

## **Promoting multicultural competence in master's students and improving teaching using action research**

Debra S. Gentry  
University of Toledo

Stacy A. Jacob  
Texas Tech University

### **ABSTRACT**

The ability to work effectively with diverse student populations is increasingly important for student affairs practitioners as college campuses become more diverse in their student populations. A three part conceptual framework for developing multicultural competence was used to design a master's level course on multiculturalism and diversity. This framework includes developing awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to become competent in working with diverse populations. An action research design within a case study method was used to improve teaching and learning in this masters level course. Findings indicate growth in the instructor's own classroom practice and growth in students own awareness of their assumptions and worldviews, development of a knowledge base about diverse populations, and minimal growth in skill attainment for working with diverse student populations. Findings also suggest that action research is a very effective means for reflecting upon, and improving, teaching practice as well as reflecting upon students' own learning.

Keywords: action research, case study, teaching, multiculturalism

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## **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE CASE**

In the fall of 2009 the principal researcher for the study taught a master's level course on diversity and multiculturalism for student affairs practitioners, using the class as a case study to improve teaching, learning, and course design. The students were part of a cohort of entry level, early career professionals, training to work in various student support positions at colleges across the U.S.; these support positions included: residence life, financial aid, advising, student activities, multicultural affairs, overseas study, sports and recreation, and student athletics just to name a few. The master's level course on diversity and multiculturalism covered topics of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, disabilities, social class, cultural orientation, and their respective impacts on students' lives in college. The principal researcher had not taught this particular course before and was apprehensive about teaching subject matter that often catalyzes heated discussions, or conversely, shuts down conversation, and even promotes division and hurt feelings among classmates. This case study was situated in a single classroom in a university in the deep-South in the heart of the Bible belt; the principal researcher lived in the South for several years and was aware that certain values ran deep in the heart of southerners and these values could potentially impact course topics of racism, sexual orientation, religion and even gender role expectations. One of the objectives for the course was to have students reflect on how their own worldviews and value systems impact their student affairs practice and to understand how the students they serve are impacted by their own values, worldviews, and roles. Another course objective was for students to develop a more discerning, aware, and knowledgeable mind, a more empathetic heart, and a sense of advocacy for students who do not, or cannot, always advocate for themselves. The course was designed around three key outcomes for students: 1) students would gain knowledge of diverse student populations and their needs, 2) students would gain skills to work with diverse populations and 3) students would gain awareness of self and others in order to work effectively with diverse student populations.

The following is a single case study of how action research was used in a master's level course on multiculturalism and diversity to examine and reflect on teaching practice, to better understand how, and in what ways, students were learning, and ultimately to improve teaching effectiveness and course design.

## **BACKGROUND**

As colleges and universities across the country grow in enrollment numbers so too does the number of diverse students. In the 1950s, as the student affairs profession began to flourish after a post WWII college enrollment boom, students were typically White males and females. African American students or other minorities made up a very small number of college enrollments across the country (Thelin, 2004). Now, more than 60 years later many college campuses across the country serve as havens for diverse student populations. The National Center for Education Statistics 2009 data on 25-29 year olds who had taken some college courses reported the following: Whites, 68%; African Americans, 53%; Hispanics, 34%; Asian/Pacific Islanders, 78%. However, diversity on college campuses today is not just associated with race or ethnicity, but also includes diversity in: age, socio-economic status, religion, students with disabilities, learning styles, sex and gender orientation, and cultural practices.

Because college campuses have become much more diverse in the past several decades it is now more important than ever, that early career student affairs practitioners are engaged in

some type of multicultural or diversity coursework or training in order that they become competent to understand, and serve, a diverse student population. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education (2006) guidelines suggests that student affairs graduate programs ought to provide students with opportunities to understand and appreciate cultural differences, and promote a global perspective. CAS guidelines also outline the importance of student affairs practitioners studying components of the curriculum that include understanding how student characteristics and different attributes may influence student development, learning outcomes, and retention. This study of student characteristics, at a minimum, should include: “age, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual identity, academic ability and preparation, learning styles, socioeconomic status, disability, developmental status, cultural background, family situation, and transfer status” (p. 352). Scholars of student affairs practice have suggested that all student affairs professionals have a responsibility to both commit to multiculturalism on their campuses and to becoming multiculturally competent themselves (Blimling, 2001; Talbot, 2003).

Moses and Banh (2010) conducted an extensive literature review on the impact of diversity in higher education, outlining their findings in several different themes. First, findings indicate that diversity initiatives do have a positive impact on both minority and majority college students relative to attitudes and feelings toward relations between and among different groups, institutional satisfaction, campus involvement, and academic growth. Findings from literature also suggest that diverse, inter-group relations can promote dialogue and friendships between students of different racial groups. Finally, their literature review indicates that various campus activities and programs, offices, and environmental influences positively impact the entire student body such as: ethnic clubs, themed residence halls, cultural affairs, mentoring, and engagement with the community outside of campus.

