

Increasing Personal Cultural Awareness Through Discussions With International Students

Nancy Bodenhorn, Angela DeCarla Jackson, and Rebecca Farrell
Virginia Tech, USA

Pairs of first year master's level students in the "Counseling Diverse Populations" course led discussion groups with international students about U.S. culture. The fundamental purpose of this assignment was to increase awareness of the counseling students' culture, as called for in the Multicultural Counseling Competencies. Advance preparation resulted in a combined class list of questions. Each session was video taped and feedback was provided. In this paper, segments of a discussion group transcript, student reflection paper, and professor feedback are provided. Over three years, students have rated this assignment as one of the most valuable assignment of the semester.

Across many higher education disciplines, attempts are being made to broaden cultural awareness (Bardhan, 2003; Clark, 2002; Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002; Morey & Kitano, 1997; Mushi, 2004; Oltjenbruns & Love, 1998; Roberts, 1998; Starkey & Osler, 2001). One of the challenges many individuals experience in recognizing and valuing other cultures is that they do not have an awareness of themselves as cultural beings. This can be attributed to White privilege (McIntosh, 1990), or to cultural encapsulation and an understanding that, similar to a fish not recognizing water because it is a constant and no alternative can be imagined, many students do not recognize their own culture because they have not experienced anything different (Banks, 2002; Brislin & Pedersen, 1976). With this challenge in mind, we devised a course requirement that allowed students to hear about their culture from people who come from a variety of other cultures. International students from our own campus, as well as immigrants in our community, provided stories and insights about their experiences with American culture, which allowed our students to vicariously see their own culture.

Introduction: The Challenge

Our class is specifically for master's level counselors. The students are in the program for two years, and are primarily involved in internships during the second year. Our class, "Counseling Diverse Populations," is taught in the second semester of the first year. Our campus is predominantly white, and our master's counseling cohort is predominantly female. Generally, our students are not widely traveled and many have lived primarily within one culture, that of the southeast United States. Although this setting is important to understand for contextual reasons, this assignment and approach is adaptable to other curricular areas and settings.

In the Counseling field, similar to most fields considered helping professions, we are very cognizant

of the need to be culturally aware and culturally appropriate in our interactions. Within our professional area, we have developed a set of awarenesses, knowledge and skills known as the *Multicultural Counseling Competencies* (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The first characteristic identified within the Multicultural Counseling Competencies is "counselor awareness of own assumptions, values, and biases" (p. 479). Within this characteristic, culturally skilled counselors are described as: "being aware of and sensitive to their own cultural heritage; having knowledge about their own racial and cultural heritage and how it personally and professionally affects their definitions and biases of normality-abnormality and the process of counseling; and possessing knowledge about their social impact upon others" (Sue, et al., p. 479). Locke (1998) also indicated that the first step in understanding others was an understanding of self, one's own culture and worldview. The American Psychological Association (1993) developed similar guidelines including an awareness of how both psychologists' own and their client's cultural backgrounds influence psychological processes.

These specific competencies are undoubtedly echoed in dispositions desired in professionals in all fields. For example, The Council of Europe has endorsed a Common European Framework of Modern Languages, which includes a taxonomy of objectives including "the ability to relate one's own culture to the foreign culture" (Starkey & Osler, 2001, p. 315) to enhance language learning. One cannot relate one's own culture to anything if it is not acknowledged. Evaluation of international internships in Hotel and Restaurant Administration acknowledged a need for students to recognize the extent of differences in their own cultural values and norms to those of their counterparts in the host country (Roberts, 1998). Teacher education calls for individuals who are able to deal with the ambiguities associated with learning about their own culture and those of others (Dee & Henkin,

2002), and who are self-aware and willing to confront their own cultural identities (Gay, 1997). Engineering educators recognize that engineering students who become more cross-culturally sensitive and work at developing communication skills will be more employable in the multinational job market (Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002).

