Cultural Competence and Higher Education

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Abstract

Considering both practical and theoretical applications, this paper describes how universities can approach incorporating cultural competence into the curriculum of their institutions. The authors discuss the need for cultural competence education along with its assessment, application, and improvement. The paper also highlights themes in the literature, outlines trends, and examines cultural competence’s place in other fields of study.

Keywords: cultural competence, assessment, curriculum, globalization, higher education
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Realizing that students will be entering an ever-increasing multicultural society and global economy, university administrators and instructors must begin to incorporate cultural competence education into the curriculum in a deliberate and meaningful fashion. A blueprint, however, does not exist that walks institutions through this process. In the past, very few authors examined or described practical methods for incorporating cultural competence across the entire curriculum, particularly in higher education; however, recent relevant research (Sperry & Carson, 2012) allows practitioners to fill that void. This article’s purpose is threefold: (a) to place the academic focus on cultural competence in context with broader more widely accepted applications, including recent trends (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013), (b) to highlight predominant themes appearing in the literature, and (c) to continue the conversation of cultural competence’s necessary, vital place in the curriculum.

Definitions

To understand that place in higher education with its larger implications on society and globalization, several relevant concepts first require defining in order to establish a foundation. The term *culture*, simply put, defines how groups are set apart from each other based on distinct behavior patterns. It defines the differences in a group’s “world view, in their perspectives on the rhythms and patterns of life, and in their concept of the essential nature of the human condition” (Devore & Schlesinger, 1996, p. 43). *Cultural awareness*, a related but distinct term, examines the relationship among customs, values, and beliefs without being stereotypically judgmental (Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992). Davies (2012) noted that cultural awareness also includes “people’s socio-economic status, language, gender and religious characteristics” (p. 64), not just race or ethnicity.

Finally, the term *cultural competence* as a precise and measurable descriptor (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; van Driel & Gabrenya, 2013) dates to the early 1980s and is “ubiquitous” (Gallegos, Tindall, & Gallegos, 2008, p. 51) in human services settings ranging from the applied to educational settings. Sue (2006) described cultural competence (or “cultural competency,” interchangeably) as “cultural awareness and beliefs . . . cultural knowledge . . . and cultural skills” (p. 238), a definition adopted by the American Psychological Association in 2003. Others concisely described cultural competence as a range of “knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions necessary to effectively interact with other cultural groups” (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012, p. 174).

The Study of Cultural Competence in Education

Research on cultural competence does not fit neatly into one or two simple categories. Relevant scholarly research focuses broadly on education (Colombo, 2007; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Keengwe, 2010; Paz, 2008; Rogers-Sirin & Sirin, 2009; Tanner & Allen, 2007), education of gifted students (Ford & Whiting, 2008; Henshon, 2008), international students (Wang, Heppner, Wang, & Zhu, 2015), education of nurses (Diaz, Clarke, & Gatua, 2015; Garneau & Pepin, 2015; Morton-Miller, 2013; Noble, Nuszen, Rom, & Noble, 2013), education of students with disabilities (Harmon, Kasa-Hendrickson, & Neal, 2009), higher education (De
Beuckelaer, Lievens, & Bücker, 2012), and online education (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012; Keengwe, 2010; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007).

The Study of Cultural Competence in Other Fields

Additionally, researchers examined applications in other fields, primarily in social service and health-related occupations, such as social work (Allen-Meares, 2007; Gallegos et al., 2008; Garran & Rozas, 2013; Johnson & Munch, 2009), counselor training/mental health services (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012; Plante, 2014; Sue, 2006; Tummala-Narra, 2015), campus law enforcement (Anderson & Hendricks, 2011), nursing (Perng & Watson, 2012), assessment (Trimble, Trickett, Fisher, & Goodyear, 2012), Asian culture (Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013), and coaching (Van Horn, 2008). While obviously not primarily concerned with applications in higher education, research in these fields bears on how people think and learn, what they know, and what they understand which can indeed make an impact on how administrators and teachers approach students’ education.

When examining the literature, the authors find that research in education and in other fields covers much of the same ground and shares similar goals. To varying degrees, the research examines (a) the importance of cultural competency, (b) the need for relevant education in colleges and universities, (c) professional development and training for teachers and practitioners, (d) methodologies, and (e) assessment of knowledge and skills.

