phenomenon was experienced by all. We also determined how feelings and thoughts for each participant were connected to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). Similar to the previous process, a compilation of these feelings and thoughts were written for the participants as a group. Through this process we came to understand the multiple sources of truth, which are connected to the meanings of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

Findings

Interviews

Ultimately, 22 students were interviewed, including six who self-identified as students of color. All participants were American citizens and were traditional aged (18 to 24 years) college students. Our sample was representative of students based on race and gender at this particular institution.

During interviews, the voices of students emerged as they described "what" accessibility cues were used by faculty, as well as "how" these "cues" fostered a safe learning environment, enabling them to feel comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences in the classroom. In essence, students described specific examples of what it was like to engage in "the practice of freedom" in the classroom (Hooks, 1994). Jane, a White sophomore, captured the essence of how participants experienced the environment as she described it in terms of "warmth." Jane recalled the following:

I loved it. His [the professor] class was my favorite class this semester. I felt very comfortable. He included me in all his discussions. He included everybody. So, in his class it was a feeling of warmth right when you walked in. It was very comforting.

As Jane indicated, she felt that her professor was approachable and that he created a classroom environment that made students feel included and comfortable. The “warmth” of the classroom environment was further clarified as students indicated the faculty utilized “cues” as they provided students the tools and support they needed to learn, used real world examples in order to present information, and encouraged students to share their opinions and experiences. Therefore, the “warmth” students talked about is divided into three themes; 1) “It was about us,” 2) “Makes it real,” and 3) “It was a safe place.”

“It Was About Us”

Students stated faculty allowed for flexibility in terms of the syllabus and course assignments. The students, along with their professor, changed a syllabus during the semester, designed a class project, and shared feedback. The faculty also incorporated different activities in an effort to create an engaging learning environment. In other words, students described the accessibility cues faculty used which made them believe the faculty focused on student success and learning. Alex, a biracial junior, summed up this perception:

Like from day one, he said it was about us. Throughout the semester he backed it up too...all the projects were based on our ideas. They were about getting our background knowledge, our interest involved in the class, and seeing how that applies...

As Alex suggested, participants described the instructional strategies and “cues” faculty used to create an environment that encouraged students to be active participants in the classroom. In one class, for example, the professor modified his syllabus in the third week of the fall semester by requiring students to select a national charitable foundation for which to raise money. He then attended most of the fundraising events hosted by the students. This particular class project enabled students to apply theories presented in class and allowed the professor to demonstrate his commitment and accessibility to students.

Overall, students appreciated the time and level of commitment their professors gave toward developing such creative projects. When describing her appreciation for what her professor did to make learning fun and engaging, Julia, a Hispanic senior, stated, “like the fact that she really did innovative things...She really went the extra mile. That takes a lot of time and effort to do those kind of things.” Julia understood the time and commitment required of faculty to develop creative teaching and learning opportunities for students, such as case studies and games to help students learn the material. Two seniors,

Audrey and Tad, further described the commitment their professor employed in the classroom to create an engaging learning environment. According to Audrey, their professor created an “open learning” environment. For example, on days in which students were not all that talkative or fully prepared, the professor used PowerPoint presentations and lectured for part of the class. However, on days when students were more actively engaged, he would alter his teaching approach to encourage student participation. Audrey liked the environment because it often felt like “a conversation” was occurring among her classmates, her professor, and her. Tad, a White senior, further stated that on days when students came to the same professor’s class unprepared, they were often given the first 15 or 20 minutes to read the material. Tad stated that by doing this, his professor created an environment in which everyone would get involved, and no one was left out of the discussion. Tad also felt that by doing this, his professor not only expressed that students needed to be actively engaged, he treated them with respect.

It would just be like, “Come on guys. You’ve got to do the reading. You can’t expect me to sit here and talk by myself.” And then he would just be like, “You know what, just open your books and just read it right now and then we’ll talk. You read it right now; 15-20 minutes, and then we’ll talk about the subject,” and everyone would get involved. He never really made us feel lesser than him or anything like that. He understood that some people just sometimes can’t do the homework, or choose not to do the homework.