More generally, Friere (1972) advocated that one of the main purposes of education is to liberate people to an awareness of themselves in social context. Self-awareness, particularly as it relates to ourselves in the process of relating to other individuals, is a critical piece to all areas and levels of education.

Anthropologists have long understood that those within a culture, without an opportunity to look at it from the outside, are not able to examine or understand their own culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Although it can be argued that minorities within the U.S. population interact with the predominant, White culture and can be considered bi-cultural, many majority U.S. citizens do not have the experience of seeing their culture from the outside. Indeed, according to at least two theories on White Identity Development, the first step is a lack of awareness of themselves as racial or cultural beings, that is, Whites are initially unaware of their own worldview and culture (Hardiman and Ponterotto, as cited in Wehrly, 1995).

A common reaction we and other educators receive from White students to a commonly assigned personal heritage paper is "I don't have a culture" (Leach & Carlton, 1997; Wehrly, 1995). Our challenge was to create an assignment that would provoke the students to learn about their culture from outsiders.

Solution: Transformation and Involvement

Within the field of Multicultural Education, Banks (2002) outlined four approaches to curriculum reform. Levels 1 and 2, Contributions and Additive Approaches, essentially maintain the status quo of education with a few tidbits thrown in to include underrepresented people and cultures. We hoped to integrate more of Levels 3 and 4 into our class. Level 3, the Transformation Approach, is described as: "The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups" (Banks, 2002, p. 30). This approach encourages students to understand knowledge as social construction, listen to a variety of voices, and think critically. Level 4, the Social Action Approach, is described as: "Students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them" (Banks, 2002, p. 30).

Previous educational studies have indicated that active learning is most valuable, as evidenced in a study

of a similar counseling course in which one group of students interacted over the semester with immigrants or refugees while another group participated in other (but less personal) interactions with other cultures. Not surprisingly, the students with the higher level of interaction gained more from the class as measured by grades on the final examination as well as evaluation of their journals (Mio, 1989). Additionally, students who have the opportunity to travel abroad or experience an international student group in other ways:

learn about the view of others, and become aware of their own frame of reference. Others serve as a mirror through which students obtain an image of their home culture. Against this background, it seems inevitable that the study of other cultures, countries, or religions, also encompasses the study of the home culture...For some students, it is the first time their own taken-for-granted culture becomes visible to them, or they realize that other people hold stereotypes and prejudices about them. (Stier, 2003, p. 79 - 80)

Short of sending our students overseas for a period of time, which would be ideal, we brought them together with groups of international students with the specific task of discussing U.S. culture. We have a significant international student population on our campus and community, including graduate students, families, and those attending English Language courses through a variety of sources. We have also asked local immigrant populations to participate in the discussion groups. The international students are often seeking opportunities to interact with U.S. citizens, and the teachers consistently express excitement about and appreciation for the interaction.

An added benefit to this approach was that most of the international students had only experienced the southeast United States culture within the North American continent, similar to our own students. Therefore, although we discussed the question of regional cultures and national cultures, the international students' experiences were reflective of the same culture our students represent, or at least live in currently.

Specific Purposes of the Assignment

The purposes of this assignment, as outlined in the syllabus, included the following: (a) Recognize your own culture and the impact that it has on others; (b) Increase awareness of your own cultural biases; (c) Increase awareness of cultures different from and similar to your own; (d) Recognize and reduce defensiveness about your own culture; (e) Increase your comfort level when talking about different cultures and

worldviews; (f) Create a plan to actively engage in cultural and worldview discussions with others; (g) Learn about alternative ways to approach life and education; (h) Observe individual and group dynamics as affected by cultural differences; and (i) Provide an avenue for international students to interact with American students.

