Promising Practices

A Vicarious Learning Activity for University Sophomores in a Multiculturalism Course

By Ronald E. Chennault

How can one teach a course about multiculturalism to a broad spectrum of university sophomores in a way that is research-based, pedagogically sound, and appealing—all in ten weeks? That is the situation I faced during the first quarter of my new job as an assistant professor. I felt that I had the academic preparation and teaching skills to lead the course, but the special population of students and the specific course requirements presented a new challenge. Fortunately for me (and for the students), I have had a few opportunities since then to improve upon my initial efforts.

I am not the first person to struggle with this kind of challenge, of course. During the past three and a half decades, and especially during the past 10 years, multicultural education or multiculturalism courses in various forms have been established and developed on college and university campuses. These courses, which, generally speaking, explore the existence of cultural diversity in our society, are often labeled "multiculturalism" courses, although the courses may go by several other titles such as "multicultural education," "cultural diversity," and "cross-cultural understanding."

This is not to mention the plethora of other courses that deal with race, ethnicity, nationality, and other categories of cultural difference that may not even be grouped under the category of multicultural-ism (Sleeter & Grant, 1999; Levine & Cureton, 1992). Frequently, multicultural-ism

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courses are required for all students at a particular institution, or are at least among the electives to be selected to fulfill university requirements (Levine & Cureton, 1992).

The Context

DePaul University is one such institution. DePaul, located in Chicago, Illinois, is the seventh largest private, not-for-profit university and the largest Catholic university in the U.S. by enrollment (DePaul University Division of Enrollment Management, 2005). The University strives, as part of its mission, "to foster through higher education a deep respect for the God-given dignity of all persons, especially the materially, culturally and spiritually deprived; and to instill in its students a dedication to the service of others" (*DePaul University Course Catalog*, 2001, no page). In light of its mission and origins, and because of its location in Chicago, DePaul University proudly describes itself as "Catholic, Vincentian, and urban." But to prevent the expressed statements above from merely being words on a page, the University has attempted to give life to the mission through the structure of its academic programs.

One example of the University's attempt to bring its mission alive in the academic program is the "Seminar on Multiculturalism." As part of the undergraduate general education program (the "common core"), all students are required to take a course on multiculturalism during the sophomore year.[1] Each of these courses is designed to address at least three dimensions of multiculturalism in the context of the United States. In the University's definition, these dimensions include race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, religion, nationality, language, and

sexual orientation. The experiences of individuals and of cultural groups, and the contributions of the groups to the development of American society, are the focal points of the courses.

I currently teach one of the courses, which is titled "Multiculturalism in Education," and have taught the course four times in the past. The course is offered at least once every term, and it is taught by several different faculty members in the School of Education at DePaul. In general, the course—no matter who teaches it—examines cultural differences as they relate to social inequalities in schools and in other educational sites. When I teach the course, I do so with the following goals:

1. to explore different analytical orientations concerning multi-culturalism.

2. to examine cultural difference as a construct that "marks" individuals and groups of individuals.

3. to investigate the historical roots of inequality related to cultural differences.

4. to discuss identity as, among other things, a multidimensional construction, and to require each student to reflect on his/her own sense of identity.

5. to address issues of voice, representation, and agency in educational settings.

6. to examine applications of multicultural education in an range of contexts.

In striving to accomplish these goals, my overarching aim for the course is to prepare to students to work towards the transformation of society (and its institutions) in the interest of social justice for all.

The course is demanding to teach for at least a couple of reasons. One of the chal-

lenges of teaching the course is that it must address at least three dimensions of cultural difference. I am not opposed to that requirement in principle, because it is useful not only to explore cultural groups as separate phenomena but also to explore how those groups intersect. The challenge comes in attempting to teach about these multiple dimensions within the confines of a ten-week course.

Another challenging aspect of the course is that, since it fulfills a core requirement for undergraduates, it is open to students in all major programs across the University. The course focuses on multiculturalism in the realm of education, but it is not limited to students who intend to become professional educators; this is not the case for most courses offered by the School of Education. This is a wonderful opportunity to reach students from all corners of the University. However, I feel compelled to approach the course in a different way than I would if all of the students were majoring in the field of education.

