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Keywords

Diversity, College students, Cognitive conflict, Social justice, Transformative education, Feminist pedagogy

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Abstract

Building on the Piagetian concept of disequilibrium (i.e., cognitive conflict) and empirical research documenting relationships between cognitive conflict and transformative learning, this article explores the influence of facilitated conflict (i.e., intentional efforts by the instructor to help students reflect on and work through the intergroup conflict they experienced in the course) on the learning outcomes of female students enrolled in an exploratory diversity education course. Various forms of student writing including free-writing exercises and reflective papers were used in addition to two survey response questions to identify sources of cognitive conflict and assess student learning outcomes. Findings revealed that strategies of working through conflict like small and large group discussions were helpful to students. Student reflective papers and survey responses indicated that working through intergroup conflicts in the course encouraged support for working together for social justice.

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Introduction

Social justice education is education for social change; it involves teaching in ways that encourage learners to identify and work proactively to alter oppressive social conditions (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). In the scholarship of teaching and learning, social justice education serves a transformative role by encouraging learning communities to better understand themselves and their roles in society (Gilpin & Liston, 2009) .

On college and university campuses, diversity education courses represent one example of social justice education. Positive outcomes of student enrollment in diversity education courses include reduced bias, enhanced cognitive development (Antonio et al., 2004; Bowman, 2009; Hurtado, 2005), a range of democratic outcomes such as increased democratic sentiments, greater motivation for perspective-taking, increased political activity (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, 2005), and increased concern for the public good (Hurtado, 2005). By facilitating student exposure to diversity in ways that encourage appreciation and respect for difference, higher education classrooms can serve as vehicles for social justice education by encouraging the democratic citizenship skills that will enable students to live and work successfully in an increasingly diverse society (Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005; Pittman, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

A persistent focus in social justice education in general and diversity education specifically concerns ways to conceptualize and deal with the conflict that often occurs when diverse individuals come together to grapple with issues of identity, power, and privilege (Do Mar Pereira, 2012). Given the positive outcomes associated with student enrollment in diversity education courses, and the important role that diversity education courses can play in social transformation, it is important to explore issues of conflict that occur within diversity education courses and ways in which conflict can be managed in these courses to encourage transformative learning.

Research presented in this paper is taken from a multiple case study of processes and outcomes associated with the intergroup contact of demographically diverse female students enrolled in an exploratory diversity education course at a public university located in the southeastern United States. The IRB-approved "Student Thoughts on Coalition-Building" project introduced participants to the concepts of social justice education and coalition-building (i.e., cooperation among oppressed groups for mutual benefit) and collected multiple sources of information on learning processes and outcomes as students explored social inequities, issues of difference, and their own identities.

Conflict in the course, resulting in part from diverse student perspectives and communication styles, was a major part of the learning environment. To help students work through the conflict, various instructional strategies (detailed in later sections of this article) were employed to facilitate the conflict. Building on Piaget's theorized relationship between disequilibrium and development, this study explores connections between the facilitated conflict experienced by students in the course and student learning outcomes measured by an end of course survey and by student writing samples. Of particular interest in this study was whether facilitated student conflict, conceptualized as a source of disequilibrium, could enhance student learning outcomes related to social justice.

Theoretical Framework: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1950, 1977) proposed a four-stage theory of development through which youth achieved qualitatively different levels of cognition, culminating in engagement in higher order thinking, abstract thought, and increasing cognitive flexibility in social interactions. Central to Piaget's theory is that idea that cognitive growth results from the struggle to reconcile new or discrepant information into existing mental models of the world, which he referred to as schemas (Piaget, 1977). Progression through each stage of cognitive development (i.e., sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational) is facilitated by equilibration, a self-regulatory force that seeks cognitive balance and is achieved through processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1977).

Assimilation results when new phenomena are incorporated into existing schemas. Disequilibrium, or cognitive conflict, results when individuals encounter circumstances that conflict with their existing schemas (Piaget, 1950). Disequilibrium is an unpleasant mental state of crisis (Piaget, 1950); in order to resolve it, individuals engage in accommodation, or re-organizing their schemas to effectively incorporate new information. Equilibration fuels a dynamic process of knowledge reconstruction towards higher order thinking where individuals gradually broaden their mental schemas to incorporate new information from the social environment. Piaget describes this process as follows:

The whole development of mental activity from perception and habit to symbolic behavior and memory, and to the higher operations of reasoning and formal thought, is thus a function...of the equilibrium between an assimilation of realities further and further removed from the action itself and an accommodation of the latter to the former. (1950, pp. 9 – 10).