Other research highlights the fact that a diverse student population provides a campus environment that engages students (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000) and also helps students become more competent as citizens as they prepare to work in a diverse world (Hu & Kuh, 2003). Campus diversity impacts student satisfaction positively as students are more likely to interact with others very different from themselves (Astin, 1993); students are also more likely to develop in their openness to diversity if their interactions with diverse peers include discussions of controversial or value-laden topics (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996). While diversity initiatives on campuses may positively impact students’ overall college satisfaction, studies also show that multicultural effectiveness can be linked with a greater individual sense of happiness and personal adjustment, positive relations with others, and the ability to adapt to other cultures, yet maintain a sense of well being ( Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Leslie, Dalton, Ernst, & Deal, 2002). However, if colleges and universities hope to achieve positive student outcomes from promoting diversity they must be intentional in the ways they both manage and address diversity issues on their campuses (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000).

While preparing student affairs practitioners to work competently with diverse student populations is becoming increasingly important, little research exists that uses a multicultural competence framework to understand how, or in what ways, students develop awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with those diverse populations. Research that does exist on this topic is only loosely related to student affairs practice, as most of the literature comes from research in counseling education.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For student affairs practitioners to be effective in their work Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) outline seven areas of core competency that practitioners ought to possess; one of these core competencies includes developing multicultural competence. This study was conceptualized using the authors' framework for developing multicultural competence, a three part process of developing awareness, knowledge, and skills. Their three-part framework of multicultural competence was derived from counseling psychology research and literature and conceived of in the following manner:

Multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills entails the awareness of one's own assumptions, biases, and values; an understanding of the worldview of others; information about various cultural groups; and developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004, p. 9).

The aforementioned framework was used to design the course on multiculturalism and diversity. In designing the case study the principal researcher considered both how to collect student level data and what that data would be, generating the curriculum by considering course readings, activities, and assignments to incorporate all three of the multicultural competence areas in an effort to reflect on teaching practice and improve teaching effectiveness, to understand how and what students were learning, and to make recommendations for course improvement.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Action research was used, in a case study format, as a way to improve teaching effectiveness and to improve students' learning. Action research is a cycle of inquiry used as a means to improve one's practice or the practice of a community; the researcher is at the center of the research ("I") and follows a cycle of observing their setting, reflecting on what is occurring in the setting, acting on what is occurring (collecting data or evidence), evaluating the data, and modifying practice based on data findings (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). In this particular case, the principal researcher continuously observed and monitored what was occurring in the class, reflected on these observations, collected student level data through various means (including keeping a personal journal and observation notes), evaluated findings from the data throughout the course, used these findings to modify the course as needed, and prepared for redesign in a future iteration of the course. A case study format was used as a way to think about the context of the case, and lessons learned.

### Sample

The case study was conducted in fall 2009, in a master's level student affairs course on multiculturalism and diversity, at a research university in the deep-South. Twenty-two students were enrolled in the course. Nine were African American students, 11 were Caucasian students, and two students were bi-racial. The class was co-taught with a male, African American, doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program. He signed up for an elective in supervised teaching under the direction of the principal researcher. To preserve his anonymity he is named "Michael" for this study.

The study included a total of 13 participants. Eleven students signed consent forms to participate, along with signed consent from the doctoral student who co-taught the course and was considered a participant observer. Of the 11 student participants six were students of color, five were white. The principal researcher was a participant observer which is typical of action research methods (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Consent forms were signed after the end of semester grades were posted in December 2009, thus eliminating any pressure students may have felt to participate for a “grade”.

### **Timeline**

Typical of case study method (Creswell, 1998) this case was bound by time and place. The case study officially began in August 2009 on the first day of class. The class met once per week for two and a half hours for a total of 15 weeks. At the end of the first class meeting the researcher explained to the students her plans to conduct an action research case study in the class and also explained action research as a method of inquiry and the resulting benefits of improved teaching and learning. The study officially ended during the last week of November 2009 as the researcher finished collecting data, including course observations and notes, and Michael’s written reflections of the course.

### **Data Collection**

According to McNiff and Whitehead (2006) action research is guided by gathering data that shows how personal practice, informed by one’s own learning, is also influencing the learning of others and their own practice. In action research the practitioner is looking for two kinds of evidence or data—that which reveals their own learning, and that which reveals the learning of others. Thus, data gathering is informed by this guiding philosophy. The point is to “look for episodes that occur over time and that show the development of your participants’ learning in relation to your own” (McNiff & Whitehead , 2006, p. 135).

