

Facilitating Learning on Diversity: Challenges to the Professor

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ABSTRACT. This article focuses on faculty responses to critical classroom incidents related to race and the importance of faculty being sensitive to issues of racism in order to effectively handle such situations. Data from a national study of 304 graduate and undergraduate level social work faculty are presented. Discussion addresses teaching challenges and approaches for addressing issues of diversity, oppression, and difference when they trigger student conflict and strained classroom interaction. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>*]

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INTRODUCTION

In order to adequately prepare students to become multiculturally competent professionals, diversity content taught in schools of social work must include content on oppression, privilege, social identity, and racism. This requires that students engage in a demanding experience that involves both learning about diverse populations and confronting their own personal experience related to difference and privilege within the dominant culture. Such learning, by necessity, rests on examination of the consequences of injustice,

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inequity and oppression. Exploration of one's experiences, values and perspectives about social justice can threaten core belief systems, leaving students feeling devastated. Focusing the learning on individual concerns within a context of social power places enormous demands on both faculty and students that exceed intellectual and emotional expectations ordinarily found in other curricula. There is some evidence that when critical incidents related to diversity occur in the classroom, it may be difficult for faculty to maintain a learning focus in the midst of emotional agitation (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999).

This article presents data from a national study of undergraduate and graduate level social work faculty that focused on their beliefs about racism and their responses to vignettes of classroom interactions related to interracial conflict. Racism was selected as the focus of the study because of its rootedness in U.S. sociopolitical life and the insights it provides for understanding other forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, ableism, heterosexism). Prior work in this area provided the motivation to utilize a vignette methodology for data gathering (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999). Main findings of the study are reported in Van Soest and Garcia (1998). This article will focus on data related to sensitivity and responsiveness to racism and teaching concerns.

THE CHALLENGES AND DYNAMICS OF TEACHING CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONTENT

While all learning is imbued with emotion related to personal adjustments as students absorb new content (Brookfield, 1990), diversity content often arouses unexamined feelings about difference. The affect evoked in students places heightened pressure and responsibility on faculty to be responsive to process issues that include students' emotional as well as learning needs. Critical thinking skills can be valuable in assisting faculty to navigate through intensive class discussions while maintaining a focus on learning.

Although critical thinking is an essential skill for examining the assumptions and coherence of one's worldview (Brookfield, 1987), additional skills are also needed for managing classroom situations when it feels as if they are ridden with "hot triggers." Because educators most often desire to see themselves as having something to give their students, they may feel compromised when heated discussions leave students questioning the professor's intentions (e.g., seeing them as unfairly putting some students on the "hot seat," not sufficiently protecting some students, steering away from relevant content). The stirrings that faculty may themselves feel can create a sense of clouded perception that produces doubts about one's judgment and can make it difficult to maintain a focus on learning.

Literature on teaching issues relevant to teaching diversity content is primarily found outside of traditional social work literature. Pedagogy addresses a wide range of content that includes teaching methods, skills and student dynamics. The following discussion will identify central themes in the teaching literature that are relevant to diversity teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional pedagogical methods, such as use of a clear conceptual framework with which to interpret and guide class discussion, can aid faculty in facing the emotional challenges unique to diversity issues (Lowman, 1995). Yet, faculty who teach content with a dual focus on valuing diversity and understanding oppression face more profound professional and personal demands. They must deal with and teach from a perspective that views oppression in terms of social power and institutionalized patterns. This requires emphasizing and exploring the effects of privilege as discussed by McIntosh (1995) and socialization and internalization of values and their effects on interpersonal interactions as discussed by Miller (1986) and Pharr (1988). The challenge in this task is to illuminate psychological dynamics without capitulating to a reductionist view that psychologizes sociopolitical phenomena (i.e., find a balance between the personal and sociopolitical).

The powerful role of affect in the learning process suggests that the professor must be aware of the risk levels that students experience (Land, 1987). Egalitarian, safe climates that encourage risk taking by students are facilitated by moving from high to low structure over the course of the semester (Lowman, 1995; Schwartz, 1980), emphasizing joint problem solving (Dalloz, 1986), and couching one's language in terms of indirect suggestions rather than directives. It is hazardous to assume premature consensus, stifle disagreements or student anger, and unintentionally undermine the creation of a safe classroom climate (Schwartz, 1980).