Piaget's theory supports the notion that cognitive conflict can result in the re-organization of schemas necessary for cognitive growth; this study concerns itself with ways in which cognitive conflict can facilitate specific manifestations of cognitive growth – students' receptiveness towards and experiences with social justice education.

Related Literature

A number of educators interested in transformative learning have found Piaget's concept of cognitive conflict to be a useful tool in the conceptualization and implementation of learning environments that encourage social justice. For example, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) argue that when learners encounter differences of perspectives in classrooms, instructors who understand Piaget's concept of accommodation can structure the learning environment in ways that encourage students' cognitive growth towards democratic and social justice outcomes. They contend that by actively engaging students' cognitive discomfort over issues of difference, educators can encourage learners to assimilate new understandings of difference into their cognitive maps that are consistent with democratic and social justice aims (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Several empirical studies have also been conducted to explore relationships between cognitive conflict and transformative education. It is important to note that although these studies utilize diverse terminology (e.g., cognitive conflict, conceptual conflict, disequilibrium, and cognitive dissonance), they nevertheless retain Piaget's basic premise that perceptual discrepancies between an individual's cognitive schemas and the environment create an impetus for cognitive change (Cantor, 1983). Once such study by Chevalier and Houser (2001) explored the role disequilibrium could play in encouraging multicultural self-development in their literacy methods course. The authors used simulation activities, cultural plunges, multicultural novels, and the sharing of diverse personal experiences to encourage disequilibrium in the thirty pre-service teachers enrolled in their class. Using multiple data sources including participant observation, audio-taped discussions, informal interviews, and reflective journals, the authors examined connections between student disequilibrium and multicultural self-development. Findings were that multicultural novels encouraged cognitive conflict and multicultural self-development.

Although each student's level of growth in the course was different, the authors found that a number of students' experiences of cognitive dissonance inspired them to think about alternative plans and future actions related to their teaching roles.

In another study, McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2009) explored whether incorporating information about cognitive dissonance into their diversity instruction could reduce students' resistance to diversity issues in a required multicultural education course. In their study, one hundred and twenty-four undergraduate students were divided into two groups. In the first group, students were asked to read an article on White privilege, write a structured response to the article, participate in a class discussion about the article, and answer several anonymous questions about their experiences. The second group received a lecture on cognitive dissonance and participated in an exercise designed to induce cognitive dissonance before completing the same learning activities as the first group. After analyzing the anonymous questions submitted by students in both groups, it was found that the group receiving the supplemental instruction in cognitive dissonance experienced less resistance to the White privilege article. Thus, the authors concluded that direct instruction on the causes of cognitive conflict helped learners to better engage with transformative educational material.

Walton (2009) intentionally developed curricula in his communications class that encouraged cognitive conflict and he implemented group dialogue to foster an environment for transformative learning in his classroom. Students aged 18 – 41 (n = 17) were enrolled in the 16-week communications course and multiple data sources were collected including participant observations, field notes, in-depth interviews, student journals and student assignments. Findings were that the students experienced increased appreciation for social and cultural diversity and a deeper appreciation for dialectical ways of thinking and knowing at the end of the course. The author found that group dialogue was very important for students' learning and growth. Also, students indicated that cooperative peer interaction and feelings of connection and rapport helped them in their growth.

Finally, Houser, Parker, Rose and Goodnight (2010) explored student perceptions of the relationship between cognitive conflict and affective safety using data from four sections of a social studies foundations class (n = 81 students) and two sections of a social studies methods course (n = 42). Sources of disequilibrium used in the course included course readings, discussions, and a simulation activity. Data for the study consisted of anonymous questionnaires and a constant comparative method was used to guide qualitative data analysis. Findings were that most of the cognitive conflict experienced by the students occurred during class discussions. In terms of safety, students identified respect, patience and sense of community as important contributors to their learning and growth. The authors found that positive student learning outcomes included increased awareness and empathy, increased ability for critical reflection, desire for continued learning, and commitment to action.