### **Observations and personal notes.**

The principal researcher began collecting data at the beginning of the fall semester 2009. As a participant observer she kept a journal of thoughts and reflections of what was occurring in class. This method of gathering data aligns with the first phase of the action research cycle which is to observe a setting and to reflect upon those observations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Often this meant observing what was transpiring in the classroom and quickly writing notes about these observations. Observations included monitoring class discussions, watching body language, paying attention to students who spoke up and those who remained silent and paying attention to students’ emotions. Written observations also included the researcher’s own responses to what was occurring, whether these responses were internal or external. Michael also kept a journal or running log of what he was observing and his own reflections on what he was observing in the course. Data also included the researcher’s observations and reflections of student communications generated during the semester such as weekly emails, text messages, and phone conversations that were course related.

### **Written reflections.**

In and out of class writing assignments were also used as data sources. Some of these writing assignments were graded, others were not. Seven non-graded reflections were collected over the semester, roughly one every other week. Five of these were anonymous writings and two were turned in with student names. The anonymous writings were given so that students could feel free to reflect on and write about sensitive topics without fear of judgment or censorship. Typically these reflective writings were in response to a guest speaker, a case study discussion, or in response to a direct question posed. As an example, one week a female graduate student talked to the class about her experiences as a “coming out” lesbian. At the end of class and after the guest speaker left the class, students were asked to write about their reactions to what our guest speaker had talked about and to do so anonymously. These anonymous writings were collected and used to foster course discussion. On another occasion the Dean of Students talked to us about racial issues on campus; after he departed students wrote an anonymous reflection/reaction based on what he had said and the ensuing discussions; these anonymous writings were used to begin course discussion the next time class met.

### **Writing assignments.**

In addition to the non-graded writing, three graded writing assignments were used for data analysis; these assignments were collected after the end of the course from those students who provided written consent to take part in the study. These three assignments included one essay, one critical reflection of a journal article, and a final paper that synthesized course elements. The essay was a three page writing whereby the student introduced themselves and talked about how they situated themselves relative to cultural upbringing, racial and/or ethnic identity, gender identity, religious stance, socio economic status, ability or disability, and age. Students were then invited to read these aloud to class so their peers could begin to understand the diversity in the classroom, and to foster discussion.

The second graded assignment, a critical reflection on a journal article, required students to read an article addressing the construction and deconstruction of race and ethnicity in the United States. Students were asked to lay out the claims made in the article and then reflect upon, and write about, what these claims meant relative to their own understanding of racial and ethnic identity in America. This graded writing assignment was three to four pages in length.

The third graded assignment, a final paper, required students to reflect on their own development throughout their student affairs masters program in the areas of multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills guided by a rubric which outlined the components they should consider in each area for discussion. As part of the reflective writing they were asked to discuss how different events and experiences impacted their development. This graded writing assignment was five-seven pages in length.

In total, narrative data consisted of more than 200 pages of writing including the principal researcher’s observations and reflective writings; Michael’s observations and journal and a final paper he wrote as part of his supervised teaching; and a set of student papers that included essays, reflective writings, a journal article critique, and a final paper written from a developmental perspective.

## Data Analysis

Typical of action research, data gathering and analysis is continuous and requires different forms of evidence of learning. For the purpose of this study data analysis occurred in three parts or phases. The first phase of analysis began during the semester the course was offered. The principal researcher's observations, journal notes, and discussions with Michael before and after class were used as a way to understand what was occurring in class and to understand what she learning about her teaching. The ongoing cycle of observation and reflection led to extensive note-taking and these notes were eventually used to look for emergent themes or patterns, typical in case study method (Creswell, 1998).

The second phase of analysis also began during the semester as the principal researcher read student writings, made observation notes of student discussions in class, observed behavior and body language, and also made notes about course-related phone calls, emails, and text messages received from students. Student writings, written observations, and any pertinent emails or text messages were sorted and placed in one of three categories based on Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller's (2004) multicultural competence framework of awareness, knowledge, and skills. For instance, a student wrote about her new understanding of what it must be like to be a student with a disability; this writing was placed in the "awareness" category because this particular student became more aware of what it must be like to live on a daily basis with a disability. In another instance a student wrote about the understanding she had gained from learning about Chinese culture from a faculty member who visited class to talk about the experience of being an international student earning a Ph.D. in America and then working as a faculty member. This writing was placed in the "knowledge" category because the student wrote about the fact that she did not know that Chinese couples do not show public displays of affection and this student felt this was an important nuance to learn. After the writings were categorized into awareness, knowledge, or skills, a matrix was created to organize the data. Three columns included the awareness, knowledge, and skills conceptual framework of the study and the rows were defined by each of the writings with a heading. For instance, one heading read "visit from Chinese faculty", another heading read, "reflection of case study". In total, the matrix had three columns and seven rows. In each cell of the matrix a quotation from one of the writings was placed that best represented each category.

