Literature Review: Interim Student-Instructor Feedback in Multicultural Teacher Education Courses

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The Role of Multicultural Education

The purpose of multicultural teacher education courses or programs, according to Artiles and McClafferty (1998), is to prepare teachers to work successfully with diverse learners. The need for this kind of preparation is driven by the enormous and growing disparity between the backgrounds of teachers and students. For example, the vast majority of elementary school teachers in the United States are white, middle-class, and female, while the student population is increasingly diverse—racially, ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and economically. Students also come from a variety of family structures (Van Hook, 2002).

Fox and Gay (1995) explain why multiculturalism should be a fundamental component of teacher education programs (pp. 68-69).

- At the *ideological* level, multicultural education promotes equity, social justice, and respect for different cultures (p. 68).
- At the *practical* level, understanding of different cultures allows teachers to recognize incompatibilities that are detrimental to students from marginal cultural groups, and to bridge cultural differences in the classroom (p. 69).
- At the *political* level, multicultural education provides students with the skills they need to combat the unequal distribution of power among dominate and subordinate groups (p. 69).
- At the *methodological* level, multicultural education encourages teachers to tailor instruction to the particular cultural experiences and frameworks of different cultural groups, which will lead to greater achievement in diverse student populations (p. 70).

When the tenets of multiculturalism are successfully implemented, teachers can bridge the gaps that stymie the academic success of underrepresented or minority students *and* prevent majority students from accepting the mores, behaviors, and thinking patterns of those who are different from themselves (Major & Brock, 2003; Montgomery, 2001).

Goals of Multicultural Education

Fox and Gay (1995, pp. 71-73) articulate six clusters of objectives of multicultural teacher education at the curriculum level:

1. to transmit factual information about ethnic and cultural diversity;
2. to train prospective teachers how to aid the personal development of diverse student populations;
3. to train prospective teachers how to develop personal empowerment skills in diverse student populations;
4. to allow prospective teachers to analyze and clarify their own attitudes and values about cultural diversity;
5. to provide prospective teachers with social skills for functioning in diverse educational settings; and
6. to train prospective teachers to engage in what they term *culturally responsive teaching*.

Gay and Kirkland (2003) describe culturally responsive teaching in some detail; it involves using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills. More specifically, culturally responsive classrooms acknowledge and value student differences and promote strategies to help them connect with one another and with the subject matter (Montgomery, 2001). Culturally responsive teaching also involves recognizing and unpacking unequal distributions of power and privilege, and teaching students cultural competence about themselves and each other (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In essence, culturally responsive teaching is an interconnected and somewhat seamless mix of methodological, social, and political components that allow powerful learning to occur without regard to student differences.

Interim Feedback

While some teachers can intuitively create an inviting, accepting classroom, most need specific training. It is therefore extremely important for today's preservice educators to learn about multiculturalism in general, and specific techniques to ensure that their own classes are tolerant and accommodating. The criticality of multicultural education is demonstrated by the growing number of state departments of education that require

colleges and universities to include in their curricula courses on cultural diversity (Artiles & McClafferty, 1998).

Since most teacher education students will take but one course on multiculturalism, it is particularly important that this course be effective. For this reason, feedback about the course from students is crucial, not only at the end of course (where student feedback can be used to improve the course the next time it is offered), but also – and perhaps more importantly – during the course. This *interim feedback* allows instructors to see what they have been doing, how it has been working, and where they are progressing (Lewis, 2001). The gathering of feedback should occur repeatedly during a course; Lewis (2001) remarks that changing teacher behaviors is often a slow and painstaking task, and that teachers need to obtain feedback regularly to monitor for improvement.

Lewis (2001, pp. 33-34) describes four main characteristics of useful interim feedback. First, it must be continuous, providing information at regular intervals, thus allowing the instructor to make changes on the basis of the feedback while the course is still in progress. Second, interim feedback must be broadly based, providing information about all aspects of instruction in the course (e.g. lectures, materials, syllabus, and so on). Third, it must be specific and focused, rather than general or vague. Fourth, interim feedback must reflect the teacher's personal goals; in other words, it must provide information about how well a teacher's instruction matches his or her own specific instructional goals and objectives.

