Using Student Evaluations of (Dis)Engagement as a Critical Reflection Tool to Improve Practice in Developing Diversity Courses

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Abstract

Student evaluations allow students the unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of instruction and the relevance of curriculum in their coursework. However, teacher educators often do not welcome nor value the feedback of their students. This self-study investigated the importance of student evaluations for a novice professor engaged in individual as well as collaborative critical reflection with other junior faculty across the US and Canada. The group utilized online reflective journaling and shared student evaluation forms in an effort to foster discussion about student reactions to and feedback about curricular choices, instructional methods, and instructor responsiveness. This particular piece focuses primarily on student (dis)engagement with curriculum and instruction in newly developed diversity courses.

Introduction and Context

As a new teacher educator, I was invited to join group of novice professors engaged in self-study of their practice. The four of us, as novice teacher educators, committed to keeping reflective journals and sharing our entries with one another and, eventually, with our students. Our goal was to establish a mutually self-disclosing context, free to ask and answer questions, to discuss our practice, and probe for deeper understanding of complex issues. Journal keeping over time allowed us to look at our evolving educational practices, the "self in action" (Elliott, 1989), to monitor our professional growth. We also view students as research partners as we sought their voices to improve our practice through informal discussions and formal evaluations. In this, our third year, we have decided to disaggregate our data, opting to take divergent paths and examine topics that have personal meaning for us, choosing the research goals that might best guide our continued efforts to improve our individual practice.

As a novice teacher educator in a geographic location that is experiencing swift demographic changes, my personal topic for examination relates to issues of diversity in my courses. In an attempt to address the recent changes, I was asked in my first semester to develop and teach a course on diversity in education. No such course had previously been part of the teacher education program and I anticipated some student resistance based on others' experiences in similar situations (e.g., Garmon, 2004; Milner, 2005; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). In an effort to better understand students' reactions to the course, the formal evaluations used asked students to articulate when they felt most engaged with the curriculum and when they felt most distanced or disengaged. These questions are the main focus of this study.

Objectives

In diversity courses, students often experience feelings of discomfort, guilt, resistance, or denial (Garmon, 2004; Milner, 2005; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). My work as a novice professor is highly influenced by my students' perceptions, feelings, and experiences related to diversity. Thus, students' level of engagement and discomfort emerged as the focal points of this study. The research questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. In what moments do students report they feel most engaged in the course content, curriculum, and/or instruction?

2. In what moments do students report they feel most distanced or disengaged from the course content, curriculum, and/or instruction?

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry is guided by social constructivism and critical social theory literature. Social constructivists view knowledge as constructed through interactions with others. This construction takes place against a backdrop of context, including "historical and sociocultural dimensions" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Consequently, knowledge is neither static nor neutral. Rather, it is continually evolving and reflects the ideologies of those who participate in its constructions.

This view of knowledge is furthered by theorists from the critical social theory perspective. Briefly, critical social theory is concerned with uncovering the taken-for-granted assumptions and normalized ways of thinking that serve the dominant class in silencing and dehumanizing those identified as "other" (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Brown, 2004). Relatedly, educational theorists have argued that critical reflection is the hallmark of reflective practitioners and that it is at the heart of effective educational practices (e.g. Larrivee, 2000; Walkington, Christensen, & Kock, 2001). Critically reflective teachers strive to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, values, biases, and experiences, and their students need not be silent partners in that ongoing process. Students, through either formal evaluations or informal dialogue, can make meaningful contributions to instructors' improved practice.

Finally, this study is guided by the tenets of self-study of teacher education practices. As Russell (2010) states, self-study occurs when something triggers discomfort or dissatisfaction and there is the desire for improvement. For me, this discomfort came in the first semester of teaching new courses on diversity, as students had very little exposure

to diverse populations and initially resisted the necessary conversations about addressing

the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students. As an example, in our state, the