The third and final phase of data analysis occurred after the course had ended, during the Spring of 2010 and Fall 2011. In the spring graded student writings were given to the principal researcher after Fall 2009 grades were posted and consent forms signed. Michael also turned in his own journal writings after his grade was posted for his supervised teaching and after he had signed the consent form. Course assignments were then read and contents placed in colored or highlighted categories with each category of awareness, knowledge or skill represented by a different color. Student quotes or paraphrased writing were placed in different cells of the matrix. Michaels's own writing was analyzed for patterns or themes of his own learning. This was categorized separately into his own learning about his practice, and what he perceived to be his students' learning. The principal researcher's own observation notes and personal reflections were categorized separately in the same manner. The second phase of analysis concluded with three charts or matrices: 1) student data or evidence, 2) Michael's data or evidence, and 3) the principal researcher's own data or evidence.

In the Fall of 2010, two graduate assistants, unrelated to the study, read through students' reflective writings and graded assignments. Again, they looked for data that could be used as

evidence of students' learning and placed directly quoted material, or paraphrased material into categories of awareness, knowledge, or skills. These categories were not placed in a matrix but were used to develop overall themes from the data. After they completed that task we met as a group and compared notes or personal observations on what they were finding to the material in the student data matrix. I read over their placement of data into categories and if I did not agree with a placement we would discuss it and come to an overall agreement as to what category the data should be placed.

## **FINDINGS**

Typical of most action research, findings are categorized into the participant-researcher's own learning, and the learning of others (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Thus, these findings were categorized into the principal researcher's own learning, students' learning, and Michael's learning as a co-teacher.

### **What the Principal Researcher Learned**

Overall, there are four themes that emerged in this study. These themes are related to what the principal researcher learned about her own teaching and categorized into four broad areas: 1) class structure and assignments, 2) what to be prepared for, 3) the phenomenological world of students, and 4) impact of culture and geography. These themes emerged from observations and reflections, students' writings and course discussions, discussions with Michael, and email and phone communications from students.

#### **Class structure and assignments.**

New understandings were gained about the structure of the class and required assignments. First, the course design required more attention paid to helping students develop skills needed for working with diverse student populations. In a future course the skill component will be more heavily embedded in the course structure; this skill component will involve listening skills, observation skills, and skills to facilitate diverse groups. At the end of the course almost half of the students commented that they did not feel like they had appropriate skills to work with highly diverse student populations. However, there were students who reported that they had developed new skills, for instance, one young man commented "I learned 'soft skills' in communication styles when discussing sensitive subjects within an eclectic group of people." Another student said, "I have learned to think in a different way in analyzing situations by attaining the skill of looking at each situation from every perspective, rather than just my own."

The second understanding gained from teaching this course is that using reflective writings is an important component of students' learning; the anonymous writings were excellent tools for fostering meaningful discussion and helping students see many perspectives different from their own. They were also a way to observe what students were willing to write but in some cases, not willing to say out loud in a public forum. For instance, after a female guest speaker talked about her experiences as a "coming out" lesbian one anonymous student wrote, "I was at first put off by how TIMID our guest speaker was by talking about her experience in being a lesbian. But now I think I understand how scary it is for her. I wished our [country] gave them



more support where they did not have to feel this way.” Another student wrote, “I thoroughly enjoyed hearing something straight from the source. It made it very real for me and this is the best way a conservative girl like me can learn.” And finally, one student admitted “For me this is an experience I have never gone through—worrying if my parents will disown me. It is amazing what I have taken for granted in my own personal development.”

The third understanding gained from observing and reflecting upon the course structure and assignments is the tendency for the principal researcher to want to stick to the syllabus and “cover” readings and topical areas. Teaching may be more effective if students guided the depth of discussion, readings, and topical areas. At the end of the course about thirty percent of the students said they enjoyed the course, yet felt we often rushed through discussions or readings to move on to a new topic.

### **What to be prepared for.**

Going in to the start of the course the principal researcher knew there would likely be, at some points in class, heated discussions, moments when students shut down, or hurt feelings and was prepared for this; however, was not prepared for the emails, phone calls, and text messages received from upset or concerned students. There were several instances in which a student would speak up about a controversial issue in class and later send an email with an apology for their perceived “angry” or emotional behavior. As an example, in a class discussion about racism in the South one student became very defensive as she felt her ideas were being attacked. Much later that same day she emailed the principal researcher with a lengthy apology about her reaction and said that she had not realized that her feelings had always been “under the surface” but never acknowledged. She found it very upsetting to acknowledge her feelings publicly, and then be attacked for them. She agreed that we could use her feelings as a way into a next course discussion that would consider how emotion may get in the way of talking about difficult subjects.

