

Stimulating Critical Thinking in U.S Business Students through the Inclusion of International Students

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Students enroll in college with different expectations, aptitudes, and cultural backgrounds. Research supports the need for faculty to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable discussing cultural sensitive issues. As the business world is becoming more global, critical thinking and the ability to form and articulate thoughts proficiently have become essential competencies for effective communication in all avenues of life. Discussion and Multicultural Education as methods of teaching have the potential in aiding the development of critical thinking skills of students. Moreover, students' intellectual progress by means of the discussions enhances from critically evaluating views from global perspectives. This paper provides an argument as to the importance of faculty being knowledgeable of the cultural and sociopolitical history of international students to better foster a classroom climate of respect to ensure that the discussion perspectives from all students are inclusive and valued.

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes more diverse so do higher learning institutions around the country and world. Sue (2010) proposes that the increasing diversity in the United States is possibly best reflected in our classrooms where students of all nationalities represent a microcosm of multicultural relationships in modern society. The notion of cultural retooling has been an important construct currently under examination in the global business environment (Molinsky, 2013), which arguably should be extended to the classroom where students first come into contact with the business profession and the social microcosm of American society. Cultural retooling is the theory that an individual working for a business with a different background will have to “retool”, or reinterpret and present in an incongruent fashion to their own beliefs, in order to communicate their intentions across to the receiving business culture paradigm (Molinsky, 2013). Unfortunately, feelings of dissonance, confusion and marginalization can interfere with the ability for different cultures to work together. Therefore, the classroom is ultimately the ideal setting where students begin to understand how to function together in an ever increasing globalized and international economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although this may be an ideal representation of diversity, the nature of identifying and processing multicultural issues within both society and the classroom requires certain competencies so that certain issues, such as marginalization, discrimination and prejudice are not inadvertently perpetuated within the learning environment. For instance, Sue (2010) found that interactions between students and teachers often polarized students and teachers' roles rather than contributed to mutual respect and understanding about culture, among other issues. Thus the danger of creating "pedagogical impediments" to the learning environment (Quarles, 2011, pg. 844) may be more common and perpetuated by educators than is within awareness. Arguably, the classroom and higher education represent the ideology of appreciation to diversity, openness to new experiences and respect for the individuality of each person and their representative demographic backgrounds.

As a pervasive academic term, critical thinking is 'seldom clearly or comprehensively defined' (Petress, 2004). Critical thinking basically involves a set of skills, such as analyzing, arguing, synthesizing, evaluating and applying. Critical thinking has become an essential competency for people in the new information age and the global economy society (Mason, 2007). Modeling the pedagogy of discussion provides a demonstration of a method to develop critical thinking skills at any level of the educational process (Helterbran, 2007).

Researchers studying globalization of higher education agree that all undergraduates require contact with and understanding of other nations, languages, and cultures in order to develop the appropriate level of competence to handle the increasingly complex and ill-structured nature of professional work and to function effectively in the rapidly emerging global environment (Ainsworth, 2013). Knight (2004) proposed that the preparation of graduates who have a strong knowledge and skill base in intercultural relations and communications is considered by many academics as one of the strongest rationales for internationalizing the teaching and learning experience of students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

In view of the increasing business globalization trend, the development and implementation of teaching/learning strategies appropriate for business curricula is critical for the success of graduates who can think critically and work with others from diverse cultures. As corporations become increasingly global, many more graduates need to be able to function in a global environment. The increased importance placed on international business education carries the teacher's responsibility of encouraging students to develop the skills and competencies to successfully function in a global business environment (Vielba and Edelshain, 1995).