In spite of tremendous teaching challenges, doctoral students may be receiving limited preparation for teaching in social work (Valentine et al., 1998). In addition, there is very little research regarding the type of preparation and resources that faculty need to teach diversity content. While skills in traditional teaching methods that include a lecture format are needed, feminist (Dore, 1994) and cooperative learning strategies (Valentine et al., 1998) hold particular promise for transforming intra- and interpersonal conflicts into learning experiences.

King (1993) proposes that faculty should aim to be a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage" when attempting to facilitate self-reflection and productive class discussion. This may require that faculty formulate personally relevant guidelines and options for handling strained classroom

interaction. Such guidelines are particularly useful when professors' own personal histories and life experiences trigger strong emotional responses within themselves that make it difficult to remain focused on the learning objectives or the needs of the class as a whole.

Core teaching skills have been identified in the literature as characteristics of effective teachers. They may assist faculty in containing what feels like a rush of affect and staying focused on the learning goals when teaching diversity and oppression content. These teaching skills cluster into those that deal with relational student interaction and those that are more cognitive and related to classroom management. Relationally-oriented skills include attending to the relationship between oneself and students (Daloz, 1986; Lowman, 1995), supporting the personal development of students (Cramer, 1995; Eble, 1988), and encouraging students to become a resource for one another (Coulshed, 1993; Sirls, 1994). Skills oriented toward the cognitive domain include: utilizing activities geared to develop higher order thinking by engaging students in activities followed by reflection on what they did (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991); keeping students' cognitive styles in focus (Sonnier & Sonnier, 1995); and arousing a critical outlook in students (Wilkinson, 1984).

Other areas of the literature delve into student perceptions of professors. Research on student perceptions of the qualities of effective professors includes both attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. Observations and research about attitudinal characteristics that students perceive as effective include: enthusiasm, ability to motivate students, accessibility, encouragement of critical thinking, eagerness to make the course relevant, fairness and compassion for the students, conveying a commitment to teaching (Brookfield, 1990; Dillon, 1984; Eble, 1988; McKeachie, 1986; Parish & Stallings, 1992), and demonstration of pleasure in learning (Lowman, 1995). Professors' behaviors that are perceived positively by students include a process-oriented approach that emphasizes classroom interaction, encourages student expression of feelings (Lee, 1989), and provides intellectual stimulation via clarity of content and strong emotional impact on students (Lowman, 1995). Brookfield (1990) contends that a clear presentation of the rationale and values, beliefs, and purposes that underlie classroom activities is one of the most important ways for faculty to demonstrate clarity (Brookfield, 1990). Moreover, it is vitally important that the course content be linked to students' backgrounds, culture, worldviews, expectations and experiences (Brookfield, 1990; Wasserman, 1983).

The current study investigated faculty responses to classroom events that exemplify "hot triggers" that can produce intense feelings in professors, while simultaneously challenging them to utilize their best teaching skills. The classroom events presented to participants in the study in the form of vignettes were related to racism, one of the most volatile of subjects in

cultural diversity content. Racism is defined by its principal elements, which are a belief in racial superiority-inferiority, strong in-group preference, and moral exclusion and rejection of people who are different based on socially defined physical criteria. The results of the study are viewed as having the potential to increase understanding of the dynamics of teaching cultural diversity in a broader sense to include others judged as different and, therefore, subject to oppression on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, or socioeconomic status.

METHODS

An exploratory study was conducted to investigate responsiveness to critical events related to racism that occur in the classroom. Critical events were presented in the form of vignettes to which participants were asked to respond. The vignettes were adapted from events that actually occurred in university classrooms, two of which were identified in a previous study (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999). A critical event is defined as a significant classroom episode that is characterized by intense or conflictual interaction between students and/or faculty. The event represents a “teachable moment” in which student growth and learning can be facilitated. Since the critical events dealt with racism, a sensitivity to racism scale was developed to measure participants’ sensitivity to racism. Sensitivity to racism is defined as an ability to be aware of and to understand various personal, social, and institutional manifestations of racism.

