

## Article 42

### **Teaching Social Justice Counseling Skills at a Rural University: What Has the Greatest Impact?**

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Research in multicultural counselor education indicates that an increased cultural awareness of oneself and others is best supported in a program that infuses an emphasis on cultural competency throughout the curriculum and utilizes a variety of instructional approaches, particularly within the primary course on cultural contexts in counseling (Bemak, Chung, Talleyrand, Jones, & Daquin, 2011; Dickson & Shumway, 2011; Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012; Sharpe & O'Connell, 2005). Although some research explores how counselors currently employ their knowledge of cultural differences (Packer-Williams, Jay, & Evans, 2010), this leaves open the complete continuum of counselor preparation programs and courses and does not take specific training practices into account. Other studies (Bemak et. al, 2011; Dickson & Shumway, 2011; Ockerman & Mason, 2012;) emphasize the inclusion of a service-learning project into the counselor preparation program, which is helpful in culturally diverse geographic locations. However, there appears to be a lack of research of how to best provide these experiential learning activities in areas of the country that are racially homogenous. The counseling department in the current study, although located in a region with limited racial diversity, encourages students to utilize area and campus resources to maximize their cultural awareness.

The purpose of this study was to better understand preservice counselors' interpretations of course readings and activities concerning social justice, race, and multicultural education. The activities within the cultural contexts course, to be described below, have been carefully planned over time by members of the department who are all very dedicated to issues of social justice. The geographical location of the counseling program came into play during this planning process, as the census for the region has consistently remained at 93% White (quickfacts.census.gov) with an estimated median household income of \$36, 691 in 2011(www.city-data.com). However, there is a Native

American reservation within an hour's drive, as well as several campus organizations that are comprised of students who are racially and/or culturally unlike the majority of the region's permanent population. The racial demographics of the student population are 77% White, with 8% of the students being Hispanic/Latino, 6% Black, and 2% Asian (www.collegedata.com). The graduate program did not reflect this level of diversity, but the students within the program could still see their races, cultures, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, etc. reflected in the greater campus community. Most students within the graduate program did not grow up in the immediate geographic area.

The aforementioned campus organizations often host educational and cultural events, which are viewed as optimal learning opportunities for students in the counseling program. The author taught this course every semester for 3 years, and included the same activities and course requirements each time. To best assess the perceived effectiveness of these activities, the author deemed it necessary to follow up with prior students to determine which activities they felt were most helpful in their journey toward cultural competency. The participants in this study, who mostly identify as White and middle class, were asked to reflect on their level of cultural awareness prior to entering the course, as well as which activities created the most insight for them as they have entered into internships and professional working positions.

### **Graduate Student Beliefs**

Current research in multicultural education indicates that stand-alone college-level courses may not substantively change student attitudes in a short period of time (Garmon, 2004; McDonald, 2005; Sleeter, 1995; Winitzky & Barlow, 1998). Students are often attached to their beliefs and only take in new information in a way that fits with prior assumptions (Adler & Confer, 1998). In many cases, students find their prior beliefs are supported and possibly strengthened through the course, rather than having their beliefs broadened to include more diverse perspectives (Sleeter, 1995). Many people from the dominant White and middle-class culture have reached young adulthood without ever questioning the racial and classist biases entrenching most aspects of American society (King, 1991) and are unaware of their own passive racism that has resulted from being raised in a Eurocentric society (Marx, 2001). The challenge for counselor educators is to assist all students in their self-awareness as racial beings and in their power and responsibility to help eradicate racism. Counselor educators must assist future professionals to see outside their monocultural worldviews and to help them understand that despite socioeconomic disparities, there is still privilege associated with being White (McIntosh, 1988). Understanding that many counselors choose the profession because they truly want to help others, it is not surprising that the topic of racism in counseling is often met with resistance by these well-intentioned individuals (Marx, 2001; Milner, 2005).

### **Admission Into Counseling Program**

While the values of social justice are emphasized during the admissions day process for applicants of the counseling programs, students enter into the counseling programs at different levels of identity development. Because aspects of social justice are so central to the programs, and because the number of applicants has historically been robust, applicants who seemed indifferent to these core values would likely not be

admitted into the graduate school. Perhaps as a result of this application process, which included interview questions and small group discussions regarding issues of race, ethnicity, and social justice, there were very few students within the counseling department who claimed they “did not notice racial differences.” There were, however, times when White students seemed somewhat resistant to exploring aspects of their racial identity development, most often citing as a reason that the model “doesn’t fit for them” or that “not everyone experiences this.”

