Culturally Sensitive IS Teaching:
Lessons Learned to Manage Motivation Issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to raise awareness of culturally sensitive teaching that is largely overlooked in the IS teaching community. In a global, networked environment commonly faced by the contemporary business or academic world, it is imperative to prepare future IT professionals with adequate cultural understanding of such a multicultural environment in which their future work practice will engage. Derived from a teaching case situated in the context of HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) in the US, this paper narrates and reflects cultural issues and challenges that are increasingly prevalent in today's education systems. More specifically, the study analyzes motivational issues that are commonly observed in a homogeneous student group and provides practice lessons to help educators who might face similar issues in their teaching context to manage those issues. Insights gained from the study help reflect the significance of developing culturally sensitive pedagogy that might require future IS educators' and researchers' attention.

Keywords: culturally sensitive, IS education, case study, HBCU, motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural teaching has not gained adequate attention in the IS community. Most empirical studies in the mainstream IS education journals tend to focus on IS teaching issues involving particular subject matters such as virtual teams , Web 2.0, and other emerging topics (Chou & Liu, 2005; Retalis & Avgeriou, 2002; Shee & Wang, 2008). In today's global, networked society and business world, multicultural groups often interact with one another. Many cross-cultural issues stemmed from group differences are embedded in most employees' routine operations (Skelton & Allen, 1999). Inadequate understanding of cross-cultural issues in the teaching and learning process would then indicate poor preparation for future IS professionals' career.

The purpose of this study thus seeks to provide empirical analysis to advocate culturally sensitive teaching practice in the IS community.

More specifically, the study focuses on gaining insights of cross-cultural issues involved in the context where a homogeneous student group interacts with a diverse faculty group. Set in this backdrop, the study inquires "How faculty members can improve IS teaching and learning in a culturally challenging environment?" Broadly speaking, the meaning of culturally challenging in this study is based on the instructor's perspective and refers to significant cultural differences between the faculty group and the student group. For instance, a White male professor situated in an all Arab female class or an Asian professor situated in a Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) would be considered culturally challenging. The latter is indeed the research context where case stories narrated below occurred.

It is expected that insights gained from the study could provide several contributions to the IS community. First, it calls for attention to and

raises awareness of culturally sensitive teaching practice that is critically needed in the IS world. It also helps understand a minority instructor's survival experiences in a culturally challenging environment that has not been much understood in the literature. In addition, it provides lessons to IS educators worldwide regarding how to practice culturally sensitive teaching. Lastly, it serves as an exploratory platform on which future cross-cultural studies in the IS teaching community could build.

2. CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

The literature of cross-cultural education tends to focus on the multicultural significance in curriculum and instruction (Ball, Berkowitz, & Mzamane, 1998). While much discussion leads to specific educational contexts such as teacher education (Britten & Mullen, 2003), higher education (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991), and business education (Slone & Wines, 1995), a significant proportion of the cross-cultural investigation is devoted to national differences or international experiences (Fedorowicz, 1997; Smolicz, 1997). A serious concern is that little attention is paid to the teaching in general relating to multicultural and cross-cultural education. Only few researchers address the teaching implications of such cultural issues as in culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally centered pedagogy (Sheets, 1995), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Foster, 1995). Although slight, perhaps cosmetic, differences exist in the terms, they all emphasize the understanding and incorporation of cultural elements in teaching. Gay (2000), most specifically, defines culturally responsive teaching as:

> using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of theses students. It is culturally validating and affirming (p. 29).

Gay's notion is extensively related to other scholars' works (Banks & Banks, 1995). To prepare teachers for a multicultural teaching context and education, a clear understanding of Gay's scholarship will greatly facilitate the endeavor. However, there is an implicit, taken-for-granted assumption embedded in Gay's and other scholars' culturally responsive research— i.e., they all tend to assume or advocate a diverse student population and omit the teacher's identity, which is also a major shaping force. In other words, these researchers simply advocate a greater recognition of the minority students or diverse student populations (Irvine & York, 1995; King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997) and pay little attention to a teacher's voice and background. An incorporation of a teacher's voice and identity in cross-cultural research is rather significant because it could better articulate the role a teacher plays in the teaching and learning process, most specifically with respect to culturally responsive teaching. Moreover, it could further help broaden and deepen the understanding of the realistic teaching context in the contemporary internationalized society and multicultural educational environment (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999; Schoem, Frankel, Zuniga, & Lewis, 1993)—particularly in higher education and IT education where multicultural issues are often greatly involved not just in student populations but also in teachers' backgrounds (Ball, et al., 1998). In other words, the teaching and learning process involves not just the students but also the instructors. The traditional literature of cross-cultural education that mostly focuses on cultural differences among students is thus no longer sufficient in today's internationalized education systems. The cultural differences between teachers and students (instead of merely among students themselves) should also be considered.