Latino population alone nearly doubled from 2000 to 2010 (2010 US Census). With 82% of

the university's student body from within the state, it was clear that most of them had been

born and raised in areas that had been predominantly White. Very few had any

experiences with individuals or groups from culturally, ethnically, or linguistically diverse

backgrounds. Many of them, then, held a deficit lens or a stereotypical perspective as we

began to talk about issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as part of

the diversity course. This led to a feeling of discomfort and dissatisfaction for me, leading

me to engage in research in collaboration with my students. I hoped to better understand

their points of reference as well as how I might meet them there to raise their awareness of

the histories and experiences of a broader range of people. As a novice teacher educator, I,

too, was learning how to best educate the future teachers under my tutelage. This research

endeavor, then, was an opportunity to study myself and my practice while also meeting the

needs of my university students and the middle school students they would eventually

teach. Russell (2010) posits that this type of self-study can be a powerful strategy when

the teacher educator is "willing to explore the complexities of learning by those who wish

to become teachers in the context of exploring simultaneously the complexities of one's

own learning to teach" (p. 691). Those complexities and their exploration and

understanding are at the heart of this research.

Data Sources & Methods

As with most self-study research, this study utilizes qualitative methods and data sources. Data was collected over four semesters in a teacher education program at a midsized state university. The teacher education program in which this research was conducted is regionally and nationally recognized and highly regarded for its historically innovative teaching methods and its leadership in research. The program boasts some of the top teachers/researchers in middle level education and has received national awards for its commitment to the improvement of middle level education nationwide. The study was conducted in two courses, one undergraduate and one graduate course. The undergraduate course, entitled Literacy, Language, and Culture in Middle Level Education, is the sole course for undergraduate middle grades teacher education majors that addresses diversity in any way. All students in this course are preparing to teach middle school math, science, social studies, or language arts. It is a 10-week course taught only once a year to a small group of students (approximately 40-50 per year); thus, the data from this course is somewhat more limited than that of the other course.

The graduate course, Advanced Topics in Diversity, is a 16 week course for students who are currently working in schools as teachers, media specialists, or aides. These students, in general, tend to be more non-traditional as many of them are older, well-established in their careers, and returning to school after many years away. There are the rare exceptions who transitioned directly from undergraduate degrees to graduate programs, but some have been teaching (and out of the student role) for 20 or more years. Nearly without exception, and perhaps because they are so far removed from their

undergraduate coursework, the students in this course have never had a course specifically addressing student diversity. Therefore, the word *Advanced* in the course title is rather misleading. These students are not all working in middle schools. Some are high school history or foreign language teachers, others are media specialists, others are elementary teachers, and still others are currently unemployed but have worked in schools as aides or support staff for years. The course is taught every semester and is open to a wide range of graduate programs; thus, there tends to be a wider range of perspectives and experiences among a more diverse group of students.

Over the four semesters of this research, the five courses studied have included a total of 88 students. Of those, 100% were White; 66% were female (n = 58) and 34% were male (n = 30). All students were given the opportunity to participate in the study or to opt out without penalty. Thus far, none have opted out, which has allowed me to more accurately and fully study my teacher education practices and curricular choices to better assess their impact on student learning.

Prior to beginning this individual research project, I engaged in systematic, bi-weekly journal entries as part of the larger collaborative study. These entries served as the foundation of our study and included personal reflection, problems, challenges, questions, and revelations to which we would all respond, creating a four way dialogue about our ongoing experiences and professional learning. As I began this particular research agenda, I continued to use that online venue as a place to share ideas and seek feedback from my colleagues across the US and Canada. They provided alternate frames of reference, different ways of thinking, and experiential comparisons which contributed greatly to my

own professional development. These journal entries were one of the main sources of data used to design and focus the study. For the purposes of this study, I focused mainly on my own critically reflective journal entries and the responses to those by my collaborative research partners. As the study has progressed, however, the focus has shifted, valuing less the voices of myself and my research colleagues and more the voices of the students whom I teach.

As such, I collected a variety of data from students. At midterm and at the end of the semester, students filled out a course evaluation and questionnaire. These were a set of open ended questions that allowed the students to provide explanation and examples of their opinions about the course curriculum and instruction. These anonymously completed questions were shared by my research colleagues, adapted for our larger study from Brookfield (1995) and utilized with permission. In our third year of collaboration, we agreed to continue using the shared measurement tool, although we have each pursued foci that are individually relevant. I focus mainly on students' evaluations of their own engagement and disengagement in the learning process, as this is what is most pressing for the courses I teach.