### **The Current Study**

After teaching this course several times, the researcher wondered which course experiences were most meaningful for the students. Although the course evaluations at each semester’s end for this particular class were overwhelmingly positive, the researcher sought to discover which activities the participants reflected upon the most since entering their internship or professional working experiences. The researcher also sought to explore how the students integrated the content of the multicultural course into their identities and which experiences they felt were most helpful in learning how to work with people who are racially or culturally unlike themselves. While many studies have examined student beliefs before and after taking a particular multicultural course, there is less consistent information regarding the process of change over time, when putting these practices into place.

The underlying research questions of this study were as follows:

One: How would students rate their level of cultural competency prior to taking this class and how would they rate it now? Why?

Two: Were there any activities and/or experiences that participants feel changed the way they view and/or interact with people unlike themselves? If so, what were they?

Three: What activities and/or experiences do participants feel impacted them the most while enrolled in this class and in what way?

Four: What activities and/or experiences do participants feel they have reflected on the most during the time since taking this class and why?

Five: Are there any aspects of this course that participants feel impact them on a regular basis? If yes, in what way?

Additionally, participants were asked how they self-identity, length of time since taking the course, and about their current work setting.

### **Method**

It was the author’s intention to gain a better understanding of the impact of her own teaching methods within the context of working in a racially homogenous and rural setting, rather than to make generalizations to other populations. After obtaining IRB approval, the author employed a qualitative case study approach utilizing post-hoc analysis as she searched for similarities in participant responses regarding the class activities that seemed to create the greatest impact in regard to cultural awareness and

growth. A constant comparative form of analysis was used to illuminate themes between participant responses in regards to the most beneficial class experiences.

### **Participants**

This study took place at a state university in a rural location in the Northeast United States. The seven participants were former graduates of a multicultural counseling course taught by the same instructor between 2009–2012. The author e-mailed 25 former students and explained the purpose of her study. Although many more students had taken the course, there was not a current e-mail on file for all graduates. The researcher asked for willing participants to respond if they were interested in providing feedback on the course activities. Nine former students responded via e-mail with an expressed willingness to participate in the study, and seven of them completed the response questions. Four participants identified as female and three as male. Six identified as White or of European descent, while one female identified as Black, with Caribbean descent. One participant identified himself as homosexual, another as lesbian, and another as bisexual. The other four participants did not mention their sexuality when asked, “How do you identify yourself?” Only one participant included religion (Catholic) as a part of this response. The age range of the participants was 24 to 38 years, with the median age being 30 years. The cultural contexts course was paired as a co-requisite with a pre-practicum course that required the students to practice their counseling skills with a class partner. Additionally, the course was part of a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs accredited program, where cultural contexts were embedded throughout all courses in the counseling program. The author identifies as a heterosexual White female in her late 30s.

### **Course Design**

The course provided an introduction to the consideration of cultural differences during the counseling process. The objectives outlined in the syllabus described a course where students reflect on their own experiences and actively engage in discussions of racial and cultural issues both in class and through later reflections on Weblogs. The author added Weblog discussions to this pre-existing course to provide an extension of class discussions. As found by Ilieva and Erguner-Tekinalp (2012), the added element of online discussions is ideal for the often delicate and emotionally charged conversations involving racism and discrimination. Students who may hesitate to speak in class are provided an opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and type them out, without fear of interruption. Students also seem “less exposed” in sharing their feelings and opinions in the online forum, despite the fact that the writer’s identities are apparent to their classmates (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012, p. 10) The reading material required for this course included, among others, topics such as White privilege, racism, social class, ablism, sexual identity and discrimination, language diversity, ageism and adultism. This class was taken as a co-requisite with a pre-practicum class, where students continued to learn and hone their counseling skills. Aside from reading assignments and in class and online discussions, other assignments in the class included the following.

**Peer counseling component.** Students met for six counseling sessions with a classmate to openly explore issues related to culture, race, class, sexual identity, etc. Each dyad video recorded the weekly counseling sessions, held in the department’s counseling

lab, lasting approximately one hour each. The student counselors then met privately with the class instructor for supervision and feedback on counseling skills used throughout the session. Student growth was measured throughout this process by instructor observation of improved counseling skills, as well as by self-rating evaluations and reflection papers written by students about insights gained during the process of counseling another person in regards to cultural concerns.