After fielding the emails, text messages, and phone calls it became clear that the apologies, explanations, and emotional responses were gendered; communications outside of class were from females. This would have been an excellent observation to make in the class to provide a platform for discussion about how gender impacts our worldviews, the way we see ourselves and others, and the way we interact with others.

### **The phenomenological world of students.**

Throughout the course the principal researcher observed students learn the true meaning of phenomenology and how individual phenomenological experience of the world interacts with how students work with others, how they perceive others, and how they react to others. Discussions of phenomenology came to life as students interacted, and reacted, in the classroom. Because of the nature of the class discussions it was easy to see how students’ own personalities and personal experiencing of the world deeply impacted what they observed, what they thought, and how they behaved.

### **Impact of culture and geography.**

While going into the start of the course, the principal researcher knew that the geographic and cultural influence of the deep-South would have an influence on student perceptions, value systems, and worldview, she was ill-prepared for the depth, or impact, that would have in the classroom. Two students in the classroom were “Northerners” and would speak their mind with little hesitation, often causing friction among classmates; yet this did not seem to deter them. On the other hand, students from the Southern region were very polite and would seemingly rather not speak up in order to not offend someone; however they would come to office hours later, or send an email, about something someone said in class. This was perplexing at first, but came to be understood as a part of Southern culture—being polite and gracious is taught from a very young age. This new understanding was used to create an atmosphere that acknowledged that politeness and reservation; yet, as gently as possible tried to foster discussion around tough issues such as race and sexual orientation.

### **Students’ Learning**

Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller’s framework (2004) for multicultural competence was used as a way to categorize how, and what, students were learning into the three categories of awareness, knowledge and skills. Based on this framework, multicultural awareness is defined “as becoming more aware of one’s own beliefs, personal biases, value system, and assumptions, as well as being able to understand worldviews different from one’s own; multicultural knowledge is defined as learning or developing a knowledge base about different cultural groups; skills are considered different strategies and techniques for working with cultural differences and include developing appropriate interventions”(p. 9). The following three sections provide evidence of students’ own learning based on findings from essays, written in-class reflections, and classroom discussions and observations.

#### **Awareness.**

All students that agreed to take part in this action research study talked about becoming more aware of their own beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, privileges, and awareness of others worldviews as different from their own. Following are some comments from students that highlight their growing awareness. One young woman wrote, “I began to realize the privileges associated with coming from a two-parent, White household.” This statement seemed to be somewhat of a turning point for her, because until that acknowledgement she had strongly defended her ideas and her beliefs about her earned status in the world, so much so that her defenses seemed to inhibit her ability to listen closely to others.

One white, male student wrote about his growing understanding that “trust and respect are fundamental in any relationship but are essential in student affairs.” Along these same lines, a young African American woman wrote about her work in student affairs, admitting the following,

I have realized that I may not have been as open as I thought I was. My beliefs and habits have been challenged and I want to continue to grow to be accepting of everyone under any circumstance. I sometimes feel that problems don’t exist in the world because I can block them out of my little world.

Another white, female student wrote a deeply insightful essay about her own evolving awareness stating, “I found that my stereotypes ran much deeper than I had first thought, and that they were incongruent with my religious values.” Many other insightful comments were either made verbally or in writing including the following that were noteworthy:

- “I learned that stereotypes and ignorance do not exist exclusively between racial groups, in fact, division can frequently arise within one’s own cultural context”
- “I am now more aware of others’ preconceived notions about certain minorities and under-represented groups than I was before.”
- “I have become more aware of my language and what it can imply”

### **Knowledge.**

Student participants in this classroom action research project wrote about, and discussed, their growing knowledge base in various ways. Some students focused on new information they were learning about other cultural groups while others focused more on the affective aspects of learning about cultural groups in order to improve their understanding of others. One White, female student wrote in her professional development essay that “I was always trying to make sure that I treated everyone the same. I now realize that to truly understand a person I must see them for who they are and who they are includes their culture.” An African American female acknowledged her blossoming understanding of working closely with others different from herself, “We will always be forced into situations where we work with someone of opposing views, or different from us, which forces us to self-examine.” It is interesting to note here that she used the word “forced” in talking about working with others that are different from herself and in the need to self-reflect. This language may suggest that while the student recognizes she will have to work with others with different beliefs or cultural mores, she may not necessarily embrace the idea.

A white, male student observed that even though he had learned more about different elements of cultural life in different cultural groups he astutely said, “Instead of assuming I understand someone I should try and step into their world and discover their truth.” Another student agreed with his comment and added, “differences really present opportunities for [people] to see the world through the lens of another.....creating opportunities for personal growth.” And finally, a female student admitted her own shortcomings with trying to understand what it might be like to be a person with a vastly different cultural background or cultural worldview, “I really need to be able to look beyond my own world view to try and consider how someone else experiences a situation. I remind myself that a different point of view does not always constitute an opposing one.”