In addition to the anonymous data, student work samples were collected at the end of each semester. These included written reflections, homework assignments, and comments from class discussions. For example, one homework assignment asked students to articulate their personal beliefs, biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about their students of diverse backgrounds. Other assignments asked students to reflect on readings that are particularly controversial; e.g., a series of online news articles related to the

suicides of youth who were bullied and harassed. Yet another homework assignment

asked students to create a plan of action for combating discriminatory practices in their

homes, schools, and communities. These types of data were used to highlight the initial

perspectives of students, their thought processes as they grappled with tough issues, and

their growth in understanding and acceptance (or lack thereof) over time.

Data from these sources were coded to identify themes and to uncover broad

patterns, relationships, or categories (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Analysis of my own journal

reflections and the responses of students allowed me to compare and contrast emergent

themes to better understand the whole and reassure myself that the events and themes

were not "wholly idiosyncratic" (Miles & Huberman, p. 172). Analysis of students'

assignments, reflections, and comments during class discussions was conducted

inductively, using Glaser and Strauss' (1999) constant comparative method. Although all of

these data sources were used and analyzed as part of the larger study and will be discussed

more fully in future publications, for the purposes of this particular piece, the emphasis lies

on the student evaluations and their self-reports of engagement and disengagement.

As the themes emerged, I shared the data and preliminary findings with my

collaborative research colleagues to check for verification and any bias on my part. As

much as possible, I strive to provide glimpses of the students' voices without revealing the

identities of the participants. As I analyzed the data for themes within and among

individual voices, it was important for me to not overly emphasize singular comments by

any individual. These "snapshot" statements could be misconstrued or viewed as part of

the core belief system of an individual when it might be simply a solitary articulation of an

idea. Thus, to respect the participants involved in the study, their comments were not used unless they were repeated in three or more instances. This not only strengthens the study's dependability, but also lends credibility to the findings as true patterns and themes rather than isolated remarks.

This study is limited in two ways. One limitation is that the student population in our teacher education program is overwhelmingly White. Although some of the courses used for this study are off-campus at extension sites, the demographics do not change. I would have liked to have a wider variety of backgrounds represented in my participants, but this was simply not possible. I see this as both a limitation and an attribute of the study. Because much of the research on diversity coursework in teacher education program finds reluctance, resistance, and retreat as common practice among prospective teachers, having only White students allowed me to confirm that research (Garmon, 2004; Milner, 2005; 2006). Milner (2005) suggests that teachers, when in predominantly White contexts, do not feel conversations about race, ethnicity, culture, language, etc. are relevant to them. Garmon (2004) found that some of his White students in diversity courses attempt to retreat (physically, cognitively, and/or emotionally), while others resist having the conversations at all.

A second limitation, and perhaps the most important to include here, is me. My social positionality as a Latina professor may have detracted somewhat from the study because the students may feel unable to speak freely about biases, stereotypes, assumptions, etc. when the professor is a "minority" and yet in a position of relative power. At the beginning of each course, I introduce the research study and answer questions about

it as they arise throughout the class and the semester. I strive to be fully responsive to

students' frustrations, questions, experiences, and needs and do so in an open, critically

reflective, and non-judgmental way. I ensure students early on that our classroom is a

space in which we are all learning and that all views, opinions, questions, and ideas are

welcomed and valued. I also take the stance that although I am the "authority" figure,

according to the institution in which these conversations take place, I am not an "authority"

or "expert" on all things related to diversity and/or education and am, therefore, an equal

member of our learning community. In addition, because I am the instructor as well as the

researcher, I take care to ensure the anonymity of data collected from students. The

evaluations are always anonymous and the work collected is copied without names (by a

graduate assistant) and not viewed for research purposes until after the semester has

ended and grades have been finalized. My identity as a teacher researcher is such that the

two are not easily separated; however, I am fully committed to the fair treatment of my

participants, without whom my self-study and growth as an educator would not be

possible.

Findings

Currently, I have gathered, read, analyzed, and coded five sets of student course

evaluations over four semesters (Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Summer 2010, and Fall 2010),

including responses from two undergraduate and three graduate level courses. Analysis of

this data indicates four major themes: students are most engaged during class discussion,

students are most disengaged during what they feel is a lecture format, student are

disengaged when addressing content that they consider "taboo" or uncomfortable, and

students are disengaged when their own biases or prejudices impede their ability to engage with the content.