**Interviews with eight individuals unlike yourself.** The course syllabus contained the following list of identifiers:

- a. an African-American
- b. an Asian-American
- c. a European-American
- d. a Latino or Latina
- e. a Native-American
- f. a person who is openly gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered
- g. a person with a visible disability
- h. a person who is over 70 years of age
- i. a person not of your biological sex
- j. a person who espouses commitment to a particular religion or spiritual perspective that is not the same as yours
- k. a person who was not born in the U.S.
- l. a person who is significantly over- or underweight

Students were asked to select eight of the 12 people on the list with whom to conduct an interview. The interviewee could not be someone within the counseling department, and could not be a close friend or relative of the interviewer. Students were required to hand in their interview questions, along with a transcript of each interview. At the end of the semester, students were required to write a reflection paper based on the collective interview process. As students reviewed this assignment on the first day of class and realized they would be required to approach strangers and ask questions about their racial or cultural experiences, the resulting anxiety and/or resistance was often palpable within the classroom. Some students would immediately state that this activity would be impossible for them to complete, as they did not know many people who fit these descriptors, or that they did not have the time to locate such individuals and conduct interviews. Students would often verbalize a discomfort with the prospect of approaching others to talk about issues such as race or culture. However, as will be discussed, this activity is the one that appears to have had the greatest impact on the participants involved in this study. Throughout the semester as the interviews were being conducted, students were asked to share their interview experiences with the class. While keeping the interviewees' identities confidential, students shared with their classmates basic descriptors of whom they interviewed, as well as their own feelings throughout the interview process. This sharing process created a vicarious learning experience for the class and also provided a more diverse pool of responses than what only one interview can provide. For example, students were able to recognize, "Oh, your White male interviewee did not have the same feelings/ideas/responses as mine did," which emphasized the differences that exist within cultural groups.

**Cultural collage.** For this project, students used everyday objects to create a social justice collage that represented the most salient aspects of their identity and the journey of personal advocacy that shaped how they view social justice theory, the nature of human challenges and resilience, and the reasons they have chosen to become counselors. Students were then asked to make a brief class presentation of their creations during the last days of the semester. Because this assignment was so open-ended, many students became very creative in their approach. For example, one student demonstrated how making a pie encompassed his cultural heritage. Another student played the banjo, while another created a box that was decorated with song lyrics, photos, and other elements of herself that she found valuable. In the 3 years of teaching this class, all students appeared to be actively engaged in this assignment. Each semester as students shared very openly about themselves during this presentation, the instructor was consciously aware of the deep privilege she had in being part of this intimate sharing and always expressed gratitude to the students for their honesty and candor.

**Cultural immersion activities.** Attend and *actively participate* in at least three activities outside of class that offer the opportunity to engage in, be a participant-observer in, and immerse oneself in social/educational activities outside student's typical comfort zone. As stated before, this often involved attending a campus event or a visit to the nearby reservation. Many students also elected to attend a religious service for a denomination or sect outside of their own beliefs.

**Assessment of racial identity development following one of the identity development models.** As previously stated, students were asked to complete this assignment following class discussions and readings in the text pertaining to the various identity development models.

**Multicultural audit.** Students were asked to conduct an audit of their 15 closest friends, and identify them based on race, gender, sexuality, religion, and social class. They then reviewed the outcomes with respect to the level of heterogeneity/ homogeneity of their closest relationships and wrote a brief reflection paper. Students often wrote about the insight they gained when considering their relationships through this lens.

**Videos watched in class.** The author often used video clips to complement instruction. These included an occasional documentary on topics such as transgender issues and more frequent brief video clips to illustrate a point being discussed in class. One full class was devoted to the topic of "deconstructing media," where students viewed commercials and clips from children's movies to discuss topics such as: How are women and other minorities portrayed? Whose voices are heard and whose are not? What are the impacts of these stereotypes when viewed by young children?

## **Procedures**

The author contacted former students and described the premise of the study, asking for an e-mailed response from anyone who was interested in participating. For the nine students who responded, the researcher explained that although individual responses would be identifiable to her, they would be combined into group format for purposes of the study. Participants were provided with a list of course activities and the aforementioned research questions. All correspondence took place via e-mail. Once all responses had been received, student names were removed and all data was transferred

into a Word document. Utilizing grounded theory, the student responses were reviewed and coded for themes using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998).

## **Findings and Discussion**

**Research Question One:** How would students rate their level of cultural competency prior to taking this class and how would they rate it now? Why?