Sample

The participants in this study were faculty who teach in undergraduate and graduate CSWE-accredited schools of social work in the United States and Puerto Rico. A packet containing two copies of the study instrument with self-addressed stamped envelopes for anonymous return and cover letters were sent to the dean, director or chair of all MSW and BSW program (n = 511 programs), excluding the researchers’ two schools. The heads of programs were asked to select two members of the faculty to participate in the study, one who had experience teaching diversity content and one who did not. A total of 1022 faculty were invited to participate in the study.

Three hundred and four faculty, from 48 states and Puerto Rico, completed the instruments for a response rate of 30%. The sample represented a diverse population (see Table 1). The majority (62%) of the respondents identified as White/European American. The remaining respondents were predominantly (20%) Black/African American with small percentages of Latino (7%), Na-

tive American (4%) or Asian/Asian American (3%) faculty. Thirty-three percent were male, 9% identified as gay/lesbian/bisexual and 1% identified as disabled. The majority were either tenured (50%) or in tenure track positions (33%) with assistant and associate professors accounting for over two-thirds of the sample. Sixty percent of the participants had taught at least one course in cultural diversity.

Instrumentation

A two part questionnaire was constructed that includes four vignettes of classroom critical incidents and a 15-item Assumptions About Racism scale. One open-ended response item inquired about faculty concerns regarding their responses to the vignettes. See Figure 1 for description of vignettes.

Participants were provided with five possible responses to the critical events. The five optional responses were used as measures of the cross cultural competence model developed by Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Issacs (1989). See Figure 2 for the description of the items ranked from Level 1 to Level 5, which represent a harm-to-help continuum. Level 1, cultural destructiveness, involves colluding with harmdoing through the use of humor; Level 2, cultural incapacity, represents an inability to use the event as a learning experience for the class; Level 3, cultural blindness, takes a position of neutrality rather than examining issues of race directly; Level 4, cultural pre-competence, attempts to address the issue with confrontational tactics; and, Level 5, cultural competence, attempts to address the issue in an open way in order to transform it into a "teachable moment." In addition to the five response options, faculty were provided with a list of personal concerns that may have influenced their choice of response and asked to check all that applied for each vignette.

The Assumptions about Racism scale consists of 15 items that measure sensitivity to racism (See Figure 3). The instrument uses a Likert-type scale with values from 1 through 6: one for responses of strongly disagree and 6 for responses of strongly agree. Total Sensitivity to Racism Scores could potentially range from 15-90. The Assumptions About Racism instrument was critiqued for face validity by 15 social work faculty from two schools of social work and the subsequently-revised instrument was piloted with three groups of undergraduate and graduate social work students ($n = 74, 115, 69$) with reliability at coefficient alpha of .57, .73, and .77.

Findings

Sensitivity to Racism. Two-tailed t-tests for independent samples performed to investigate the effect of other variables on Sensitivity to Racism

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N = 304)

Variable	Sample Size	Percent
Gender		
Female	195	64
Male	109	36
Social Identity		
African-American/Black	63	20
Latino/Hispanic	23	7
Asian/Asian American	12	3
Native American	15	4
White/European American	189	62
Persons with Disabilities	6	1
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual	29	9
Other	9	2
Age		
under 40 years	40	13
40-49 years	120	39
50-59 years	110	36
60 and older	34	11
Highest Degree		
PhD or DSW	193	63
MSW	111	36
Faculty Position		
Full Professor	59	19
Associate Professor	101	33
Assistant Professor	120	39
Lecturer/Instructor/Adjunct	23	7
Tenure Status		
Tenured	153	50
Tenure Track	102	33
Non-Tenure Track	46	15
Teaching Experience		
20 or more years	78	25
10-19 years	89	29
5-9 years	79	25
less than 5 years	58	19
Have Taught Course on Cultural Diversity	182 *	60
Have not Taught Course on Cultural Diversity	119	40

*Of these, 106 (34% of total sample) were teaching a course on Cultural Diversity at the time they completed the survey.

