

From the Beginning: Creating a Diversity and Multicultural Education Course at Jacksonville State University

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Abstract

In the fall of 2015, a new secondary education class, Diversity and Multicultural Education, was introduced at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama, USA. Although many multicultural theorists emphasize the importance of students taking diversity/multicultural education courses in college, there is no real model for creating such a class. This article creates a framework for how to conceptualize and teach a diversity and multicultural education course at the university level. It discusses the creation of the class through a critical pedagogy framework, the units which comprise the course, and the connection to current events. The article also includes student reflections about personal growth due to taking the new course, as well as personal reflections from the author.

Keywords

higher education, social justice, diversity, multiculturalism

Introduction

When I was offered an assistant professor position at Jacksonville State University (JSU in Jacksonville, Alabama, USA, I was unaware of which

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courses I was going to teach. I was hired for a position in the secondary education department, specifically focusing on English/Language Arts (ELA), and I was working on the assumption that my course load would pertain only to that specific content area. After I relocated to northern Alabama, I was surprised to learn that, in just a few weeks, I was going to be teaching the first ever Diversity and Multicultural Education (DME) class in the secondary education department. Being a firm believer and practitioner of critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, and social justice, I was incredibly excited to build such a course. Unfortunately, that was when the fear set in.

There is no textbook manual for creating a university-level class focusing on diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice. While some theorists address the importance of DME in prominent texts (e.g., Sonia Nieto's *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* and Banks & Banks's *Multicultural education: Issues and Perspectives*), what to cover specifically in a DME course is not often approached; in other words, it is rare to find any curricular resources provided in a given text or journal article.¹ While some may feel that it is difficult, if not impossible, to lay out a DME class in a "how-to" manner, for new DME university instructors like myself, I would have greatly appreciated a basic framework to begin with. Therefore, in the following pages, this article is going to explain how I created an engaging and thought-provoking DME curriculum that challenged students' personal beliefs and understanding of the world around them. It will also discuss the expectations of the students taking the DME class as well as the curriculum covered in the course. This article will present student feedback from the class, which explains how their personal belief systems were challenged during our time together and affected their view of the world around them as they were about to embark on their own teaching careers, many in urban settings.

Importance of Multicultural Education

Even though there are increasing numbers of students of color in U.S. schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015), many classroom teachers continue to use a superficial and ineffective approach to multicultural education by simply focusing on popular holidays and particular "heroes" of specific racial and ethnic groups (Haynes Writer & Baptiste, 2009; Rios, Trent, & Vega Castañeda, 2003). Research has shown that a high-quality multicultural education program has positive benefits, such as engaging students of color, increasing academic achievement, and reducing dropout rates (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012; Dee & Penner, 2017). Although the theory of multicultural education is quite complex and does not just have one, agreed-upon definition

(Haynes Writer & Baptiste, 2009), multicultural theorists James A. Banks and Cherry McGee Banks (1995) define multicultural education as

a field of study and an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. One of its important goals is to help all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good. (p. xi)

Ultimately, teaching diversity and multiculturalism in our schools means including all races and cultures into the classroom discussion (Hinton & Berry, 2004) in a way in which one culture is never privileged over another (Woods, 2009). In addition, multicultural education attempts to deconstruct the current stratified system in the United States, which privileges those being White (J. E. King, 1991).

In schools around the globe, “beginning to speak about race can open up avenues of possibility for speaking about other forms of marginalization and oppression” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 251). Therefore, it is vital that each student’s experience be addressed in the classroom. In U.S. society today, patterns of disadvantage are so deeply ingrained in people’s everyday lives that they are often not even recognizable anymore; this is especially true for those particular groups who benefit the most from those patterns (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). Teaching multiculturalism addresses how “different groups’ social and cultural ways of knowing have been disaffirmed, misunderstood, and/or devalued in the classroom context while male, upper-class, and Eurocentric ways have been affirmed” (Carter, 2007, p. 353). Teaching a multicultural curriculum has such importance because it helps students become aware of the power relations in the United States (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010) as well as the consequential advantages and disadvantages certain groups have just because of their race, nationality, religion, gender, or physical ability.