As Tad stated, he never felt his professor belittled or punished students for coming to class unprepared; rather, he gave them a few minutes of class time to read the material so all members of the class could fully participate in the discussion. The professor created a positive environment for all of the students, and although he expressed that he wanted students to come to class prepared, he did not forego a class session because students did not read the material, unlike some of Audrey’s other professors. Audrey reflects upon the difference:

...it was just a very positive environment for us all to be in and he was very like, “Okay. So you didn’t read this time. Next time you will. We’ll learn about this today instead.” He would never let – I’ve had professors like kick everyone in class out because they didn’t read. I’ve experienced it...

According to Audrey, her professor’s flexibility and approach created a student-centered environment that promoted learning, and students felt they were an

essential part of the learning process. In addition, unlike some of her other experiences with faculty, Audrey felt this professor demonstrated a different level of accessibility than her other professors. Rather than dismiss students, he took great care to ensure he was teaching students regardless of whether or not they came to class fully prepared. Thus, Audrey felt she mattered, and her learning was important due to the flexibility and commitment displayed by her professor.

Although Tad and Audrey presented the benefits of a faculty member's use of "cues" such as the willingness to be flexible and accommodating, two participants voiced disappointment in faculty adjusting the syllabus and canceling assignments. According to Lisa, a White junior, her African American female professor failed to meet the high expectations originally set forth in the class syllabus. Lisa stated her professor developed a reputation for dropping assignments, and although Lisa admitted this practice lowered some of her personal stress, she seemed disappointed and a little angry when her professor did not maintain the high expectations initially placed on the class. Lisa recalled:

At the beginning it was really stressful because she has said she had so many things planned for us, so many big papers so many essays, so many tests but then... I, like other people were like, she'll drop half of that stuff by the end of the semester...which she did...I just wish she would like go on beyond my expectations of her and just actually be able to complete a class...and the fact that she missed three weeks of class for like her dissertation and then...a conference and it was just kind of like, felt like it was unfair to me because like I'm paying to go to school, to be in this class that I have to take to get into the second part of this class, and she's missed three weeks of class...she didn't go beyond the expectations of what I thought the class would be.

As Lisa indicated, she set intentionally low expectations for her professor from the very start. According to Lisa, she expected dropped assignments over the course of the semester, and when that happened, Lisa's low expectations and opinion of her professor went unchallenged, leaving her disappointed in her professor. Similar to Lisa, a second participant, Nick, a White senior, expressed the sense of disappointment because he believed his African American male professor was easily swayed by students to alter assignments. Nick believed his professor could have asserted his authority a bit more: "You know, he would just side with us and like give us what we want instead of just, you know... he has the power... he's the professor..."

As Nick reflected upon his professor's willingness to give in to student requests, he also recognizes that his peers and he were disrespectful because they did not come to class prepared. Nick alluded to feelings of regret:

I mean, I think personally, I speak for everyone in the class we could of all come to the class a little more prepared to like help him out a little bit so we could...when he'd ask a questions we'd just leave him hanging out to dry but you know that's what I'd do differently...definitely cause I mean he's being respectful to us I feel like we should be respectful to him and actually prepare for his class...do what he asks...

Although participants may not have come to class fully prepared, as described, participants felt faculty remained focused and responsive to the students in order for learning to occur. In addition to remaining flexible and creating opportunities for students to be fully engaged in their learning, faculty provided students with the tools needed to be academically successful. For example, one professor provided students with study guides and options to earn extra credit. According to Jamica, a Hispanic junior, the use of study guides enabled transparency for students to be successful on exams. Danee, a Hispanic senior, further felt her professor encouraged students to seek academic resources by administering extra course credit. According to Danee:

She [the professor] accepted all kind of forms of learning, you know... like if the writing center wasn't working for me and I went to [the tutoring center] instead or I went to a professor that I had a relationship with that helped more... or a student, ya know...she really, "Okay, you're getting extra help. I'm going to give you credit for it."

As Jamica and Danee stated, their professor supported students' receiving academic support from various resources and she gave credit when students sought academic help. For Danee, her professor's flexibility proved that she was student-centered.