scores revealed that women ($n = 195$) had a significantly higher total mean score ($M = 70.01$) than did men ($n = 109$, $M = 67.78$) (t value = 2.11, $df = 302$, $p < .05$); faculty who had taught a diversity course ($n = 182$) had a significantly higher (t value = 2.24, $df = 302$, $p < .05$) total mean score ($M = 70.14$) than professors who had never taught a diversity course ($n = 122$, $M =$

FIGURE 1. Four Critical Incidents in Teaching and Learning about Racism and Oppression

<p>Vignette 1.</p> <p><i>In a generalist social work course that includes policy and community organization issues, the class is discussing local and state issues such as immigration policy and renaming parts of the city after famous ethnic persons. At one point, a white student says that the border should be closed and that there is no basis for naming a local street after Caesar Chavez. A first generation Mexican student responds passionately, pointing a finger at the other student while defending the rights of immigrants to social services and renaming of the street. The white student angrily responds: "Do not speak to me while pointing your finger at me that way!"</i></p>
<p>Vignette 2.</p> <p><i>Midway through a course on cultural diversity and oppression, students are making presentations. A white student begins a presentation by pointing out that, contrary to the focus of the course on racism as an institutional and societal phenomenon, racism is in fact a personal and psychological phenomenon.</i></p>
<p>Vignette 3.</p> <p><i>In a social work course that you are teaching, an African American student speaks. You and a few of the students nearby overhear a white student turn to another white student and say, "I can't stand when that [racially derogatory label] talks!"</i></p>
<p>Vignette 4.</p> <p><i>In a foundation social work course, a student brings up the issue of having Spanish speaking clients. A discussion ensues about whether people feel uncomfortable when others converse in a language they don't understand. A white student admitted to being offended when people spoke Spanish and confronted another white student—who had been promoting the value of bilingualism for social workers—by asking: "Are you bilingual?" When the response was no, the student further declared, "Well, you have no right to act righteous about it then!"</i></p>

67.83); professors who were currently teaching a diversity course ($n = 106$) had a significantly higher (t value = 2.02, $df = 300$, $p < .05$) total mean score ($M = 70.62$) than those not currently teaching a diversity course ($n = 196$, $M = 68.46$).

Critical Events. Faculty responses to Vignettes 1, 2, and 4 reveal a high cultural competence level (Means = 69.26, 69.22, 69.34). Two-tailed t -tests for independent samples were used to examine the effect of demographic variables on Responsiveness Level to the critical events. For Vignette 1, results showed that Latino/Hispanic respondents ($n = 23$) had a significantly higher (t value = 4.89, $df = 51.53$, $p < .01$) Responsiveness Level mean ($M = 4.86$) than did all other respondent groups. For Vignette 3, results revealed that African American/Black respondents ($n = 63$) had a significantly higher ($t = 2.56$, $df = 294$, $p < .01$) Responsiveness Level mean ($M = 3.26$) than did all other

FIGURE 2. Response Choices to Critical Events: Levels of Responsiveness and Cultural Competence

Item #	Response	Responsiveness Level	Level of Cultural Competence (Cross)
5	"I would try to use humor to deflect the situation."	1	cultural destructiveness
3	"I would talk with the involved student(s) outside of class."	2	cultural incapacity
1	"I would emphasize the importance of academic freedom and respect for diverse opinions when dealing with the situation/issue."	3	cultural blindness
4	"I would challenge students to uncover any of their own racist beliefs/attitudes related to the situation/issue."	4	cultural precompetence
2	"I would invite students to engage in a dialogue/discussion about their thoughts/feelings related to the situation/issue."	5	cultural competence

respondent groups while White/European American respondents ($n = 189$), on the other hand, had a significantly lower ($t = 3.76$, $df = 219.46$, $p < .01$) mean Responsiveness Level to Vignette 3 than all other groups ($M = 2.70$).