The research reviewed underscores important connections between cognitive conflict and transformative learning outcomes. Lacking from these studies, however, is an explicit exploration of ways in which the theorized relationship between cognitive conflict and social justice education might differ based on gender. As much research on feminist pedagogy highlights the importance of transformative education and/or education for social justice

(Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009), connecting research on cognitive conflict and social justice education to gender studies hold the promise of extending both areas of inquiry. This article examines relationships between cognitive conflict and transformative learning in a diverse group of female college students. The purposes of this article are: (1) to explore manifestations of cognitive conflict among female college students in an exploratory diversity course; and (2) to examine the influence of instructor-facilitated strategies for conflict resolution on student learning outcomes related to social justice education.

Methods

Case studies are in-depth explorations of activities or individuals based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2008). The case presented here utilizes writing samples and demographic survey responses from one section of a diversity education course titled "Gendered Worlds" associated with the IRB approved "Student Thoughts on Coalition-Building" project.

Description of the Gendered Worlds Course

The Gendered Worlds course was offered during the fall semester of 2008 at a mid-sized public university in the southeastern United States and was designed to encourage dialogue and cooperation among students from two academic programs: Women's and Gender Studies (where the majority of enrolled students self-identified as White females) and African American Studies (where the majority of enrolled students self-identified as Black or African-American). The impetus for this exploratory course was the instructor's previous experiences at the university teaching courses in both the Women's and Gender Studies program and the African American Studies program.

After soliciting support from the directors of both academic programs to develop a course that would encourage interaction between students in the two programs, the instructor developed the "Gendered Worlds" exploratory course. To encourage enrollment from students in both programs, both directors allowed enrollment in the course to satisfy degree requirement in both academic programs. Additionally, both directors participated in advertising the course to students majoring in their respective programs.

The course design was informed by existing research on feminist pedagogy and social justice education. Based on these principles, the course emphasized building community among enrolled students (Wood, 2009) by privileging student's personal experiences as valid sources for knowledge construction (Maher & Tetreault, 2001); additionally, the instructor sought to cultivate an environment where open-mindedness, honesty, and dialogue were emphasized as desirable approaches to understanding differences (Donadey, 2009; Wood, 2009).

Consistent with research on effective diversity courses, curricula highlighted diverse perspectives and included content from a broad range of viewpoints (Gurin, et al., 2004); instructional activities included interactive student assignments such as free writing exercises, small and large group discussions (Freedman, 2009), and the viewing of cultural films. Course curricula highlighted social identities of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, nationality, socioeconomic status, and religious and/or spiritual affiliation.

Based on principles of feminist pedagogy, a major theme explored in the course was the necessity of intergroup cooperation (referred to in the course as coalition-building) for social justice (Maher & Tetreault, 2001).

Methodology

Enrolled students were informed of the exploratory nature of the course as well as the purposes of the "Student Thoughts on Coalition-Building Project." As students encountered and responded to course content, a number of instructional techniques informed by principles of feminist pedagogy were used to help students to process information and engage in dialogue. These techniques varied according to student responses to the course content. Frequently, free writing exercises were employed during the first 10 minutes of each class to provide students with opportunities to express their reactions to the assigned readings and/or previous class discussions. Small and large group discussions were then utilized to provide opportunities for students to discuss and be informed by others regarding issues related to the course (Freedman, 2009).

As conflict between students in the course increased, the instructor provided additional opportunities for students to engage in non-graded free writing activities in order to express their concerns and experiences during the course. Based on these responses, the instructor began scheduling individual meetings with students immediately before class, immediately after class, and during the instructor's office hours based on student preferences. During these meetings, many students identified frustrations over the way that differences were communicated in the course. Subsequent member checking activities (e.g., asking students to respond to open-ended prompts about communication issues in the class and organizing small group discussions about effective and ineffective communication strategies) supported the notion that much of the class conflict was related to or exacerbated by clashes between two predominant styles of communication.