Theoretical Perspective

The DME class at JSU was created and presented through a lens of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has many different definitions depending on which theorist you consult. That being said, I align with Peter McLaren (2003), in that “critical pedagogy is a politics of understanding and action, an act of knowing that attempts to situate everyday life in a larger geo-political context” (p. 7) with the objectives of “[empowering] the powerless and [transforming] existing social inequalities and injustices” (p. 186). Critical

pedagogy is an important tool to view the world of education, in particular, to explore the relationship between education (knowledge) and power in society (Darder, Mayo, & Paraskeva, 2016; Macrine, 2009; Mayo, 2015). According to Darder et al. (2016), critical pedagogy is “uncompromisingly committed to the amelioration of inequalities and social exclusions in the classroom and society at large” (p. 1). The DME class was positioned in critical pedagogy with the hopes that students in the course, as future secondary educators, would help empower their own students to fight for social justice. Malott and Ford (2015) have asserted that “critical pedagogy, at its best, challenges students to become conscious of their own consciousness as part of the process of self-transformation” (p. 21). Thus, through education, future teachers can assist youth to learn how to question their own thought processes as well as iniquities in all areas of life to fight racial, ethnic, sexual, classist, and gendered issues as adults.

Positionality

DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009) have posited that “the call for positionality is an assertion that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and ascribed social positions” (p. 446). It was essential that, as a professor of a DME course, I was able to position myself within the local community and university to see any potential biases I might have had to create and present this new course. In brief, I am a White, Jewish, heterosexual male in his early 40s, and due to my religious background and Polish-Russian descent, my racial/ethnic background is quite different from many of my students at JSU (e.g., Evangelical, Black). Before coming to JSU, I was a K-12 classroom teacher for 17 years, in both the western and southwest regions of the United States. As the professor of the DME course, I was acutely aware of my status in U.S. society due to my gender, race, class, and primary language (English). I created the DME course with this understanding in mind.

Jacksonville State University

Jacksonville State University (JSU) is a public university located in the small city of Jacksonville (population 12,548) in northeast Alabama. The most recent statistics showed that JSU had a total enrollment of 8,314 students, with 71% White, 22% Black, 1% Asian, 1% Latino/a, and less than 1% American Indian and Native Hawaiian. Overall, in fall 2015, 2,436 (29%) of those attending JSU were enrolled in the School of Education, where the Department of Secondary Education is housed.

The DME course was offered for the first time to preservice teachers in the teacher education program (TEP) during the fall semester of 2015. The students were from all academic disciplines; specifically, ELA, social studies, math, science, and foreign language. A majority of the 24 students in the class (21 White, 2 Latina/Latino, 1 Black) began their practicum work in local middle and high schools in the region during the same semester as their enrollment in the DME course. Therefore, the students were taking DME at the same time that they were having their first teaching experiences in the public schools.

The Curriculum

According to Malott and Ford (2015), “Racism and white supremacy are not surface features of U.S. society; they are structural features that are engrained materially and ideologically” (p. 118). Due to the deeply ingrained racist roots which run through this nation’s past and present, I wanted the DME class to confront and challenge the issues of race, class, and ethnicity in U.S. society and not just celebrate a “look how far we’ve come” perspective. Therefore, to decide upon which areas to cover in the DME course, I reflected upon my past readings of texts by some of the leaders in the fields of multicultural education and critical pedagogy (i.e., Antonia Darder, Christine Sleeter, James Banks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Robin DiAngelo, and the list goes on and on), and I began to identify specific focus areas that I thought needed to be included in the course (e.g., White privilege, heteronormativity, the school-to-prison pipeline). Then, based on issues addressed by these eminent theorists in their vast bodies of work, I began to research more recent articles for modern perspectives and scenarios. Therefore, in line with Amy Sueyoshi (2013) and her creation of a class on Whiteness at San Francisco State University, I felt it important to “link class materials to contemporary issues” (p. 380). In my syllabus, I introduced current YouTube videos as well as recent documentaries to relate the actions of the past to social justice concerns of the present (see Table 1). In addition, I also asked the students to bring current news articles to each class session. That way, we could connect current events to our weekly conversations, just like those they will likely have with their own students someday. I think that these discussions were essential to students’ learning about issues of social justice. Unfortunately, there were more than enough examples of injustice during the semester to relate to our current readings, for example, the cell phone video of a Black South Carolina student’s violent arrest in class for not working (Aarthun & Yan, 2015).

I divided the DME course into 10 mini-units. These units, and their accompanying themes, were in no way static; the issues were fluid and would often

Table 1. Course Content.

Unit 1—What is Multicultural Education?