Discussion

Many international students who move to the United States specifically to take up their studies may find some challenges with adjusting to a different country. For example, learning how to communicate with the locals in their language, adjusting to a different time zone, climate, and food can all be significant adjustments. For many, the process may seem endless and may include mood swings ranging between mild depression and exhilaration (Chan, 2012). Colleges and universities must be sensitive to the adjustment of these students so that the international students can fully participate in the collegiate experience. This study attempts to contribute to the internationalization of higher education literature, and business and intercultural communication. A major priority for this study is to emphasize the importance of preparing students for a globalized economy and to assist students in coping with, and benefiting from, cultural diversity. The ingredients of furthering the classroom to better prepare students for a global economy includes a more conscientious strive for higher education to better incorporate international students into the classroom, increase critical thinking skills that are mutually respectful for students of varying backgrounds and augmenting faculty abilities to navigate and deconstruct the complexities of oppressive microcosms while at the same time facilitate and promote social change through delicate facilitate of the classroom.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is the leading global center for higher education. In the 2012-2013 academic year the United States hosted a record 819,644 international students, 21 percent of all students studying abroad worldwide (Ruiz, 2013). As many U.S. metro areas become more globally engaged, the relationship international students have with their home markets, particularly large and emerging cities, are a significant potential source of demand for U.S. metro economies. For these reasons, it is important to understand metropolitan trends in where foreign students study, from which cities they come and where many students work temporarily once they graduate (Ruiz, 2014). A segment of Ruiz's (2014) report revealed:

- Foreign students are concentrated in U.S. metropolitan areas. They contributed approximately \$21.8 billion in tuition and \$12.8 billion in other spending—representing a major services export—to those metropolitan economies over the five-year period.
- Most foreign students come from large fast-growing cities in emerging markets. Ninety-four (94) foreign cities together accounted for more than half of all students on an F-1 visa between 2008 and 2012. Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, Hyderabad and Riyadh were the five foreign cities that sent the most higher education students to the United States during that time.
- Forty-five (45) percent of foreign student graduates extend their visas to work in the same metropolitan area as their college or university. Metro areas that retain high shares of their foreign graduates under the temporary Optional Practical Training (OPT) program tend to be either large diversified economies (e.g., New York, Los Angeles), or specialized labor markets that align closely with foreign graduates' training (e.g., Honolulu, Seattle, Las Vegas).
- These findings suggest that foreign students can provide important economic benefits to their U.S. metropolitan destinations—serving as bridges back to their growing home cities and offering valuable skills to local employers. More metropolitan leaders should emulate leading practices that capitalize on the knowledge and relationships of foreign students to strengthen local economies while also maximizing students' educational and professional experiences in the United States.

Importance of Global Inclusion

According to Gutierrez-Gomez (2002), there was a dire need to create an environment where all students, including international students, felt more comfortable and safe about discussing culturally sensitive issues. Success for all students depends largely on how capable higher education institutions are in building meaningful pedagogical bridges across different cultural systems. Simple tolerance is not enough; institutions should focus on inclusion, cultural sensitivity and respect. Inclusion refers to the realization that certain groups have historically been excluded from participation in mainstream society. Discrimination is likely to emerge not when behavior would look prejudicial, but when other rationales can be offered for prejudicial behavior, and when we attempt or pretend not to notice differences (Sue, 2010). This is also related to ambiguity in the classroom.

Difficult racial dialogues are perceived differently between people of color and Whites. The invisibility of interactional dynamics that may trigger intense reactions from students of color is often outside the level of conscious awareness of the White students, and even the professor (Sue, 2010). Because American culture is centered on White norms, most White people do not consider themselves members of a racial or cultural group and are not pressed to examine that aspect of their identity, making it easier to dismiss or minimize the importance of racial identity to one's overall identity construction (Bolgatz 2005; Jensen 2002). There is a profound tendency to downplay, ignore, or minimize the impact of cultural discrimination and exclusion in America. The reality of having to deal with such treatment on a daily basis impacts the perspectives one develops because of the way exclusion isolates students from the rest of the school community. Faculty and students alike should question; how does this impact the

learning process? How might this impact my ability to learn from a different perspective with a known growing business globalization trend?

The research tradition of the contact hypothesis is based on interpersonal interaction. The contact hypothesis stems from the work of Gordon Allport (see Allport, 1979) and is based on the simple notion that prejudicial attitudes are developed from a lack of information about various others because of our societal tradition of segregation. This presumes that placing peoples of different cultures into contact with one another leads to improved attitudes and relations (Wright & Tolan 2009). But as can be observed from the integration of public schools, simply putting people together in physical proximity does not necessarily lead to harmonious relationships. In order for the contact hypothesis to be valid a number of conditions must be met (Allport, 1979; Wright & Tolan, 2009). Namely, the context must: (a) have equal status among group members, (b) create meaningful personal encounters, (c) involve interdependence and cooperation to reach common goals, (d) disconfirm prevailing stereotyped beliefs, and (e) demonstrate normative support for group equality.

