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Development and Delivery of an Intensive Diversity Engagement Course


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Introduction

The 2010 U.S. Census, with its profound shift in demographic changes, marks a “turning point in the nation's social, cultural, geographic, racial and ethnic fabric” (Nasser & Overberg, 2011). With every passing year, people and populations are interacting at faster speeds, broader ranges, and further reaches. As more and more channels of communication are opened, the kinds of relationships we might form and the possibilities for new cultural exchanges grow. For counselors and counselor educators, this accelerating pace of diversity presents both old and new challenges. While cultural competence and multicultural sensitivity have long been tenets of ethical codes, our clients, students, and the populations that we encounter may be finding themselves having quickly to adapt to an increasingly changing world. Therefore, developing cultural competence is more crucial than ever for our effective work with both students and clients.

Many training programs and educational institutions alike promote cultural competence for their students, faculty, and staff. Missouri State University, as an example, considers cultural competence “critical to [its] public affairs mission by encouraging community engagement through ethical leadership” (Missouri State
Practicing counselors, counselor educators, and counselor trainees have further obligations to their ethical codes as well (American Counseling Association, 2005). However, the climate from which many students are entering university is one of increasing segregation (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997; Orfield & Lee, 2006). In fact, a more recent study shows that schools are more segregated now than they were 40 years ago (Orfield, 2009). Educators are faced with the challenge of fulfilling this goal of developing cultural competence in a rapidly changing world that seems to be getting more segregated as it becomes more diverse.

One way to help fulfill these obligations and support a movement towards greater cultural competence is to educate student leaders through courses in diversity engagement. Such courses have been shown to decrease racial prejudice and lead towards greater social justice activism (Chang, 2002; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005). Furthermore, diversity courses have been shown to aid in cognitive development and moral reasoning skills (Bowman, 2009).

The authors propose a model for an experiential diversity engagement course directed at student leaders and facilitated by an experienced counselor/supervisor and advanced counselors-in-training, to develop cultural competence skills in student leaders while enhancing multicultural facilitation skills in future counselors.

The three facilitators are from the Counseling Program at Missouri State University, having become acquainted as instructor and students in the “Multicultural and Diversity Issues for Counselors” class. Many conversations ensued during and after that class about effective strategies to offer diversity or “cultural competence” training. The facilitators’ different perspectives (as male and female, Black and white, from 24-51, seasoned professional and student) were valued as sources of input necessary and beneficial for successful delivery of the course. One co-facilitator was exploring this topic for her thesis and the other co-facilitator was taking an advanced directed readings class, leading us to develop this course together. Our experiences first as mentor and advanced counseling graduate students, then as proponents of social justice, and finally as co-facilitators led us to these reflections from our experience developing and delivering a diversity course to graduate and undergraduate student leaders called “Diversity Engagement in Leadership.”

Class Composition

Class members were recruited to represent diversity in these areas: gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and religious identity, with every effort made to avoid having any one individual be the “only” representative of their identity group. A diverse composition of students is important in facilitating inter-group dialogue, a component that is positively associated with student adaptation to diverse campuses (Cole & Arriola, 2007; Cole, Case, Rios & Curtin, 2011). Especially when cultural competence is relatively low, heterogeneous training groups facilitate the learning process (Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2001).

Student participants were all involved in leadership roles: of campus organizations, residence halls, or other leadership positions. This “leadership” framing of the class is consistent with findings that framing diversity training as more advanced (rather than remedial) increases motivation and subsequent level of learning (Holladay, Knight, Paige, & Quinones, 2003). One long-term goal of focusing on student leaders
was to encourage them to share their experiences and knowledge with the students they would eventually encounter in their various roles across campus, providing a “ripple” effect.

The counseling student co-facilitators were also enrolled in an advanced “diversity engagement” practicum, and fulfilled requirements associated with course development, group facilitation, didactic content delivery, and post-course evaluations. This course for the co-facilitators was designed to create “diversity competent group work” skills, and to develop their diversity-related skills and conceptualization beyond the individual counseling paradigm (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Okech & Rubel, 2007).