The Learning Activity

One of the means by which I have tried to meet the challenges of teaching this course is by assigning a group project in the course. The project might be thought of as a "vicarious learning" activity, which Cook and Cook (1954) define as "an experience *in*, a contact *with*, rather than reading *about*" (p. 291). Perhaps the most common type of vicarious learning activity is role playing, and the activity I have created resembles conventional role playing in many ways.

However, the major difference is the students in my activity *imagine* being in a role instead of *acting out* that role. Research supports the use of vicarious experiences (which might also be thought of as simulations) in learning about cultural difference. Anderson et al. (2000), for example, report on a study of current and former university students' understanding of multiculturalism as strengthened by classroom incidents. The students identified simulations (as categorized by the researchers) as the third-largest category of impactful incidents.

The learning activity might also be seen as an exercise in "perspective taking." Davis et al. (1996) claim that "empirical evidence gathered by social psychologists over the past 20 years has been broadly consistent" with the consensus among theorists that "an ability to entertain the psychological perspectives of others has a number of important consequences" (p. 713).

One of these important consequences might be that a perspective-taker would be more likely to offer an account of the behavior of the person whose perspective is being entertained that resembles how that person would account for his/her own behavior (Davis et al., 1996, p. 713; Regan & Totten, 1975). Furthermore, Davis et al. (1996) offer evidence that "role-taking activity can produce measurable changes in cognitive structures associated with social knowledge" (p. 725).

The activity I use is intended to be a way for students to perceive how an individual who is culturally different from one's self might experience group identity. It attempts to move students closer to understanding the perspectives of others who are in some significant way culturally different from them. It is not, however, some futile attempt to help students gain "mastery" of the cultural experiences of others.[2]

The project, which is assigned to groups of three to five students, is comprised of two different parts. Students receive the instructions to each part separately. The directions for the first part are given below.

Part 1.

For a period of at least three consecutive days, you will assume the identity of an imaginary DePaul student from a particular cultural group (to be assigned). You will imagine what concerns, problems, desires, pleasures, etc., a student from that cultural group might have from day to day, especially as a student at DePaul. In a sense, you will be looking at the world—to a certain degree—as if you were this person. You and your group members may choose to do this in a similar fashion or according to your own desires. You are encouraged to engage in the following activities, for they may be helpful: reading magazines produced by members of this cultural group, watching television shows by and/or about people of this group, observing how other people relate to persons of your assigned group. You should make mental, written, or oral notes about your thoughts and experiences.

Then, within your class group, discuss your experiences with each other. Each group member should contribute to this process. Record and compile your experiences into an organized written document in the form of a report. You do not have to come to any agreement about your experiences, but you should provide evidence that you all have discussed them as a group. Your report should be at least four pages (typed, double-spaced). Include the names of each group member on the report and identify the cultural group assigned to you.

It should be obvious that this is an activity that is marked by reflection. In your reflections, you should demonstrate critical thinking and offer explanations for your thoughts.

Part 2.

Instructions will be given in class at a later date.

I usually ask the students to organize in work groups during the second week of a ten-week quarter. I encourage them to choose their own group members, and I place in groups those students who express no preference for a particular group. Ideally, the students would have more time to become more comfortable with each other before beginning the assignment, but I believe that allowing them some freedom to choose their fellow group members adds a level of comfort to the process.

After the work groups are formed, I purposively assign them their temporary cultural identity "labels." My purpose is to have the assigned cultural group be as distinct from the members of the work group as possible. Depending on how students select their group members, this assigning of identities necessitates a small or large amount of management and more identity labels than there are work groups. However, once the students form their groups, the actual assignment of labels takes only a few minutes of class time.

I create the identity labels beforehand based on cultural groups that we examine in the course and based on the identities of the students in the course. Another important criterion for selection of the cultural groups is that each group has to have faced sustained marginalization or oppression in the United States. Thus far, cultural group labels I have used are: "Latinas (Mexican)," "Latinas (Puerto Rican)," "white women from poor backgrounds," "lesbians," "working poor men and women," "African American men," "Americans of Asian descent," "gay men," and "American Indians."