In relation to personal concerns that may have played a role in their response choices, two items were identified by the majority of participants: (1) "My responses would depend on situational factors such as the composition/profile of the class and the point in the semester/quarter in which the incident occurred, e.g., having an event occur too close to the end of a class period" ($n = 190$); and, (2) "I found that, in reality, I have used several of the above responses in sequence" ($n = 190$). Other concerns included: "My response depended on how much tension I thought I'd be willing to bear in that situation" ($n = 76$), "I found myself wondering if I had the level of skill to respond effectively" ($n = 45$), and "I had some concerns about being considered a racist" ($n = 10$).

When asked if they had "other" concerns about their responses, the strongest concern theme dealt with a fear that they might manage the situation in a way that would stifle or suppress classroom interaction ($n = 19$). Comments related to this theme included being concerned about whether they would be able to use the moment to "show trust and care that every student is able to deal with the

FIGURE 3. Assumptions About Racism Items

1. Racism is a belief system that is woven into the fabric of American society.
2. One responsibility of belonging to American society is learning the primary language.
3. Individuals participate in racism to the extent that their attitudes conform to the system of racism.
4. Refusal of whites to recognize themselves as beneficiaries of racism in the American social system reinforces racism.
5. Racism is no longer prevalent today.
6. Each of us has a responsibility to recognize our own racist feelings.
7. Hostility of people of color to whites is a form of reverse racism.
8. As long as people alter any racist behaviors, it doesn't matter what their beliefs are.
9. Racism is a combination of prejudice and power.
10. Learning about racism is painful.
11. The pride and power movements of people of color emphasize separatism and thus are detrimental to our society.
12. Racism dehumanizes white people.
13. Social work practice has traditionally legitimized racism.
14. The English language reinforces racist assumptions.
15. As long as I treat all students equally, it doesn't matter what my beliefs are about their race.

situation at hand,” whether they could ensure that “students felt supported [so that] ‘changing’ students could ‘hear’ and ‘stuck’ [students] were confronted,” being able to “balance data and opinion,” and being able to “balance the rights of various students involved.” Distinct from such concerns was an explicit concern about being able to make use of the exchange as a learning moment (n = 8) in ways that would result in learning for both the student and professor. One professor suggested that “it is highly important to promote the view that

conflicts between students' perceived (subjective) realities should be re-framed to emphasize the opportunity for growth in dealing with (i.e., hearing and interacting with) different opinions, realities and perceptions." Several respondents (n = 14) felt that the response options for the vignettes were not sufficiently inclusive of what they would do, and that, in reality, they use several responses in sequence, as opposed to only one (as the instrument instructed). In addition, respondents expressed concern about possibly "hurting" students with their responses (n = 9), and the possible inappropriateness of some students for the social work profession. Some suggestions were made that faculty need to evaluate the maturity or ability of students to work with the feedback and interaction in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study revealed a profile of faculty that in many ways is representative of social work faculty in general. The profile is female, seasoned (mature), tenured or in tenure track positions. The greater number of women is representative of social work faculty, while the large proportion who were 50 years of age and older (47%) is in fact larger than one might expect, even with national statistics showing many tenured faculty approaching retirement. It is notable that 81% had more than 5 years experience teaching and 60% had prior experience in teaching diversity content.

While the vignettes of classroom incidents and the sensitivity to racism instrument may be useful as one pathway to assess cultural competence of faculty, two limitations to the study need attention. First, responses to real life classroom critical incidents are undoubtedly more complex than the vignette instrument in this study tests. Second, there was a risk of social desirability bias on both measurements. Thus, limitations of this kind of approach for gauging faculty competencies in addressing diversity content need to be recognized. While the data resulting from this study are limited, they do reflect some beginning comprehension of faculty differences related to diversity and racism.