Content Areas

The course was developed with multiple diversity content areas (impact of gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation) and was framed within the context of developing leadership skills in an increasingly diverse world. We utilized the following foundations: Ground Rules and Course Objectives, Leadership Model, Diversity Challenges for Leaders, Individual/Group Differences (using Ken Wilber’s [2000] four-quadrant model), and Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Skills; building upon this structure to discuss diversity directly. “For the likelihood of transfer, for both men and women and remedial and advanced assignments, diversity training with a broadly focused content frame would be the most effective” (Holladay et al., 2003, p. 259). Throughout the course, diversity issues were engaged using skills developed within the course’s foundational content areas. Students engaged with issues of privilege, power, and difference; including gender, race, class, sexual orientation and religion. This array of topics was chosen to promote student empathy, which is an outcome associated with effective diversity courses (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). Most topics had at least one activity or film to prompt discussion. The co-facilitators had also carefully reviewed and explored all materials and had identified learning objectives or desired outcomes from each activity or film.

Multimodal Material Selection

Our goal in material selection was to activate affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of learning. The course included didactic instruction, films, activities, and extensive opportunities for dyad, small-group, and large group discussion among the 14 students and three instructor/co-facilitators. We intentionally assigned students to bonding (“like me”) and bridging (“different from me”) dyads to create bonds and to enhance the experience. Putnam (2000) postulates that bonding and bridging work in concert as an element of a harmonious culturally diverse environment, Since our course operated as a microcosm of the global society where students are members in a variety of roles (as students, citizens, workers, and leaders), the curriculum sought to counteract the tendency for participants to be minimally invested and mistrustful of one another on the basis of identity group differences through strategically directed bonding and bridging activities.

We selected materials on the basis of their ability to help us reach training goals. Materials were expected to elicit strong feelings, for which we planned both individual response activities (through journals), small group processing (mostly in dyads), and in large group discussions. Most topics had at least one activity or film to prompt discussion,
and meals and snack times were assigned a “task,” such as “Choose someone who you think is similar to you with whom to share lunch, and discuss your reactions to the film/activity.” During another meal the assignment might be, “Choose someone whom you think is different from you....” In the group sessions following, we typically did a “check-in” round and then discussed the new awareness. As co-facilitators, we had also carefully reviewed and explored the materials and had identified learning objectives or desired outcomes from the activity or film. To this end, we prompted key phrases or questions designed to elicit those topics. However, we discovered that a group member usually reacted non-verbally if not in discussion, so we intentionally watched for those responses to further the discussion, so that the activity stayed “within the group.”

Activities in the first few hours of the course were chosen based on their ability to allow participants to know one another personally based on similarities. According to Putnam (2000), “bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity (p. 22).” Insuring some homogeneity within the group created a safe space for participants to explore course content candidly. To this extent, we designed early small group engagement with a “similar to me” focus. With this foundation of camaraderie in place, the course shifted into activities and films that highlighted the differences between groups. The facilitators noted that when participants had first made connections within their identity group they were more likely to empathize with others. “Being able to be empathic requires an ability to suspend judgment and bias to walk in the other’s shoes” (Greason & Cashwell, 2009, pg. 4). The experiential learning context activated empathy across differences by participants’ doing, feeling, analyzing, and reflecting on each other’s experiences (Cruz & Patterson, 2005). Although the films and activities were helpful in activating empathy in participants, additional facilitated processing was necessary for participants to link their personal experiences and relationships to current institutional practices. To this end, we prompted key phrases or questions designated to elicit responses to those topics. Using Putnam’s (2000) concept of social capital, in which bonding social capital allows us to feel connected with others we perceive like ourselves, and bridging social capital allows us to build connections with those different from ourselves; both are necessary to build and sustain healthy communities. In order to sustain the bonding capital within the group, dyads were continued through the course. To increase bridging capital, both “different from me” dyads and large group processing were employed.