In a closing comment in one of the final reflective papers for class a student admitted, “The competent student affairs person realizes that there is never a point at which he or she is familiar with every world view or know all there is to know about cultural nuance, but is willing and keeps learning [growing] just the same and knows that learning is a lifelong process.”

### **Skills.**

Of the three parts of the multicultural competence framework, the skills component was least discussed or observed in class or in written reflections or other written assignments. The concept of “skill” was typically discussed as building a knowledge background in order to

improve one's own learning or to influence the learning of others. For instance, one student commented, "I hope I can use what I have learned to influence my close-minded friends and family in a positive way." Several other students made comments in a similar vein:

- "I find myself wanting to educate others on all that I have learned"
- "I [challenge] myself to question things more and not see the world so black and white. I am also a resource for my friends who are naïve to other cultures, so I think I should learn for their sakes as well."
- "I am beginning to see a shift in my thinking and I am even trying to challenge my peers to see what I have learned."

While the majority of the study participants did not talk about skills in an overt way, several students mentioned actual skills they believed would serve them well in their student affairs roles.

- "I have become more skilled at paying attention to students' body language."
- "I know I have learned how to think in a different way by analyzing situations, by gaining the skill of looking at each situation from every perspective, not just my own"
- "I have learned skills that are [important] to being successful in student affairs, such as working with others who are different from me, learning to really listen, and to watch behaviors. I think these are important!"

### **Michael's Learning**

Over the course of the semester, Michael, who had signed up to do supervised teaching under the direction of the principal researcher shared many conversations about the class. These conversations took place before and after class met, walking in the hallway, and sometimes during office hours. Two topics of discussion that often came up during impromptu meetings were his frustrations with the students and his own teaching, and perhaps the course in general, along with his continual surprise at comments that were made in class and in course writings.

Michael generally opened each class meeting with a topic for discussion. These topics were aligned with the syllabus and were often generated by a student's or students' anonymous written reflections from a previous class meeting or by a statistic he would post for discussion. These statistics were often related to retention rates of minority students, socio-economic status of various populations, college going rates of various ethnic groups, and other similar topics. Michael also regularly led case study discussions by breaking the class into groups and then tasking each group with responding to questions relative to a common case study everyone had read. These case studies were situated within a student affairs context on different types of college campuses and presented a variety of issues surrounding topics of diversity and multiculturalism such as issues of race relations, sexual orientation, religion, student disability, and ethnic differences.

During various class activities or whole class discussion Michael's frustration with students would become apparent, especially when he perceived them to be apathetic about a topic. In reality what appears to be apathy may be masking fear of speaking up about a topic in front of one's peers. On the other hand, apathy can also come from students who simply do not want to engage with a topic. Patience is also important and when you throw out a difficult or polarizing topic for discussion one must sit and wait, sometimes what seems like hours, before the first student will speak up; Michael was just learning this and appeared to struggle sometimes with waiting. He was, by nature, a quick thinker and speaker, so his natural tendencies were to

jump in and try and move the conversation forward. Throughout the semester Michael struggled; he struggled with his own emotions relative to the course topics, he struggled in disbelief as he encountered students' ignorance of topics, he struggled with students' lack of awareness of their own unconsciousness, and perhaps most importantly he struggled with acceptance of the ebb and flow of the course and the emotions that go along with that. In the following several paragraphs Michael's internal and external struggles will be discussed, using his journal entries as ways to highlight understanding of what he was learning and how he was learning.

### **Dealing with his own emotions.**

Michael had been a doctoral student for about three years during which time the principal researcher had Michael as a student in class, worked with him on independent projects, and came to understand him as a person. One of his most admirable traits was his passion for learning and passion for engaging in deep, critical thinking, especially if the issue involved advocating for underserved student populations, student retention of minorities, and most any or all issues of social justice. However, his zeal for these topics could also be his Achilles Heel. Sometimes his own excitement blinded him from understanding how his emotions impacted his ability to successfully move topics forward for discussion that were often steeped in controversy to begin with—topics such as race relations, sexual orientation, and religion.

As an African American male Michael was understandably passionate about the topic of minorities in higher education. In one of his first journal entries he wrote:

I believe I was born to talk about race. I remember being seven years old and fascinated about marrying a little white girl who had freckles and stringy, dirty blond hair. I thought this would be my way of ending racism... race has always been at the forefront of my mind. I have talked about racism in [many places] but it never meant so much to me to tackle the subject of race as it did when I was offered the chance to talk about racism in [the deep-South]. It was finally a chance to dance with the devil of racism toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye...the opportunity to teach on the subject of multiculturalism and diversity at a public university was finally an opportunity to set the record straight.