I realize that these cultural groups are broadly defined (some more than others), but the labels are designed to correspond with groups encountered in the course and with groupings that are commonly used in everyday discourse. I mention to students that the "messy significance" of the identity labels is meant to reflect both the messiness and the significance of the groupings in our society.[3]

After the preliminary steps are completed, the students have approximately two weeks to complete and submit this part of the activity. On the day that the students

submit their reports for the first part of the assignment, I disseminate the instructions for the second part. The students read the instructions in class, after which I address their questions and concerns. The instructions are printed below.[4]

Part 2.

Locate at least one *self-identified* member of the cultural group to which you were assigned. This person (or these persons) should not be one of your classmates in ISP 200; however, it may be someone you already know outside of class. Once you have identified a person, you should carefully explain Part 1 of the assignment to him or her so that they understand their role in the assignment. Your task is to discuss with him or her the findings that you documented in your report and to find out his/her reactions to what your group has compiled.

You may do this in a variety of ways, which include the following:

◆ You may ask your respondent to read your group's report and then to share his/her reactions with you in an interview (30 minutes or so).

◆ You may have a conversation in which you summarize your report and then document your respondent's response to your summary.

◆ You may ask the respondent to read your report and then write a reaction to it.

The point is that, in some way, your group is to share what you have written with a member of your assigned cultural group and to document what that person has to say about what you have found. Keep in mind that your goal is not to argue with your respondent or to defend your report. Your goal is to discover that person's response to your report. You may, of course, ask clarifying questions and offer explanations of what you have written when necessary.

In your report for Part 2, you may include as much descriptive information provided to you by your respondent as he/she allows. However, the only identifying information you *must* include is the person's cultural group, age, and occupation (student, instructor, bank teller, etc.) if given. Do *not* give the respondent's name in your written report. Additionally, I prefer that the selected person be a student, but if you find someone who is not a student, you may still proceed with the assignment.

IMPORTANT: Your selected person's participation is voluntary; he or she is agreeing to help you. Do not attempt to force anyone to participate. If at any point your respondent declines to participate, you must respect that. However, you

should have no problem finding someone who is willing to assist you. Remember: be respectful and be resourceful.

Your group's report should be typed and double-spaced. You must include (in either an introduction or conclusion) your group's reactions to the comments made by your respondent.

There is no single "right" answer or response for this assignment. You should see this assignment as a learning experience. It will help you to maintain an open mind and a spirit of curiosity as you complete the project.

Other Course Content

Of course, the vicarious learning activity described above could not and does not stand alone in the course as an instructional activity. It is only one piece of the entire course (which is itself only one piece of the entire undergraduate experience). It is complemented by other assignments that serve to provide a broader and deeper educational experience for the students in the course. The foundation of the course is provided by the reading assignments.

Readings that I currently use for the course are *Ourselves as Students: Multicultural Voices in the Classroom* (Broad Minds Collective, 1996), which is an edited collection of first-person essays dealing with culture and identity written by university students; *Beyond Black and White: New Faces and Voices in U.S. Schools* (Seller and Weis, 1997), in which each chapter examines the American schooling experiences of a specific cultural group; the well-known *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1992), which provides a window into the institutional dimensions of social inequality; and various other articles, handouts, and films that connect to the other readings.

Students in the course also have to attend a public forum outside of class and provide a written and oral report on the forum. The event has to address some aspect of cultural difference and/or social justice. After attending the event, each student has to write about what they learned and has to give an oral report to the class based on what they wrote. The goal of the assignment is to urge students to participate in and learn from relevant out-of-class experiences with the hope that they will continue to seek out similar opportunities after the course ends.

One last assignment is the final course project, which is a research paper on a chosen topic related to the themes of the course. My reason for including this assign-

ment is to offer students the chance to explore a particular topic in detail through their own independent research. This assignment is a variation of Sleeter's "why" paper (Sleeter, 1996).