Danee also believed her professor's support and commitment was "a kind of gift" to her academic success:

...this is a kind of gift I think...she would give us points for going to the writing center and seeking extra help, which was awesome because I do that anyways and for her to give me credit because I'm doing somethin' - it's kind of high school-ish a little bit. College they don't do that for you really at all. So I thought that was like, wow, she's really [chuckles] trying to help us out. She's on our side.

As indicated, participants' perceived faculty as student-centered because they provided students with the resources and support needed to be successful. In addition to developing creative learning activities,

being flexible, and supporting students in their use of academic resources, participants stated faculty were concerned about students fully grasping the concepts presented in class, so they could apply that knowledge. Overwhelmingly, students indicated the faculty accomplished this by using another accessibility cue: integrating real-life experiences in teaching.

“Makes It Real for Us”

Students indicated faculty brought topics to life in three significant ways. First, faculty used instructional techniques such as videos, reflective assignments, case studies, and group projects that engaged students in “real world” issues. Second, faculty shared their own personal experiences as examples in the classroom. Finally, faculty encouraged students to weave in their own experiences and interests into class discussions and assignments in an attempt to connect theory and practice. All of these “accessibility cues” made topics more relevant, and participants described how it made a difference in their learning experience. Danee reflected upon how this occurred:

I liked how Laura [her professor] took the topics and made them real...It wasn't just something we were reading in a book. She made the AIDS topic personal for us, for all of us to understand...She takes videos that are relevant to our topics and makes it real for us and gives us a connection with these people, with the populations that we're going to work with as human development professionals.

Kelsey, a White junior, also described how this same professor's use of learning tools helped her to connect theory and practice.

She brought in a lot of outside information. She brought in a lot of videos and documentaries and everything and taught us about specific populations. We would watch a movie about something and then she would have us relate back to different theories and everything. We learned a lot about theoretical perspectives and um...we kinda learned how to process the whole person and everything, the family, the race, the religion, the age, the gender, the sex, all that kind of information, and learning how to not just see a person for one aspect of their lives but just be able to see the person as a daughter and all these different aspects that could impact a person.

Danee and Kelsey both described that by linking theory in course readings to relevant learning tools, such as videos, it was as if a bridge closed the gap between theory and practical application. In some ways, this also helped

students to care about the topic more. The utilization of such learning tools helped Danee and Kelsey prepare for their futures as human development professionals. For some students in the earlier years of their academic careers, the link between classroom theory and real-world examples also served to keep students' attention. Patrick, a White first-year student, stated;

The easiest way for me to be motivated is to not be bored and he [the professor] would do his best to make sure the class isn't boring, he would stick to the topic but he would relate it to the outside world like the outside the classroom with different chains of restaurants different stores it, it would keep our attention. He would show us a clip of a video every once in a while of something that relates to the class just so it wouldn't seem like a constant lecture and that would keep me motivated at least I wouldn't be falling asleep in class.

Regardless of how the integration of theory and practice was perceived (i.e., connecting theory to real world examples or keeping one's attention), all participants received alternative learning tools, which served to make the class material more interesting and relevant. By providing tools such as video clips or informative news items, students also became more aware of topical issues relevant to their course work. For Cal, an African American sophomore, his professor's continued reference to newsworthy issues prompted him to read the newspaper and watch the news, which kept him “interested” in the class and well-informed.

One professor took the concept of integrating theory and practice to a new level in the upper division course he taught. According to Bryan, a White senior, this professor was the first he ever had who focused on learning and had students actively participate in a project with a concrete and real product as the goal. Bryan indicated his professor taught them to move beyond the book because there are real needs in the world where one can take concepts from class and put them toward something positive and real.

...He really was the first professor that it was like, okay, not everything is in the book...there's things out in the world... the whole [class project] thing you could take the concepts you learn in class and put it towards something positive so the things we were learning in class through the lectures and the power points and all that other stuff we were able to put into [a children's charity]...and at the end when you get to present that check [to the charity] it's nice to see...