Michael's own passion is exhibited in the above words, yet it was also this passion and emotion that frequently acted as a barrier between him and the students. His wanting to "set the record straight" over controversial issues, often came across as gently as a sledgehammer. Frequently in discussions of difficult course topics such as racism, sexual orientation, or religion, it was best to remain objective, offer up "food for thought", facilitate discussion from the background, and from an emotionally cool stance. Michael noted at one point in his written reflections that "the joy I had to discuss equality became a frustrating, tiring, and very draining attempt to help students become aware of their own unconsciousness."

### **Encountering student ignorance.**

Ignorance means simply to not have knowledge of a topic. For Michael, his comments and written reflection indicated his level of surprise, and frustration, with students' ignorance of various topics surrounding diversity and multiculturalism. At one point early on in the semester the campus Dean of Students came to talk to the class about "isms"—racism, sexism, and classism. The Dean had asked students to recall names of prominent people from various

backgrounds of race, class, and sexual orientation. The students struggled with this activity and Michael wrote, “I found this to be shocking evidence that students were truly ignorant about issues of race, gender, and class that affect American society.” He also reflected on another point in the Dean’s visit that surprised him greatly:

The Dean began to provide statistics and historical facts about racism that plagued the university, he shared that a number of college landmarks were named after General Nathan Forrest of the KKK. A number of students fidgeted in their seats while several black students [gave] slight cheers of ‘amen’. One student shouted out ‘I don’t believe you!’ It was as though she thought the Dean had made up facts about the historical issues of race that had plagued the campus.

### **Encountering students’ lack of awareness.**

Several times through the semester Michael had indicated that he was learning a lot about students’ lack of awareness of their own “unconsciousness” about issues and about their own perspectives and biases. He wrote:

Prior to leaving class this week, in a more personal manner, I purposely engaged some students....as I spoke with these students I realized that a number of them never had to think about race, gender, or class as a barrier. I realized that many students simply had no idea what it was like to be a minority and recognized that students could not relate to students of diverse backgrounds because they had not taken the time to think about the impact of diversity and multicultural issues in the world of student affairs [work]. This alarmed me because every student in the class wants to become a student affairs professional.

About midway through the semester Michael was beginning to understand clearly that many conversations were difficult because students were operating from their own unconscious beliefs; when these beliefs were made conscious or known to them students often became uncomfortable. What he appeared to struggle with were the students who simply seemed to remain unaware of their own worldviews and value systems and how this impacted their daily interactions with others. His response to his own frustration was the following:

I began to focus my discussions and presentations on things that would really make them think. I wanted to say things and present ideas that would cause them to deal with some of their emotional baggage. I wanted to use the class to help them see themselves so that the students could understand that they were actually making decisions based on their own personal feelings.

Michael was also learning how students, without awareness, attempt to understand issues from their own perspective rather than from the “other.” After a particular class where we had a young woman come and talk to the class about what it was like to be a lesbian and how the coming out process affected her, Michael wrote his surprise at some of the students’ reactions.

[this woman] had talked about the challenges she faced as a student and an everyday community member and how she lives a secret life due to fear of how her family may treat her. [She ] also discussed what it was like for her to go through relationship issues as a lesbian woman. The majority of class accepted her comments, but not really. During a break it appeared that a number of students struggled with how a person could live such a lifestyle. I remember how two students were talking about why [she] had chosen to become a lesbian and what that meant for Christianity. I was interested

in how they attempted to box [her] into their own world; yet, I expected students to try and see the world from [her] perspective.

### **The ebb and flow of course dynamics**

Finally, one of the aspects of teaching Michael reflected upon in his journal was the nature of the class as a living, dynamic entity. He noted that from week to week the dynamics in the classroom could change; sometimes class could be exhilarating and other times class could be “emotionally draining.” At one point he wrote:

Providing the lecture this week was really tough. I am not sure if these students are getting it. The major professor has discussed important theoretical frameworks, I have presented case studies but still I feel that there is a great deal of resistance in the class. In fact, the more I talk the more I feel that students reject what I have to say and the majority of what I have shared is from real-life work experience.

Michael and the principal researcher spent many moments before or after class talking about the nature of classroom dynamics and how this can affect the emotional side of one’s teaching. After all, teaching is a human endeavor, prone to the ebb and flow of human emotions. He summed up these conversations nicely when he wrote, “In the pages to come this will serve as a reflection of some of the highlights of the issues, challenges, and joys I had as a teaching assistant ....” From observing Michael over the course of the semester it became evident that he was learning to navigate in the frequently challenging environment of college teaching; this navigation often meant that he struggled against what was occurring as a natural classroom dynamic rather than accept the natural ebb and flow of the course.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The purpose of this action research study was for the principal researcher to reflect on her own teaching practice, to better understand how, and in what ways, students were learning, to understand how, and in what ways the teaching assistant was learning, and ultimately to improve teaching effectiveness, and course design, in a master’s level course on diversity and multiculturalism for student affairs practitioners.

