

Curricular Interventions for Pre-Service Teachers: Cultural Palooza and Self Identity

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Abstract

This presentation is inspired by three culminating projects included in the multiculturalism and education course taught at my university. The course is designed to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop a critical and reflexive understanding of who they are as individuals and social beings, examining how consciousness is/was constructed, and promoting understanding through the complexity of difference. In addition, the objectives encourage understanding and promote a more active/critical learner/citizen participation in the society in which we live, as well as globally.

These course objectives have been realized through three projects; the social justice field experience, the cultural self-identity project, and the Cultural Palooza event. The social justice component consists of the pre-service teachers working within local area community organizations identified to provide needed services to disadvantaged families and youth, and schools whose student population serve lower-income and working poor families. The pre-service teachers work with children on art projects, which reflect the child's own cultural identity and lived experiences. These projects are displayed at the Cultural Palooza at the end of the semester.

1. Introduction

In her 2009 TED talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie describes the danger of “the single story” told about racial and cultural others.

(http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html) She says, “If I had not grown up in Nigeria and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, White foreigner.”

She continues on to say, “...show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”

The power to tell the stories of others is, Adichie argues, one of the most effective ways in which racial and cultural diversity is flattened and the experiences of racialized and othered peoples erased. The call to complicate the single story and to facilitate a multitude of stories, is in line with scholarship in fields including critical race theory, and critical pedagogy, which examine how cultural and racial stereotypes are formed and sustained [1], [2], [4], [5], [6]. Scholars working in these fields name the importance and significance of racialized and otherwise marginalized peoples telling their own stories, what Richard Delgado (2000) has called *counterstorytelling*. The value of counterstorytelling is the challenge such narratives can offer against mainstream accounts.

2. The Project

There are two foci I use in my multicultural education classes: 1) identity formation and 2) social justice, which together address the issues discussed above. In 2000 I developed the Cultural Palooza Project, which aims to develop a critical and reflexive understanding of who we are as individuals and social beings, examine how consciousness is/was constructed and promote understanding through the complexity of difference. The Cultural Palooza is three separate projects designed to provide students with opportunities to develop a critical and reflexive understanding of who they are as individuals and social beings, examine how consciousness is/was constructed, and promote an understanding through the complexity of difference. The

three separate assignments that make up Cultural Palooza are: the social justice service learning, Zanadu: The Imaginary Place art project, and the cultural self-identity project.

2.1 Social justice & service learning

Assignment description provided in the syllabus

Reflection is an important part of the Social Justice Project. Throughout the semester we have asked you to work in various organizations doing multiple things. In the final part of the Social Justice Project we now ask you to reflect on the learning that took place over the course of the ten hours. Below is a list of questions that you need to answer in "The Three Levels of Reflection" in a 3-5-page paper. You will not be able to address every question in a paper of this length but you are expected to address each level of reflection. Although you can be creative in the writing/format of the paper we expect you to follow rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Also, there is a rubric for the paper that will guide you in developing the paper.

A commitment to social justice is a necessary component to any pre-service teacher class, especially one that is focused on multiculturalism. The first assignment in Cultural Palooza is the social justice service learning assignment. Service learning is the blending of service goals and learning goals in such a way that both occur and are enriched by the other. For their service learning, pre-service teachers are required to work 15 hours within local area community organizations identified to provide needed services to disadvantaged families and youth, and schools whose student population serve lower-income and working poor families. In the past students have worked at a homeless shelter, safe-house for sexually abused children, literacy program, soup kitchen and women's shelter. Their participation has ranged from gardening to painting to working with children on their academic skills.

The intended learning outcomes of the service learning project are to promote an understanding of the role of service in education and to develop strategies for combining community service and service learning. It is my hope that students gain a deeper understanding of urban culture and society (values, beliefs and practices), through direct interaction with community people. Students are told to approach the project as an exchange for what they will learn from the experience. Their primary goal should be achieving a sense of mutual support between themselves and those with whom they develop and carry out the activity. According to Community Engaged Scholarship in the Academy, "community engagement as a core mission of higher education. Students, faculty, and community partners all benefit from moving the classroom to the community (and back again)" [3]. Students are exposed to cultures different than their own and their worldview and hopefully commitment to making a difference is expanded.

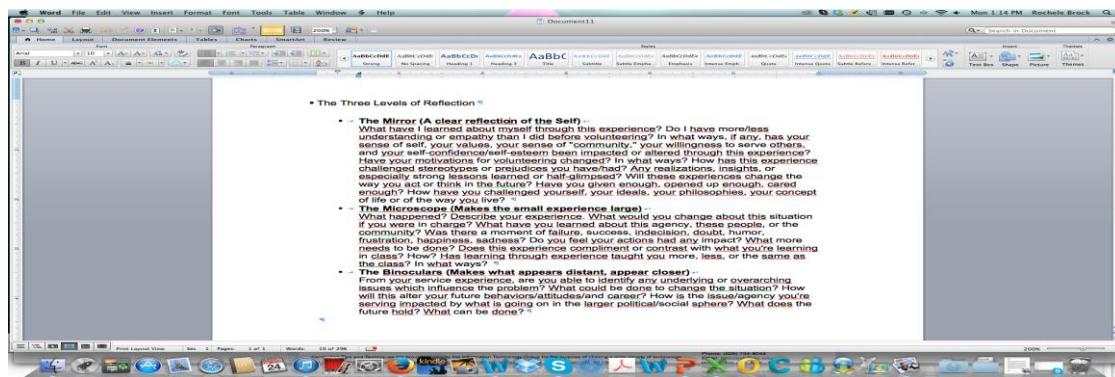


Figure 1 The Three Levels of Reflection assignment description

Once students complete the field work they are required to critically reflect on the experience (see figure 1). The **reflective** component of the assignment requires students to utilize higher order thinking skills to make sense of and extend the formal learning derived from the experience. Students are asked to reflect on their

experiences using The Three Levels of Reflection, (see above) which has them look at self, society and their place within society.