In order for conflict to be a useful strategy for learning, it must be appropriately facilitated (Walton, 2011). A number of instructor facilitated strategies for conflict resolution were utilized to increase opportunities for engagement and learning. For example, the instructor enlarged copies of students' anonymous writings and displayed them around the classroom; students were asked to walk around the classroom, read the displays, and then write reflective papers on the different perspectives. At other times, students were given each other's anonymous writings to read out loud so that all perspectives could be voiced. Additionally, many small group activities were used instead of large group activities after conflict in the course became highly salient. During portions of the course, students were allowed to choose their own small groups so that they would feel comfortable honestly voicing their opinions. Alternatively, the instructor also required students to participate in small groups selected by the instructor to allow individuals who often did not interact in class to work together. During the small group activities where membership was selected by the instructor, group members were often given a task to complete (e.g., to read a scenario involving cultural difference and discuss why participants in the scenario might have reacted as they did) and assigned various roles such as note taker, observer, discussant, etc. These small group activities encouraged intergroup cooperation and the instructor varied the roles assigned to group members in order to increase interest and discourage power imbalances within the small groups. One final strategy for conflict resolution included anonymous and

student-identified online discussion posts that provided students with additional outlet for expressing their views.

Sources of data collected from the course included samples of free writing, weekly reflective papers, end of course reflective papers, and a demographic survey conducted at the end of the semester. In addition to these data sources, instructor notes, course syllabi, and instructor observations also served as data for this study.

Participants

Survey data and writing samples were obtained from 28 undergraduate students who enrolled in the evening section of the Gendered Worlds course and met once each week on Mondays from 6 – 8:45pm. The majority of students in the course (52.1%) were between the ages of 21 and 25. More than half (56%) of the students who responded to the survey self-identified as White and thirty-six percent of the students who responded to the survey self-identified as Black. A table of demographic information for participants in this study is included in Appendix 1.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Student writing samples were used in this study to document instances of conflict occurring in the course and to assess student learning outcomes at the end of the course. The primary task involved in analysis of the student writing samples was data reduction and interpretation (Creswell, 1994). Data were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2006). This interpretive process involved multiple coding activities to assess similarities and differences among identified concepts (Merriam, 2002).

All student writing samples from the class were organized and read carefully to gain a sense of the underlying meanings. Observations and learning experiences discussed in each writing sample were highlighted and notations summarizing the content of each document were placed in the margins; comparisons across documents were made to identify categories of commonality and difference.

Categories from each of the documents were compared and contrasted to identify sub-categories and these sub-categories were grouped together by theme. For example, a major theme in the documents was clashing communication styles. Each excerpt relating to communication was highlighted and then organized into categories (e.g., frustration over communication, types of communication, communication strategies, etc.) and these categories were used as primary codes. Each primary code was highlighted in the student samples and these codes were examined to identify their related themes and given secondary codes.

Preliminary analysis was conducted to assess the accuracy of categories and sub-category groupings. Qualitative verification was increased through the use of thick descriptions of the data and the use of multiple sources of data to triangulate findings (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). After qualitative verification was conducted, colleagues unaffiliated with the study read the excerpts and findings to reveal areas of interpretation needing further explication.

The following themes emerged from the analysis process related to cognitive conflict and transformative learning: clashing communication styles, student perceptions after

implementation of conflict resolution strategies, evidence of student growth, and student reflections on coalition-building. What follows are textual examples of ways in which student writing samples evidenced these themes.

Clashing Communication Styles

Conflict often occurs when diverse individuals and perspectives come together in the learning environment (Walton, 2011). In this course, a main source of conflict seemed to stem from contrasting views of what constituted acceptable communication styles. For some students in the class, communication needed to be rational, controlled, and lacking in strong emotional content to be effective. Others in the class favored a more lively and emotionally engaged style of communication. To complicate matters, the conflict took on a racial dimension because many of the students who favored the less emotionally-engaged communication style self-identified as White while many of the students who favored the emotional communication style self-identified as Black.

Through interpretive analysis, themes from student writing samples reflective of clashing communication styles were identified and organized. The excerpts listed below are reflective of both commonalities and anomalies in this theme. Each of the student excerpts below were written in early October, after students had met in the course approximately six times; student names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the writers. When these excerpts were written, the communication conflict had been addressed and students, over several class meetings, were working through the process of articulating their understandings of the issue as well as possible solutions.

In trying to understand the nature of the conflict experienced in the course, many students expressed frustration and skepticism over whether the class would really be able to come together in coalition-building. Wendy's excerpt conveys this sense of frustration and pointlessness when she writes:

I have not spoken up in class today, not because I am scared or intimidated, but I will always believe that some issues that are up for discussion are "beating a dead horse."... I think it is pointless to dwell on issues that will always remain unsolved. I think all that was accomplished today was the fine line between respect from some and ignorance from others, but I do like this class.