In the context of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), this point can be even more articulated due to its inherited cultural differences. In the existing literature, studies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities mainly concern the general characteristics and historical context involved (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002; Jewell, 2002; Nettles, Wagener, Millett, & Killenbeck, 1999; Oliver, Oliver, Kolheim, & Glenn, 1996). Although it helps provide an overview of what distinguishes HBCU from other colleges and universities, cultural and technological specific aspects of college education in HBCU have almost never been addressed. For example, Oliver et al. (1996) demonstrate historical role HBCU play in the society in general and in military leadership in particular. Nettles et al. (1999) provide information regarding the geographic regions of HBCU. Evans et al. (2002) compare the enrollments of all 106 HBCU between 1990 and 1999. Jewell (2002) further notes how HBCU serves and educates African American

community when the society was racially stratified.

All of these viewpoints seem to focus on the African American perspectives. Little attention is paid to teaching and learning in HBCU. For contemporary and future educators who face increasing cultural issues in everyday practice, a clear understanding of how teaching and learning evolves in a culturally diversified environment such as HBCU is essential.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to its sensitive nature and unique HBCU context that could not be easily understood without real experiences lived and told, personal experience method is considered the most suitable and feasible research approach. Personal experience method has its own long intellectual tradition under the umbrella of qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and most suitable when the research context involves with authentic and subtle issues in a unique context that will not surface otherwise (Grant, 1999). To enable a deeper understanding of subtle issues occurred in the research context, personal experience method requires a researcher's systematic reflections on his/her participant observations and work practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Rearick & Feldman, 1999). Those reflections need to eventually be organized into convincing stories that narrate authentic issues in the research context investigated; they are thus often related to the notions of reflection in action (Schön, 1983), narrative knowing (Bruner, 1996), narrative truth (Spence, 1982), and professional knowledge landscape (Craig, 2003). In the field of education, these notions have greatly contributed to the existing body of knowledge and helped reshape teaching practice over the years. In the classroom settings, these notions argue that a teacher's knowledge is embedded in his/her teaching practice and thus could not be better understood than his/her own professional reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988). It is thus not surprising to observe that personal experience method is widely used in educational settings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987) and cultural studies (Bruner, 1996).

The HBCU teaching experiences narrated in this study occurred during one academic year when I taught a Java Programming course two sessions a week. At the end of each teaching day I reflected my teaching experiences in a personal journal. In addition to such autobiographic reflections, my understanding of the teaching (and research) context was also derived from a great deal of interaction with my colleagues' experiences in the professional setting that created a professional knowledge landscape (Craig, 2003). During that academic year, email messages occurred in the teaching context were also saved and later retrieved and analyzed. More than five hundred received email messages helped build a more holistic understanding of my lived experience during that academic year.

4. CASE STORIES

4.1 Organizational Context

The institution where my teaching took place was a public university located in southwest U.S.A. When I first interviewed for the position, I, an Asian Ph.D. student at that time, was not aware of its history. During the interview, the Dean questioned, "We have lots of underprivileged kids here. How would you motivate them?" As I walked around the campus after the interview, I realized that almost all the students were African Americans. The link between African American, on the one hand, and economically underserved students, on the other hand, began to emerge as major themes characterizing the population of the institution of which I would soon be a part. Prior to teaching in this institution, I taught various courses for four years in two different public universities. Two years earlier, I also taught the same course and obtained a high teaching rating in another university nearby where student population had one of the highest diversity indexes in the nation.

My primary contacts in the college included departmental colleagues: Dylan, an assistant professor from Canada who was recruited at the same time as me, Mooney, an Indian assistant professor who was hired a year earlier, Dr. Om, an older assistant professor who came from Africa, Sharon, a full time adjunct professor who was a White American born and raised in the State, and my officemate, Ray, also a full time adjunct professor who was an African American. To protect confidentiality and privacy, I used pseudonyms for all characters appeared in the study. My interaction with these colleagues, among others, helped me better reflect my personal teaching experiences and broaden my narrative understanding of these teaching stories.

4.2 The First Encounter

When I first stepped into the classroom, not a hint of any expression was on anyone's face. Before my first lecture began, the following conversation occurred.