Title of Text

1. *Multicultural Education*^a Chapters 1-2
2. *Is Everyone Really Equal*^b Chapter 1
3. Hackman (2005), “Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education”

Unit 2—Are We a Post-Racial Society?

Title of Text

1. *Is Everyone Really Equal* Chapters 3 and 5
2. Warde (2014) “Why Race Still Matters 50 Years After the Enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act”
3. Niehuis (2005), “Helping Students Explore White Privilege Outside the Classroom”
4. Allen (2004), “Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy”

Unit 3—Blacks and the Media/Society

Title of Text

1. *Is Everyone Really Equal* Chapters 7-8
2. King (2015) “The ‘Knockout Game’: Moral Panic and the Politics of White Victimhood”
3. Watch “White Riots vs Black Protests” on YouTube (in class; Brave New Films, 2015)
4. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal?”

Unit 4—Blacks and Representation in Schools

Title of Text

1. *Multicultural Education* Chapter 11
2. Ladson-Billings (2011), “Boyz to Men”
3. Hinton and Berry (2004), “Literacy, Literature, and Diversity”
4. Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, and Marshall (2014), “The Role of Race in the Out-of-School Suspensions of Black Students”

Unit 5—Latinas/Latinos in Our Schools

Title of Text

1. Cooper (2013), “Safe, Affirming, and Productive Spaces: Classroom Engagement Among Latina High School Students”
2. Gándara (2015), “With the Future on the Line: Why Studying Latino Education Is So Urgent”
3. Journell and Castro (2011) “Culturally Relevant Political Education”
4. Watch *Precious Knowledge* (in class; Palos, 2012)
5. Watch “Tucson’s Mexican-American Studies Ban” (in class; Paone & Shroff, 2012)

Unit 6—What’s Wrong With the “Washington Redskins”?

Title of Text

1. Quijada Cerecer (2013), “The Policing of Native Bodies and Minds”
2. Shear, Knowles, Soden, and Castro (2015), “Manifesting Destiny”
3. Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone (2008), “Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses”
4. Sanburn (2015), “California ‘Redskins’ Ban a Rare Statewide Win for Movement”

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Unit 7—Issues Regarding “Model Minorities”

Title of Text

1. Wong and Halgin (2006), “The ‘Model Minority’: Bane or Blessing for Asian Americans?”
2. Rubin (2013), “Still Wandering”

Unit 8—GLBTQ Students in our Schools

Title of Text

1. *Multicultural Education* Chapter 9
2. Thornton (2003), “Silence on Gays and Lesbians in Social Studies Curriculum”
3. Robinson and Espelage (2011), “Iniquities in Educational and Psychological Outcomes”

Unit 9—Students With Learning Disabilities

Title of Text

1. *Multicultural Education* Chapters 13-14

Unit 10—So, What Now?

Title of Text

1. *Is Everyone Really Equal* Chapter 10

^aBanks and Banks (2012).

^bSensoy and DiAngelo (2012).

be brought up in their relation to another group and/or situation. For example, the class began the semester by discussing what multiculturalism is as well as defining social justice and critical thinking (see Table 1). These concepts were then brought back several weeks later to discuss education today and preservice teachers’ futures in the classroom. The main units were as follows: White privilege, Blacks in the media, Blacks in schools, Latinas and Latinos in education, issues affecting Native Americans, the “model minorities,” gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) issues in school and society, and students with physical and intellectual disabilities. I decided to focus on Blacks over several units (as compared with other minority groups) due to the fact that Blacks comprise 27% of the state’s population, while Latinas/Latinos are relatively small at only 4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In other words, I wanted to give due diligence to the largest minority group in the state. For instructors of a DME course, this aspect of the curriculum can easily be altered based on the region of the country and student demographics.

Course Units

I began the first DME class session with an overview of multicultural education and social justice (see Table 1). We discussed three chapters from our foundational texts, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* by Banks and Banks (2012) and *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to*

Key Concepts in Social Justice Education by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012). These two texts introduce key issues in DME quite clearly and thoroughly and, as such, were chosen for the foundation of student learning in the course. In Chapters 1 and 2 of *Multicultural Education*, several key concepts are discussed, such as the “hidden curriculum” in schools, “cultural capital,” “cultural deficit models,” and “funds of knowledge.” In the first chapter of *Is Everyone Really Equal?* several ideas are explored: critical thinking, the myth of education being neutral, critical theory, and how discrimination often eludes one’s conscious awareness. The class also discussed what social justice education is and how it can be used effectively in the classroom.