Three participants rated themselves at a low level of cultural competency prior to taking the class, and a medium level of competency at the current time. The other four participants indicated that they began the course with a medium or high medium level of cultural competence and are all at higher levels at the time of this study. Their reasons for this change included class activities and, for two students who are now employed as counselors, current work experience with historically marginalized populations. Several students mentioned having a lack of exposure or thought to cultural issues prior to entering the course. Most also indicated an increased awareness of their own privileges and biases as a result of their work in this class. As one White female participant noted,

I think that I may have thought (my cultural competence) was higher than it was. It was probably medium. After taking (this class) it was probably higher medium to lower high. Before the class, I had thought more about cultural diversity in terms of race. Although being from a low SES family, being a woman, and sexual orientation had been a part of my diverse experience, I had not thought of this as much in terms of cultural diversity. Although I saw inequities in the lives of my students of different races, I had not thought about my own privilege as much or how I may unknowingly contribute. I am also better able to address bias when things are said or done by others. I am better able to check my own bias and privilege.

Another participant reflected on specific course activities that enlightened her during the semester. She reflected,

Prior to this class I would say my competency was about medium going into high due to being in (a mostly White, rural environment) for 4 years. After taking this class I would say it's high due to the racial identity model assignment. I got a chance to explore the phases I went through and felt more comfortable knowing that I was not the only person going through a similar process. Also, doing the peer counseling I learned that there are other isms that can be related to others regardless of race. For example, I had some classism issues which stereotypically people would not know because I am Black.

Overall, all participants indicated an increased level of awareness and competency as a result of taking this class.

**Research Question Two:** Were there any activities and/or experiences that participants feel changed the way they view and/or interact with people unlike themselves? If so, what were they?

All participants responded by mentioning the impact that the interviews had on them as cultural beings. The following quote by a White female participant summarizes the sentiment expressed by many of the respondents:

The interviews, although awkward when approaching those I did not know, allowed me to think of things that I had not previously thought about. I had a sense of various inequities, but got a better sense of how this may play out in people's lives. The interviews allowed me to hear about micro-aggressions that I may not have been aware of. It helped me to try to pay even more attention to my own behavior, thoughts, bias, etc. It also gave me a sense that I would be a part of the problem if I do not address such things when I see it happening.

As another White female participant responded, "The multicultural interviews were particularly helpful in learning about other populations' experiences. The interviews illuminated other populations' struggles in a way that readings simply cannot."

Although a couple of participants mentioned the cultural collage and others remarked on the immersion experience, there was 100% agreement on the growth impact of the interview assignment.

**Research Question Three:** What activities and/or experiences do participants feel impacted them the most while enrolled in this class and in what way?

Although the responses for this question varied and three respondents mentioned the interviews, four participants spoke about their growth as a result of the class discussions. As one male participant stated, "The class discussions were certainly eye opening. I felt the effect of the discussions for days, some were a bit intense." This intensity he references was echoed in the responses from the other students who mentioned the impact of the class discussion. Another participant referenced the lingering effect of these conversations in the following statement:

The class discussions and multicultural interviews impacted me the most. know they impacted me because they continue to inform my work with populations that differ from my own. They also continue to inform how I choose to live my life-with whom I associate, when I speak out against injustice, and how I choose to advocate for others who cannot advocate for themselves. (White female)

Other participants expressed their surprise at the amount of "White defensiveness" that became apparent during class discussions. This element of the class was enlightening even for White students who had never considered their privilege prior to entering the class. An important consideration here is that the class composition varied each semester, which likely had an impact on many aspects of the class discussions between courses. For example, one class consisted of six White females, but there was diversity within the group in terms of socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, and age. In that particular class, those topics became more salient in our discussions than race and ethnicity, which were more prominent points of discussion in most of the other classes. In all the classes, students shared the stories of their interviewees, as well as their reflections on each interview experience. This provided the class with real examples of the lives of "others," and it also allowed for discussions regarding the similarities and differences within populations based on the individual responses of those who chose to participate in the interviews (students were very rarely turned down). Overall, the class discussions appear to have been helpful in promoting student awareness and growth.

**Research Question Four:** What activities and/or experiences do participants feel they have reflected on the most during the time since taking this class and why?

The responses here did reflect some variation, with a couple of participants mentioning the deconstructing media and White privilege components of the course, but the majority focused again on the interviews and class discussions. As one White female participant stated,

The experiences I have reflected on the most have probably been the interaction between the counseling component and the interviews. Through the counseling component I thought more about my own identity, being true to myself, and others definitions/perceptions of me. Sometimes I felt I was living as others viewed me, rather than my true self. With the interviews, I learned about other perceptions that I might not have been aware of for others. This has made me think a lot about authenticity, both my own and others and what may be barriers from being authentic. I think this can affect everyday interactions between people and is something I try to be aware of when working with others. This also gets back to recognizing my own privilege and how that can affect others (and myself).