Although differences related to social identity groups were not significantly related to the Sensitivity to Racism scores, a trend was detected that some groups showed more sensitivity to racism than others: African American faculty showed more sensitivity than did other ethnic groups, women showed more sensitivity in comparison to men, assistant professors had higher scores than full professors, and faculty who had either taught a diversity course in the past or were currently teaching one had higher scores in comparison to faculty who had never or were not currently teaching a diversity course. This pattern could suggest that direct experiences either in life and/or in teaching diversity courses both brings into awareness racism dynamics and also moves

individuals along in processing their experience and attitudes (i.e., cognition, feelings, behavior). In other words, discriminatory experience based on one's social identity may be a critical factor in how a professor processes an event in the classroom, and what he or she does about it. Ethnic minority professors selected higher responsiveness levels to some of the vignettes compared to other groups (e.g., Latinos had the highest response level to Vignette 1 and African Americans and Gay/Lesbian/Bisexuals were the most responsive to Vignette 3). Differences related to ethnicity and gender found in the study imply that living some form of oppression may very likely enable one to perhaps empathize more and thus possibly be more open to addressing this kind of weighty content. Also, these differences may be the basis of having more experience in discussing and/or thinking about oppression which can translate into classroom behavior.

Assuming that ethnic, female and Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual faculty have more direct experience with and awareness of social power dynamics, these data suggest that immediate, first hand experience has potentially sensitizing and motivating effects. Further, the data suggest that these experiences may be reflected in one's teaching orientation and approach. Confrontation with particular experiences may make it more difficult to ignore or deny similar situations or one's responses to them. There is also an implication in the study results that faculty may be more sensitive and responsive to discussions in the classroom when they relate to a group of which they themselves are members. For example, Latinos were more responsive to Vignette 1, which involved a Latino student and issues, and African Americans were more responsive to Vignette 3 which involved an African American student.

Interestingly, the finding that assistant professors scored higher on the Sensitivity to Racism scale than did full professors could suggest that there is greater commitment to social issues in the beginning of one's academic career in comparison to a later period in one's career. Also it could be speculated that as academics move up in academic rank, they become more influenced by such changing historical trends as the waning value on social justice. More data are needed on differences between junior and senior faculty in order to gain a clear understanding of this distinction. An interesting question to explore would be whether the results reflect differences in the education for the profession across time (e.g., CSWE's increased focus on diversity curriculum).

The findings also raise a question regarding who can best teach diversity content. The data imply that individuals who have a greater chance, based on their personal life experiences, of having their consciousness raised might show greater sensitivity and responsiveness. The findings indicate that faculty who have experienced oppression in their own lives (e.g., women, people of color) were significantly more responsive to two of the vignettes. This

does not imply that people who have experienced oppression or members of an oppressed group are the best suited for teaching diversity content. The study findings should not be interpreted as having such predictive power. Rather, it is important to emphasize that all faculty need to develop competence in dealing with diverse classrooms and diversity content. Faculty education is needed to bridge the gap between being reactive and avoidant as opposed to having the flexibility to engage in controversy and process.

Open ended responses to the question about “other concerns” faculty had in responding to the vignettes identified several themes. These themes included responding in ways that communicate respectfulness and safety in the midst of confrontation, involving everyone in the learning (including the professor), and responding in direct, honest ways that facilitate learning and are not hurtful to students. Such responses suggest that the most effective methods may be organized first by process and second by content. Faculty continually need to be sensitive to the changing readiness of the class to deal with difficult issues.

More information is needed about specific experiences that occur in the classroom and the learning that faculty take away from those experiences. Two of the findings in particular merit further exploration: (1) many faculty are attuned to and allow “timing” to guide their response (e.g., a response at the beginning of the course before trust has been established may be different than a response in the middle of the semester); and, (2) many faculty use a variety of responses identified in the survey in sequence, rather than only one isolated response. While much can be gained from applying pedagogically sound methods to diversity teaching, much can also be gained by faculty sharing insights and practice wisdom that are derived from experience in the classroom. Such sharing needs to be done in a pre-planned organized manner.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Several dynamics and activities in the literature, identified earlier in the manuscript, can provide guidance and application to teaching diversity content. The following areas are discussed in relation to their application to the types of skills that may be required for the teaching of this unique material and for managing emotionally charged incidents.