In the second unit, we focused on why race is still a salient aspect of American society. The two chapters in *Is Everyone Really Equal?* explain the concepts of prejudice, stereotypes and the media, discrimination, and dominant group privilege. To me, the most important aspect of the text is the notion that all people have prejudices and discriminate, especially those of the dominant group (Whites). The concepts of Whiteness and White privilege were also discussed simultaneously via course readings. According to Bruner (2008), “Privilege is often invisible to those that possess it” (p. 487), and for many of the students in the course, this was difficult to grasp. Many students had a difficult time seeing how being White offered them any kind of benefits in society, thereby limiting the benefits for others. This particular unit was, by far, the most tense and hotly debated class session of the semester. To say the least, “exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often [create] chaos and confusion” (hooks, 1994, p. 30). This type of work can be messy, and I was fortunate that the students did not shut down, dig in their heels, and refuse to move forward with open minds.

Unit 3 focused on Blacks and their negative portrayal in the national media (see Table 1). In the two chapters of *Is Everyone Really Equal?* issues of racism, racial disparity, White supremacy, and “stereotype threat” were covered. We discussed the media and how it is skewed against Blacks in this country by viewing a YouTube clip titled “White Riots vs Black Protests” (Brave New Films, 2015). It is a short, but powerful, video that shows how mass media treats White rioters much more positively than Black protesters, even though they exhibit the exact same behaviors (in reality, the behavior of Black protesters is often better). During this unit, the class also explored unconscious racial discrimination against Black people in hiring practices.

The next unit (Unit 4) focused on the lack of representation of Black people in school curriculum. In Chapter 11 of *Multicultural Education*, the concepts of “backstage” and “frontstage” racism² were explained as was the notion of “microaggressions.” The course readings also addressed how the absence of Black representation in curriculum content affects all students

negatively. The purpose of this unit was to address the vital importance of representation in the secondary classroom, and how this was applicable across all content areas. The class also discussed how people of color could begin to be represented more thoroughly in other content areas and why this is so important to Black youth, in particular. We also investigated the idea of the school-to-prison pipeline and how it greatly affects Black students (and all students of color) in U.S. schools.

In Unit 5, the class discussed the various issues affecting Latinas/Latinos in American schools today. We covered which types of class settings facilitate more successful academic/social experiences for Latina/Latino youth. We also discussed the importance of Mexican American studies (MAS) at the secondary level. We then watched a documentary, *Precious Knowledge*, to gain a further understanding of the importance of MAS and the conflict in Arizona over such programs. This was followed up by a clip from *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, which showed how school board members came to their decision to eliminate the MAS program in Tucson, Arizona in 2010.

In the next unit, we addressed the lack of accurate portrayal of Indigenous peoples in classroom content, specifically, social studies curriculum. The class identified the aggressions and microaggressions that Native American students endure on a daily basis in schools across the U.S. We also explored how the use of Native American mascots in high school and professional sports teams negatively affects the self-esteem of Indigenous youth. Not only was the term *Redskins* discussed but, rather, all sports teams with Native American names (e.g., Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks); therefore, we questioned whether it was appropriate for any teams to use Indigenous peoples' names or cultural representations for their own benefit.

In Unit 7, we discussed the concept of the “model Minority” and how this, despite its positive perception, is harmful to both Asian and Jewish Americans. In this unit, we covered how the stereotype of the brilliant Asian American math student not only is false but also puts unhealthy pressure upon Asian youth in school (i.e., stereotype threat). The class also explored anti-Semitism, the lack of representation of Jewish people in multicultural class discussions, and why this lack of representation needs to be remedied at the university level.

The next unit addressed GLBTQ students and the difficult challenges they face in school and society. Chapter 9 of *Multicultural Education* covers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues in school curriculum, curricular inclusiveness (or lack thereof), homophobia, and harassment in school. Through additional readings, the class also engaged in discussion about the physical and psychological threats GLBTQ students face on a consistent basis in school, from teachers, administrators, and peers. Suicide

attempts and feelings of uncomfortableness in school were also addressed. In this session, the class also explored the issue of heteronormativity and how all academic curriculums are presented through this lens. Specifically, the lack of GLBTQ historical figures presented in the social studies classroom, and how to one day change this as future educators, was also covered.