In addition to using multimedia and projects as opportunities to generate interest in the course work, faculty shared personal experiences, which also made course material

more “real” and relevant for the students. For Scott, a White sophomore, his professor’s use of personal events and storytelling helped him learn the material. Scott indicated that these stories told in class helped him to remember the material and do well on exams.

Furthermore, when faculty shared personal experiences, it created an intimate environment that allowed students to feel connected to their assignments, as well as their faculty. For example, Kelsey, a White senior, shared what it was like to be in an African American Literature course taught by an African American instructor. Kelsey reflected upon the significance of this experience:

...[S]he had so many personal experiences that it came more naturally to her to teach a class. And she was so passionate about it and so engaged in it that it really was very interesting...she really got in depth a lot... Bringing her firsthand experiences of racial segregation and everything, especially hearing about her mom and her grandmother – she was probably around 50 or something. So, she’s seen her share of different racial situations. ...She talked about how she used to not be able to go to certain restaurants and stuff. Even her. And it just made it more real life and it really helped to relate it to the readings and everything and made it a much more interesting class...She would sit on the desk and she would get people so engaged and just the way she talked about it, she was so passionate about it.

The personal accounts and passion regarding the subject made a significant impact on Kelsey’s experience and learning in the classroom. Hearing the personal accounts of her African American instructor provided her with a context that she may not receive from a White faculty member.

In addition to faculty sharing personal experiences to enhance learning, participants described how they were encouraged to integrate their own personal interests into course assignments. Alex, a biracial junior, explained:

The thing I like about it, it was that he was just encouraging us to apply it to what we were doing. I did extra credit assignments that were just research in the aquaculture facilities on the business side. Um...You didn’t have to get bogged down in just memorizing terms and definitions and everything. It was, “all right here’s the information. Let’s apply it to what you’re doing and what you’re going to be doing.”

In addition to being encouraged to apply personal interests to coursework, participants also stated that

faculty often wove student interests into class discussions. Joe, a White sophomore, indicated that once his professor knew something about students’ personal interests or goals, he would always refer to them at appropriate times in class.

...[Y]a know, the thing about him is when something came up that had to do with something you’ve told him in the past, he’d go right to you. Ya know what I mean...he asked us at the beginning of the year, “What do you all want to do?”...I told him I wanted to be a cop but I wanted to minor in professional studies. I want to own a business. And he was like, “Yeah, that’s cool.” He always remembered that...like a girl wanted to open a salon. He’d tell her, when salons came up in certain things and hair products and stuff like that, he pointed out like on the graphs and what to invest in and how it worked. He’d always remember certain things you told him.

Jane, a sophomore, further stated that by continuously referring to participants’ interests and goals, her professor displayed how much he cared about students. Jane recalled:

He cared enough to know some extras in people’s life and he would use that as an example when talking to them and talking to the class and trying to get everybody involved. And he’d say, “Well, what do you think about this?” or “What do you feel about this?”

Participants stated the faculty often asked for their opinions and perspectives. According to Linda, a biracial senior, when her professor asked her for her thoughts on a subject, she was excited to share her experience. She stated the following:

I was more excited [by] the fact that I know what he’s talking about because I do it [banking industry] in real life. So everything he would bring up in subject, I had something to say and I was so excited...I’ve got something to say because I’ve read it or somebody told me or I’ve seen it somewhere...I know what I’m talking about.

As this passage illustrates, Linda felt confident in her ability to contribute in class by sharing her experiences and opinions. Her professor therefore created an exciting environment for students to make strong connections between the materials presented in class with real world examples. Ultimately faculty demonstrated their accessibility to students as they created an environment for them to feel safe enough to openly share their personal opinions and experiences in class.

“It Was a Safe Place”

Students described how African American faculty supported and valued their participation by encouraging them to share their experiences and perceptions. As Kelsey, a White junior, stated, the use of this accessibility cue created a “safe place to express your opinions and ask questions.” Linda, a biracial senior, recalled that when students spoke up in class, her professor overtly supported them by stating, “That’s awesome! That’s good!” This verbal support created an environment in which Linda felt comfortable contributing in class. She also stated when students spoke up in class, he thanked them for their contribution. In this manner, her professor displayed a genuine appreciation for student participation. For Linda this also created an environment in which she felt she was a valued participant in the learning environment. Cal, an African American sophomore, stated his professor would never negate a student’s comment. Rather, he would weave their thoughts and perceptions into the class discussion.