> Me: "Have you taken any programming course before?"
> Students: "Yes!"
> Me: "What kinds of programming languages?" While someone said "Structured programming" others shouted "Visual Basic!"
> Me: "What did you learn in Visual Basic class?"
> Students: "Nothing!"
> Then they looked at one another and laughed as if that course was a joke.

As I came to realize that I might have to build their understanding of programming from the basics Sharon's advice for me to "switch gears" quickly emerged.

> You have to *switch your gears*. Students are different here. Do you know what is the average of SAT scores here? 650...They don't have the motivation to do what it takes.

4.3 Stories of Motivation

In addition, students' attitude toward the textbooks also left a striking impression on me. Most students did not even have a textbook two weeks after the semester started. One faculty member even emailed to the entire faculty and indicated that the situation was less than tolerable. His email might have resulted from his sheer frustration and cultural shock that we all collectedly experienced. Two kinds of frustrations typically resulted from the issues of student's motivations: (1) some of them demonstrated negative motivation toward the course, and (2) others disorganized priority at school. To avoid repetition, only Mitch and Kalere's stories were narrated below to show the first type of issue and Neil's and Ella's stories for the second type.

4.3.1 Negative motivation

Mitch was a student in the first semester. The first few weeks when the class was conducted in a regular classroom, Mitch would come in and sit by the window looking out to business school's parking lot. He did not seem to be one of those members who were close to any social group and thus always appeared in the hallway or classroom alone. When later the lectures were conducted in a computer laboratory, he would choose to sit in one of the last rows and hide himself behind a computer. Although I often attempted to attract students' attention by interacting with them during the lectures, he mostly could not answer my questions.

To encourage him to visit me for further assistance, I reminded Mitch at every opportunity that presented itself. A student such as Mitch who showed little interest for the class and demonstrated little progress throughout the process usually would not pass the course let alone achieve high marks. Mitch eventually came to visit me occasionally. The questions he asked were usually very basic and were expected to be understood in previous chapters. It was common that I explained details of beginning concepts from the first few chapters. A polite student as him might merely perceive that visiting me for assistance was for me because I "requested." The initiative did not stem from his intention of learning but rather from fulfilling my 'requirements' for the class. Nevertheless, he fulfilled basic requirements and passed the course with an average score. He would later graduate on time and come back to request a letter from me for his MBA application.

In contrast to Mitch's disinterest, Kalere's motivational issues appeared to involve different matters. Since the first day of second semester, Kalere had never showed interest in being my class. When the class was conducted in a regular classroom, she would come to the class with a stern face and sat through it without a word. She and her friend would always sit together and murmur among themselves as the lecture proceeded. Once when I conducted a lecture in a computer laboratory, Kalere apparently lost interest in my lecture and started combing her hair instead. As she started slowly combing her hair in front of the entire class, my lecture was almost disrupted because I could not believe what I just observed.

Her low motivation was also shown in the first assignment submitted. Kalere and her close friend Venetia, among very few others, only submitted hand written assignments. Students such as Kalere often detached themselves from the instructor and the course; communication and interaction was reduced to a minimum. The first time we had a conversation was when she quickly came and announced that she would not be in the class because she needed to deal with student organization affairs downstairs. As I passed through downstairs hallway after the class, Kalere and her fellows of student organization were making macaroni cheese on a

little school table and handing plates to students who passed through. In Kalere's case, what I could do was to remind her that she needed to at least fulfill all necessary requirements so she would not have to come back again. When the final grade was calculated, it was probably a great relief for both of us that she indeed achieved just that objective.

4.3.2 Disorganized priority

In contrast, Neil and Ella's motivational issues stemmed from a different type of source—the disorganization of their priorities at school. Neil was a noticeable student because he always sat right in front of the classroom podium. He sometimes came to the classroom, paid attention and responded to the questions; other times, he might just fall into his sleeping zone. His attendance was significantly lower than most students'. As I once entered the classroom, Neil was requesting one of students to take some notes for him and immediately left the classroom without acknowledging my presence not to mention explaining his absence.

Neil's problem, largely struggling between school work and extracurricular activities, finally began to manifest itself when he came to speak with me about considering dropping the course. After understanding his concerns, I explored his options between dropping the course immediately and trying to continue and pass the course. As he revealed that his main objective was merely to pass the course and move on, I encouraged him to continue because the possibility for him to pass the course was still likeable. In addition, in the worst scenario, even if he failed eventfully, he would have learned a general picture of the course and thus built a better foundation for his next trial. He seemed to take my reasoning rather well and decided to continue. Three days later, Neil showed up at my office with an add/drop form in his hand. He explained that he reconsidered it over the weekend and leaned toward staying in the class if there was still reasonable hope for him to pass the class. I reviewed the record once more and explained to him that the chance for him to pass the course was manageable. After my explanation, he then decided to continue but also requested special tutoring. Nevertheless, when the lecture started that day, Neil's eyes were only fixed on the floor. When the first computer programming exam was held in a computer laboratory, the only person who did not attend was Neil. Surprisingly, his pictures soon appeared everywhere on campus—"Vote for Neil Richmond." Now the specific reason that he was distracted was revealed—he was running for the president of the student government. To him, that took priority over his college education.