The next unit, Unit 9, focused on students with physical and learning disabilities and the challenges they face in U.S. schools. Chapters 13 and 14 in *Multicultural Education* explained the different categories of students with disabilities, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), effective classroom instruction for students with disabilities, inclusion/exclusion of students with disabilities, and inclusive pedagogies. The class explored the legal protections of students with learning disabilities (e.g., IDEA) and their importance for all students. We also discussed various methods and techniques to help support students with learning disabilities in U.S. classrooms to become successful, both academically and socially.

In the final unit, the class discussed what comes next for them as future educators; in other words, we reflected upon what they intend to do with the knowledge they gained from the DME course. In *Is Everyone Really Equal?* we explored how to put critical social justice into action and how developing a social justice perspective is a constant, ongoing process. The students reflected upon the entire course and talked about what they will take with them as they get closer to becoming teachers in the classroom. Finally, as a classroom activity, I divided the students into groups of three to four and gave each group a different scenario, such as “You are explaining the requirements for the class research paper for this semester. Amid the moaning and groaning, a student blurts out, ‘That’s so retarded.’ How do you respond to this?” and “You are standing in the hall, right in front of your classroom, during the passing period. Suddenly, you hear a male student (who you don’t know) call another male student a ‘fag’ (whom you do know). How do you respond to this?” My intent was to have the students contemplate what they had learned over the course of the semester and apply that knowledge to realistic, potential classroom situations. I will now explain how I assessed learning in the DME course.

Initial Student Hopes and Beliefs

During our first evening class session, I requested that the students write down, on index cards, what they hoped to gain from this class (beside the fact that the course was now a graduation requirement for the secondary education department). I received many different responses, with some focusing on

their future teaching in the classroom and others focusing on larger, societal issues. For example, a student mentioned that she hoped to “learn how to teach to not just one group of people but to everyone.” I assume that she was referring to focusing curriculum on other groups of students rather than just the White majority. I appreciated how a student hoped to “gain a better understanding of how to teach a diverse group of students while truly understanding their culture and what they may be going through” while another student was concerned with “how to interact with a diverse classroom in a way that engages everyone equally.” It was my intent to delve into various racial/ethnic/religious/socioeconomic issues and provide detailed information as to how various groups of students are represented in the modern-day classroom. That being said, I was not certain that I would be able to specifically answer all of the students’ questions by the end of the semester. As I mentioned to the class many times throughout the course, I was going to introduce a great deal of material in DME, but how they were going to use that information to directly influence their own teaching practice was up to them—that I could not tell them specifically what to do. In the course, we discussed a wide variety of pedagogical (e.g., representation of all students in the curriculum) and multicultural concepts (e.g., the notion of “Whiteness”). Even though my academic focus at JSU was ELA, I introduced material which spanned across content areas (see Table 1). While I did incorporate content material from other academic subjects, it would be up to the individual students to meld what they learned in the course and apply to their own specific content areas.

At the beginning of the semester, some students had large, societal questions they hoped to have answered during the course. For example, the Black student in the class asked, “How can African Americans as a whole better themselves and be seen in a better light socially?” Another student asked, “Why do we still treat people differently (race-to-race)?” While these were huge questions to tackle, I believe that the curriculum was able to address their complex questions in various ways.

As the DME course began, it was interesting to note how religion immediately became a topic of interest. In particular, while discussing which specific groups of people were seen positively in society (e.g., heterosexuals, Whites, males) and negatively (e.g., gays, people of color), several students spoke out about feeling persecuted as Christians. Two White males, in particular, explained how Christians were a persecuted group in this country. They felt that they could not often share their opinions about particular contentious issues, such as gay marriage, due to others’ unfounded beliefs that they, as Christians, would be intolerant to such ideas. Due to an overwhelming majority of State residents identifying as Evangelical Protestant (pew.org; Pew Research Center, 2015),

being confronted with this idea was not a huge surprise for me. With some discussion, I tried to explain to the class how the majority of Americans in the United States are Christian and, therefore, have a great deal of power (e.g., schools have days off for all major Christian holidays while other faiths do not). In addition, on the first night of class, after mentioning my Jewish religious background, a student told me proudly that meeting a Jewish person was on her “bucket list.” I am still not sure how to best respond to that type of microaggression, due to its odd inappropriateness, but I was glad I could fulfill that dream for her. As there was a branch of the Ku Klux Klan located in the city bordering Jacksonville, not to mention 17 other separate chapters of skinheads, neo-confederates, neo-Nazis, and White Nationalists in the state of Alabama at the time (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014), it was important for the students to be able to identify with those who believe differently than they do while being aware of the dangers right outside their doors.