Another form of frustration was expressed by Tamika. In the class that the excerpt below was written, one student commented that students who interrupted when others were speaking and who demonstrated high levels of emotionality overpowered students in the class who did not communicate in this manner. When a number of students expressed agreement with this statement, students in the class who typically engaged in high spirited communication styles expressed bewilderment and frustration. Below, Tamika illustrates this bewilderment when she writes:

I don't understand why people feel like just because you are passionate about a situation you have power?

Some students attempted to identify the sources of the conflict they were experiencing in the class. Because a number of students who preferred animated communication exchanges

stated that they had grown up communicating in this way, several students explored the issue of culture and its influence on communication styles. Karen's excerpt below typifies this exploration. She writes:

I will not talk because I feel like if I say something, someone else will jump down my throat to where I wouldn't even be able to finish what I was saying... I believe that the issues of power also ties into culture and how people were brought up. I am not racist or anything but typically it has been the African Americans in the class that have spoken their mind more than anyone else... everyone is different and will react to things differently, but I think that in our classroom we can all be adults and sensitive to everyone else and not tend to be so "hostile" about certain things.

Some students responded to the class conflict by attempting to provide solutions. They used their writing to suggest alternative communication strategies. One example of this is provided by Janelle when she writes:

My suggestion would be that if we always have to have this discussion (respect, voicing opinions, etc.), maybe it will be a little better if we could participate in online discussions (like Blackboard). Therefore, one will feel more freely to voice their opinion. Plus, you won't actually be able to match a face with a name.

Student Perceptions after Implementation of Conflict Resolution Strategies

In order to document changes as the course progressed, excerpts reflecting student perceptions after conflict resolution strategies had been implemented were included in this analysis. The student excerpts below were written in late October or early November. Although conflict resolution strategies implemented in the course resulted in class communication that was more controlled, some students continued to express skepticism over the ability of the class to come together. Diane expressed this skepticism when she writes:

I think that this conversation was nice, but I'm not sure if we will get anywhere with it. Like a lot of people said tonight, we are all different and have our own opinions. I think that no matter what conclusion we get to make this a more comfortable environment, someone is going to have their own opinion and disagree.

Other students in the course expressed frustration over the realization that working together across difference was important and, as demonstrated in the course, also very difficult. Christina expresses these sentiments in her writing below:

It is very frustrating when people can't possibly understand when the world is made of different people with different opinions who were brought up in different towns, societies, cultures, etc...We can't begin to think that everyone can have the same views, and it is frustrating when people can't even imagine what it would be like to view something in a different manner. And what is even more frustrating is that people put down others or make them feel uncomfortable for voicing their opinions. The only way to grow, learn and even attempt to coalition build is to hear all types of views and opinions. Unfortunately, because of the

fear to voice our opinions, we cannot successfully coalition build because many people remain silenced for fear of being ridiculed.

In contrast to the views expressed above, some students expressed hopefulness after conflict resolution strategies had been implemented. As one example, Tamika notes in her writing that positive changes had occurred in the class. She writes:

I feel that our class has came [sic] a long way, but we still have a long way to go. I have noticed myself enjoying the class because it draws my attention on the way people feel and why they feel that way.

Evidence of Student Growth

Of interest in this study was whether strategies for facilitating student conflict encouraged student growth. The excerpts below were written by students at the end of the semester. Before writing their responses, students were asked to review all of the reflective papers that they had produced in the course and critically analyze whether they experienced any type of change from the beginning of the semester.

Although she did not identify “major” changes as resulting from participation in the class, Wendy identified a change in the way she approached sensitive subjects such as those introduced in the diversity course. She writes:

I would not say that this class changed me in a major way but it has definitely shown me many ways of dealing with touchy subjects in a diverse setting...Regardless of what I thought at the beginning of the semester, I am very happy that I was a part of this women's gender studies class.