The thread that links all of this together, of course, is the collection of lectures and class discussions that explores all of the topics raised throughout the course. The lecture-discussions cover, among other things, the development of multicultural education over time, different approaches to teaching about multiculturalism, axes of oppression and resistance to such oppression, individual and institutional forms of discrimination, and affirmative action. The in-class discussions are used to highlight and deal with relevant issues. Using a combination of challenge, critique, and encouragement, I try to create sophisticated, meaningful discussion of our important topics.

Purposes of the Learning Activity

As a single learning activity in the course, the vicarious experience project is obviously limited in what it can accomplish. It does, however, both build on and contribute to the larger goals of the course. I have identified three main purposes for using the activity. These purposes are consistent with the objectives of the other course assignments and activities. They are:

1. to promote healthy risk-taking in learning;

2. to enhance understanding of culturally different others;

3. to encourage students to see others as individuals *and* as (multiply located) group members.

Promoting Constructive Risk-Taking

In order to complete the vicarious learning activity, the students have to step outside of their realm of everyday experience and their comfort zones. This request is a reasonable one; in fact, it is a constructive aspect of the assignment. Reflective thinking—and development in general (and cross-cultural understanding in particular)—are promoted through the taking of risks (King & Kitchener, 1994; Paige, 1993; Sanford, 1966).

In order to be most effective, however, the encouragement of risk-taking has to be strategic and take place in an environment of intellectual and emotional support; too much risk and not enough support is likely to be counterproductive (McAllister &

Irvine, 2000; King & Kitchener, 1994; Paige, 1993; Sanford, 1966).

The second part of the activity may be even more risky than the first, but the extra risk can be accounted for. For one thing, the students have presumably become more comfortable with each other as group members by then. Secondly, they can rely on the thoughts explored and knowledge gained as a result of completing Part 1 of the activity and of having participated in the course for an additional two weeks beyond completing Part 1. Thirdly, my written and oral instructions to them anticipate and attempt to address their discomfort.

For example, the written guidelines state that their goal is not to defend their report or argue with their respondent, but to discover that person's response. I also write that "[t]here is no single "right" answer or response for this assignment. You should see this assignment as a learning experience. It will help you to maintain an open mind and a spirit of curiosity as you complete the project."

The statements above, along with my reiteration of them in class, reinforce the idea that their goal is not to "prove" but to "discover." In addition, I tell them that their respondent's participation is voluntary, but that they should have no problem finding willing participants.[5] In my experience so far with the activity, this last statement has been true, so I tell them this not just for comfort's sake but also for honesty's sake. But I make the statement to emphasize the fact that this is a *learning* activity, and if presented as such to potential participants, the participants will be more likely to help.

Enhancing Understanding of Culturally Different Others

It is already obvious that I use the activity for this purpose; indeed, that is what the entire course is designed to accomplish. What I want to point out are three specific ways in which the activity helps in this regard. One means of promoting understanding of other perspectives that the activity relies on is its indirect encouragement of self-examination on the part of each student (King & Kitchener, 1994).

As stated earlier, the first part of the activity asks students to reflect on what life might be like as a student of another cultural group. In order to conceive of what someone else might experience, the student has to examine his or her own beliefs and values about the cultural group in question. This was made clear to me by a gener-

ally inquisitive, White, male student who asked, "How do I keep from stereotyping?" I responded that the activity should, fortunately, cause him to become particularly aware of any stereotypes he held, and that he should think through and beyond those stereotypes so that he could imagine what someone of his assigned cultural group might experience.

The instructions to Part 1 also urge students to read and watch texts produced by, for, or about their assigned cultural group and to observe real members of the assigned group in everyday situations. This suggestion encourages students to depend on what Tatum calls "self-generated knowledge" (1992). Tatum identifies the power of knowledge generated by students for helping to enhance their development in classes with race-related content (Tatum, 1992).

I am extending her thinking a bit in applying it to my course, which deals not only with racial content but also with other forms of cultural difference. In keeping with what she notes, I have found that the ideas and reflections produced by students for this learning activity have been quite central to their initial and continued understanding of the lived experience of others who are in some way culturally different from them.