Methods for Gathering of Interim Feedback

Given these requirements for informative, useful interim feedback, it is clear that the process of obtaining it cannot be casual or haphazard. A formal, systematic approach is more likely to provide meaningful, accurate feedback data. Lewis (2001) suggests the use of surveys to collect feedback from students at any time during a course, and provides a number of examples. When well-structured, such surveys can reveal students' perceptions of their own understanding and learning, the teacher's performance, the course materials, and the course as a whole. Lewis advocates a closed-response design to aid scoring and data analysis, although one can also use open-response items to allow richer input from the students. He also suggests other methods for gathering interim feedback from students, including Muddiest Point CATs, which are very brief surveys (around one minute in length) to determine students'

misunderstandings, and asking students to name one or two practices that the teacher should start, stop, and continue.

According to Lewis (2001, pp. 38-39), the following conditions are essential for the successful gathering and use of interim feedback from students:

- The teacher must be willing to take action based on the feedback;
- The students must understand why the instructor is asking them to provide feedback; and
- The students must be able to provide feedback; they must know what they're expected to do (provide ratings, rank choices, or give examples).

In addition, Lewis (2001) notes that assured anonymity of survey results can encourage greater honesty from students; however, he also points out that knowing a respondent's identity can allow the instructor to better address individual needs.

Carpenter-LaGuttata (2002) suggests two informal methods for soliciting feedback in multicultural education courses. First, the instructor can write notes on students' papers when grading them. She found, in her experience, that such notes frequently result in feedback from students that communicates their feelings about the course or the teacher's performance. Major and Brock (2003) made a similar finding. Second, the teacher can assign short, informal reaction papers (Carpenter-LaGuttata, 2002), in which students write about the course materials, what they like and dislike about them, and what they do and do not understand. The teacher can use the information generated by both of these methods to adjust the course and his or her own teaching methods rapidly.

An additional method for gathering interim feedback is the use of periodic teacher/student conferences (Montgomery, 2001), in which the teacher asks the student about his or her learning and progress in the course. Again, the teacher can use this feedback to tailor the course to each student's particular learning needs. Montgomery (2001) suggests that students can bring portfolios of their work to these conferences, so that the teacher can monitor their progress. Fox and Gay (1995) also suggest the use of student portfolios, which the teacher should review frequently in order to determine areas in which students need help, and their levels of understanding of the course content. A course requirement of student portfolios, therefore, is a means of soliciting indirect feedback from students; the teacher can use this information to determine each student's progress and learning needs. Moreover, the student can use it to determine his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

Learning Climates Conducive to Student Feedback Provision

Course and curriculum design plays a major role in students' willingness and ability to provide feedback. Fox and Gay (1995) posit that teacher-dominated transmissive curriculum, which focuses on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, puts students in a passive role and discourages interaction of all kinds, including feedback from student to teacher. By contrast, transactive and transformative curricula, which recognize students as active participants in the classroom, enable interaction and encourage student-teacher feedback.

Transformative curriculum in particular is constructivist, encouraging students to create understanding through active learning, self-reflection and collaborative construction of new knowledge (Major & Brock, 2003), and maximizing student engagement with the course content. Instructors in teacher preparation programs should provide prospective teachers with opportunities for guided practice in self-reflection using inquiry teaching techniques (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), and may even need to provide instruction in what constitutes self-reflection, and how it is performed (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In order to increase student engagement and reflectivity, instructors may need to simplify difficult language; as Major and Brock (2003) note, an inability to understand academic discourse may be a factor that inhibits reflection.

In this way, teacher education programs can create learning climates where self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are part of the routine demands of students (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Such learning climates create questioning, reflecting students who are willing to engage in dialogue, interact with the teacher and their fellow students, and to communicate openly about the course content and their attitudes toward it (Major & Brock, 2003) – in other words, to provide feedback. Indeed, it is only in such a learning climate, where understanding gained through reflection and collaboration is valued, that we can expect students to examine their own attitudes and to communicate them openly and honestly, and thus to provide informative, honest feedback that the instructor can use to improve the course.

References

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