Later, I met him by chance in a hallway and wondered why he never officially dropped the course. He revealed he has asked another professor's signature to do so already. Interestingly, Neil reenrolled in the same class the next year. To his surprise, the course was still instructed by me. To my surprise, he was much more focused the second time and managed the course better. My observation led me to believe that he then understood certain intellectual thinking was required to pass this technical course. Although after he turned in his midterm exam, he exhaled to me "oh, I hate thinking," he received a decent grade the second time without too much struggle.

Similarly, Ella did not seem to prioritize her life and schools effectively. Her goal had always been to only pass the course. In a class where most students detached themselves from the instructor, it was not difficult to notice a quiet and friendly student such as Ella who would often come and visit for further assistance. In the beginning, I was delighted to assist her but soon realized that she was concerned less about understanding the materials than about building good relationship with me. For instance, her first visit was not about classroom materials but about a request for a copy of CD from the book. Apparently, she did not intend to purchase the textbook but hope to make a copy of CD from my book. As our conversation continued, her family and work conditions were soon revealed. A mother of a little boy and with a boy friend and a job in the National Guard on campus, she expected to graduate the following year and to maintain the same job. Before the second exam in which a paper section and a computer section were expected, she visited me again and we had an interesting conversation.

> Ella: "Are you gonna really have the computerized exam?"
> I was stunned because the format has been publicly announced during the lecture repeatedly. As such, my reaction was: "Yes, why do you even need to ask?"
> Ella: "Well, I was hoping you would say no."

Ella's first reaction when she handed me her computer exam was, "This is hard!" Similar

situation occurred before the final exam. Ella visited my office a few days before the final exam. Her intention, again, was less about preparing for the final exam than about 'softening' my standard for her. In addition to her family condition, she described her needs to pass the course because of the requirement of her military financial aid. Her request was eventually explicit and direct—"Please give me a C!" Before she walked out of final exam room, she turned and whispered to me, "Give me a C!" Her final score turned out to be the second lowest in the class. After receiving her grade, she emailed me to tell her disappointment. I could simply line out her grade profile in a dim hope that she would eventually understand that her grade was determined by her own performance not by her 'talk' with me. Ella registered in the next Fall semester. Perhaps she has learned from her first experience and became more dedicated to the course in a professional way, and eventually advanced her graduation plan on schedule.

4.4 The Reshaping Process

The issue of students' motivation first occurred to me when the Dean interviewed me. While the frustration was overwhelming in such teaching contexts, it was also an opportunity for me to develop my understanding of the students' social and cultural backgrounds and, in turn, reshape my teaching approach as my narrative knowing evolved. Several subtle changes were gradually incorporated into my teaching. First, the way I addressed the requirements of the course including textbook, computer software, exams, and assignments has changed to accommodate the students' needs. While many instructors were frustrated with students' disinterest in purchasing textbooks, I reexamined my goal of teaching and sought ways to encourage their learning even without required materials. Although the course was technical and difficult by nature, I emphasized that my focus would be on their overall effort and understanding instead of simply the test results. Since I was also a student at that time, I connected to their issues concerning the burdensome expenses of higher education in the US. If a student could not afford to purchase textbooks, I understood their desperation but encouraged them to seek other sources from classmates or me.

The use of learning management tools further allowed me to post lecture materials so that the impact of not having a book could be minimized.

When some students complained that they did not have a computer or the Internet at home, I simply related to my own experience as I also lacked of the Internet and explained how to utilize local library's computing resources to access online learning materials or submit assignments or projects. The fact that I worked two part time jobs and continued my doctoral study at the same time also helped me to better sympathize with the difficulty they were facing in raising families and continuing college education at the same time. My intention was to help them recognize that there might be more efficient ways of managing their life and school simultaneously. Better utilization of technology and relevant resources and better organization of their priorities were two of those examples.