DISCUSSIONS AND CRITICAL THINKING

With the development of advanced communication and technology, higher education has seen a shift into becoming more globalized. A common trend in the advances of globalization include a class of both within group and between group ideologies concerning traditional and modern values. Globalization of the learning environment creates a unique opportunity for the intersection of modern and traditional values to negotiate how these personal constructs effect the way we conceptualize multicultural education. Modernity, or the individual cultural adaptation and incorporation of values as the reflection of a changing society (Chang, 2012) is an ever increasing construct for professors to understand when acknowledging different ideologies, attitudes and behaviors within the classroom. The concept of modernity arose when societies changed from an agrarian unit of living to a predominately industrialized modality. Globalization implies these historically different societies as intersecting, along with its implications of social hierarchy, religious values, gender roles, coping, motivation and decision-making. Societal modernization includes concepts such as democratization, industrialization and internationalization in politics, education and the economy. However, most nations continue to retain varying degrees of traditional customs, which play into the microcosm of the classroom dynamics. The classroom may initiate a nonjudgmental, conducive and safe space where diverse ideas are exchanged in order to further a globalized and unified future.

On the other hand, traditionality represents the perseverance of historical values reminiscent reaction to changes at the societal and global level (Chang, 2012). Traditional values are important to respect, especially when attempting to understand a student's point of view. The negotiation and facilitating of what may seem as a clash of traditional versus modern values is important to build awareness as a professor advancing the principles of multicultural sensitivities within a global classroom. What may be viewed as a student appearing disengaged and uninterested in a heated debate may easily translate as a student attempting to preserve one's image and maintaining social harmony with his/ her peers.

Another example provided by Dr. Wei-Wen Chang (2010) documented that an American classroom value includes increasing students' sense of autonomy and assertiveness where "speaking for oneself is a critical for learning" (p. 35). However, many cultures value silence as essential to learning. Without appropriate recognition to embrace and value different experiences, values that are different from the American ethnocentric perspective will continue to be marginalized or even disappear from a setting where such values are essential to advancing education. Depending on the professor's ability to understand, communicate and build a bridge of understanding and acceptance between peers and between the peer-teacher relationship is important in wanting to create an environment where critical thinking continues to be encouraged rather than shut-down. A hallmark of human beings is our capacity to learn from others. As means of intentionally increasing students' mutual respect, critical thinking and understanding of diverse students, classroom interactions and discussions may prove to be helpful. Such

understanding entails a respect for the potential innovation that can be derived from attention to solutions inherent in cultural diversity.

In the same 2010 article, Dr. W. Chang studied the appropriateness of classroom group activities as either perpetuating segregation or breaking down barriers depending on educators' abilities to facilitate the process of group activities. Examples are given where the instructors' aims of group activities are to increase engagement, respect and critical thinking between students of diverse backgrounds. However, the activities may easily translate into individuals turned off by one another and wanting to strengthen their own identities rather than a challenge of identifying with group differences.

Multicultural Education and Critical Thinking

Multicultural Education could shed some light in being deliberate in the inclusion of international students. Banks (1997) discussed the dimensions of Multicultural Education: content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction and an empowering school culture. The goal in Banks' dimensions is to create schools that encourage the full development of all students. Furthermore, Gay (1994) suggested that Multicultural Education should be a regular part of education in the United States for three major reasons: (1) the social realities of USA society; (2) the influence of culture and ethnicity on human growth and development; and (3) the conditions of effective teaching and learning.

A reality that underscores the need for multicultural education is the high rates of segregation along racial, social class, ethnic, and residential lines that continue to exist in U.S. society and schools (Gay, 1997). Most people live in cultural and ethnic isolations. This segregation produces social and curricular consequences that higher educational institutions should strategically confront. Gay (1997) proposed that because the "cultural sites," actual, and "existential places" where students and teachers live their lives are fundamentally different, they create some referential gaps that can make teaching and learning in ethnically and culturally pluralistic classrooms extremely difficult. This lack of multicultural interactions must be compensated for by higher educational institutions being strategic and deliberate in preparing students for a global society.