For Diane, the course was challenging and helped her to reach a better understanding of the wider social environment. Diane's views suggest that her experiences in the course helped her to accommodate new social understandings into her cognitive schema. She writes:

Throughout this class, I have learned even more about such topics as oppression and prejudice. We have had discussions in class about issues of gender, race, religious beliefs, and nonreligious beliefs that have challenged my mind and helped me to reach a better understanding of the world around me...The diversity of the beliefs in this class truly helped me to develop my own views of these important topics.

Although most of the themes illustrating evidence of student growth also contained positive perceptions about the course, Tamika's writing did not. Tamika's excerpt evidences growth in critical thinking, but also a lack of positivity about the course. She recognizes and sees as positive the fact that more voices in the class were being heard, however, she feels that some students ultimately silenced themselves to give other students voice. In her excerpt she notes that outside of the college classroom setting, individuals will not silence themselves to allow others to be heard; consequently, she sees a need for students in the class to speak up for themselves. She writes:

Since we are at the end of the semester I can tell that some of the females have opened up to using their voice, but you also have the ones who have been talking

the whole semester to hold out on what they have to say because we want everyone to be heard. My dilemma with is that in the real world (outside of the classroom setting) no one will hold out so you can speak or be heard. You have to do it on your own. Overall, I feel that some of the females in the class need to wake up and smell the coffee because they will not always encounter people who have the same values as them. They should try not to take everything to the heart.

Student Reflections on Coalition-Building

A final goal of the study was to identify evidence of student support for intergroup cooperation, referred to in the course as coalition-building. A major assumption of this study was that, after experiencing and working through intergroup conflict in the course, student support for coalition-building in their final reflective papers would be an indicator of accommodation (i.e., adjusting their perspectives in positive ways to incorporate new information about their experiences in the course) and suggestive of transformative learning.

Earlier in the course, Diane expressed skepticism over the ability of the class to come together in coalition-building; her writing sample taken from the end of the semester lacks her earlier skepticism and discusses the important of both diversity and coalition-building. She writes:

Our class was able to come together and discuss the coalitions of which each of us was a part... I believe that diversity is a wonderful thing because we are able to learn about different perspectives of life and furthermore mature into a wiser individual... Coalition-building definitely has its obstacles today in our society. Different people believe different things and that is what makes our world so diverse and beautiful. Learning about these different coalitions can strengthen us and mold us into more mature human beings. Connecting with people who share your same view on certain topics allows us to strengthen one another.

In a final excerpt, Felicia notes that working with diverse groups of people in the class on coalition-building resulted in growth, even though that growth may have been undesired. Interestingly, she notes a preference for the argumentative discussion that began the communication conflict at the beginning of the class because it encouraged growth. She writes:

I think that using this class to see if coalition building was a good idea was great because you had a diverse group of people. I think by doing this that you open a lot of discussion. I think that we have grown as a group of students even if we didn't want to. I know that my eyes have been open on a lot of topics and I greatly appreciate that. I feel that you should do this again and allow for argumentative discussion because you grow from it.

Taken together, the qualitative analysis reveals a gradual progression in student thinking about coalition-building with many students expressing initial frustration and skepticism that changed to hopefulness after conflict resolution strategies were initiated. By the end of the course, most students saw evidence of growth in their thinking and behaviors about diversity and coalition-building, though a few students questioned the more controlled

communication styles that prevailed at the end of the course.

Survey Data Analysis

In addition to the qualitative data discussed above, responses to two survey questions were also used to assess student learning outcomes in the course. Question 1: Based on your experiences in this course, do you think that coalition-building is a good idea? Question 2: Based on your experiences in this course, do you think that coalition-building is possible? Due to the diversity of students enrolled in the course, frequencies of participant responses are presented for the entire class and also by the self-identified race/ethnic categorizations of the two largest groups of enrolled students in the course. Participant responses to these two survey items are presented below.

Table 1 displays the frequencies of responses by race/ethnicity of students who responded to the following question: Based on your experiences in this course, do you think that coalition-building is a good idea? The results of this survey question were the identical when responses from all students were combined, and when responses were analyzed by race/ethnicity. In each scenario, all of the students (100%) indicated that coalition-building was a good idea.