Assignment

Pairs of our students led discussion groups about U.S. culture with international students. In our situation, we were able to access established groups of international students and/or spouses who met regularly for language class (EFL) or discussion. Our students arranged to meet with the classes or groups during the international students' regularly scheduled meetings, in an environment with which the international students were familiar. The class teacher or discussion leader usually introduced our students and remained in the room during the discussion. Classes or groups lasted either 60 or 90 minutes. International student membership in the classes or groups ranged from four to fifteen.

Our students were instructed to prepare in advance for the session with their co-leader classmate. They were required to submit at least five questions to initiate discussion in the groups. From these submissions, a master list of questions was circulated to the students for a comprehensive selection. Sample questions are included in the Appendix.

Students were advised that this was not a counseling session or a counseling group. However, similar to counseling sessions, a primary goal was to understand others' viewpoints, in this case about U.S. culture. Students were also advised to be aware of their own defensiveness in the discussion group. Although they were required to have questions planned, they were encouraged to not limit themselves to those questions, and to interact with the group members as group dynamics evolved.

Each student wrote a paper after the session, in which they were asked to answer the following questions: (a) What did you learn about culture and worldview?; (b) What did you learn about American culture?; (c) What did you learn about yourself as a discussant of culture?; (d) What did you do or say that promoted discussion in this group?; and (e) What did you do or say that hindered discussion in this group?

Each session was taped and feedback was provided to students regarding their communication. Feedback focused on the following areas: (a) Comfort – your own as well as your effect on others' comfort; (b) Inclusiveness – awareness of and ability to include all in the room; (c) Invitingness – willingness to embrace

other cultures and ideas; (d) Appropriate use of language – awareness of effect of verbal and non-verbal language; (e) Appropriate use of questions and responses; (f) Awareness of and/or comfort in asking about cultural norms; (g) Awareness of and adjustment to group dynamics; and (h) Evidence of pre-planning.

Sample Excerpt

An excerpt from a tape, pertinent reflections in student papers, and feedback are related below. Both students granted permission for inclusion in publications.

[International Student]: I was shocked that people went to the mall as a party; the weekend plan was to go to the mall. My country is a very poor country, so if you buy something it is because you really need it. Here it is like you buy something that you already have, so you can have two pieces of the same stuff, or three or maybe four. Money here is like something to play with.

[Counselor in Training]: So how would you change that, would you make Americans see how fortunate we are?

[International Student]: Maybe to realize what is really important and how you can spend your time in different ways – talking with friends – or different ways other than shopping, and not to think that you are better because you have more things. It's like you work and buy, work and buy, and this relation does not work for me.

[Counselor in Training]: So do you think Americans are materialistic?

[International Student]: Yes

[Counselor in Training]: How many others would agree with that?

Reflections from this student's paper included,

When I listened to the International students I agreed with everything they said. Americans are materialistic....Most of these things I did not realize because I live with them every day.

Feedback from professor on this section of the tape included,

When the woman was talking about the shopping excursions in America, you paraphrased this with a question about 'how fortunate we are'. I think the

term fortunate came from your values rather than from her statements. You did phrase it as a question and she felt comfortable in clarifying that she did not see this as fortunate, so she was able to clarify her thoughts. This is the crux of multicultural counseling – being able to hear what the other person is saying without imposing our own values. You may need to pay more attention to your communication, learn to monitor when you are introducing your own values, and learn to see and reflect what is important in the other person's eyes rather than your own.

Classroom Follow-Up

The student class discussion following the assignment was also instrumental to the learning process. Students listed various characteristics associated with Americans by the international students and discussed actions that could lead to those associations. A typical example was that many International students report experiencing Americans as busy, rushed, and uncaring. During the discussion groups, our students learned that the action that brought about this generalization was the habit of Americans to say “hi, how are you” to people as they pass by, without stopping or seemingly caring what the response was. Our students had never stopped to think about the impact of this seemingly innocuous cultural habit. Overall, our students admit to the practice, but not to the attribution of rushed, busy and uncaring. In general, they were able to see a progression of how ideas about others' cultures can stem from misinterpretations of actions, and that the misinterpretation can be based on our own cultural lens. They were also able to acknowledge many of the cultural characteristics that had been identified by the international students. They indicated that their comfort level in talking about culture increased. This was evident on some of the tapes where the students exhibited an initial anxiety. Most of the international students shared amusing stories and insights. This sharing added a relaxed dimension to an educational and rich topic.