Although the United States has a large group of diverse cultures, many tend to interact mainly with identical cultures. The United States is not only separated by cultures, but also separated by racial and economic lines. There is an absence of interactions with people who are different. Higher education institutions should be intentional in teaching students about cultural diversity and providing opportunities for these students to learn, live and work together as preparation for a global society. Moreover, it should be understood that Multicultural Education is an ongoing process requiring long-term investments of time and effort by all stakeholders. Gurin et al. (2002) make a convincing argument for why exposure to diversity experiences might foster the development of more complex forms of thought, including the ability to think critically. Drawing on research that speaks to the social aspects of cognitive development, they point out that students will be more likely to engage in effortful and complex modes of thought when they encounter new or novel situations that challenge current and comfortable modes of thinking.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2014), in Fall 2011, of those full-time instructional faculty whose race/ethnicity was known, 79% were White (44% were White males and 35% were White females), 6% were Black, 4% were Hispanic, 9% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native or two or more races. Furthermore, among full-time professors, 84% were White (60% were White males and 25% were White females), 4% were Black, 3% were Hispanic, 8% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The differential demographic among students and university personnel have profound implications and challenges for reforming higher

education. Yet, the disparities are not fully recognized or accepted by many higher educational institutions.

If universities and faculty members are serious about the retention of international students, students of color and other marginalized groups, it is important for faculty to explore their own cultural biases and examine the ways in which the culture of the campus may conflict with diverse students' cultural identities and experiences. Given the curriculum that drives programs, it is important to deliberately have some type of policy or guidance to establish an environment that supports discussions related to culturally sensitive issues (Norman, 2012). Furthermore, faculty members also need to enter into dialogues with colleagues and learn from the experience of others in similar circumstances.

Many educators believe that effectively facilitating difficult dialogues on sensitive topics such as race, sexual orientation, etc., represents significant opportunities to promote goodwill and understanding (Willow, 2008). To create a safe climate for discussions that is inclusive to all students, we recommended faculty to:

- ▶ Become knowledgeable of different worldviews including participating in diversity activities and initiative outside the classroom and campus setting
- ▶ Understand the socio political history of marginalized and international groups
- ▶ Plan questions ahead with particular interest paid to how diversity challenges may influence students' perception of the American classroom
- ▶ Prepare the students with ground rules and expectations with as much transparency as possible. Students may be more willing to foster relationships with the professor who is clear and honest in their intentions.
- ▶ In the classroom, control the process and not the content. In particularly sensitive situations, it may be important for faculty to foster an understanding of mutual empathy and respect.
- ▶ All students should have equal access in participating and sharing their opinions. Avoid utilizing the same approach in all settings. What may be comfortable to the professor (ie. repeatedly asking students to answer questions within a huge classroom setting) may not be comfortable for the students.
- ▶ Stay appraised on social norms in the classroom. Are certain groups clustering? Do you recognize certain students are constantly being ignored in activities?
- ▶ Express your appreciation to the participating students, acknowledge the difficulties in participating in such dialogues and normalize the feelings of apprehension, fear, anger, and other emotions that one may have experienced during the activities.
- ▶ Acknowledge that a power differential will always exist within the teacher-student dynamic but that the teacher continues to appreciate different viewpoints. Although an egalitarian relationship is not possible, minimizing the fear of being punished, ridiculed or marginalized is an important step in helping students understand how to navigate the social and global process where certain demographic identities hold more control and power than others.
- ▶ Each opinion represents a single, unique perspective. If students disagree with the professor (or vice versa), examine how the perspective is different and appreciate this difference to aid critical thinking.
- ▶ Consult and work closely with colleagues who share similar perspectives and goals. It can be isolating and more difficult to engage in these classroom practices without social support of those around you.

CONCLUSION

Faculty may be hired to teach a particular course, but their role may be more appropriately defined as creating an environment and providing appropriate stimuli for students to master a particular set of concepts, skills, and/or attitudes (Lyons, McIntosh, & Kysilka, 2003). Classroom discussion is a traditional model of teaching at the college level. It is an approach that can be used to strengthen content by enhancing and reinforcing comprehension, offering students an opportunity to engage in academic

discourse, providing a forum for students to develop and exchange views and ideas in a thoughtful, purposive, not to mention civilized, fashion (Helterbran, 2007).