Urgency of Cultural Competence Education

It is worth noting that some do not accept the prima facie value of cultural competence education. Gallegos et al. (2008) admitted that the ephemeral nature of such a construct may defy evaluation and testing. In the field of social work, Johnson and Munch (2009) decried “contradictions” in instilling cultural competence that undermines presumed equality of clients and fosters spurious heuristics in client treatment. Nevertheless, the general assertions of Gallegos et al. and Johnson and Munch are in the minority. Significant dissent in academe and other areas with respect to the value of cultural competence is scarcer. In fact, Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007) argued that universities and colleges should promote cultural competence so that students can “operate effectively in an increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse society and globalised economy” (p. 414). Building on Eisenchlas and Trevaskes’ argument, Garran and Rozas (2013) implored educators not only to emphasize the need for “respecting the dignity and worth of a person” (p. 98), but also to encourage practices that “[acknowledge] power and privilege in relationships” (p. 108).

In an influential work on diversity and globalization, Anderson (2008) wrote that “people interpret their experience across different contexts and ultimately make evaluative judgments based on this feedback . . . racial and gender identity become critical components of meaning-making” (p. 82). While Anderson specifically addressed racial and gender identity, the broader implications for cultural competence are clear—with “meaning” being such a unique and personal construct, static pedagogies are not adequate for a diverse population.
Broad Recommendations on Improving Cultural Competence

Recommendations about improving cultural competence exist across the literature in relatively broad themes. Overarching all of the following examples, Anderson (2008) argued that all instructional efforts should be student-centered in order to reach all populations, and should include alternative (multiple) pedagogies, in addition to traditional lecture and testing methods (p. 104). Examples of alternative pedagogies include simulations, case studies, service-learning opportunities, and various other real-world scenarios.

Proponents of active learning such as Nakanishi and Rittner (1992) suggested that students look at culture with their own backgrounds in mind while respecting other ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, increasing self-awareness and self-examination helps students learn what their biases are and how those biases affect their thinking and acting (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larson, 2002).

In addition to student-centered instruction and active learning methods, Anderson (2008) suggested that creating valid learning outcomes is vital to success. Changing the curriculum and effectively using learning outcomes assist in incorporating diversity with traditional subject matter. Specifically, “a focus on outcomes allows for application of formal assessment tools, which, in turn, facilitates evidence-based decision making” (p.139). Further, “developing meaningful and measurable learning outcomes is a critical component of effective classroom assessment” (p.141). This process also allows for modifications in an effort to close the educational loop.

Tharp (2012) addressed the topic at hand more directly but was also somewhat vague in his recommendations. Tharp’s four recommendations for those in higher education included:

1. “Be aware of and own your social identity and its impact on others”
2. “Know and apply social identity development theories”
3. “Recognize how multiple social identities and power interface with society on an individual, community, and institutional level”
4. “Carefully consider your approach to curriculum development and facilitation of diversity education” (pp. 29-30)

On the face of it, Tharp’s article appears the most neatly reconciled to the current topic but avails few operational definitions to aid the reader or college administrator. Regardless of which direction an institution ultimately takes, “It is often the case on many college campuses that new initiatives either evolve or remain stagnant relative to the degree of institutional readiness—structural, political, procedural, temporal, etc.” (Anderson, 2008, p.125).

Training and Professional Development

The United States is a melting pot rich in cultural diversity; however, education appears to be homogenous. While the population is changing, the educational system does not seem to
be flexible or mindful of the backgrounds of students. Not all professors possess the cultural knowledge and experience of working or teaching in diverse environments (Colvin-Burque, Zugazaga, & Davis-Maye, 2007; Robinson & Clardy, 2011). Focusing specifically on teacher education, Robinson and Clardy (2011) wrote, “If teacher educators do not value or have experiences with cultural diversity, it is unlikely that they will be able to teach these culturally relevant teaching skills” (pp. 101-102). Sirin, Rogers-Sirin, and Collins (2010) described the need for teachers’ cultural competence education as “urgent” (p. 49), while some boldly considered it a “requirement” (Allen-Meares, 2007; Rogers-Sirin & Sirin, 2009; Trimble et al., 2012). Precedent exists in training educators in primary and secondary education (Colombo, 2007; Ford & Whiting, 2008; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011; Keengwe, 2010; Paz, 2008; Trimble et al., 2012), nursing education (Long, 2012), and higher education (De Beuckelaer et al., 2012; Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012; Ponterotto et al., 1998; Tharp, 2012). In addition to training, some authors suggested a need for the diversification of the teacher workforce as well. For example, Rogers-Sirin and Sirin (2009) warned against the implications of a static, white, female teaching force in the changing face of student demographics.

Assessment Strategies

Diagnostic tools in cultural competence often use broad barometers. Johnson and Munch (2009) described National Association of Social Workers (NASW) accreditation standards within the field of social work; however, similar concreteness is rarer in education. Paz (2008), writing to school administrators, conceded that organizations must begin with the ability to assess cultural competence, an implicit suggestion that these mechanisms are not widespread.