Overwhelmingly, students found class discussion to be the most engaging activity of the courses studied. Because this study is centered on a theoretical framework of social constructivism, discussion was a key component in class meetings. There were 87 responses to the question concerning when they felt most engaged with what was happening in the class. Of those, 41 responses specifically noted discussion (47%). Additionally, students responded positively to discussion and sharing their ideas in class in 53 other responses to questions concerning, for example, what helped their own learning or what action any member of the learning community took that was most affirming. Discussion is a pedagogical tool that is common in the majority of classrooms; however, in efforts to confront assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes, discussions have been used specifically to spark discourse and challenge dominant discourses (Mensah, 2009). Mayher (1990) suggests that while we are able to learn as individuals, "we usually do our best learning in a community of learners which features collaboration" (p. 58).

Discussions allow students to create knowledge by sharing their own vast and varied experiences and deconstructing their prior learning through the influence of new and differing perspectives, which aligns with the social constructivist framework of this study. Students in the courses studied here seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss and share their sometimes uncomfortable experiences. Some students felt the most engaged when "everyone had a voice," was able to express their experiences and opinions, and had a "chance to share information in a nonthreatening environment" (student

evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 8).   Still others felt that the "discussions made the class enjoyable" and felt that they "learned more because of it" (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 8). Many students commented on the ability to "discuss openly" or share ideas in an "open forum" or take part in an "open dialogue" (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 1; Spring 2010, p. 1; Summer 2010, p. 1). Overwhelmingly, students' comments spoke to the importance of having open, honest, and respectful discussion of issues that were often new and potentially uncomfortable. This was able to happen through concerted efforts at community building and modeling respect and acceptance. One student noted, "you modeled how to effectively hold discussions about diversity and issues that may be controversial" (student evaluations, Summer 2010, p. 6). Another stated that I, as the teacher, "always responded in a positive way to every comment; students then respected and listened to each other's opinions, with respect" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 2).

Although the courses studied included a variety of discussion techniques, students seemed to prefer large group discussions "when everyone could participate" or when they were "able to incorporate my own apropos experiences" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, pg. 1). Students liked this format because they were able to "get feedback from others" and they felt that discussions were "relevant," "meaningful," and "engaging" (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 1). A subset did prefer the smaller group discussion format, stating that the smaller group activities and discussion helped their learning more. They felt that these differing group configurations "helped me learn additional techniques to be used in my classes" and that "the constantly changing group dynamics helped me see other perspectives" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 7; Fall 2009, p. 5). Only one student did

not appreciate discussions, commenting that they sometimes felt "contrived" and that they sometimes did "not have any meaning in my life" (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 2).

The second research question was of particular import because of the tendency of students in courses emphasizing diversity and multicultural education to experience discomfort. Milner (2006) confirms this tendency, noting that, in his experience, students tend to demonstrate "resentment and/or resistance to multicultural doctrine, instruction, application, and interactions (p. 352). Thus, I was interested in finding out when my students felt most distanced from the content, curriculum, or instruction in their first course focused on diversity. The most common response from students was that they felt least engaged and most distanced during lecture or PowerPoint presentations (teacher and/or student led). Surprisingly, students did not offer specific information or elaborate on this particular evaluation question and thus, it is unclear at this time the exact reason for the distance they felt during lectures or presentations.

Although lectures and PowerPoint presentations may seem to be related, they varied in important ways. In all instances but one, PowerPoint presentations created by me included interactive participation from students using quiz questions, think-pair-share, or free writing prompts. Thus, they were not strictly lecture in the most traditional sense of the word. In two class meetings, the PowerPoint presentation included the use of iClickers, where students were able to respond to questions and receive immediate feedback on the responses of others. These examples were intentional attempts to create more interactive, technologically infused presentations; however, students seemed to still feel they were distanced from the intended learning during these types of instructional strategies. Despite

their dislike of the lecture/PowerPoint format, when students were responsible for leading class discussions on particular topics, they also used this format.