The theoretical rationales invoked to explain the role of discussion in promoting students' academic achievement derive largely from sociocognitive and sociocultural theory (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey & Alexander, 2009). According to Piaget (1928), social interaction is a primary means of promoting individual reasoning. Similarly, Vygotsky (1986) conceived of learning as a culturally embedded and socially mediated process in which discourse plays a primary role in the creation and acquisition of shared meaning making. According to Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alvarez (1995), when students interact with others in a group in deep and meaningful ways, the outcomes or results that are produced are beyond the abilities and dispositions of the individual students who compose the group. Students bring to the discussion unique social and cultural values, background experiences, and prior knowledge and assumptions. Through the interactions, learners incorporate ways of thinking and behaving that foster the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support transfer to other situations that require independent problem solving (Anderson et al., 2001).

Proactive faculty members must continuously seek to understand the perspectives of students, not only through research reports and talking with colleagues, but also through listening intently without judgment to individual students themselves (Norman, 2012). Faculty should incorporate international students' knowledge base into the richer environment that is created when more diverse perspectives are represented. An atmosphere of respect and inclusion allow students to question with confidence, withhold judgments and to learn from every situation (Norman, 2012). Classroom discussions that take place in a safe environment are encouraging and of great value to the entire class. These discussions provide a setting for intellectual exploration for students while providing opportunities to blend life experiences, basic knowledge, and practice the skill of thinking. However, critical thinking development may be impeded within a learning environment where the student may feel their differing opinions are not respected. For instance, students with shared cultural experiences and worldviews working alone may arrive at a conclusion too quickly without reviewing other perspectives. The opportunity for a broad discussion that is inclusive to students with different experiences and different cultures may present different perspectives. Inside and outside of the classroom and the business world, like-mindedness may create rigidity and decrease critical thinking. These dialogue exchanges could strengthen content by enhancing comprehension and offer opportunities to develop and exchange views and ideas, thus promoting critical thinking skills.

As students improve their critical thinking skills, instructors should witness students recognizing and/or appreciating ideas not previously considered. Furthermore, students will begin challenging their own perceptions, thus allowing for open-minded dialogues (Helterbran, 2007). The use of discussions could be the central component of rationality in the classroom. An environment where students feel valued and safe could demonstrate the social values of inclusion, respect and understanding that ought to be encouraged. Thinking for oneself, understanding that this life is replete with uncertainties and emergent situations and circumstances, and that one's thoughts or ideas are likely to be subject to revision is the very essence of effective discussion in the college classroom (Helterbran, 2007).

If a goal is to impress upon students the importance of maintaining an open mind and the valuing of diverse points of view, instructors must make room in classroom settings to underscore student voice in this respect (Helterbran, 2007). Diversity within a classroom of individuals is not all that is required for a critical dialogue. Fear can co-exist with discussions regarding sensitive topics and fear may impede the necessary growth for students, as well as faculty. Fear of the unknown can shut down rational inquiry as surely as the absence of diversity of thought. People experience the world subjectively, from different perspectives; there is no reason for denying the existence of a shared reality.

In many metropolitan colleges and universities, international students and recent immigrants are an especially significant population. Professors must be sensitive to their students' ethnicity, language, religion, culture, and sexual orientation, for each of these factors influences students' learning paradigms (Lyons, McIntosh & Kysilka, 2003). Discussing ways to talk about cultural issues when they arise in the classroom are areas for faculty to further explore and to continue creating opportunities for all students to

feel included. While there may be debate on the merit of various initiatives that have fostered the increase of enrollment of international students, it is the author's belief that our society becomes stronger when all students are open to learning from the others' experiences.

Over the course of their lives, with exception of sleep, people will spend more time working than virtually any other activity. In the workplace, graduates are likely to encounter cultural differences. The collegiate setting can aid in the preparation of working with diverse groups in a global market. Much support has been made that a diverse workplace can benefit immensely from critical thinking. Not only does it give a reason for people of diverse backgrounds to work together in day to day business operations, it also encourages teamwork and gives each employee a chance to impact the future of the organization.

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