

So, That is What You Said?

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Abstract

Classroom learning is a shared experience where ideas and concepts are shaped by the interactions between students and teachers. Different cultural backgrounds of the students compared to the teacher can increase misconceptions or confusion. Although the effective teacher may plan for a range of questions to promote classroom discussion, the more cultural diversity exhibited within a classroom, the greater the likelihood for miscommunication. The intentionally inviting teacher understands different does not mean deficient. This type of effective teacher handles miscommunication, misconceptions, or conceptual confusion by empowering the diverse learner to actively seek or provide greater clarity. By contrast, when a culturally diverse learner's response does not fit the instructor's preconceived expectations, the intentionally disinviting teacher can disable the learner's continued inclusion in class dialogue. As a foundational system for responsive classroom management, Invitational Education theory aligns with culturally responsive teaching practices. A key feature of culturally responsive teaching is presentation of knowledge in a way that builds upon the cultural knowledge, experience, and performance styles of the student. This practice-based analytical paper describes the authors' attempts to apply tenets of Invitational Education theory to optimize responsive communication within the culturally diverse undergraduate classroom.

Introduction

The goal of Communication Theory is for the sent message to be comprehensible by the receiver upon receipt. Effective communication results when there is a sharing of information that achieves a desired response or result (Mindszenty & Roberts, 2000). However, during the ordinary instructional practice of expecting students to participate in classroom discussions, whenever a student's perspective is minimized by the sender, the receiver becomes intentionally disinvited. In such a situation, to optimize the learning for all mission (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011), the teacher's instructional practice needs to be modified to exhibit an intentionally inviting learning opportunity for all participants. The need for culturally responsive practices provide abundant opportunities for the instructor to apply Invitational Education theory (Purkey & Novak, 2016) to the classroom discussion so the ensuing student discussion can optimize "human potential" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p11). When a teacher invites active communication, the teacher will

essentially promote the “nature of human existence and opportunity” (Purkey and Novak, 2015). As a result, classroom engagement can become a more satisfying and enriching experience whereby discussions invite students’ thoughts based on their lived realities that everyone can consider.

Although speaking the same language, each classroom discussion participant has a wide range of experiences and perceptions. This reality may lead to a lack of mutual understanding. Students have complained that teachers misunderstand them.

The premise of this paper is that the more culturally diverse a classroom, the greater the likelihood for miscommunication. While planning questions and creating a set of possible answers to facilitate the discussion, effective and thoughtful preparation based on cultural awareness increases student learning and participation. Teachers often plan lessons and sessions with prewritten questions designed to elicit discussion, elaborate important points, and encourage generalization of learning.

Classroom Engagement

Several approaches seek to promote active dialogue and learning. To prepare a class, the teacher will typically create notes for the lecture and have questions peppered throughout the notes that involve students in the topic and create an atmosphere for discussion. Often the teacher will identify several expected answers so the lecture can touch upon the desired focus points and efficiently transition to new topics during the discussion. However, what happens when a student misunderstands the question or perceives the intent of the discussion differently, resulting in an unexpected answer? The effective teacher must quickly evaluate whether the answer is satisfactory. If satisfactory, how much discussion must the diverse answer require? If the answer is unsatisfactory: Mystifying, off-topic, or not addressing the point of the question, then should the teacher take the time to explore the unexpected response? Brookfield (2011) believes an effective discussion thoroughly explores the topic with no predetermined summary. Therefore, a student’s unexpected response creates a critically important need for action.

Compared to their teacher, many students experienced different types of primary education methods, lived in a variety of family models and interactions, and may have vastly different life experiences. A comprehensive list of “good” answers to the teacher’s planned questions may actually be incomplete if not constructed from the students’ perspectives. Within today’s classrooms, especially in high schools and colleges, students may come from very diverse neighborhoods and cultures. By its nature, a diverse society will exhibit less common experiences compared to a culturally homogeneous group.

For instance, Payne (2009) researched the difference in conversation focus and style between diverse social classes. She found significant differences in the direct and anecdotal understanding between members of diverse social classes. This can easily influence how one may relate to an event or issue, perceive the patterns of a discussion, or comprehend the structure of statements depending upon the senders and receiver’s social class. Formal language register, which is typically the language for education venues, is essentially foreign to a person from lower socio-economic circumstance whereby casual language register is the norm. Similarly, someone from a middle class background invited to a wealthy person’s distinguished dinner party would find the event confusing and unfamiliar. Diversity transcends ethnicity, language, or special needs.