This statement reflects a shared sentiment expressed by several of the participants that learning the perspectives of other people had a lasting impact beyond the confines of the semester. All participants appeared deeply reflective in regard to this element of the course.

**Research Question Five:** Are there any aspects of this course that participants feel impact them on a regular basis? If yes, in what way?

Although responses varied, most participants reflected on the insight they gained in regard to their own privilege and self-awareness as cultural beings. Three participants again referenced the powerful impact of the interviews and how these served as a helpful experience in talking to others about issues of racism and discrimination. As one participant stated,

I think that the intimacy of the class, the sharing of thoughts, and the pushing myself out of my comfort zone are carried with me. I was somewhat uncomfortable with the interviews, but now see it as a launch pad to engaging in interactions with people in every day life. (White female)

Based on the responses to the research questions in this study, the impact of the interview component of this class cannot be underestimated. This activity seemed to create the most initial anxiety for students, but also appears to be the most transformative class experience. In some cases, students became rather resistant to the idea of participating in this activity and verbally expressed reasons why they could not participate when the assignment was discussed on the first day of class each semester. Although none of the participants of the current study exhibited outward displays of resistance, one theme that was common among their responses was a feeling of nervousness related to interviewing strangers about topics which could be personal or sensitive. All participants indicated an increased sense of awareness as a result of the interview process. This particular activity seems to be an ideal solution for a counseling program that is geographically situated in a mostly White, rural area. While there is

abundant research to support the use of service learning projects, particularly in urban environments (Dotson-Blake, Dotson, Glass, & Lilley, 2010; Wilczenski & Schumacher, 2008), a service learning project in the immediate area may be limited in exposing the counseling students to a wide variety of cultural difference. Nonetheless, all students were able to locate at least eight people unlike themselves to interview as part of the class requirement. As evidenced in the participant responses throughout this paper, the impact of this experience was long-lasting and appears to have assisted the students in their cultural awareness and growth.

The other elements of the class that seemed to have a lasting impact on the students included the class discussions and the cultural immersion and collage assignments. Several participants also remarked that the conglomeration of all the class experiences seemed to propel them forward, rather than one or two activities in isolation.

### **Limitations of Study**

The sample size of this study was rather small. Out of about 25 former students who were contacted (10 former students could not be located), only nine responded with an interest to participate in the study and two students did not complete the study. Furthermore, the seven participants were volunteers, which may indicate some qualitative difference between those students and other classmates who did not volunteer to participate in the study. Also, based upon the author's memory of student behavior in class, the responding participants enjoyed the class and not did exhibit much resistance during the class.

Researcher bias was also a possible limitation. The author, who was also the instructor of this class, was raised in the United States with the perspective of a White middle-class female, which certainly had an impact on how the class was taught. It is therefore a challenge not to overlook any comments or viewpoints of people who have experienced the world from a similar frame of reference.

Finally, it is not possible to meter out the experiences in student lives since taking the course and how these may impact the ways in which these graduates now reflect on their class activities from the past.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The aforementioned concerns regarding sampling and the specifics of this rural setting should be addressed in future studies. The strongest finding in this study is the emphasis the former students placed on the interviewing activity and the intrapersonal changes they experienced as a result of this process. The inclusion of an interview assignment in counseling classes in similar geographic locations, with follow-up surveys and observations of the students after graduation, could yield information on how students reflect on the multicultural course in light of insights gained from time in the actual classroom and life experiences after the course. Another recommendation is to replicate the theoretical and methodological aspects of this study with other diversity courses utilizing similar educational techniques. Any similarities in meaningful learning experiences expressed by the students can then be emphasized in future courses.

### Implications for Multicultural Educators in Rural Settings

Based on information gained from student applications to the counseling program, many students entered into the program without a lot of experience or time spent outside of a mostly White, rural setting. While a given community may not host a lot of opportunity for a heterogeneous racial experience, most college campuses offer a plethora of racial, cultural, and religious events throughout the year, where many students can learn about groups unlike those with which they most closely identify. Asking students to conduct individual interviews creates an intimate experience for the student to learn about others without the need for a large heterogeneous population.

A final implication for cultural contexts educators is that of congruence across courses in a multicultural approach to education. As previously stated, one course is not enough to alter a lifetime of experiences and worldviews regarding racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Although the questions asked as part of this study pertained only to the one course in particular, the students were constantly learning about cultural contexts in counseling through their other coursework in the program.

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