2.2 Xanadu: The Imaginary Place Art Project

In addition to the above, pre-service teachers work with children (k-12) in afterschool programs at local schools on Xanadu art projects. These art projects reflect the child's own cultural identity and lived experiences. The project, *Xanadu: The Imaginary Place*, asks children to visually and orally create their dreams for the future. My students work with the children to help them identify and choose the elements of an imaginary place. The k-12 students either work as a group on a large group art project or the work individually on their own projects. The decision about which one to do is based on the amount of students we are working with, the number of my students participating in the project and the amount of time we have to complete the project. Regardless of group or individual project the purpose remains the same—creating your perfect world. In addition to the art portion of Zanadu, students must write a description of their perfect world. Depending on the grade level, students will write anything from one sentence to several pages. In past classes students have either divided their service learning hours between working with the afterschool program and the community experience or concentrated completely on one of the experiences.

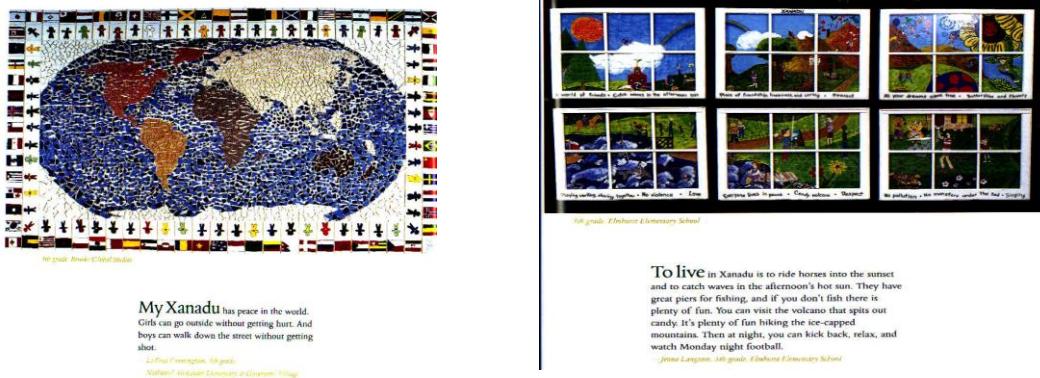


Fig 2 Xanadu Art Projects

2.3 Representations and Controlling Images Art Project

Assignment description provided in the syllabus

Throughout this semester the course readings, films, and class discussions have analyzed the various ways society both constructs and portrays the individual. The Representation and Controlling Images Art Project is your opportunity to express your understanding of how you are represented and how this representation attempts to control how you view yourself and how others view you. Although the images may be false they are nevertheless believed by many and sometimes internalized by the individual. The theme of your final assignment, Representation and Controlling Images—requires you to answer the question— How do you see yourself and what is the difference between how you view yourself and how others view you? Your Art Project is a visual representation expressing this theme through drawing, photography, media, etc. In this assignment your job is to provide a visual representation of the liminal space which exists between these separate views. In addition to the art project you need to submit a 3-4 page double-spaced explanation.



Figure 3 Self Identity Art Project

The second component to Cultural Palooza is the *Representation and Controlling Images Art Project*, which seeks to have students answer the critical questions of: Who am I? How do I understand my culture? My ethnicity? My nationality? How does my understanding of my culture affect my perception of self? In this assignment the students design a piece of art that answers the above stated questions (see figure 3). The art project is the last assignment of the semester, after students have had a semester of readings and discussions that are designed to help students understand the factors that control and influence how they have been constructed. During this activity, student learn to see their own stories as both single and multi-faceted—a direct first step in building solidarity across lines of difference.

Figure 3 is an art project from one of my students. The plywood circus cut out is 3'x3' and represents the circus of life the students feels that they participate in. In the 3-5 page paper students have to write that describes their art project the student states

Middle class ideals shaped how I act and react, what I think, the way that I view things, and the way that I feel. These ingrained principles make me who I am, but I have realized that I can choose if I want to be this social construction. The real power and freedom comes from being able to step out of this ‘constructed’ society to decide if I will spend my time and money contributing to the perpetuation of the circus. Will I allow myself to be a manipulated player? Is this who I want to be? Can I walk away and not be a part of it? Or now that I know, if I should take a spectator seat, will I be able to just sit back and enjoy the seat.

3. Cultural Palooza



Figure 4 The Event

The culminating event, Cultural Palooza, brings together the three components of the project and creates a place for students, community and the university to celebrate. Cultural Palooza is held on campus and the audience has traditionally been parents of the children from the schools, as well as the parents of my pre-service teachers, community members, university administration and staff, and the pre-service teachers and their friends. Students in the pre-service education classes display their self-identity art work and the k-12 students display their Zanadu art projects. In addition to the display of art, local groups are invited to perform. Cultural Palooza becomes the opportunity for not only university students to display and discuss their identity art pieces but importantly for community members that do not often come to a college campus to come and participate in a safe space.

4. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that action research is relevant for multicultural education pre-service teachers. Ultimately pre-service teachers better understand their culture, privilege, power, and responsibility in society. From this presentation the audience will be able to see the development of this project to creating a clearer self and social consciousness of the environment in which they live. The objectives of this presentation are threefold: 1) Expose others to this inclusive and effective project; 2) Provide the audience with the tools to expand and/or implement the project/s into their own programs and 3) Emphasize theory-into-practice learning and its contributions to the learning of future teachers.

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