Given common experiences, cultural references become shorthand in conversations and in writing. For instance, as society becomes more secular, fewer people now go to houses of worship on a weekly basis. Therefore, fewer people in a diverse environment would understand religious

references. As a consequence, well-planned activities based solely on the teacher's perspective includes no guarantee that her students will fully comprehend culturally or historically sensitive messages.

The teacher who is less in-tune to the need for cultural responsiveness may erroneously perceive a class interaction as a "failure" if a desired response was not provided. The lack of further exploration of either the diverse or non-response only exacerbates the problem as alienated students further detach from the current or subsequent discussions. This downward spiral toward inactive classroom discussions is undesirable.

By contrast, in a culturally responsive, effective classroom, the goal of discussion is to achieve the desired learning outcome. If discussion is limited to the teacher's perception that the class did the assigned homework, then class discussion may also exhibit ineffective communication. It is important for each answer to be meaningful. When a divergent response is provided, exploration of what the student meant should be pursued. Thus, the teacher intentionally invites dialogue and increased success. This creates the desired climate of care, optimism, and trust, which empowers all students. By intentionally inviting dialogue and success, the teacher promotes formative assessment of students learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The ensuing communication loop increases the teacher's understanding of the students' diverse experiences.

Communication is related to its context. Context is generally influenced by culture and individual perception of external and internal stimuli. Therefore, it is important for the intentionally inviting teacher to create a bridge between the students' informal language register to the more formal language utilized in education venues (Payne, 2009). The open or flipped classroom creates greater opportunities for in-class discussion and mutual learning. Rather than maintaining the more structured role of the teacher as lecturer in the front of the classroom, the flipped classroom approach promotes open discussion, activities, and interactions. In the flipped classroom, the teacher needs to ask for definitions and conceptual meaning so that all diverse participants can exhibit increased active learning that results in conceptual understanding and perceptual awareness based on shared experiences and realities (Roehl, Reddy, & Shanno, 2013). Invitational Education theory intentionally invites success. Through the exercise of Invitational Education theory, stakeholders are encouraged to create an environment whereby care, trust, optimism, and respect are intentionally communicated and celebrated (Burns and Martin, 2010).

Benefits of Intentionality, Care, Optimism, Respect, and Trust (I-CORT)

Possible cognitive dissonance may arise when a student provides an unplanned response. How far off-topic and the function of the unexpected response determines the level of potential conflict. Is the response meant to take the class off-track or did the student respond based on cultural misinterpretation of the question? Is it possible that the student has had a very different set of life experiences and is answering the teacher's question in a way that the teacher does not recognize or understand? What happens to that student's academic experience if his/her response is dismissed or set aside in deference to the teacher's expected response? What happens to how the student perceives the teacher's response? How will that interaction affect the academic experience of the rest of the students in the class? Consideration of cultural responsive practices during planning invites success through consistently exercising care and respect for these dynamics. A key feature of culturally responsive teaching is presentation of knowledge in a way that builds upon the cultural knowledge, experience and performance styles of the student (Gay, 2002).

Creativity, inspiration, and intellectual curiosity may not be supported within the parameters of a planned lecture or lesson (Predmore, 2009). If the intent of the student was to provide a coherent and incisive response, the rejection or acceptance with faint praise may actually serve to alienate the student and fellow classmates. This then creates a noticeable gap between students and teacher experiences that impacts engagement within the classroom. Every instructor can relate to asking a question and then only listening for the predetermined answer. True depth of learning can actually be in further exploring unexpected answers.

The humanistic approach of Invitational Education theory differs from the behaviorism exhibited by Skinner's (1969) operant conditioning theory. Invitational Education theory intentionally promotes care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT), thereby promoting active discussion while wrestling with the concepts developed during class. Invitational Education theory invites group interaction, not a pre-determined action or response provided by the group to which the instructor may identify.

To be intentionally inviting, it is not sufficient to be positive about every response. Rather, diverse responses should be further explored, respective of the topic's central theme. Invitational Education theory and culturally responsive teaching promotes empowerment and inclusion, not anarchy. The goal of discussions based on "I-CORT" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p 14) is to use the inviting stance to further the understanding of all discussion participants. Inclusive participation in any discussion is not about the quantity of spoken words but the quality of the engaged conversation. An open-minded examination of diverse responses provides additional learning opportunities. While promoting I-CORT, empowerment, and inclusion, it is important for the intentionally inviting teacher to follow the new conceptual thread offered by a student's diverse response so a different set of life experiences can influence or illuminate the conceptual discussion within the classroom. A primary difference between an intentionally inviting stance and an intentionally disinviting stance is in how a student's diverse response is received or treated.