Affective and Communication Skills; Conveying Enthusiasm for Teaching and Learning. Reaching students through constructive use of affect and communication skills places increased responsibility on faculty to be aware of their own emotional life and to have a high degree of skill in communicating sensitive content. In the midst of class interaction on diversity issues, faculty are often required to respond to students’ feelings as well as communicate their own immediate feelings. Oftentimes the biggest challenge in these situa-

tions is being able to connect intense or sensitive affect with course concepts in order to achieve the “teachable moment.” While the goal is to maintain focus on course objectives, there are occasions when faculty must utilize basic interpersonal communication skills to facilitate student processing, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and conveying warmth and concern.

Faculty can generate enthusiasm by creatively sharing about their own history of exploration related to their experience with oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism), the insights derived from those reflections, and how their social identity has affected their life experiences. This involves demonstrating and modeling for the class through sharing insights gained about the ways they have been affected, and how they have processed and worked with that awareness. As Schwartz (1980) proposed, faculty must model appreciation for diversity, a willingness to express their views, and a determination to not succumb to intimidation about sharing genuine feelings. The results of this study suggest that the professor’s own social identity may influence their responsiveness to student struggles with diversity content. By understanding their personal experience and struggle with issues of diversity and oppression, professors are in a position to use themselves with more confidence in classroom interactions.

Awareness of Student Risk Level and Cognitive Styles. Some faculty in the current study seemed to understand the need to be prepared to provide a sequence of activities that create a safe environment (i.e., one characterized by mutual respect) and an ability to adapt their response so as to progressively engage the class in mutual risk taking. Perhaps what is difficult for many faculty, particularly in the midst of a strained interaction, is to find ways to focus on individual student needs while equally engaging in the process of developing the class as a group. By recognizing the central role of affect in learning about diversity and oppression, faculty can design activities that address the changing levels of comfort in risk taking as they evolve for students. For example, course activities can be designed to engage students initially in safe topics where they feel some distance from the topic and progressively move into discussions and activities that focus on more personal and strongly felt feelings. Initial safe topics may deal with identifying stereotypes and values that they hold as well as “messages” that they grew up with in their families. Sensitive topics that can trigger strong emotions deal in the realm of taking responsibility for what has been internalized and with how this has been handled.

The current study suggests that the social identity of faculty may influence responsiveness to critical racial events, and it is important that faculty be aware of how their life experiences influence their own learning processes related to diversity and oppression. Similarly, faculty awareness of student beliefs and worldviews can help provide some direction for making course

content directly relevant to student experience. In addition, understanding diverse learning styles and needs is important. Faculty awareness of diverse learning modes can provide guidance for utilizing learning activities that are relevant to the various ways in which students learn. Studies have been identified at every educational level that demonstrate how students learn more easily and remember better when they are taught through their preferred learning style (e.g., visual, experiential, auditory) (Dunn & Griggs, 1988). This suggests that all class sessions should include a variety of classroom activities that integrate opportunities for students to learn through different media (i.e., preferences) that include listening to lectures and taking notes, and other more interactive modes such as small group or class discussions, role plays, or videos. A study of graduate and undergraduate social work students revealed that the strongly preferred learning style for social workers may be learning through concrete experience that includes sensing, feeling, and active experimentation (Van Soest & Kruzich, 1994). It thus would appear that many social work students may learn best through active engagement strategies related to diversity issues. Faculty can model such active engagement through sharing of their personal experiences with diversity and oppression and thoughts and feelings related to their own social identity development process.

Modeling Concepts and Values; Communicating Accessibility. Whether issues are verbalized or not, communication about them is always present. Response options to the vignettes used in this study were intended to point to the harm that can be done even when a position of neutrality or distracting through the use of humor are responses to a difficult classroom issue. Thus, faculty must develop comfort with discussing issues related to diversity in order to demonstrate how to place perspective on heated and strained interaction. Professors can model where and how to operationalize and apply course concepts by being clear about their position on issues and by applying diversity concepts to their teaching practice. In the midst of class interaction on diversity, faculty need to feel free to share their impressions and insights and yet maintain focus on the learning needs of the students.

Emotional accessibility of faculty can also be conveyed through availability for informal conversations. The authors suggest that faculty need to develop more comfort in stepping out of the role of remote professor and reach out to students, while still maintaining clarity regarding the unique responsibilities of both professor and student.

