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CCT 693
Action Research – Enhancing Diversity Project

Introduction/Research

Enhancing social diversity within the Critical and Creative Thinking Program (CCT) at

UMASS-Boston has been an objective for the students and faculty since last year. Our

professor, Peter Taylor, requested that we continue the project and "help motivate and form

constituencies to produce some lasting effects" (Taylor, "Enhancing Diversity in the CCT

Program"). As part of an action research project this semester, my fellow students and I have

investigated the long-term ("AQUAD") plan of the CCT program, past research from last year's

students, interviewed CCT faculty, and posed new fields of inquiry.

My research group (Kerstin Adami, Robert Norris, Gloria Perez, and myself) was

interested particularly in diversity of the CCT program through the curricula of four regularly

offered classes in the program. We were concerned with the range of topics in the syllabus, the

goals of the course, flexibility of the professor during classroom interaction, and the range of

materials (i.e. guest speakers, videos, literature, etc.) included in each curriculum. Knowing that

diversity within the CCT program was an issue, our group assumed that diversity was being

harnessed for its positive effects in classroom activities. The premise of my investigation is that

a diverse curriculum is essential for attracting a diverse population to the program.

Initial Questions and Data

The individual task, which I undertook, was a review of CCT 627: Issues and

Controversies in Antiracist and Multicultural Education curriculum. I suppose this is a unique

class in this investigation since it deals directly with issues of race, culture, and sexual

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orientation. However, I still wondered if Professor Blum encouraged each individual's

expression of diversity in the class.

- Are the goals stated in the syllabus such that the professor encourages a comfortable atmosphere, which will allow each individual's diversity to be expressed?
- Is classroom interaction encouraged?
- How diverse are the readings and materials used in the course?

To find the answers to these questions, I first consulted the goals stated in the CCT 627 syllabus.

In the syllabus, Professor Blum encourages:

- "Gaining a deeper understanding of the complex issues of race, culture, sexual orientation, and education through dispassionate intellectual inquiry." He also promotes sharing and discussion of personal experience.

- "Encourage dispositions of mind involved in critical thinking, such as questioning assumptions, searching for alternative ways of looking at an issue, and looking for evidence"

- "Encouraging self-reflection, humility, and self-criticism: learning and applying critical thinking dispositions to one's own thinking, especially concerning issues of race, culture, sexual orientation, and education. This includes being open to recognizing one's own prejudices, stereotypes, and limitations of understanding—and striving to correct these limitations."

Based on these goals, I feel this class lends adequate flexibility for participants to discuss,

explore, and learn from each other's personal experience. Since I am in the class, it does seem

that the class presents a range of racial, gender, and professional diversity.

I also wished to confer with Professor Blum his reasons for such encouragement of an

understanding and expression of diversity in his classroom goals. In one interview, I asked him

about the benefits or disadvantages of a diverse classroom. He replied:

"Assuming you are referring to racial and ethnic diversity here, (1) that diversity brings a broader range of experiences and (somewhat less) a broader range of opinions [I don't think opinions correlate as strongly with race as experiences do,(2) it means that all members of the class have to learn the skills of relating and conversing with people who differ from them in important ways, (3) with regard to (2), it enhances important life skills for a racially and ethnically diverse society." [Blum interview]

I noticed "hidden diversity" seemed to be a phrase that regularly appeared in our group's

discussion, as well as a common inquiry in class. This term refers to the myriad of professions,

religions, sexual orientations, ages, and individual talents and interests that exist in the CCT program.   I wondered how/if Professor Blum understood hidden diversity to be an asset along with racial diversity in the classroom. His response included:

"… I feel that if what you are concerned about is inclusion and justice for groups defined by race, gender, sexual orientation, then the kinds of hidden diversity you mention is not relevant. Well, actually sexual orientation is a form of hidden diversity. The idea of hidden diversity can be helpful in keeping people from feeling that "all white people are like," "all men are alike" etc etc. But it still doesn't deal with the justice and inclusion issues--which, to my mind, are the more important ones."

Finally, I examined the materials used in Professor Blum's class. I recognize that most those are journal articles, selections from books, and newspaper articles. There is one video which we will watch dealing with anti-homophobia education. It is my impression that personal stories (which are written by the students of the class) will be part of the classroom discussion as well. While there are no guest speakers, I feel this component will be a sufficient, if not better, means of learning about race and diversity.

Action Proposals and Constituency

Collectively, our group determined that it would be important to share our research and data with the faculty of the CCT Program. We acknowledge that the faculty from these four classes has been supportive by answering our questions. Since we have determined social diversity as a positive enhancement of the program, we would like to encourage the faculty to continue focusing on it as a problem.

We realize that time is a factor, especially since only one of the entire CCT staff is full-time. However, we propose that they engage in a bi-monthly dialogue, which maintains the principles guidelines of a dialogue process (as stated in Allyn Bradford's class, "Dialogue Processes"). After approaching faculty to "reintroduce" this topic of enhancing diversity, we hope to bring our suggestions and hopes that came from our action research. We suggest that the

initial question, "How does the role of diversity play in your classes?" to be a starting point for their dialogue. We suggest that they discuss how they can allow each individual voice to continuously be expressed throughout the semester. We also would like them to analyze the materials they use in each class and take into consideration that perhaps a diverse curriculum may attract a more diverse community. As far as the logistics of each dialogue, we would like to recommend they begin each session with a "check-in" and end each session with a "check-out." The "check-in" would be a time for them to quickly get acquainted (maybe briefly share their feelings about this dialogue). After discussion, we offer a "check-out," in which they name one "take away" (one important detail they found helpful or interesting) and one "maybe next time" (one new "plan of action").

I feel our constituency also includes our fellow classmates in this class, for their common interest in enhancing diversity would help develop this project even further. I wonder if we, as CCT 693 colleagues, could engage in a dialogue first, in which we share our suggestions and hopes that came from this action research project. Based on their research and the rapport they have develop with their constituencies (who are other members of the CCT faculty that my group did not communicate with), I feel they could assist in gathering the professors in a meeting to engage the CCT faculty in the aforementioned dialogue. Since I found certain questions helpful in my own definition of diversity, I would like to pose questions for the students in the CCT program to consider as a starting point:

- **Is a diverse curriculum an important element when trying to recruit a socially diverse population?**
- **If the CCT program encourages a safe and comfortable learning environment, do you think this will attract a more socially diverse population?**
- **When is hidden diversity important and when is racial diversity important?**