A third means by which the activity promotes understanding is the "forced" contact with a member of the assigned cultural group required in Part 2. Research certainly supports the notion that direct contact with people who are culturally different creates more comfort with cultural diversity (although we know that mere contact is not sufficient (Schofield, 1995)). To some degree, the direct contact takes place in the classroom itself.[6]

However, the direct contact that comes as a result of the learning activity is initiated by the students. This distinction is important because, ideally, the student-initiated contact sets the stage for future cross-cultural contact in which students may engage. In other words, it gives the students "practice" in encountering others who are culturally different. Additionally, I believe that the activity avoids one of the pitfalls of forced contact by creating an occasion for a *meaningful* encounter instead of one that simply happens for the sake of happening.

Encouraging Students To View Others as Individuals and as Members of Groups

The activity, especially the second part of it, serves another important purpose: it

helps students to understand that people can be simultaneously viewed as individuals and as members of a cultural group (or groups). By viewing other people as individuals who may also identify with particular groups, the students should be better able to comprehend how group identification informs our beliefs and practices.

As Banks (2001) points out, many social scientists have noted that "Americans— particularly those in the mainstream—are highly individualistic in their value orientations and behaviors" (p. 10).[7] In my experience with the course (and not surprising to me), most of my students have reflected this individualistic outlook and have often promoted individualism as an ideal.

What they have demonstrated much less awareness of is that some cultural groups within the United States—especially marginalized ones—are not as committed to individualism as an ideal and have tended to be more group- or community-oriented (e.g., Beck, 1997; Goldberger et al., 1996; Ogbu and Simons, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Timm and Borman, 1997). Since the course is centrally concerned with the exploration of multiple cultures and not just of the mainstream culture, I see the inclusion of the study of group identification as necessary.

The vicarious experience activity involves the study of group identification by asking the students to imagine themselves as part of another cultural group. The students are expected to see themselves as distinct individuals, of course, but as individuals who identify with various groups. They then have to share their experiences with the other members of their activity group, which should further underscore both the individual nature of their own reflections *and* the intragroup similarities between the experiences of the members.

The second part of the activity deepens the learning experience by requiring them to share their reflections with a self-identified member of their cultural group. The perspectives they uncover from their respondent also promote the view of people both as individuals and as group members, for the respondents undoubtedly demonstrate how they both resemble and differ from the portraits of the cultural groups that are developing in the students' minds. This exercise also helps to combat the formation of essentialist views about a particular cultural group by allowing the students to witness the diversity within the group.

Students' Responses

Each time that I have taught the course, several students have asked two questions that resemble the following: "How am I supposed to do this?" and "How do I keep from relying on stereotypes?" The first question is understandable, especially since the project is most likely different from any they have been asked to complete for a course. Furthermore, their concern is probably occasioned by what I consider to be the "loose structure" of the directions. That is by design, although there are certainly other, equally effective ways to instruct students how to complete the assignment. I like to believe that the assignment is structured enough that I can expect a degree of consistency of outcome from each group, but it is sufficiently flexible that it leaves room for creativity of approach.

The second question is a fascinating one, and perhaps equally understandable. My response to that question, in short, is to repeat a portion of the instructions: that they are to attempt to assume a *different* perspective than the one(s) they usually hold. In other words, the purpose of the task is to think beyond stereotypes, especially since the groups they are studying would not necessarily subscribe to stereotypical characterizations.

The students' expressions of uncertainty also appear to be indicators of discomfort with the nature of the assignment. Again, this is to be expected, because the activity is probably different from one in which they have participated before. But there is another dimension to this discomfort, which has been made more evident when I have distributed the instructions to Part 2 and listened to students tell me their concerns about being able to complete that part of the assignment.

Some students have demonstrated some additional apprehensiveness regarding Part 2, whereas others have expressed excitement. The apprehensiveness centered on a fear of not being able to find a person of the group or of offending that person. So far, neither feared outcome has occurred.

On one occasion, however, a White, female student questioned the activity's potential to offend. I had assigned her work group to the "African American men" cultural group, and in their Part 2 report she commented on her initial surprise and dismay at being asked to approach a self-identified member of that cultural group. When she identified an appropriate respondent, she told him that she believed the assignment to be offensive and was reluctant to complete it. The respondent told her that he understood her concern, but that he thought the assignment was a beneficial learning experience and was pleased that she was required to interview him.