One lesson the principal researcher learned was that observing teaching practices and reflecting upon them was an excellent way to attend to her own learning and a meaningful way to make course corrections throughout the semester as well as improve the course for future semesters. For instance, it became obvious that the pace of the course required closer monitoring so that plenty of time for discussion could be built in, especially on those days when the discussion takes an unforeseen path. It also became obvious that the tendency to rush through course topics in order to meet the goals of the syllabus lead to breadth rather than depth, however a course on multiculturalism and diversity may need more depth of discussion in certain topical areas. The principal researcher also learned that very little time was spent on helping students develop skills for working with diverse student populations; future iterations of the course will include skill development in the areas of listening, observing, and responding appropriately—skills that are typically used in counseling courses.

Another lesson learned is that students bring their own phenomenological worlds with them to the classroom and these worlds impact their own learning and perceptions of themselves and of the course. The culture of the deep-South is clearly a part of students’ phenomenological

worlds and influences students' value systems which in turn influence perceptions and reactions to course content. In the same vein, this understanding provided important context for emotional reactions, especially from female students. It became apparent, in this class, that gender played a role in how students processed what they are learning and in how they reacted to course content that may have caused them to question their worldviews, assumptions, and their own level of awareness. A very important lesson learned was to expect phone calls, text messages, and emails as a way for students to process what they were thinking about and learning.

Teaching this course allowed the principal researcher to watch the unfolding process of students' own learning. The students in the study reported becoming more "aware" of their thoughts, feelings, assumptions, biases, values, and worldviews relative to issues of diversity; this awareness seemed especially true when issues were controversial such as issues of race, religion, or sexual orientation. Several students admitted that their views had been challenged, which was sometimes an uncomfortable feeling. Others stated that they had simply not been aware of their own worldviews and how this impacted their student affairs practice. One student commented that her own stereotypes and judgments of others were incongruent with her religious beliefs and values which made her uncomfortable with her own lack of awareness.

Students also observed that they learned more about ethnic groups and how students of different ethnic or racial backgrounds may be impacted by the college experience and how they may in turn, influence campus environments. All the study participants voiced their appreciation for the guest speakers who came in to class to discuss how their diverse backgrounds impacted their college experiences; they were especially appreciative of the young woman who talked honestly about her coming-out process as a lesbian because she helped the students understand the emotional struggles that go along with the already difficult process of publicly admitting your differences in the face of expected social norms.

And finally, students observed that while the course did not focus heavily on skill development, some students did develop more of an awareness of certain skills that will help them work with diverse student populations. A handful of students talked about skills such as listening and providing affirmative feedback, attending to body language, and even the skill of attending to personal use of language and its impact on students and their perceptions of their experiences and of campus environments. Several students commented on their growing knowledge base of diverse populations and how this fostered their desires to educate others and also advocate for oppressed students or those who may be overlooked by the majority population.

Teaching this course allowed the principal researcher an insider's look at what, and how, Michael (the teaching assistant) was learning. Frequent talks before and after class, personal observations of him in class, and his written reflections, fostered better understanding of Michael's own experience of the course and the students. Although he maintained that there were "moments of joy" and insight, he also freely discussed his challenges with his own emotional reactions to course topics and to students responses, his challenges with facing students' own lack of awareness about their own assumptions, biases, and worldviews, his challenges in facing students' ignorance of important topics that will impact their student affairs practice, and finally the simple challenge of dealing with the emotional ebb and flow of a classroom dynamic throughout a 15 week semester. In the process of co-teaching the course Michael learned that there are many aspects of teaching that are fun, joyful, exciting, invigorating, and positively challenging yet there can also be frustrating moments that may cause



a faculty member to question their ability to teach and to lead students toward opening their minds and hearts to engage in critical reflection and deep learning.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using action research methods in a case study format was a valid means of observing and reflecting upon teaching and learning in a master's level course on multiculturalism and diversity for student affairs practitioners. By following the action research cycle of observing, reflecting, acting, evaluating, and modifying (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) the principal researcher was able to pay close attention to what was occurring in the course and understand not only what she was learning, but what, and how, the students were learning and what, and how, Michael was learning as a teaching assistant. Reflective practice, embedded within the cycle of action research, can be a transformational means of understanding one's "self in the world" and also understanding how others view their "selves in the world"—it is an excellent way to become more aware of one's thoughts and actions and to discover the weak areas in a curriculum and make appropriate adjustments. However, the real power of using action research to improve teaching and learning lies in the process and not in the final product. The act of observing, reflecting, and acting upon one's own practice, and one's own learning is, and was, transformational.

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