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Teaching Conscientizacao: Helping Social Work Students Raise Their Awareness Levels of Cultural Diversity

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“Teaching students how to raise their awareness levels and their consciousness can be both a frustrating and exhilarating challenge for the professor.”

Consciousness raising, "conscientizacao" to Paolo Freire, means understanding of self and others. Students of the social work profession devote their professional and personal lives to raising awareness and, through this process, eliminating oppression. Teaching students how to raise their awareness levels and their consciousness can be both a frustrating and exhilarating challenge for the professor. Freire, one of the world's premier philosophers in education, wrote eloquently regarding how one must understand one's personal situation, others' presence, and the inevitable results of interaction. Freire speaks of "transformation," or being able to absorb knowledge from an unknown area and allowing that knowledge to permeate and change world views. These professors utilize various teaching strategies and methods to assist students in accomplishing "conscientizacao" and "transformation" as they do "personal work" to understand themselves. As an example, the film *Romero* is used as an instructional tool to assist students in their visualization of what transformation looks like. Out of this visualization emerges the creation of the energy and empowerment needed to combat the battles against ignorance, oppression, and racism. Conscientizacao is fulfilling but, to some students, unappreciated at this point in their studies. Many times students question their entire lives in this process, including their family relationships and friendships.

Recently, much research has focused on the use of alternative paradigm and its relevance to assisting students in learning from the experiences of diverse perspectives (Schriver, 1995). The presentation format includes interactive discussions based upon the principles and concepts of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1988). The review will then lead into examining critical elements of the film *Romero*. This process has assisted students with transformative learning in the classroom. My colleague and I will direct attention on "how" (the visualization) the main character, Archbishop Oscar Romero, transforms from an uninformed and apathetic person to a person who was willing to die for his people of El Salvador because of social injustice. We are not interested in our students dying for the many social injustices that face our society. Rather, we are interested in their examination of self, and to what extent they're willing to sacrifice to help others.

Scott Peck (1987), in his book *The Different Drum: Community and Peacemaking*, presents an interesting question: if we are "full," to what extent do we let go of other things in our lives to make room for other community? As social work students discover

how "full" their lives are, we wonder what things will be let go for the sake of understanding with respect to cultural diversity, oppression, racism, and other isms. In our methodological approach, we ultimately impress upon the student the need for authentic expression and soul searching as we critically analyze these concepts.

The presentation relies heavily upon alternative paradigm approaches. Alternative paradigms include hermeneutic phenomenology-lived experience (Van Maner, 1987), qualitative methods, use of the subjective, and understanding of oppression through feminist frameworks, which is to understand the power dynamic (McIntosh, 1990). Social work students have benefited immensely from this pedagogical method of discourse. This style of curricular activity inspires the social work student to work from an experiential perspective and rely on his or her intuitive strengths. Teaching from a "lived experience" perspective allows the student to gain valuable personal insights that create lasting images. If learning becomes an intrinsic and intimate part of a person through experiential methods, then it may be more difficult to erase the memory.

Appropriate handouts and articles will be shared with the audience as a way of introducing how they may facilitate this method of learning in the classroom, the community, and/or any significant system.

PRESENTERS

Theresa Barron-McKeagney, Assistant Professor, has been with the School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha since 1989. Her experience in teaching is diverse, ranging in content from Introduction to Social Work courses, Social Policy (Institutional Racism and Sexism), Social Work with Latinos, Working with the Minority Elderly, and Human Behavior and the Social Environment. Her strengths also include a strong commitment to the Latino community, education for people of color, and advocacy efforts in people of color communities.

Claudette Lee, Assistant Professor, is the University of Nebraska at Omaha School of Social Work's Practicum Coordinator. Lee's experiences range from family services to mental health. She teaches introduction to social work courses and is responsible for the entire practicum program for undergraduate and graduate students in the school.