Sperry (2012), while offering no specific tool or system of measurement, provided great detail about the dimensions of cultural competence as well as varying levels and degrees of cultural competence. Dimensions include cultural knowledge, awareness, sensitivity, and action; levels range from “Very low” to “Very High.” The authors believe that universities have enough flexibility to create their own basic assessment tools based on Sperry’s work.

Ford and Whiting (2008) were somewhat more concrete when describing two models. They recommended that the organizational spectrum of Cross (1988) apply to individuals. On one end of Cross’s five-part continuum is “cultural destructiveness,” in which a malevolent ignorance prevails about culture and its implications. On the opposite and more refined end is “advanced cultural competence” where “culture is held in the highest regard” (Ford & Whiting, 2008, p. 106) and where “culturally competent individuals or organizations assertively and proactively develop new educational models and approaches based on culture” (p. 106). Ford and Whiting also referred to Storti’s (1998) four-part continuum ranging from “blissful ignorance” of culture to “spontaneous sensitivity” of culture (Ford & Whiting, 2008, p. 106).

Robinson and Clardy (2011) assessed teacher education candidates and K-12 teachers to evaluate their work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and peers. They generally recommended “coursework that focuses on effectively teaching CLD students should be a requirement of all teacher education programs due to the growing numbers of these students in our schools” (p. 109). The authors studied this problem using the Critical Race Theory (CRT)
to “analyze race and racism at macro and micro levels as it affects our society and our schools/institutions” (p. 102).

Ponterotto, Baluch, Greig, and Rivera (1998) advanced the Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey (TMAS), a 20-item self-report scale measuring “teachers’ awareness of, comfort with, and sensitivity to issues of cultural pluralism in the classroom” (p. 1003) among preservice teachers, where preservice teachers rate themselves on a 1-5 Likert scale. Example items include “I can learn a great deal from students with culturally different backgrounds” and “Being multiculturally aware is not relevant for students” (reverse-scored). This scale appears to tap into cultural competence as directly as any discussed thus far, but a subjective self-report scale such as this may have less objective utility than some of the other approaches described in this paper do.

Specific Exercises and Activities to Improve Cultural Competence

Administrators have ample leeway to lead cultural competency efforts as they see fit. It could be a “top down” university-wide program, or more of a grassroots campaign where departments create their own methodologies. While requiring all degree programs to include cultural competence initiatives may be immediately impractical and unrealistic, administrators could initially place such efforts in first-year experiences or general education curricula ensuring that most students would benefit from the experience. These activities could be as simple as shared readings focusing on cross-cultural interactions; or, they could incorporate more evaluative and advanced methods such as surveys, exercises, and pre and post-tests. To provide some direction, described below are four proven methods for improving cultural competence.

Racial and Ethical Sensitivity Training (REST)

Rogers-Sirin and Sirin (2009) produced specific educational tools for preservice teacher education (later validated by Sirin et al., 2010) called the Quick Racial and Ethical Sensitivity Test (Quick-REST), a video-based instrument, and the Racial and Ethical Sensitivity Training KIT (REST-KIT), a training module. The REST program helps teachers recognize intolerance and develop skills related to addressing marginalization of students based on demographics. These skills notably use context-specific vocabulary.

The program consisted of pre and post-tests (including a survey, the TMAS, and Quick-REST) with a training workshop between the two. Educators-in-training watched ethically problematic videoed scenarios occurring in settings such as a faculty lounge and a basketball court. In each, by the authors’ description, overt and subtle racial discrimination occurred. Overall, participants scored better on the post-tests indicating (a) a heightened awareness of the ethical concerns at play and (b) the effectiveness of the workshops. The authors noted, however, that tests must go beyond self-reporting and measure actual behavioral change, which the REST does.
The Self and Other Awareness Project (SOAP)

Originally designed by Colvin-Burque (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007) in 2001, the Self and Other Awareness Project (SOAP) promotes the advancement of cultural competency skills. Specifically, the model focuses on topics such as “diversity and culture; power, inequality, and stratification; minority and majority groups; and prejudice and discrimination” (p. 226). Created for an undergraduate minority-grouped course, SOAP’s primary objects are:

(1) to foster students’ ability and willingness to recognize and explore cultural diversity; (2) to facilitate students’ acknowledgement of their own cultural identity; (3) to increase student knowledge related to minority-group concepts, and majority-minority group dynamics; and (4) to develop skills in cross-cultural communication, in preparation for working in a diverse society (p. 226).