Multifaceted training approaches are recommended for diversity training (Ridley, Mendoza & Kanitz, 1994). Since stereotypes and cultural assumptions are embedded in a variety of ways by the culture around us (through media, spoken word, non-verbal messages, patterns of behavior, and other ways), it is helpful to provide a variety of ways for participants to identify and challenge those internalized beliefs. Counselor trainees and student leaders alike often possess biases and, depending on their experience and exposure to different groups of people, may lack knowledge and awareness. To be effective, diversity coursework should provide a framework for promoting the development of these areas of knowledge, skills, and self-awareness (Ancis & Ladany, 2010). Delivery of multicultural coursework should include traditional (didactic), exposure (engagement with others different from oneself), and participatory strategies (introspection, discussion, role-plays) in order to maximize student learning (Dickson & Jepsen 2007; Dickson & Shumway, 2011). Presenting a variety of materials in exploring
aspects of diversity and stimulating a new level of thought and application of concepts of privilege and difference is thought to be particularly crucial for the education of white participants (deFrietas & McAuley, 2008).

We intentionally chose materials that were likely to create tension (including films such as The Color of Fear (Lee, 1994), activities such as The Privilege Walk (Kivel, 2002), and dyadic assignments such as “for discussion, pair with someone whom you consider to be ‘different’ from you”). In these curricular choices, we intended to promote a “risk discourse” about race in which contradiction and tension are seen as both a more honest reflection of social dynamics and necessary elements for effective learning to take place (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Experience with culturally different others in personal lives has been shown to be a component of influential multicultural development (Coleman, 2006).

**Group Process and Co-Facilitator Role**

As with most group processing, this course offered time for students to practice their cultural competence. The effectiveness of group process in developing empathy with participants relies heavily on the skills of the facilitators. “CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs; 2009) standards emphasize the need to understand group theory and dynamics, group leadership styles, group counseling methods, ethical standards, approaches needed for different kinds of group work, and relevant research. However, these standards do not specify how to translate this knowledge into skills” (Furr & Barret, 2000, pg. 94). As a solution, we employed the use of a structured group design. This format allowed us the ability to facilitate a psychoeducational balance that was responsive to the skill level of all of the facilitators (Furr & Barret, 2000), and allowed us to maximize the participant’s experience.

Offering a course addressing diversity engagement requires facilitators be willing to process unfamiliar and often polarizing viewpoints in a way that fosters respect and understanding. Prior to facilitating a course of this nature it is imperative that co-facilitators are willing to initiate conversations about cultural issues and issues of power, oppression, and privilege (Glosoff & Durham, 2010). Whether this occurs as a component of supervisory experience or among colleagues is independent of its necessity. To increase cohesiveness as co-facilitators, we met beforehand to practice co-facilitation style with one another through role play. Special attention was given to factors of power, oppression, and privilege related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and spirituality that provided us opportunities to view the experience as a group member and co-facilitator (Lassiter, Napolitano, Culbreth, & Ng, 2008). This allowed use to develop a rhythm with and establish trust in one another during course development.

Throughout the course development we were continuously curious of one another’s perspective on the class organization, materials, and assessment. In addition to the group “check-ins,” we set time aside throughout the course to “check-in” with one another. These times were especially enriching because we were able to offer each other support, identify parts of ourselves that would be useful in sharing with the group without operating outside the facilitative role, and regulate the pace of the course/group process.

To best facilitate these dynamic topics, a group process described as intergroup dialogue was utilized in order to encourage students to participate in an educational
process consisting of conversation and activities that help improve cross-cultural relations. In group dialogue, the process is collaborative, members are encouraged to search for the strengths in the others’ positions, personal experience is key, and the goal is to “identify express, and work with as much of the impact of our exchange as we can in the moment and to bring the other after-effects of our dialogue back to the dialogue process” (Kardia & Sevig, 2007). As co-facilitators we adhered to methods aligned with Lee Mun Wah’s (2004) suggestions for mindful facilitation such as, observing what is and what is not said, being aware of the impact culture has on relationships, and embracing anger and conflict as an intimate experience and opportunity. Although most participants were able to use this format to voice their perspectives within the natural discourse of the group, co-facilitators also used structured “check-ins” to allow all participants time to “use the floor.”