Assessments

I based student grades on four different areas: active class participation, text reflections/analyses, a culminating reflection paper, and a research paper and presentation. According to Bruner (2008), “Self-reflection is the first step in problem-solving” (p. 486). Therefore, for the students in the course to become more aware of their own biases and predispositions, they needed to reflect. Then, they could act upon their new-found personal understandings. Banks (1992) asserted,

Students who are born and socialized within the mainstream culture of a society rarely have an opportunity to identify, question, and challenge their cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives because the school culture usually reinforces those that they learn at home and in their communities. (p. 35)

Hence, I wanted to provide my students with several opportunities to challenge their personal beliefs, most of which they probably never even considered before. Students wrote reflection papers based on given prompts: (a) Are we “past” race in this country? (b) What are the major issues facing Blacks in our schools? (c) Should the Redskins³ change their name? and (d) What are your issues/concerns with covering GLBTQ texts, themes, and so on in class? I deliberately made the prompts open-ended so that the students could explore whichever tangents they felt like. Although most of the students stated that they initially felt uncomfortable having more open-ended prompts, I think that this facilitated their growth in critical thinking.

For each student to reflect upon where they were situated before the class began, where they found themselves at the end of the course, and where they saw themselves in the future, I assigned what I called the culminating reflection paper. According to Gay and Howard (2000),

Part of this self-examination is unpacking their own ethnicity and understanding themselves as racial and cultural beings. Central to this process is knowing and admitting that racism permeates schools and society, recognizing the benefits they derive from it, and making a conscientious commitment to stop its perpetuation. (p. 5)

It was my hope that the students would be able to identify their own biases before coming into this course and begin to contemplate how they might make changes, for both themselves and their future students, to help eliminate societal injustice.

For the students to further delve into a DME topic or theorist that interested them, they completed a seven to 10 page research paper and class presentation. This research topic was chosen by the student with instructor approval. While most students addressed issues which were of interest to them (e.g., the school-to-prison pipeline), a few students chose to focus on theorists in the field of DME (e.g., Sonia Nieto).

Student Feedback

According to Michael Apple (1999), “Education is a site of struggle and compromise,” and for most, if not all, of my students, there was a great deal of personal questioning throughout the semester. This was quite evident to me when I read the students’ culminating reflection papers at the conclusion of the course.

As mentioned previously, at the start of the class, there were several students who felt that they were being persecuted because of their Christian faith. Upon reflection, one of those students stated that, “I tried to make an argument [that Christians were persecuted in this country] and that being a middle class White male was a bad thing . . . but that first day I got slapped across the face with a wakeup call.” He then went on to say, “That first class cleared the shroud that was hanging over me and it made me realize that everything I thought I knew was wrong.”

One of my goals was to help open my students’ eyes to the realities of oppression and discrimination based on race, class, and gender in the United States. One student reported, “I once viewed American society as one that allows anyone who works hard to succeed, but I now see it as a façade set up

by the dominating majority to covertly repress minorities.” The idea of seeing the world for what it really is was another prominent theme which emerged from the students’ reflections. According to DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010), “critical multicultural teaching requires the ability to consider multiple and constantly shifting factors . . . You need a basic understanding of how power relations work in society, and your own position in the matrix of these relations” (p. 98). In that same vein, one student stated,

What this class has done for me is it made me realize the rose colored glasses that I had been wearing. I knew minorities had a rough life, but I always believed it was due to their own behavior, not because this world is harder on minorities. I also realize that even though I didn’t mean to, I had contributed to the prejudice and stereotypical views of minorities my entire life.

Another student came to the realization that “‘Backstage’ racism was not only occurring, it seemed to be thriving in [his] hometown, and [he] was oblivious.” It is essential that students become aware of their own behaviors, as well as those in their communities, to become more equitable and socially just educators.

Many students became aware of their own biases and prejudices during the course of the semester. This was evident when a student asserted,

Although I saw minorities being oppressed on my social media newsfeed, television news, and even heard it on the radio, I simply dismissed it, because I, a White American, have never had to personally deal with someone discriminating against me. I only thought about what was important to my success and what was going to affect me every day.

It was my hope that the students would begin to see how we, as Americans, must all be involved in the battle for social justice for there to be significant social change. If we do not all work together to better society, then we are complicit in its failure.