[H]e liked the class to get involved and to... give their input in the class and stuff like that... he wouldn’t like bash your idea or anything like that... he would just ya know try to fit your idea in what’s going on...

By including all students’ thoughts and viewpoints in the class discussion, his professor created a learning environment in which participants felt they were an important part of the learning process. According to Audrey, a senior, this same professor created an environment that made it safe for everyone to participate:

But it was one of those classes you could tell people actually liked going to. It wasn’t boring. It was just like exciting, a fun class and you could tell. Most of my classes you have people that like don’t talk, you just sit there and you learn. But in this class, every person would give their opinions about things and you could tell it was a very open atmosphere. No one felt nervous. It was just open. There was a girl in my class that I’ve had like four classes with her before. She never talks. But in that class, she would open up... and I thought that showed a lot about him too. He made sure we all felt comfortable enough to agree or disagree with whatever we were learning or his opinion or something.

As Audrey indicates, students perceived her professor to be accessible and open. He promoted an exciting classroom environment that encouraged all students to share their differing opinions, and he was very careful not to insert his own personal opinions into classroom

discussions. Joe, a White sophomore, further stated that this same professor “just stood in the middle” when students were engaged in classroom debates. Joe believed the professor’s ability to remain impartial in the classroom was beneficial because it encouraged students to openly share their perspectives in class, critically analyze information, and formulate their own opinions. Thus, by encouraging students to express themselves, as well as by incorporating their differing viewpoints into the classroom discussion, the professor created a learning environment in which students felt they mattered and that they were valued members of the class.

In addition to making students feel valued by incorporating their opinions and perceptions into class discussions, faculty were respectful when challenging students to reframe their thinking and use of language. Julia, a Hispanic senior, shared her interaction with her professor after she naively used a derogatory term in class:

So I think she’s really open to listening and she’s nonjudgmental and she really um...tries to point out your strengths and validate your good points. And she...I like the way she corrected me. I could notice sometimes when she corrected me. Like one time I said, um...’Islam guys’ or something like that, something not politically correct, and she was like, ‘Oh, Muslim men’. You know what I mean?...she helps correct you but not in a way that puts you down or anything. Like when you say something that could be offensive, she says it in a way that she thinks in her opinion is like a more neutral way to say it and I like that...ya know...’cause she’s kind of leading through example.”

For Julia, the way her professor approached her and challenged her to think about the use of language made her feel supported and respected. It is also apparent that Julia felt safe and comfortable during this interaction. As Julia indicated, her professor taught by “leading through example” as she exemplified the methods in which human development professionals should educate others about their preconceived notions, stereotypes, and use of language.

For one participant—Jamica, a Hispanic junior—in addition to feeling she could openly express herself in class, she described how meaningful it was to have her ethnic identity included in the course curriculum. According to Jamica, during high school she experienced feeling isolated and alienated when an African American teacher failed to recognize the Hispanic experience when presenting information about diverse populations. In this class however, all ethnicities were represented in the curriculum and Ariel states she felt included and comfortable.

Yeah, I did feel different because I felt that Amy [the professor] focused like – she talked about

everything, and she included all of us. She didn't just neglect all the Hispanics and White. She talked about like everybody; the Blacks, the Whites, the Hispanics. All the ethnicities were included."

As Jamica indicated, when the experiences of Hispanic men and women were acknowledged in the classroom, she felt that her personal experience mattered in the learning process. For Jamica and many of the other participants, the faculty's use of "accessibility cues" in the classroom created an inclusive, safe, and welcoming environment where they could fully participate.