Learning as Partnership and Joint Problem Solving. Learning about diversity is a mutual exploration process that uses student and faculty experience as a primary impetus for growth and change. The challenge for faculty is to trust the students and the process, even during those moments of strained interaction and intense conflict. Significant pedagogical dynamics regarding

the centrality of student experience in the learning process have been discussed by Freire (1973) and Knowles (1973). Both help to inform faculty about ways to respond to critical classroom events and, in fact, emphasize the importance of responding directly. Freire (1973) emphasized the necessity of integrating students' day to day life experiences, because of the powerful emotional response that can be utilized in the interest of learning and change, particularly as it involves issues of oppression and liberation. While painful and uncomfortable at times for a class, professors can "stay with" the process in order to help students move through the distress to a deeper understanding. Knowles (1973) used the concept of adult learners to emphasize the importance of utilizing the greater awareness that mature students have regarding their learning needs. The capacity for self direction and intensified need for learning are tremendous resources for faculty to utilize. From this perspective, faculty become a "helper, guide, encourager, consultant and resource" so that students can learn to formulate questions and find their own answers (Knowles, 1975, p. 34).

Self-Evaluation. When perceived by students as required and unwanted socialization, diversity content often produces anger and resentment. Even when the opportunity to learn diversity content is welcomed, the process often proves to be more difficult and painful than expected. Faculty need support as they also engage in a growth process that may challenge their teaching philosophy and skills. Several methods have been developed that can be invaluable for systematic examination and enhancement of one's teaching: examining verbal and nonverbal communication (Flanders, 1970), contrasting methods of teaching (Dolon, Blakely & Hendricks, 1988), and using peer consultation (Heppner & Johnston, 1994). Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of various learning domains (i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) have tremendous utility for the analysis and modification of one's teaching methods. Whenever possible, collegial support in the self-evaluation process is recommended. Peer support is particularly important for processing and dealing with difficult classroom interactions. Faculty members who teach cultural diversity content could gain considerable support and develop the skill of transforming difficult classroom events into teachable moments through engaging with each other in critical incident debriefing processes (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study reported in this article addressed issues related to faculty response to critical classroom incidents related to race and the importance of faculty being sensitive to issues of racism in order to effectively handle such incidents. The study was based on an assumption that there are

faculty stressors in the classroom whenever issues of diversity, oppression, and difference trigger student conflict and strained classroom interaction. The profound professional and personal demands placed on faculty as they engage in a decision-making process about how to respond to such classroom stress should not be underestimated. Special attention to the unique challenges of teaching diversity content is required if social work education is to effectively prepare students for culturally competent practice that of necessity requires advocacy for social justice in order to eliminate societal oppression.

Teaching diversity content with an emphasis on institutionalized oppression and privilege often propels students onto a journey characterized by considerable anguish as they struggle with issues related to social injustice. Learning about oppression when one had previously experienced the world as a just place (Van Soest, 1996) or re-experiencing the pain of being treated differently based on one's social identity can be depressing, infuriating, and immobilizing. Both students and faculty need support and hope in order to engage in the process and persevere and succeed on the journey.

Learning about cultural diversity and oppression is a discovery process for students that requires faculty to model risk taking and to subject their own work to scrutiny (Webb & Phillips, 1985). Learning about diversity has cognitive and socioemotional aspects (Dunkins, 1986) and addresses feelings students have regarding dealing with new ideas (Brookfield, 1990). It is particularly essential that class activities be structured to encourage joint problem solving with an emphasis on mutuality and application of course concepts to practice (Gitterman, 1991).

Teaching diversity content requires substantial personal and professional insight, risk taking, communication, and process skills on the part of faculty. It is no small task that faculty, in addition to being prepared to teach core curriculum, will increasingly need to develop skills for adapting to diverse classrooms and responding to diverse content that spontaneously emerges in the classroom. Teaching and learning about cultural diversity integrated with issues of societal oppression is a hot topic and critical classroom incidents are inevitable. Faculty can be supported by engaging in practices such as critical incident debriefing processes with other faculty, self-assessment of their own sensitivity to diverse populations and related oppressions, and development of unique skills to meet the multiple demands.

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