As future educators, several students commented on their need to embrace all of their students in the classroom. One student affirmed how the class

helped me realize that if I don’t first take the time to understand and know my students, then I may not be able to effectively mentor them. In order for me to understand my students, I must first place into context who I am and what role my race plays in society.

As most teachers in this country are White and female (Feistritzer, 2011), it is essential that future teachers be able to identify with their students of color and understand the challenges they face on a daily basis.

According to DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010), “Developing a critical multicultural perspective is a lifetime of work and is not completed midway through a course” (p. 102). This idea was reflected by one of the students when she stated that, “I realize this one class is just the beginning of the change of my view of diversity and multicultural education and that I still have a great deal to learn.” I would add here that we all, as critical thinkers, have a great deal to learn from one another. This process of understanding is certainly a difficult one, and I hope that the DME class provided the basic tools to begin the journey.

Personal Reflections

Although the DME class was rather challenging for several students, I felt that the class was a success, overall. My course evaluations were a mixed bag—some appeared to enjoy the course and learn a great deal while others really disliked me and my presentation style. Interestingly enough, no one actually commented directly on the course content, but rather some students called me “opinionated” and a “dictator” in the classroom. While hurtful initially, poor teacher evaluations are not uncommon when a DME course such as this challenges students and pushes them outside of their comfort zone (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Wood, 2009). It is essential to continue to present the students with information and situations that make them uncomfortable. I consider negative evaluations in this type of course as something to expect, and honestly, a badge of honor.

Upon reflection, I realized that there were ideas and concepts that I would like to introduce the next time DME is offered. For example, due to recent events involving terrorist attacks and perceived terrorist threats in both the United States and abroad, I feel it is important to incorporate issues regarding discrimination against Muslims in the United States, which is currently lacking in the DME curriculum. I had introduced antisemitism and the lack of Jewish presence in multicultural discussions, yet I had neglected to include Muslims and their plight for equity. In addition, I think it would be of benefit to my students to discuss the notion of Christian privilege while discussing antisemitism, Jews, and Muslims (and all other faiths or lack thereof).

It is important to discuss how Christian privilege affects people of various faiths, particularly as most of my students live and intend to teach in the southeast region of the United States.

Becoming a critical multicultural thinker does not just occur over the course of one semester (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010). Ultimately, the best that I can hope for is that the students, due to being challenged in the DME course, are now beginning a journey of critical and multicultural thought that will last

them the rest of their lives. And just like my students, I must also continue to reflect upon my own ideas and attitudes in the coming years to grow as both a professor and multicultural educator.

Conclusion

Although this article presents a basic “prescription or a recipe” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. x) for teaching a DME course at the university level, it is only intended as a starting point. I, in no way, feel that this class is the end-all-to-be-all in DME courses. Not only would that be arrogant, but it would be ignorant as well. The intent of this piece was to help future DME instructors by providing a baseline to create their own engaging and challenging courses, again, to provide something that I wish I had had while creating my own DME course. In teacher education programs, the ultimate goal for such a class is to prepare future educators to better engage with all students, especially students of color in urban settings.

Dunn, Dotson, Ford, and Roberts (2014) have asserted that “it is crucial that, as professors of multicultural education, we continue to push against the status quo. For us, this means that we have the responsibility to teach our students about power, privilege, and hegemony” (p. 98). We not only have the responsibility to challenge the status quo for our students, but for ourselves as well. By creating a DME course, professors can continue to challenge power structures in society and help prepare future teachers to work with their students (both of color and white) in ways to help break the cycle of prejudice and racism that exists in the United States today. By creating a curriculum that challenges students to question their own long-held beliefs about race, gender, religion, ability, and class, I attempted to provide an opportunity for growth. Ultimately, it was my goal that the students in the course would begin to “understand, embody, and become advocates for social justice and, in turn, transfer this perspective to their students as a way of understanding and improving society” (Rios, Trent, & Vega Castañeda, 2003, p. 6). Only time will tell if the students in the new DME course are able to transfer their knowledge to a new generation of America’s youth, for the betterment of all.

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Notes

1. In the article by Dunn, Dotson, Ford, and Roberts (2014), the reader is directed to visit a website to view the authors' collection of supplementary materials.
2. When members of a racial group act differently toward a nongroup member in their presence than when alone.
3. The Washington Redskins of the National Football League.

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