Assessment

At the end of each semester, students were given a list of the class activities and were asked to rate them anonymously on a scale of 1 (Worthless) to 6 (Invaluable). In the three years we have taught the course with this assignment, 45 students have been involved. Of these participants, 21 students identified this activity as a 6, *Invaluable – what I learned from this assignment changed my viewpoint*, 16 students rated the activity as either a 5, *Very helpful – I learned quite a bit from this activity*, or a 4, *Quite helpful – I*

learned a lot from this activity, and 8 students rated the activity as either a 3, *Somewhat helpful – I learned something from this assignment*, a 2, *A little helpful*, or a 1, *Worthless – I learned nothing from this assignment*.

In a follow-up question, they were asked to reflect on one or two of the activities they thought were the most beneficial, and what the value was. Reflections included the following quotes:

1. This activity forced me to become a minority, and it made me more sensitive to the struggles immigrants and foreign students encounter when they come to the U.S.
2. I learned a lot about American culture – it made me want to have more immersion experiences.
3. It was an opportunity to share views with several cultures at one time.
4. Brought into focus the importance of considering cultural background and individual differences.
5. An eye-opening, real-life experience.
6. Great practice with asking questions about culture.
7. A valuable learning experience about how other people view our own culture in America.
8. A chance to be exposed to situations that I wouldn't otherwise be exposed to.
9. I became aware of my stereotypes, and their responses and discussions really made me think!
10. This allowed me to view American culture from a different perspective.

Since this is one of many assignments in a class within a program that focuses on developing empathy and communication skills, it is impossible for us to indicate the impact of this individual assignment on behavioral and developmental change among our students. This is one of the many challenges of assessing courses that use many different modalities. We continue to rely on the consistency of feedback from the students about the value of the assignments.

Modifications

As indicated earlier, this assignment was designed with our particular population in mind. With other populations and curriculums, the approach could still be used in various ways. A discussion about U.S. culture would benefit any groups of students, but there may also be additional variations of the questions – for example experiences with, views about, or practices of health care, education, child rearing, or technology. Generally, any concept for which there are cultural variations, which arguably includes everything, can be the focus of questions with an international population.

Hopefully, through an increased awareness of the fact that there are different ways of looking at questions, self-awareness, adaptability, and creativity will develop as well.