5. REFLECTIVE LESSONS

In reflection, several lessons could be derived from stories narrated above. First, a clear understanding of cultural context of student population is imperative to enable an effective teaching approach. In Mitch's case, he was a shy and polite student who clearly was disinterested in the course; Kalere valued social relations more than classes; Neil prioritized extracurricular interests over course requirement; Ella focused on networking with professors instead of understanding materials. All of these cases required the instructor to find ways to better manage motivation issues. In Mitch's case, I requested his attention and even official visits for extra tutoring; in Kalere's case, the bottom line was to make her realize that the best interest for her was not to come back again; in Neil's case, my approach was to be specific about passing possibility and the effort required and allow him to reason with himself—it was too late for the first time but served the purpose the second time; in Ella's case, my message was very firm about class integrity in which students were expected to earn their grades with their performance not with their networking—it also eventually accomplished the objectives in the second trial.

One of approaches that could shorten the differences between a non-African American instructor and students in a HBCU was to relate the students' situation to the instructor's personal experiences. I found this approach particularly effective in managing students' lack of motivation. For instance, the majority of students struggled between jobs, family, and college education. As working two jobs with long

commuting and completing a doctoral degree simultaneously, I explained my own situation and shared my time and emotion management experiences. Once the students realized that their problems were not unique to themselves, they became more receptive to the instructor's advice and in turn sought alternatives in life or at school that they might not previously experience.

Another important lesson learned was that it would be better for the instructor to be flexible in the teaching and learning process. When a large proportion of students struggled between their jobs and college commuting, a more flexible teaching approach would be much appreciated. For instance, online learning tools helped provide materials accessible anywhere. Textbooks that were rarely purchased by students should not be the sole source of teaching information. The fundamental requirement was to provide the same teaching standard so the students could receive similar training as those in other institutions.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Maybe the situation faced in HBCU could be attributed to its historical backdrop where non-African American professors would normally face difficulty to connect to the homogeneous African American students and in turn shapes a teaching context that is particularly challenging from the outset. However, cultural differences faced by educators in today's global, networked teaching environment do not necessarily occur in the HBCU context only. For educators, how to resolve or shorten such cultural differences will provide valuable implications in the IS teaching and learning process in contemporary higher education systems and in HBCU in particular. A general approach as shown in my teaching case is to be more culturally sensitive. In other words, the instructor will need to first understand the inevitable differences but at the same time connect similar personal experiences to the students' real life problems. This approach certainly requires more compassion and dedication from the instructor. In reality, this could mean that the instructors will face greater difficulty and challenge that might be beyond their expected work routine.

For example, when an instructor faces a large group of students, it would become nearly infeasible to deal with each individual student's social and cultural issues. This situation, as commented during ISECON (Information Systems Educators Conference) presentation, could provide an opportunity for instructors to convey their culturally sensitive mentality to their students in a different way. What students in this situation would need to know is that their instructor is sensitive to their needs and will be there for them when requested, and that in reality their instructor, just like them, faces inevitable social, cultural, and political difficulties that require their understanding and collaboration to enable a mutually respectful sensitive teaching and learning environment. Nonetheless, this proposition is beyond the scope of this paper and would require future research endeavor to further investigate.

For researchers, the implications derived from the teaching case suggest that many potential topics in relation to culturally sensitive IS teaching are emerging. First, little is known in the literature about motivation issues in HBCU, particularly from a cross-cultural perspective. There is even less information about a non-African American instructor facing a homogenous black student group. For instance, will teaching pedagogy vary when the same minority instructor faces a different student population, namely all Arab students? Or where faculty group is homogeneous and student population is heterogeneous, such as an African American female instructor in a department with all White male professors?

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While these insights and implications provide practical lessons for teaching practice and research, this study is inevitably limited by several empirical issues. First, it is situated in a single teaching context. To draw broader implications, studies in other contexts involving gender, racial, national and/or other differences might be necessary. Second, personal experience method chosen might raise concerns that the interpretation might vary if done by researchers with different backgrounds. Fortunately, the research context consists of a diverse faculty group where much interaction among them also helps provide deeper reflection in the case stories. However, future studies could explore these issues in other teaching contexts where different interaction between instructors and students occurs.

Despite these limitations, the study's authentic experiences help provide insights as to how an instructor's cultural awareness might help

achieve the students' learning objectives. As such, the purpose of this study to draw attention to culturally sensitive teaching is served. In today's diverse higher education systems, a better understanding and higher awareness of cultural context in which the teaching and learning process is situated should help motivate students, improve student services, and ultimately enhance IS education. Future research could thus build on these insights to broader IS teaching contexts and help build more culturally connected teaching and learning systems globally.

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