Table 1. Is Coalition-Building A Good Idea?

| Coalition-Building A Good Idea? | All | | Black | | White | |
|---------------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Yes | 26 | 100.0 | 9 | 100.0 | 14 | 100.0 |
| No | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Prefer Not to Indicate | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

Table 2 displays the frequencies of responses by race/ethnicity of students in the course who responded to the following question: Based on your experiences in this course, do you think that coalition-building is possible? The majority of enrolled students believed coalition-building was possible based on their experiences in the diversity education course. These percentages did differ somewhat by race/ethnicity with 100% of Black students indicating that they believed coalition-building was possible based on their experiences in the course and 85.7% of White students indicating the same.

Table 2. Is Coalition-Building Possible?

| Coalition-Building | All | | Black | | White | |
|--------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |

| Possible? | Number | | Percent | | Number | | Percent | |
|------------------------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Yes | 24 | 92.3 | 9 | 100.0 | 12 | 85.7 | | |
| No | 2 | 7.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 14.3 | | |
| Prefer Not to Indicate | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | | |

Results from Table 1 and Table 2 indicate that the majority of students enrolled in the course indicated that coalition building was a good idea and was also possible to achieve.

Discussion

In this study, multiple sources of data were used to examine the influence of instructor-facilitated conflict resolution strategies on the transformative learning outcomes of female students enrolled in the course. Qualitative analysis was used to explore various student writing artifacts produced during the course of the semester. Four inter-related themes relevant to student cognitive conflict and transformative education were found: (1) clashing communication styles; (2) student perceptions after implementation of conflict resolution strategies; (3) evidence of student growth; and (4) student reflections on coalition-building.

Student excerpts indicative of these themes revealed initial frustration and skepticism over prospects for coalition-building that, for most students, changed to hopefulness after conflict resolution strategies were initiated. Selected student excerpts also revealed an increased awareness of and appreciation for diversity that was common for most students in the course. Not all student reflections about the course were positive however; one student excerpt used in this article expressed concern that positive communication was only achieved in the course because some students chose to self-silence themselves to give others more opportunities to be heard. Another student excerpt suggested that the argumentative style of communication used by students at the beginning of the course was necessary to encourage growth. These diverging comments point to the difficulty of achieving consensus among a diverse group of students.

Survey data was used as an additional source of information in this study to assess student learning outcomes. Findings from the survey data supported qualitative findings that many students left the course perceiving that intergroup cooperation among marginalized groups was a beneficial and realizable goal. Taken together, these multiple sources of data reveal that positive student learning outcomes were achieved in the course despite the presence of a great deal of conflict over communication styles. Additionally, qualitative data analyzed in the study supports the idea that facilitated conflict actually increases student learning outcomes. The differences in world view expressed by students in the course, while initially frustrating, seemed to give the students much to think about and a number of students noted in their writing that exposure to these diverse ways of thinking and acting changed their perspectives. This relationship between cognitive conflict and transformative learning

is consistent with existing literature (e.g., Caughie & Pearce, 2009; Houser, et al., 2010; Maher & Tetreault, 2001).

Students also noted specific conflict resolution strategies in their writing that encouraged learning and growth; two specific strategies mentioned were working in randomly assigned small groups and writing anonymous discussion posts. In addition, students also mentioned aspects of the learning environment that encouraged growth and learning including their perceived open-mindedness of the instructor, a relaxed learning environment, and the perception that other students in the class wanted to resolve the conflict. Consistent with these findings, other researchers have noted the importance of positive classroom environments for transformative learning (Caughie & Pearce, 2009; Houser, et al., 2010).

Although this study makes important contributions to existing literature on cognitive conflict and transformative learning, several limitations are noted. First, the cross-sectional nature of this study limits the type of knowledge that can ultimately be gained about the influence of disequilibrium on social justice education. Although multiple sources of data were collected to enhance the reliability of findings, all data was collected over the course of one 15-week semester. It is possible that over time, the high level of student support for coalition-building could decrease. It is also possible that student views on growth and learning that occurred in the course might change over time. Thus, a major limitation of this study is that it lacks a means of measuring student outcomes longitudinally. Future longitudinal research in this area would be informative.

Arguably, another limitation of this study is the high degree of investment of the instructor in social justice education. It is possible that the social desirability of the students for professorial approval may have contributed to the high levels of support for coalition-building they indicated on survey responses and in their writings. Alternatively, the instructor's investment in social justice education and transformative learning may have benefitted the students by providing them with a living example of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2006) through which they could work through the processes of transformative education.