References

- American Psychological Association. (1993). Guidelines for providers of psychological services to ethnic, linguistic, and culturally diverse populations. *American Psychologist*, 48, 45-48.
- Banks, J.A. (2002). *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bardhan, N. (2003). Creating spaces for international and multi(inter)cultural perspectives in undergraduate public relations education. *Communication Education*, 52, 164-172.
- Brislin, R.W., & Pedersen, P. (1976). *Cross-Cultural Orientation Programs*. New York: Gardner Press.
- Clark, C. (2002). Effective multicultural curriculum transformation across disciplines. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 4, 37-46.
- Dee, J.R., & Henkin, A.B. (2002). Assessing dispositions toward cultural diversity among preservice teachers. *Urban Education*, 37, 22-40.
- Friere, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Gay, G. (1997). Multicultural infusion in teacher education: Foundations and applications. In A.I. Morey and M.K. Kitano (Eds.), *Multicultural Course Transformation in Higher Education; A Broader Truth* (pp. 192-210). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gilleard, J., & Gilleard, J.D. (2002) Developing cross-cultural communication skills. *Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering Education and Practice*, 128, 187-199.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995) What is ethnography? In Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, (Eds.) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (2nd ed. pp. 1-22). New York: Routledge.
- Leach, M.M., & Carlton, M.A. (1997) Toward defining a multicultural teaching philosophy. In D.B. Pope-Davis and H.L.K. Coleman (Eds.), *Multicultural Counseling Competencies: Assessment, Education and Training, and Supervision* (pp.184-208). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Locke, D.C. (1998). *Increasing Multicultural Understanding: A Comprehensive Model*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 49, 31-36.
- Mio, J.S. (1989). Experiential involvement as an adjunct to teaching cultural sensitivity. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 17, 38-46.
- Morey, A.I., & Kitano, M.K. (Eds.) (1997). *Multicultural Course Transformation in Higher Education: A Broader Truth*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Mushi, S. (2004). Multicultural competencies in teaching: a typology of classroom activities. *Intercultural Education*, 15, 179-194.
- Oltjenbruns, K., & Love, C.L. (1998). Infusing a multicultural perspective into higher education curricula. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 90, 54-57.
- Roberts, E.H. (1998). The innocents abroad: do students face international internships unprepared? *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration*, 39, 64-69.
- Starkey, H., & Osler, A. (2001). Language learning and anti-racism: some pedagogical challenges. *The Curriculum Journal*, 12, 313-329.
- Stier, J. (2003). Internationalisation, Ethnic Diversity and the Acquisition of Intercultural Competencies. *Intercultural Education*, 14, 77-91.
- Sue, D.W., Arredondo, P., & McDavis, R.J. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards, a call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70, 477-486.
- Wehrly, B. (1995). *Pathways to Multicultural Counseling Competence: A Developmental Journey*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1. Introductions: tell us your name, where you're from, and why you came to the United States of America.
2. What was your first impression of the U.S?
3. What are some of the major differences and similarities between U.S. culture and your native culture?
4. If you could design your own world/culture, what would you take from U.S. and what would you take from your own country/culture?
5. What were your expectations and how do these compare to your experiences?
6. What do you want us to know about your culture that isn't well known in the U.S. or is misunderstood? What misconceptions about your culture do you think U.S. citizens believe?
7. What are some words you would use to describe the U.S?
8. What do you like about life in the U.S? What do you dislike?
9. How have U.S. citizens reacted to you when you have come into contact with them? Have different individuals or groups responded in different ways?
10. Have your ideas about the U.S. changed since you arrived - can you trace those changes to particular experiences? How were your perceptions changed?
11. What surprised you the most about U.S.?
12. What have been some of the funny experiences you have had with U.S. culture?
13. Do your values and beliefs contradict those of U.S. culture?
14. Do you plan to return to your native land? Would you anticipate difficulties in returning to your native country?
15. What have you seen or heard since you have been here that you do not understand?
16. What do you miss most about your home country?
17. What has been your most positive experience?
18. What seems to be the strangest thing that you have seen U.S. citizens do? How would you exhibit this behavior in your own country?
19. What would make you feel more comfortable being in U.S?
20. What do you miss about your native land?
21. What is the hardest thing you have to adjust to culturally?

Author Note

Nancy Bodenhorn, Assistant Professor in Counselor Education, Virginia Tech; Angela DeCarla Jackson teaches at Oklahoma State University; Rebecca Farrell, doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at Virginia

Tech and Instructor, Human Services and Counseling Division at Lindsey Wilson College, Kentucky. Correspondence about this article should be directed to Nancy Bodenhorn at nanboden@vt.edu.

NANCY BODENHORN is a European American who has lived overseas for eleven years at various times during her life, six of those as a professional school counselor at International Schools. ANGELA DECARLA JACKSON is an African American, and REBECCA FARRELL is an Asian American. As doctoral students, they both served as teaching interns

for the "Counseling Diverse Populations" course under the supervision of Nancy Bodenhorn. All three, for somewhat different reasons, are committed to multicultural education and continue to teach the counseling diversity course at their respective universities.