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Cross-Cultural Schooling Experiences and the Construction of Identity: How Curriculum Impacts Educational Outcomes for Foreign Students

Abstract

Using both qualitative and quantitative measures, this session will examine the case of one department within one academic institution of higher learning. Using data from a ten-year follow-up study of a federally funded Title VII Training, Development and Improvement Program Grant, this presentation considers whether the increase in use of multicultural materials reflects an increase in the integration of multicultural and second language acquisition knowledge and methodology into the curricula; and how such a quantitative increase in the integration of multicultural and second language acquisition knowledge and methodology into the curricula is qualitatively perceived by students. Through data collected from itemized analysis of the syllabi, faculty and student interviews and faculty and student needs assessments, it examines the curriculum closely for evidence of "institutionalized multiculturalism."

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How Multicultural Are We? Cross-Cultural Schooling Experiences and the Construction of Identity: How Curriculum Impacts Educational Outcomes for Foreign Students

Introduction

Excerpt from "Chamber Music", a play by Arthur Kopit:

Woman in Aviatrix's Outfit: All right, check the records if you like. It's all down there, I'm not lying. July second, 1937. That's the day I crashed. Right out there in the yard. July second, 1937. Go on, check the records if you like. Why should I lie? Look, my plane is still there. Isn't that proof enough? Well, true, they've turned it into a playground for lost children. True, it's not the plane it used to be. The valiant, gallant plane it used to be. But still, that shouldn't matter. The *shape* of it should be proof enough. . . . Well, if you don't believe me, ask Fred Noonan. . . . Well, go on, if you don't believe me. Send someone over to ask him! Ask him what my name is and where I used to live so long ago. Ask him if what I say is true. . . .

Woman with Notebook: Are are we are we to to assume are we to assume that Miss that Miss Earhart would have us have us would have us believe that Miss Earhart would have us believe that we are not-not-not whom we *think* we are? (Kopit, 1964, p. 11-12).

"Who am I?" . . . "Why am I here?" . . . "Where am I going?" . . . These are universal questions which plague every human being at some point in their lives. In fact, these queries have been so entwined in the lived experiences of humanity as to become "cliche". Just as the dialogue in Arthur Kopit's play *Chamber Music* (1964) demonstrates, greeting cards, newspaper editorials, philosophy texts, art, music and theater works have all, at one time or another, pondered life's basic questions, "Who am I?", "Why am I

here?", "Where did I come from?" and "Where am I going?" Yet, the real import of these questions in the academic realm does not truly emerge until we begin to consider the sociohistorical frame (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1997; Schutz, 1964) which each student brings to their studies. If it is true that "context impacts outcome" in teacher preparation programs (Barab, Barnett and Squire 2000; Hesch, 2000; Kennett, 2000; Wellington, 1999, 2000; Doyle, in press; and others), then the institutional multiculturalization of curricula in departments of education is critical if those departments are to produce effective practitioners for a multicultural society. Like the woman in Kopit's play who struggles to reconcile her beliefs and perceptions about self with the beliefs and perceptions of those around her, life in academia-particularly for minority students (Wallerson, (2000)-challenges personal identity in a manner that can have far-reaching impact on the educational outcomes.

What progress has been made in this "battle" with the misconceptions of institutional academia related to multiculturalism? How multicultural are we? To what extent do our curricular practices reflect a multicultural orientation towards education? How explicit is the multicultural content of the curricula? How diverse is the process of the curricula? How receptive is it to ideas and processes from other perspectives? How is the curriculum actually perceived and experienced by students from diverse backgrounds?

Kopit's Chamber Music (1964), though commonly relegated to the category of "theater of absurd", does parallel institutional academia on one other way: it raises the question of what to do and how to respond when one "doesn't know what to do and how to respond". "We can't teach what we don't know", states Gary Howard (1999). If this is true, then the need for institutional multiculturalization of teaching practices becomes even *more* important. This paper considers the notion of multiculturalism in academia from two perspectives: that of an analytical examination of curriculum and that of an examination of student experiences as related through personal narrative.