Discussion and Implications

The context for this study rests within a singular institution in the United States. Results, however, may inform how faculty at institutions across the globe use pedagogy to create engaged learning environments. Findings in this study indicate that when faculty of color used accessibility cues, they taught to transgress. They created an environment for all students to become excited to learn and actively engaged in the classroom environment. From student narratives we learn that when the faculty member used accessibility cues, students felt a sense of respect, comfort, and safety that positively impacted their perceptions of faculty accessibility. As Jane indicated, students felt faculty used a number of "cues" in the classroom, which fostered a "warm" environment. Faculty in our study promoted freedom in the classroom when they allowed students to impact the direction of a course, encouraged and valued student participation, asked students to share opinions, and talked about real world issues. The transgression that occurred within the classroom demonstrates that accessibility cues have a profound influence on how students described their learning environment and perceived faculty accessibility.

First, students felt faculty were flexible and student centered. Faculty encouraged students to integrate personal interests into assignments, share personal opinions during class discussions, and take time to read in class so all could equally participate in the class discussion. The majority of students expressed the flexibility employed by faculty demonstrated their commitment to students. In fact, one faculty member illustrated this by attending the student-organized events that served to fulfill a course assignment. Although two White students criticized their faculty member for cancelling too many assignments, being too flexible, or not asserting enough authority in the classroom, overwhelmingly students shared the sense that they "mattered" as the faculty displayed a commitment to them and their learning.

Second, students indicated faculty members' use of "cues," such as connecting theory with practice through

the use of real world examples, employing active learning techniques, and sharing personal experiences in class, created an engaged classroom environment. Students reported that these practices demonstrated the passion faculty had for teaching, as well as made class topics more interesting and relevant. Faculty also wove student interests and experiences into class discussions, which for many students served to bridge theory and practice. For students, these methods created an intimate and exciting learning environment in which they became personally connected to the class discussions and assignments. Students felt these cues allowed them to develop a personal connection to their faculty members.

Third, students felt faculty encouraged them to share personal opinions and experiences in class. When students did so, faculty displayed a genuine appreciation for this level of engagement. Repeatedly, students shared they felt respected, supported, and valued by faculty in the classroom. More specifically, students felt they were an essential part of the learning experience. Findings of this study, therefore, provide further evidence that the use of "accessibility cues" can create an opportunity for faculty to develop a positive and supportive relationship with students within an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.

These findings further the work of Cole (2007), and Wilson and associates (1974) as the use of "accessibility cues" stimulates an intimate learning environment that fosters student engagement. Findings from this study indicate when faculty "teach to transgress" and employ such instructional strategies and "cues" in the classroom students feel safe, respected, and valued. These feelings ultimately influenced students' perceptions of faculty and positively influenced and increased their level of engagement in the classroom. These findings also offer support to the work conducted by Quaye and Chang (2012) as the results illustrate the meaning students make from an inclusive classroom environment. More specifically, when faculty use accessibility cues, students feel that faculty personally care about them, their success, and their learning. In other words, students feel that they "matter" to the faculty member.

Implications

As these findings relate to practical implications, this study provides additional evidence regarding the important contributions African American faculty bring to American higher education institutions. African American faculty are more likely than their White colleagues to use pedagogy that employs "accessibility cues" which promote student engagement and positively influences how students experience their learning environment (Milem, 1999;

Umbach, 2006). Thus, the hiring and promotion of African American faculty is instrumental in furthering the mission of U.S. higher education. The importance of racial/ethnic diversity in hiring and promotion, however, is not limited to the U.S. Understanding the differing contributions underrepresented faculty groups make to higher education and student learning across the globe is an important area to examine in future research. Cultural contributions of all faculty groups can have a profound impact on student learning.

Creating engaged learning environments, however, will require diversifying the faculty, as well as developing faculty teaching skills and pedagogy through initiatives such as professional development opportunities and tenure review. Indeed, this work is not just the responsibility of a relatively small but important group of faculty within the academy. Rather, all faculty, regardless of race, ethnicity, cultural background, and national origin, should use "accessibility cues" in the classroom to promote a safe, respectful, and valued learning space for students. Creating opportunities for all faculty to develop new methods which may enhance student engagement is critical for student success.

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