Interestingly, only one data set mentioned lectures/PowerPoint at all; of the 20 responses for that course, six students mentioned lecture as the time they felt most disengaged or distanced from the content and the instruction. While four said only "lecture," two of the six noted specifically that the content was "review" or that it "repeated info we already knew" (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 12). Perhaps the lack of comment on lecture after that initial semester demonstrates my own responsiveness to students' feedback. In the subsequent three semesters (Spring 2010, Summer 2010, and Fall 2010) no student mentioned lecture at all. Many did not reply at all to the disengagement question and some simply stated "never" or "nothing" to questions about distance or disengagement with the curriculum and/or instruction (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 1; Spring 2010, p. 1; Summer, 2010, p. 1). This seems to indicate an increase in engagement based on changes to the courses that I made in response to the feedback from students. For example, in Fall 2009, 13 of 29 responses in response to a question concerning learning hindrances mentioned the textbook as being "awful," "terrible," "difficult to understand," or "too high level" (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 2). After receiving that feedback, I discontinued the use of that particular textbook, choosing another text, journal articles, online newspaper sources, etc. that were more relevant, accessible, and "reader-friendly." I reflected on the students' evaluations with my collaborative research group about the changes necessary based on student feedback:

> So, for the coming year, I am totally revamping that course and hoping to get a text that is engaging, relevant, current, and which includes some theory and some practical (since that is what they said they wanted). I think this effort to find a new text is a really a good, if simple, example of how we are taking our students' comments, needs, perspectives, and wishes into consideration as we look to improve our courses (researcher online reflection, April 9, 2010).

Thus, the changes in response to the students' feedback on evaluations altered the course over time, which is perhaps why this finding was limited to the first semester of the study (Fall 2009).

Another finding of disengagement was centered on students' own perceptions of content that was controversial or taboo. In keeping with Milner's (2005, 2006) and Garmon's (2004) findings, some students stated that they felt least engaged and most distanced during times when we discussed topics they considered "taboo," specifically noting their distance when discussing race, poverty, and personal biases. The demographic makeup of the classes studied was predominantly White (98%), with only two students of color among all five courses included in the study. Students were also from communities that are still predominantly White (80-97%), despite the rapid increase in linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse populations in the state. The literature on diversity in education suggests White teachers experience some reluctance when discussing these topics in predominantly White contexts (Garmon, 2004; Milner, 2005, 2006). They often do not consider diversity to be relevant to them and teacher educators must spend an inordinate amount of time convincing them of that relevance. They resist, adopting a "prove to me diversity really matters" perspective and are unwilling to engage in conversations that they feel are unimportant or that should be kept silent (Milner, 2005, p. 776).

Students in these diversity courses expressed feelings of distance or disengagement when they felt uncomfortable with the content or with the responses of themselves or others to the content. Some students felt most hindered in their learning because of the actions and words of others. In Spring 2010, one student stated that she was confused or puzzled by some of her classmates' views on poverty to be "interesting….very little tolerance or empathy" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 2). In Summer 2010, a student stated that he felt "frustration with some of the naïve comments of others in the course" (student evaluations, Summer, 2010, p. 2). At times, based on my own observations as well as comments from others in the class, students' actions indicated their lack of engagement or discomfort with the content. Some students, particularly when discussing issues such as sexual orientation or white privilege, adopted a physical bearing that expressed dislike of the topic or disengagement. This often took the form of crossed arms, slouched posture, and facial expression of frustration or annoyance. On three occasions, students actually left the room for a short time during presentations about topics they considered particularly uncomfortable or taboo. Classmates expressed discontent with these students, commenting that some "did not participate then complained about not learning anything" or that "it still amazes me how many students do not seem to really care about their classes and learning new things" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 3; Fall 2010, p. 7). The disengagement at times seemed to be a bit contagious. When some individuals began to express frustration, discomfort, or anger, others became less engaged. In their final evaluations, two students stated that they felt distanced "when people seem to be getting upset" or when class discussions "were derailed by the moronic comments of a few" (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 10).

Perhaps the most notable example of one student's disengagement with the content and its impact on other students occurred in the Fall 2010 undergraduate course. One student, whom I have given the pseudonym John, was extremely uncomfortable with conversations about sexual orientation. The text below is a bit lengthy, but really serves as a thorough description of the situation. It comes from my reflection after the class session, one I shared with my research partners for their feedback as well.