Analysis of a Multicultural Curriculum

Using both qualitative and quantitative measures, the paper will examine the case of one department within one academic institution of higher learning. Using data from a ten-year follow-up study of a federally funded Title VII Training, Development and Improvement Program Grant, the paper considers whether the increase in use of multicultural materials reflects an increase in the integration of multicultural and second language acquisition *knowledge* and *methodology* into the curricula; and how such a *quantitative* increase in the integration of multicultural and second language acquisition knowledge and methodology into the curricula is *qualitatively* perceived by students. Through data collected from itemized analysis of the syllabi, faculty and student interviews and faculty and student needs assessments, it examines the curriculum closely for evidence of "institutionalized multiculturalism".

In a recent classroom discussion regarding the effect on minority culture students of education primarily in the dominant cultural model, responses to the query ranged from, "it could be true in *K-12* but at the university we have choices", to "foreign students *want* to learn the culture of the host country", indicating that although "the effect of Project

IMPACT on the institutionalization of multicultural awareness and practices at the College of Education is noteworthy" (Fuentevilla, 1992, p. 1), it may not be all-inclusive. In fact, the primary impetus for conducting a follow-up assessment was the repeated comments from foreign students, who now comprise approximately 30 percent of the department's student population (McCarty, 1999), that although the coursework was engaging and often "cutting edge", it did not really address the issues and/or perspectives of the educational systems in which they would be teaching upon return to their homelands. While such comments are primarily testimonial and should be considered in that light, perhaps the increase in student diversity over the past decade has brought us to a point where reexamination of the questions and concerns posed by Project IMPACT could provide a solid basis for assessment of the *current* level of institutionalized multiculturalization in the department.

The Experiences of Foreign Students in Academia

There is currently very little data available regarding the impact of an American¹ education on the pedagogical practices of foreign² teachers. How do foreign students' cultural-historical perspectives influence them as learners and as teachers? How are these perceptions and the teachers' identity, as constructed in a "borrowed context" (Freire, 1996), reflected in their own educational pedagogies and classroom practices? Using data from a series of case studies of foreign educators who come to the United States for further professional training and development, this paper examines the schooling experiences of four foreign graduate students, in order to study the impact of culture (i.e., social, political, environmental and historical factors) on learning across cultures. Using focused interviews, collaborative conversations and classroom observations, it identifies connections and tensions between the students' home contexts and the "borrowed context" in which they now study and teach. Further, it examines the role of schooling experiences in the construction of students' identity as teachers and its impact on their classroom praxis. Conclusions provide a basis for understanding how foreign students construct identity in an American university and may be used to inform departmental policy and classroom practices in graduate education departments which serve diverse communities of learners. By helping us to understand how the educational experiences of foreign students impact their professional practices and, consequently, the educational systems of their home countries, this paper will facilitate the construction of more relevant and appropriate courses of study in teacher preparation and training.

This study provides a significant contribution to the field of curriculum studies by bridging the fields of higher education and multicultural education. Furthermore, by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and analysis strategies, this study will provide information which can be utilized by many sub-groups within the field of education. The information may be used by classroom teachers who may want to examine the impact of particular classroom practices and resources, by testing and evaluation coordinators who may seek to examine the cultural variables which contribute to testing success or failure, or by program planners and any number of other stakeholders in the field of curriculum studies.

¹**American** (*adj.*) "of, or relating to, or characteristic of the United States of America, its people, culture, government, or history." (Morris, 1969). Although technically the word "American" could be used as broadly as to refer to the entire geographical regions of North, Central and South American, use of the term in this article reflects the political and historical ideologies which have shaped some of the experiences and historical perspectives of this study.

²**Foreign** (*adj.*) "Located away from one's native country." (Morris, 1969). Like "American", the term "foreign" as used in this article reflects the political and historical ideologies which have shaped some of the experiences and historical perspectives of this area of study.

Presenter

Yuri Wellington is an Issei of mixed ancestry, raised in Kailua on the east shore of Oahu, Hawaii. For the past two decades he has worked with various indigenous or non-dominant cultural communities in the fields of education and health care. He received a Bachelors degree in Education from Bradley University in 1977 and a Masters degree in Exercise Physiology from George Williams College in 1986.

Mr. Wellington is a tenured teacher in the State of Hawaii Department of Education, currently on sabbatical leave to pursue a Ph.D. in Language, Reading and Culture at the University of Arizona. He has taught at the community college level, worked with adults in continuing education and operated an alternative education program for homeless children aged 0-14. In 1989, he founded Hale Laulima, Inc., a transitional housing program for homeless, drug-addicted mothers with HIV and their children.