The SOAP model includes a variety of activities including “self-evaluation, large and small group activities, journals, videos, guest speakers, and Lensperson assignments [five homework assignments to support cultural competence development]” (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007, p. 226). The Color-Blind Racial attitudes scale (CoBRAS), studied by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, and Browne (2000), measured any attitude changes. The CoBRAS captured data through an objective, self-administered 20-question survey using the Likert scale. As with the Quick-REST, post-test results indicated significant change from the earlier pre-tests. Specifically, authors noted differences for the following objective areas (in contrast to the subjective TMAS by Ponterotto et al., 1998): unawareness of racial privilege, unawareness to blatant racial issues, and unawareness to institutional discrimination (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007). Further, the authors noted significant differences between white and black students. White students were less aware of racial privilege, blatant racial issues, and institutional discrimination when compared to black students on the pretest. Both the model and survey together seek to assess and enlighten attitudes in the areas of race, gender, age, ability, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

The Inclusionary Cultural Model

This model allows students to understand how their own cultural backgrounds shape their lives and how individuals from other cultures evolve from their own experiences as well. It allows the participants to move from the unknown to the known and to distinguish between family and cultural rules. In turn, this process has “a tremendous impact on attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, actions, feelings, and most importantly, expectations about how others should act, feel, and believe” (Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992, p. 34). Once students have a better understanding of themselves and their background, they will be more receptive to didactic materials on other cultures.

The entire program comprises several steps performed in a classroom setting. First, students divided by cultural background by referring to childhood memories and traditions. The authors noted that “some students will use only a single ethnic identity (Chinese, Cuban, English, German, Mexican, Puerto Rican) or combined identities (African-American, Italian-American, Japanese-Peruvian), while others may include religious affiliations (Irish-Catholic, Guamanian-
Hindu, Lebanese-Moslem, New York-Jew, Scottish-German-Southern Baptist), or other combinations” (Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992, p. 31).

Students then considered other perspectives including differing cultural backgrounds and traditions. This process allowed students to identify other cultures as “most like mine” or “least like mine” thus revealing any possible bias. Students discussed their childhood memories, traditions, and behaviors. Specifically, “they are encouraged to try to remember any of the admonitions, sayings, or rhymes they heard as children” (Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992, pp. 31-32). Next, students had to:

discriminate those behaviors that were most likely family-specific. They discover that what they thought was cultural may have been family-idiosyncratic in nature.
Alternatively, they realize that what they believed were family rules for behavior may have been culturally consistent with others in their subgroup (p. 32).

In the final stage of this exercise, similarities and differences with respect to family responsibilities, roles, religion, and behaviors led to interactive discussions. Nakanishi and Rittner (1992) noted that most students do not immediately understand how profoundly their cultural backgrounds affect beliefs and decisions. Further, students “may have an unrealistic expectation that minority content will teach them sufficient information about specific cultures to enable them to work comfortably with those populations” (p. 29). This “cross-learning process . . . [enabled] them to generalize more didactic material on broad, cultural components” (p. 29), thus allowing them to “recognize behaviors and attitudes most likely to be culturally influenced regardless of the specific cultural content” (p. 30) and to learn what shapes values and traditions.

Intergroup Interaction

Eisenchas and Trevaskes (2007) highlighted four different case studies at Griffith University in Australia that focused on intercultural exchanges in various settings—from the closely controlled environment of the classroom to the broader campus setting and ultimately to the greater surrounding community. Through films, discussions, group essays, and intercultural interactions, the instructors expected students to “recognise the conscious and unconscious acting out of cultural mores as situational and not necessarily universal” (p. 417). The implications, then, are clear. If students realize that culture is situational, then they can adapt to different and unfamiliar situations, customs, and people. One problem though, according to Eisenchas and Trevaskes, is that no one will take ownership of the task: cultural competence is always either someone else’s problem or “taken for granted” (p. 414).

Future Directions

Challenges to university administrators in beginning cross-curriculum cultural competency initiatives include a lack of precedent and a wide array of operational definitions. While Rogers-Sirin and Sirin (2009), Colvin-Burque et al. (2007), and Nakanishi and Rittner (1992), are explicit in their methods, universities have yet to adopt these models universally. The REST model, while concrete, focuses only on a specific target audience. Broad and less tangible principles, such as those recommended by Tharp (2012) or Anderson (2008), place the
development of program specifics on the institution. While no one would dispute that carefully considering approaches to curriculum development sounds like a profitable or necessary path (among Tharp’s recommendations), Tharp and others are reticent on specifics.

On the positive side, the literature provides an emergent scaffold upon which a university can construct a plausible, coherent plan using operational definitions of cultural competence, from self-reports as described by Ponterotto et al. (1998) to the more recent methods and ideas of those described above. Administrators, while preceded by few pioneers, have wide latitude to root initiatives in the best practices of prior studies in a national Zeitgeist that is ready to accept cultural competence training.

**References**