> "Nobody seemed to want to present on GLTBQ issues, despite their HUGE relevance this past year as numerous kids have taken their lives because of bullying about sexuality. I had found the final frontier… Anyway, the women presenting the lesson were nervous and emailed me about their concerns because they "knew" some of the people in the class were resistant to talking about it. I provided them with some guidelines and some materials from the NMSA conference. They gladly took them and made them their own and did a wonderful presentation! They did however, encounter some resistance. John was physically shut down. Sat with his hands crossed over his body and his mouth clamped shut. Just looking at him, you could tell he was extremely uncomfortable with this issue. The women challenged him to participate in the activities they had planned anyway. They discussed the differences between "intersex," "transgender," "queer," etc. and John just got more and more agitated. He got up and walked out at one point, but came back… The women tried to engage him and he just said, "I am not talking about this." I struggled with whether or not I should step in and opted to wait. The women who presented did the job much better than I think I would have. They challenged him to speak out and encouraged him to let his voice be heard, just as they hoped he would do with students struggling with sexuality. I was amazed at their willingness to call him out on this and further amazed at his unwillingness to engage in any sort of conversation about it. All he would say is that he was taught to believe that it was a choice. The women asked, " Would you choose it?" and "If you were taught that, do you just automatically believe it?" and "So, what will you do if your son tells you he is gay?" WOW!!! I was now definitely prepared to step in, but I think the respect and trust that had been built allowed these conversations to happen despite the high levels of discomfort. Other students in the class were kind of "taking sides" in a way. Some were helping to challenge John about his beliefs. Others were trying to mediate by asking him in less confrontative ways about his beliefs and whether or not he had actually critically examined them. Many tried to distance the topic by placing it in 3rd person terms, referring to students at his/their school that were outwardly gay or lesbian. He wasn't biting. He said

very little, but I think overall, he actually strengthened the lesson by demonstrating how strongly our own beliefs can influence our teaching and how we interact with kids. The following week, we talked about caring and read some great articles on caring that talk about acceptance and understanding and listening and all of that. I had hoped for a great opportunity to follow up with John and see his reaction, but he didn't attend class that night. The next class (the last one) was cancelled for snow, so I feel somewhat left hanging on this issue. I hope he walked away with at least a tiny increase in advocacy, caring, and understanding. I look forward to reading his course evaluation and sharing with you his words, if he was willing to actually give voice to his thoughts" (January 17, 2011).

This example confirms the strong feelings of discomfort some topics might stir in students. It also demonstrates how some students' engagement was influenced by the discomfort of others. Not mentioned in this reflection is that approximately one-third of the class (5 students) sat silently throughout this presentation and exchange. Although they were not outwardly resistant to the topic or the discussion it engendered, their silence seemed to stem from discomfort or unwillingness to engage. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether it was the topic, John's strong reaction, or the somewhat confrontational discussion that made them disengage and sit silent.

Another major source of disengagement reported by students was something they felt came from within themselves. In Fall 2010, 50% of students in the graduate course stated that the thing that most hindered their own learning and kept them from fully engaging with the course was "my own bias" (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 8). One said that she felt disengaged when "my own biases came in the way" and another felt most distanced "when truth was realized about myself" (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 10). Another student claimed that "fear of what I would discover about myself" prevented her from taking responsibility for her own learning and kept her from fully engaging in the

course (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 9). A student in Spring semester 2010 was concerned about her own response to issues of race and ethnicity, "I was surprised at how defensive I felt...I almost felt guilty" (student evaluations, Spring 2010, p. 3). Two students expressed an unwillingness to "voice my views" or "speak my mind" for fear of what colleagues would say (student evaluations, Fall 2009, p. 4). On student actually claimed to have a "falling out with the term 'diversity'" based on the course, but did not articulate at what moment that "falling out" occurred or what prompted it.

Some students took a more positive stance to their self-provoked disengagement, confirming "how much I learned about myself" and "how far I am from where I want to be, but aware that I can change it" (student evaluations, Fall 2010, p. 16). Another saw the experience as very positive, emphasizing the importance of "becoming aware of and accepting my own views, even when my friends were completely against them" (Fall 2009, p. 3). Similarly, after experiencing feelings of disengagement and discomfort, this student reflected on his evaluation: "I was very much surprised how much I learned about myself. These experiences taught me (among other things) that feeling acceptance is far from acting accepting" (student evaluation, Summer 2010, p. 4). These statements seemed to be particularly profound given the advocacy focus of the middle level education courses on diversity. An attitude of self-acceptance and acceptance of others is critical to adopting an advocacy approach to education; thus, these students' responses stood out as particularly noteworthy. Finally, I believe this student, from Summer 2010, said it best as he looked back on a day where he felt extreme discomfort and disengaged from the class discussion, one in which his opinion was divergent to the other 16 students in the class. He had

experienced throughout the semester bouts of both engagement and disengagement and

eventually realized he was the reason for his own discomfort.