Implications for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Building on the Piagetian concept of cognitive conflict and empirical research documenting relationships between cognitive conflict and transformative learning, this study explored the influence of facilitated conflict (i.e., intentional efforts by the instructor to help students reflect on and work through the intergroup conflict they experienced in the course) on the learning outcomes of female students enrolled in an exploratory diversity education course. Although results from this study were derived from a diversity course, the applicability of the findings extend beyond the field of diversity education to any higher education courses where democratic and social justice outcomes are desired. The broader applicability of these findings, then, is the first way that this study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In their article "Riding the Third Wave of SoTL," Gurung and Schwartz (2010) call for a third wave of the scholarship of teaching and learning that situates theoretically grounded

research within a common context. The present study attempts to engage this sort of “big picture” research through its focus on relationships between the theoretically grounded concept of cognitive conflict and transformative learning. In any course where students encounter differences and are afforded opportunities to critically reflect on those differences, the concept of cognitive conflict can be engaged in ways that encourage student learning.

In this study, the resolution of cognitive conflict was directed towards social justice outcomes and, in doing so, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development became a useful tool in the service of transformative learning (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). The second contribution of this research to the scholarship of teaching and learning, then, pertains to transformative learning and social justice. Implicit in the guiding principles of the SoTL movement is space for transformation towards social justice (Gilpin & Liston, 2009). This study joins other SoTL work focused on transformative learning and social justice outcomes through research findings that clearly link facilitated diversity experiences to positive student outcomes related to coalition-building for social justice. Like other research documenting a relationship between college student diversity experiences and democratic and social justice outcomes (e.g., Gurin, et al., 2004; Laird, et al., 2005) the current study underscores the importance of exposing college students to diversity, whether that diversity manifests itself in terms of demographic diversity, curricular diversity, or diversity of perspectives and worldviews.

Finally, within the current academic context, where college educators are increasingly required to defend their work, pedagogical research capable of demonstrating an effect on student learning is required (Bernstein, 2012). The present study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by accomplishing this goal. In the student writing samples analyzed, as well as in other student writing from the course that was not included in this article, students noted changes they perceived in themselves as a result of their experiences in the course. Among those changes were increased awareness and understanding of the importance of diversity, increased tolerance of different perspectives, and increased value placed on the importance of working together for social justice; that students attributed these changes to their enrollment in the course provides support that this diversity education course affected student learning.

An Unanswered Question

Although the present study answered many questions related to the influence of facilitated conflict resolution strategies on social justice outcomes, two questions that emerged during the qualitative data analysis remain unanswered. First, the communication conflict that emerged during the course was ultimately resolved when all students in the course adopted a communication style that avoided confrontation. In essence, students in the course who favored emotionally-invested and sometimes argumentative communication styles abandoned their styles of communication. While these actions allowed for more civil discussion in the classroom, a number of students noted that they learned more when the discussions were emotion-laden.

A common assumption in higher education classrooms is that classroom discussions should be characterized by rationality and objectivity; such assumptions, however, deny the validity of communication styles that do not privilege this type of communication. Some cultural groups, for example, view emotional investment as an indicator of validity in

communication (Collins, 2000) and some scholars contend that reasoned classroom arguments offer little for social justice education because oppression is neither reasonable or rational (Baszile, 2008). With this information in mind, one unanswered question from this study is whose interests were served by the change in communication styles in the course? Were unexamined issues of power at play in determining which style of communication was ultimately privileged in the course? Finally, could intervention strategies be developed to encourage the acceptance of both styles of communication displayed in the course, and to what pedagogical effect? Future SoTL research could explore these questions.

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Appendix 1.*Participant Demographics*

| Characteristic | Number | Percent |
|------------------------|--------|---------|
| Age | | |
| 20 or younger | 8 | 34.7 |
| 21 – 25 | 12 | 52.1 |
| 26 – 30 | 1 | 4.3 |
| 31 - 35 | 2 | 8.6 |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 25 | 100.0 |
| Male | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer Not to Indicate | 0 | 0 |
| Race | | |
| Black | 9 | 36.0 |
| White | 14 | 56.0 |
| Asian | 0 | 0 |
| Biracial | 0 | 0 |
| Multiracial | 1 | 4.0 |
| Prefer Not to Indicate | 1 | 4.0 |