Benefits of an Intentionally Inviting Stance

As noted above, the teacher's inviting stance will affect future responses from a student risking a diverse response as well as responses from the rest of the class. The teacher's inviting stance is influential upon every student's identity integration (Erikson, 1969), and self-perception (Thompson & Loveland, 2015). Identity integration looks at behavior as a reflection and an examination of the person. If someone participates in a classroom discussion, that person can identify as someone active in the classroom. The teacher's inviting stance is therefore important to supporting and encouraging active participation, which leads to optimal human potential. As a practitioner of Invitational Education theory and culturally responsive teaching, it is important to expand upon these four strategies:

- Share your divergent life experiences as a teacher and member of your culture.
- Extend an intentional invitation for students to share their own life experiences as a student and member of their culture,
- Collectively reflect upon increased awareness resulting from the exploration of diverse perspectives, and
- Periodically discuss how the class climate impacts the students' self-perception, innovation, and creativity.

Promoting Success and Self-Efficacy

When a student's answer is either not further considered or treated as superfluous, the student experiences "failure" as a discussion respondent. That self-evaluation of "failure" becomes part of the student's self-awareness and a part of his/her self-description: "I thought I understood the question and answered correctly, but I must not really understand either the topic or the question, I must be worse off than I thought." Such a negative self-perception adversely impacts the student's self-identity. As individuals interact with the world and their surrounding environment, self-perception, and self-identity changes based on perceptions of success or failure. As explored by Lukinsky, and reiterated by Reimer (2016), Erikson's identity theory illustrated that experience adds to understanding and definition of self. The interplay of individual personality and the negative experience creates opportunities for ineffective identity integration as individuals now perceive their lack of self-efficacy (Thompson & Loveland, 2015). Sadly, the instructor has lost an opportunity to make the classroom inviting or responsive.

However, through utilization of tenets of Invitational Education theory and culturally responsive practices the classroom climate evolves whereby the students' contribution can be revealed and all participants can be enlightened. In such a successful environment, the teacher readily learns from the students' cultural background and experiences and makes discussions and learning more relevant to the students. The students experience optimism and trust that their thoughts and perceptions are welcomed.

Any teacher taking the time to explore unexpected responses invites upon herself the same opportunity to expand her self-definition through identity integration. The self-image of being a good discussion leader, capable of drawing out students into effective classroom interactions, solidifies as the teacher continues to consider all answers worthy of exploration. Both the teacher and the student experience identity growth through the intentionally inviting stance.

Enhanced Creativity

Just as the self-perception of identity is cultivated by each new positive interaction, so too is the ability to be creative and innovative. When a student experiences unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) during classroom discussions, that student will feel intentionally invited to continue participating. Positive experiences with taking risks lead to increased willingness to exhibit more creativity and greater innovation. "Human potential, though not always apparent, is always there waiting for the invitation (Purkey, 2017). While Skinner (1969) posited that successive approximations of behavior should be rewarded to shape desired behavior, planning culturally responsive class discussions based on intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust may more effectively promote identity integration and the experience of success within every educational construct.

Conclusions

Educational participants experience increased understanding and improved self-worth for their positive interactions during discussions, classroom interactions, and shared experiences. The Invitational Education practitioner intentionally invites participants to share experiences that allow for differences of interpretation based on diverse perceptions. This results in more than a shared, common academic language. Effective utilization of I-CORT and culturally responsive practices increases the teacher's ability to establish relevance by intentionally planning to invite diverse opportunities for success based on myriad perceptions occupying today's classrooms

(Mindszenty & Roberts, 2000). The acceptance of divergent perspectives based on diverse cultural experiences is the hallmark of the Invitational Education practitioner. Respect for all cultures brings nuanced meaning and information into a culturally responsive classroom. As the classroom learning opportunities transition from teacher-directed lectures to student-directed discussion and interactivity, the class climate becomes more innovative, creative, and open to multiple perspectives.

The intentionally inviting stance generalizes to the future work place as well. As students transition to the world of work, they will naturally integrate the tenets of Invitational Education theory and cultural responsiveness that was effectively put into action during their education experiences. Thus, culturally responsive teachers that embrace diverse exploration of content provides their students essential collaboration skills, increased social awareness, and expanded relationship management. Blessed by the positive experiences provided by the Invitational Education practitioner, the students as workers will be better able to seek, develop, and appreciate opportunities to learn from diverse people. “To love is to act lovingly, to care is to act caringly. Unless invitations are sent and received, they can’t be accepted” (Purkey, 2017, p 12).

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