Course Delivery Outline

This outline of suggested topics and activities is based on three consecutive 8-hour days. Appropriate adjustments could be made for alternate delivery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Activity/Modality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DAY 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>GROUND RULES</td>
<td>Didactic</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND DIVERSITY CHALLENGES</td>
<td>Discussion/Group Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEEPENING DIALOGUE</td>
<td>Skill Building</td>
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<tr>
<td>SELF-AWARENESS</td>
<td>Journal Activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>Film-Killing Us Softly (Jhally, 2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RACE</td>
<td>Reflective Journal and discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DAY 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>PRIVILEGE-CLASS</td>
<td>Race/Class Walk</td>
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<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL/GROUP EXPERIENCES</td>
<td>Reflective Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</td>
<td>“It Gets Better” (Burns, 2010)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Heterosexism Activity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective Journal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discussion/Group Process</td>
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DAY 3:

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<tr>
<th>ENGAGEMENT “GETTING REAL”</th>
<th>Film-Color of Fear (Lee, 1994) Reflective Journal Large group process</th>
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<tr>
<td>COLOR BLIND</td>
<td>Film-Color Blind (Wise, 2010) Reflective Journal Discussion/Group process Film-Race is the Place (Telles &amp; Tejada-Flores, 2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP</td>
<td>Didactic Application of Leadership Principles Group Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLOSING/APPLICATION</td>
<td>Personal Action Plan Final Round—Group Process</td>
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Recommendations for Counselor Educators Developing Coursework

- Know your population! Be sensitive to the contextual issues impacting issues of diversity in your particular area and have the ability to utilize local historical references and/or materials.
- Expand your repertoire for possible materials to be utilized. It is a good idea to have more activities ready than you may be able to use and make final decisions as you convene the group, or as dynamics develop.
- Dedicate time to reviewing material beforehand. Constantly ask yourself the purpose of this material and what you can pull out of it. Don’t just consider the content; consider what the discussion will be. Ask your own questions and work out the answers. You are not the only “expert.”
- Be aware of the student’s racial identity development, comfort with conflict, skill level, and openness to supervision. Utilize reflective questioning as suggested by Glosoff and Durham (2010).
- Relationally, establish a partnership with student facilitators from the beginning that sets an expectation of ownership, trust, and competence.
- Question trainees’ rationale throughout the experience so they may discern what is appropriate behavior as a facilitator versus a participant.
- Encourage co-facilitators to bring their complete selves to the process. The leaders serve as models of healthy interaction for participants.
- Highlight trainees’ strengths and allow them opportunities to showcase them through group leadership.
- When trainees make mistakes, discuss it, but allow them space to rectify those independently within the group.
- Be open to the growth your co-facilitators will provide you, through feedback and their own style of facilitation. Discuss and explore, so that you can coordinate these styles before the class begins.
Recommendations for Counselor Trainees Aspiring to Be Co-Facilitators

- Clearly identify your own goals personally and professionally.
- BE OPEN to growing and to bringing your own full self to the process.
- Be willing to offer input throughout the development and delivery of the course.
- Examine all parts of yourselves: your identity (age, gender, racial, sexual orientation, religious, etc.), your emotions, your fears.
- Do your best to keep your channels clear and receptive to the experiences of your peers and the group.
- Trust your instincts, they might surprise you!
- Give yourself a break.
- Set aside time for meditation/ reflection.
- Be aware that what you do not take time to process internally will manifest non-verbally within the group.
- Find a mentor and work with him/her closely. The largest, and sometimes most significant, part of our development as counselors, students, and persons during our graduate program is due to the relationships we develop with our mentors.

Conclusion

In January of 2011, this framework was used to facilitate an intense and powerful 24 hour encounter with a diverse group of university student leaders. The reaction that the facilitators observed was overwhelmingly positive. While the range of emotions that came out during this weekend was wide, from anger to joy, the lasting sentiment seemed to be excitement and ambition. Numerous times since this course was offered, students (both returning and brand new) have requested this course again. Some are identifying ways to share skills obtained through this course within their student organizations; almost all have voiced their desire to advocate that this type of class be made part of the curriculum. It seems that not only is there an ethical need for cultural competence, but also a deeper and more personal need being voiced by the students to engage in this type of educational experience.

These student voices provided a great deal of anecdotal evidence; however, more systematic investigation is needed into the changes in and outcomes for student attitudes and reactions to this framework. Further research should examine the short- and long-term consequences for both students and the campus community of participating in intensive diversity engagement as well as exploring ways to measure and define its effectiveness.

References


Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm