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CCT 693
Spring '09

Creating an Anti-Racist Framework:
Action Research to Inform Curriculum Design in the Arts and Media

Background inquiry + Reflection

Currently I am working at an education organization as a developer on a curriculum designed to combine academic work in visual arts with technical skills, applications, and career exploration for Arts, Media, and Entertainment (AME) industries. The curriculum, will be composed of two yearlong arts and media courses, and model integrated units in mathematics, social studies, science, and English that align with the content of the Visual Arts course and demonstrate the importance of academic work to college and career success in the AME industry. Currently, the first year course is being piloted in four schools in California. The curriculum will be available to available freely to schools throughout California, and eventually, to schools across the country.

I pursued an opportunity to work on this project because it seemed like an incredible opportunity to design a course that would incorporate many of my interests and passions. Throughout my eight years working in the field of education I have been drawn to the intersection between issues of social justice, education and the arts. In my professional roles as a high school teacher, a community arts program director, youth program coordinator, and now as a curriculum designer, I have looked at how each of these fields informs and enriches the other. One of the design challenges of the project was to develop a course in arts education for my organization, who, in its mission statement, is committed to learning as a liberating force and education that engages learners as problem solving participants." True to its mission, throughout the curriculum design process, our team has discussed issues such as project and problem based learning, student interest and understanding, career connections, scaffolded instruction, and authentic assessment. These discussions are designed to incorporate the viewpoints and experiences of our writing team who consist of former teachers, curriculum writers, and project directors. I have had the fortune of being a part of team who are thoughtful and committed to best practices of teaching and learning supported.

Yet, when it comes to issues of race and diversity, I find that these discussions lack the depth and rigor, which is needed to design a curriculum which honors the individuality, experiences, and creativity of the students whom this curriculum is designed. I came to the project assuming that the organization had a model that addressed issues of diversity. Through staff meetings I began to observe that issues of race and culture were often dealt in a haphazard way. As we progressed in the design in the units I found myself often the only voice that brought these issues into the conversation, a strategy that, I have learned in my previous work experience, has shown to be ineffective in the workplace. As a result I have found myself disheartened, resentful, and unwilling to share my point

of view at group meetings. At this point I believe that without systematic action among our group this approach would be continued.

My organization's approach to curriculum development has awarded the organization with high praise, in the forms of large grants, accolades, and a national reputation. Yet it has also caused several internal problems including friction between staff, additional work in the rewriting of units, and an incident with the funder. During the one and a half years I have been at the organization, a colleague of color, after five months, has left, and though the reasons why he had decided to leave is still unknown, the ways in which we handle issue of race and diversity may have played a role in his departure. As to the specific approach to the yet unpublished curriculum, there have been several instances around issues of multiculturalism. Some of the feedback, which we have received by outside reviewers, is that we have not incorporated enough diverse perspectives. We have also received feedback that we have provided inaccurate examples of non-Western art and have not included students with enough historical and cultural contexts to analyze examples of non-Western art and media.

Based on my professional experiences, I knew that both on a professional and a personal level I needed to be proactive about my observations. To address these concerns, I designed an Action Research project that engages my colleagues in the creation of an inclusive framework and curriculum review process, which emphasizes the importance of critically thinking about race, ethnicity, and educational equity. This work then could serve as a best practices model that can guide the development of the entire curriculum and professional development projects from Education, Resources and Outreach, and the rest of the organization.

Definitions and assumptions that inform the project:
My work is guided by the philosophy of education pioneered by the educator, Paolo Freire. In a Freiran model of education, the purpose of education is to bring about equality and justice. Though inequity exists on many fronts in education such as class, gender, and sexuality, I will focus my project on the topic of race because it plays a critical role in many social interactions and has an impact on all aspects of society and plays a powerful role in our social interactions and in U.S. history. Oftentimes the power dynamics of race and racism, though present in the life and curriculum of schools, is neither acknowledged nor critically examined in educational settings. I also believe that during this historic moment, with the election of our first Black president, the roll back in affirmative action, and the Voting rights act, race seems unimportant. Racism seems like a topic that belongs in the past. In education, the culture of high-stakes testing, shrinking budgets, and increased workloads, consistently pushes educators to leave these difficult and complex issues aside.

Because the systematic nature of racism, it is easy to become overwhelmed by its complexity. Enid Lee argues in her article *Anti-Racist Education: Pulling*

Together to Close the Gaps, that the racial achievement gap is produced by systemic inequities and by the practice of individual teachers. Therefore, every episode of racism should be confronted and interrupted "as a means of reaching back to its systemic roots." (28) Curriculum, to be a part of anti-racist education, then needs to help teachers think about the ways in which they can counteract racial inequality and racism in their classrooms. By racism I use Mica Pollack's definition she uses in her *Introduction: Defining Everyday Antiracism*, as "any act that, even unwittingly, tolerates, accepts, or reinforces racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive; allows racial inequalities in opportunity as if they are normal and acceptable; or treats people of color as less worthy or less complex than "white" people" (xvii).

Methods and Approaches

Reflection on Our Current Approach to looking at issues of Multiculturalism in the Curriculum:
Choice of Art and Media Examples: At the beginning of the project we decided to choose current and historical arts and media examples from a range of cultures. We also decided to design a curriculum with enough flexibility so that teachers and students would be able to select their own examples that could reflect their community, or interests. In the selection of works of art and media I used the following criteria:

- The example is accessible on the web to ensure access for teachers and students
- The art and media piece either serves to reflect underrepresented voices, or
- The piece provides a clear example of how art and media reflects the power relations that exist in a society.
- The art or media example clearly illustrates the idea presented in the curriculum

Though part of our introduction to the curriculum states that we have a commitment to diversity, this has been left for the most part unclear what this means. As a result choices of art and media are, for the most part left to the decision of the authors.

Curriculum Design: In our initial research, we found few examples of studio based arts and media curriculum that addressed issues of race and educational equity. . Many curriculum models either were either humanities based, (e.g. students analyzed art through a multicultural lens), or models where students created examples of art projects from non-Western cultures without discussing of the cultural context of these works, or how the tradition of Western art has often regulated non-Western artworks as curiosities or somehow less than the individual artistic genius created by the Western artistic tradition.

Our center's curriculum design process is an iterative one, ideas are discussed at meetings, writers create units based on these ideas, and revise the units until our

center director deems they ready to go to copyedit. These versions are sent to outside reviewers that are educators, administrators, industry professional, and academics. The curriculum writers then incorporate the reviewers' comments. After the writer incorporates the comments, the units are then given to pilot teachers to pilot in their classrooms. Few of these reviewers are people of color, and few are teachers in the classroom. Three of the four pilot teachers are white one teacher is Latina. Three of the four classrooms have students from urban settings; one school is located in a rural setting that has a majority of white students. From staffing, to the choices of advisors, from the pilot teachers, the curriculum design is designed by professionals who have backgrounds that are very different from the students for who the curriculum is designed.

Reflecting on the curriculum design process, I identified several issues that contributed to the uneven treatment of multiculturalism in the curriculum. One is the individualized approach to curriculum development. Many times, the values and priorities of what was included and what was left out are unspoken and assumed. This approach has led to many misunderstandings and individualized band-aid solutions, often by those people who are the most committed to these values. Therefore, by default, multiculturalism is something that, for the most part rests on the people of color on the staff, or those with specialized training or their own personalized interest in the issues of multiculturalism.

Literature Review:
In my own search for workshop models to conduct with staff I found a lot of practical workshop approaches that would help the staff look critically at race. While looking over the workshop models I identified several workshop goals:
- Identify current ideas about race and how it impacts our work at our workplace
- To build a common vocabulary about race
- To articulate our values, and to transfer those values into a framework through which we would assess the curriculum and professional development
- To see issues of race and inequity as a systemic problem, one which, because it is part of our mission, and important to who we serve, should be at the heart of all our work at my organization

Systematic Research on Effects of Past Actions

My work on our center's diversity committee has given me a historical perspective of the ways in which our center has approached issues of race. Part of my work on the committee has been analyzing staff feedback on the meetings that the committee has planned. The committed has identified that though meetings are thought of as educational, few staff members see little correlation between the readings and discussion in these meetings and their day-to-day work, or substantive diversity efforts. Though these meetings have not been particularly effective, one organizational strategy that has led to a smaller turnover to staff of color is the buddy system. The buddy system is a system where

experienced staff is teamed up with less experienced employees. The buddy system was established in response to the high turnover rates of staff of color at my organization. In my own experience the buddy system was a useful system to help me become acclimated to the organization.

To inform the design of my AR plan I looked evaluations of diversity initiatives that took place at other non-profits. In 2003, Third Sector NE conducted an evaluation of diversity Initiatives of several non-profit organizations. In their report the evaluators identified several key factors that led to success for these initiatives these included a plan for the diversity process, an assessment of the process, and the existence of small accomplishments that lead to systems change. The report also cited the importance of "conversation" and "dialogue" to build a common language for diversity. In addition, the report cited several key barriers to the organizations' work around issues of diversity; these included the lack of resources, too little time, and competing priorities. (Linell and Belton, 2003). Third Sector NE's evaluation accurately and succinctly reflects my own experiences both in schools and non profit organizations, yet it also alerted me to the importance for assessment and the collaborative creation of a diversity plan that was ongoing and integral to the work we already do that manifested itself in concrete changes in the ways that we work together.

In *Collaboration for Social Change: A Theory and a Case Study* the authors argue that "designing inclusive planning processes, modeling and transferring collaborative skills, encouraging learning, and addressing issues of power…. results in effective action…for advancing the…work of social change and transformation." (Parker et al, 341). Based on the authors' experience work facilitating a process where a school district created and implemented an action plan that successfully reduced the racial achievement gap, I knew that the AR process needed to have all of the aspects the authors outlined in their article. But in order to do this, I knew that the AR project would probably need to be carried out on a longer timeline than I had envisioned. The article also alerted me to the very real issue of thinking deeply about the constituency-building piece of my project.

Proposing and Planning Action:

Stage I: Create a foundation upon which to have conversation about race

The goal of stage one of the action research project is to work together to build a safe space and a common vocabulary to discuss these issues of race and educational equity, At this stage staff members would take participate in conversations about issues of race and educational equity at several levels: one-on-one with colleagues and teachers, within my project team, at my department level, and at the interdepartmental level. These conversations will be structured around specific topics such as: our personal histories with race, readings about race, culture and educational opportunity, skills, strategies and

frameworks of cultural competence. The goal of the first stage of conversations will be to build a common vocabulary to discuss issues of race and culture. This phase will also begin to have participants think critically about the issue of race and culture in their work in the context of their own life histories. Another goal of this stage would be to provide a rationale for this work. Part of the presentation would be to present research on the racial achievement gap and the link multicultural education to the narrowing of the racial achievement gap.

To model the ways in which our center could discuss curriculum decisions through the lens of race I planned a diversity committee meeting. At this meeting the participants read a short article about the strengths and weaknesses of models of multiculturalism implemented in the curriculum. They then read examples of The Foundations of Visual Arts Curriculum, and tried to identify the models outlined by the article. I hoped that the workshop could model the ways in which we could constructively and systematically look at issues of diversity in the curriculum. I used this opportunity to get feedback from participants that I could use to plan future workshops and conversations about race. After conducting the workshop I learned a number of things listed in the bullet points below:

- Many staff wanted feedback and time to incorporate ideas about multicultural education in their day to day work; they did not feel that they could easily think of ways to incorporate inclusion and diversity in their day to day work
- Using clear models could lead to a constructive conversation about issues of diversity that the staff found helpful in their work: a number of people thanked me for facilitating and planning the workshop
- Specialists in academic areas such as science and math feel left out of these conversations because few discussions of diversity and race offer suggestions that are appropriate for their fields. In effect these staff members feel left out of the conversation.
- After the workshop: I have found that the workshop continues to be a common experience which I can reference in order to discuss issues of race and multiculturalism, that in a very short time our group has began the work of building a common vocabulary.

During this process the center would develop a web based it review that would include articles and resources on issues of race and educational equity. This lit review would also include tools, questions, and literature on multicultural approaches to curriculum that could inform the design of the process we develop in Stage II.

Stage II: Collaborative design of a framework and curriculum review process which places cultural competence and educational equality at the center
Stage two of the action research process will consist of the creation of a values statement that will inform all the work that we do as a center. Therefore building a safe space is an important precursor to this stage of the AR process where values, especially as it relate to equity and issues of multiculturalism are

important. Using this established list of values the center will then work together to create a framework and a curriculum review process to help the staff be able to translate these values to their day-to-day work.

<u>Stage III: Create a plan to regularly evaluate the framework and curriculum review process</u>
At this stage, the development of the framework and curriculum review process will go through an iterative. The framework and curriculum review process will be implemented during staff meetings, and revised based on staff, reviewer, funder, partner, and teacher feedback. The goal of creating a document and process would be to create a tool which is both simple to use and helpful to all staff members when they are engaged in their work. During this process the ongoing dialogue and education about antiracist education could take on different forms based on the needs of the staff identified by the group.

To incorporate the values statement in their day-to-day work, staff members would engage in a strategic personal planning process. To build in support during this process, staff members would buddy up with another person someone to discuss their plan and to prepare feedback on the design of the framework and the curriculum review process.

Systematic Research on the Effects of the New Action

The evaluation of the project will compare the current way our center looks at issues of educational equity and multiculturalism in the design of the Media and digital Design Curriculum before and after the AR project. The several indicators that will be measured include the level of engagement in issues of diversity and the changes in behavior that comes about as a result of participating in the action research project. The evaluation will seek to measure both the engagement and behavioral changes reflected in the workplace and in the curriculum itself. Because the role of multicultural education is not only about including more people of color in the curriculum, it is also about engendering an anti racist lens of education, using Mica Pollack's four principles of antiracist education would be helpful to use in the evaluation (Pollack, xx):
   • Rejecting false notions of human difference
   • Acknowledging lived experiences shaped along racial lines;
   • Learning from diverse forms of knowledge and experience; and challenging systems of racial inequality"
The effects of the New Action will also be evaluated through the actual use of the new curriculum review process and framework and the staff discussions and one-on-one interviews around the three stages of development. In addition a staff member of another center will interview staff members anonymously about their reflections about the AR project.

To communicate the findings of the action research project, and to contribute to the organizational learning about issues of diversity, a report will be created from the findings including an executive summary, a detailed summary, a lit review,

workshop agendas and notes, the framework, the current outline of the curriculum review process, and a summary of observations.

The report will be presented to the project directors and company wide diversity committee as a model for ways to incorporate issues of race in the everyday work of our centers.

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