> "What is important **now**, the feeling that is **most** important for me to
> remember, is that a powerful feeling of 'being out of place' governed my
> inner self that day, and that the only person who made me feel that way was
> **me**. Real or not, if you feel 'out of place', you'll react as if you really are. On
> that day, I conferred minority status upon myself" (student reflection,
> Summer 2010, p. 5; emphasis in original).

Significance

This research project has immediate significance for my work as a teacher educator.

Studying particularly the times when students feel most engaged and most disengaged with

the content of my courses has been helpful in many ways. First, their honest feedback

allows me to formatively assess the course and make the necessary changes midstream,

rather than waiting for the following semester or year. These immediate changes are

appreciated by students, which is reflected in their comments about instructor

responsiveness and enactment of democratic principles (questions emphasized elsewhere

in our collaborative research project). Students often commented about my

responsiveness to their reports of (dis)engagement as being an excellent model for what all

teachers should do. They felt I was "genuinely interested in our opinions," "open to hearing

from us by asking questions," and "responsive to our needs" (student evaluations, Spring

2010, p. 7; Summer, 2010, p. 7).

Secondly, studying students' levels of (dis)engagement prompted me to take a

different approach to the course structure. Knowing that students would likely be

uncomfortable at times and that topics might be viewed as troublesome or taboo, I now

utilize a variety of community-building strategies in the courses to open the lines of communication, help students feel more comfortable sharing their beliefs and biases, and create an environment of inquiry and reflection. One way I have done this is to have students establish early in each semester a set of "guidelines for participation." They decide as a group what is expected and what is acceptable. Establishing these codes of respectful conduct gives students a voice in how the course progresses. They typically develop guidelines about not interrupting, respecting all perspectives, agreeing to disagree, and not breaching confidentiality outside of the classroom. These rules allow for open, honest communication and help to mitigate some of the fear of speaking out about particular, potentially controversial topics where beliefs and opinions can be very strong. Without student feedback about feelings of disengagement, changes such as this would not have been made. Thus, I appreciate hearing their voices and incorporating their needs into the course; I feel that it makes a more positive learning environment and experience for everyone so that nobody else has a "falling out" with diversity.

This research also has significance and impact on a larger scale. Recent demographic changes in our state and the southeast region of the United States have prompted the need for changes in the curriculum and content of our teacher education programs. The local schoolteachers, students, and university faculty have all recognized the need for additional coursework that attends to those changes. As a new professor in the role of "diversity specialist," it is imperative for me to create the best possible course for my students, the future teachers in this increasingly diverse community. Their feedback is an integral part of my own learning process and their voices are essential in

creating programs that meet their needs and the needs of the students with whom they will ultimately work. Through a continual process of critical reflection, using student input and feedback as guides, I strive to analyze, evaluate, and assess my own effectiveness in preparing students for diverse classrooms as well as modeling for them what it means to be a reflective practitioner.

This self-study, transparent and shared with students, is an opportunity for ongoing investigation of "good" teacher education practices, which I believe must include critical reflection, dialogue, and a willingness to question our own beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Engaging in this self-study with preservice and current teachers may illuminate the parallels between my experiences as a novice professor and theirs as novice teachers. A study such as this can ideally ease the transitions of all involved (myself, my students, and their future students) through our engagement in shared research goals and collaborative reflection. Brookfield (1995) advocates reflective practice such as this to help us "realize that what we thought were idiosyncratic features of our own critically reflective efforts are paralleled in the experiences of many of our colleagues" (in Loughran, 2002, p. 34). Through self-study, I have come to realize that my teacher education colleagues and I share many struggles, challenges, and questions and can assist each other in improving our practice. Likewise, our continued efforts, both collectively and individually, can help our prospective teachers embrace critically reflective habits that will ultimately improve their practice as well.

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