The concern expressed by the student was not trivial, for the potential for offense-taking by respondents does exist. The next time I taught the course, I made a point of speaking to this concern during the review of the instructions. Moreover, I believe that if the instructions are dutifully followed (especially when the respondent is another university student), respondents will participate in a cooperative manner.

Future Directions

From my perspective, the vicarious experience activity has been effective, especially during my most recent use of it. I have on several occasions taken the time to reflect critically upon the activity and have refined it after the end of each course that included it. As one might expect, however, I am still looking for ways to improve upon the activity—and upon the multiculturalism course in general.

There are a few modifications to the activity that I have considered making but have thus far rejected. One such modification is one that might be made to Part 2 of the activity, by requiring students to conduct a more comprehensive and structured interview with someone of the assigned cultural group. Others educators have suggested or made use of such an interview process (at least with regard to race and ethnicity) (Brown et al., 1996; Phinney, 1996).

Also regarding Part 2 of the activity, I have given serious thought to requiring *each student* in each class group to identify and talk to a respondent instead of requiring them to find just one respondent per group. Asking each student to find a respondent would create cross-cultural encounters for everyone in the class and not just for one willing student in each group. Definite plans for the future include conducting a more formal evaluation of the activity.

I already receive student course evaluations at the end of each quarter, and from those evaluations and through informal discussions with students I have discovered some students' perceptions of the activity. However, I would like to ascertain students' thoughts in more detail. The next time I use the activity in the course, I intend to employ some more formal quantitative and/or qualitative assessment of what students have learned from the activity or of how useful they found the activity to be. This information might be gathered, for example, through an instrument like the Personal Beliefs about Diversity Scale (Pohan and Aguilar, 2001) and through the use of interviews with students.[8]

The responses on such a scale would be influenced by more than the activity, of course, but using a scale in conjunction with the interviews could allow a narrower focus on the activity if desired. This evaluative data would provide some sense of the effectiveness of the activity and the course, and would contribute to the enhancement of both.

Being equipped with this information would aid me in my quest to make the multiculturalism course and all of its components as beneficial as possible to the students. Obviously, this could also inform the practice of teaching about multiculturalism in general. It is possible that I have overlooked some other weaknesses in the vicarious experience activity, and I rely on others to bring those to my attention and to point out paths to improvement.

My hope is that the activity, as I have conceived of it, will be a useful tool to those who currently strive to teach university students to understand and critically examine the existence of cultural diversity in our society.

Notes

[1] This requirement did not come about without a significant amount of struggle, however.

[2] I realize that "the culturally different" and "[O]ther" are terms that carry a lot of baggage—baggage that is often discriminatory and offensive. However, in this paper I do not use these terms to refer to subordinated groups as distinct from the normative/dominant identity group. Instead, each student is seen as belonging to a cultural group, and those students who identify with a different cultural group are described as "others"—which includes everyone else.

[3] When I have taught the course, I have identified myself as belonging to multiple groups. But in each class I have at the very least identified myself as an African American man. This could potentially create more anxiety for those students assigned to the "African American men" cultural group. The papers from those group members have not reflected any more (or less) cautiousness, however.

[4] I should note that I am aware of the possibility of fabricating a respondent for the activity. The students understand, however, that such fabrication would violate the University's academic integrity policy.

[5] This statement also serves another purpose: it partially addresses the proper use of human participants in research.

[6] In the fall of 2003, 9% of DePaul's freshmen were African American, 9% were classified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 14% were Hispanic/Latino, and the remaining 68% were classified as Caucasian or as "other." The class was also 60% female and 40% male. In addition, 38% of the freshmen were first-generation college students. These numbers are generally consistent with DePaul's overall undergraduate population (DePaul University Division of Enrollment Management, 2003).

[7] For an example of this work by social scientists, see Bellah et al. (1985) and Lockhart (2003).

[8] The scale may still require further testing and validation, though, before using it for this purpose (Pohan &Aguilar, 2001).

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