

It Can Be Taught: Explorations into Teaching the Foundations for Multicultural Effectiveness in an Online Course

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Abstract

Connections are drawn between the development of intercultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and multicultural effectiveness. A case is made that fostering particular critical thinking skills in courses enhances interpersonal skills, and that enhanced interpersonal skills facilitate movement along Bennett's proposed continuum of development of intercultural sensitivity. As a result of these changes, students should become more multiculturally effective. Discussion centers on how to integrate these qualities (e.g., critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills) and facilitate them in courses (especially online courses). A call for research on how to test these assumptions with experiences beyond the classroom is introduced.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, multicultural effectiveness, experiential learning

Introduction

Educators have begun to call for experiential learning that focuses on developmental issues (Bennett, 1993; Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Ellis, 2006; Thomsen, 2002). The main argument is that education can and should foster skills in young people that best position them to interact successfully with others in the broader social world – a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural. Indeed, recent work demonstrates that fostering intercultural competence can enhance Anglo–Navajo relations (Debebe, 2008), that multiculturalism can be successfully measured (Fields, 2010; van de Vijver, Breugelmans, & Schalk-Soekar, 2008), and that identification with the broader group can be enhanced by actually valuing difference (Luijters, van der Zee, & Otten, 2008; Mallett et al., 2011).

Purpose

The main goal of this paper is to outline how, in the authors' opinion, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and intercultural sensitivity can be enhanced as a precursor to increased multicultural effectiveness. The motivation for this is straightforward; the authors believe that enhancing these individual skills is related

to increased multicultural effectiveness. Van Oudenhoorn & van der Zee (2002) discuss the development of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) in an effort to predict multicultural effectiveness. Although the goal was not to assess students using the MPQ, looking at the subscales of the MPQ does provide insight into the types of skills that are related to multicultural effectiveness and, as a result, give guidance to the types of assignments one could create to foster advancement in such skills. The MPQ assesses: (1) cultural empathy; (2) open-mindedness; (3) emotional stability; (4) social initiative; and (5) flexibility. These dimensions led the authors to develop a critical thought model for the course (outlined below), and two assignments the authors felt would foster enhancement of several of the MPQ dimensions: a tolerance for ambiguity assignment and use of a diversity philosophy.

Literature Review

In order to draw connections, however, between critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and intercultural sensitivity, it is important to outline for the reader what the authors mean by each of these. While outlining each of these, the authors make connections to an Internet-based course on the politics and psychology of hatred that they use in an attempt to foster and develop these skills. It is the authors' belief that critical thinking skills are an essential precursor to interpersonal effectiveness, and that interpersonal skills are an essential prerequisite for multicultural effectiveness. Details of relevant citations are provided when those resources have been used specifically to make particular decisions about how to structure the course and/or design specific assignments within the course.

Definitions of Terms

Critical thinking

Critical thinking has been defined and redefined over the years (Doherty, Hansen, and Kaya, 2007; Kuhn, 1999), and recent work demonstrates how to foster such skills in online courses (Pachtman, 2012). Additionally, research shows the relationship between critical thinking and exploring assumptions (Kennedy, 2012). Much of the education literature has made connections between critical thinking skills and creativity. Indeed, much has been published in recent years outlining how to use technology to foster creativity and innovation (Vaidyanathan, 2013) and how to develop critical evaluation and leadership skills with online discussion methods (Taylor, 2012). The authors' goal in perusing the critical thinking literature, however, was to find a definition that described what critical thinkers would be like; what would critical thinkers do? The authors found a useful model in Smith's (2002) work. Smith describes seven characteristics of critical thinkers. These characteristics describe what critical thinkers would be like and outline what critical thinkers can do more so or better than non-critical thinkers. According to Smith, critical thinkers: (1) are flexible – they can tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty; (2) identify inherent biases and assumptions; (3) maintain an air of skepticism; (4) separate facts from opinions; (5) do not oversimplify; (6) use logical inference processes; and (7) examine available evidence before drawing conclusions.

The authors felt they could use Smith's (2002) characteristics as identifiable markers to look for in assessing student work. The authors also felt that they could use these markers to design course assignments that would foster growth of these dimensions. If, as Kuhn (1999) suggests, critical thinking is developmental in nature, then it should be possible for course assignments to be designed that would foster growth of the dimensions outlined by Smith (2002).

Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills were defined, again, based on what students would do – how they would act. Although a myriad of resources are available in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature (including some excellent best practice materials such as Keengwe, 2013), the authors found three resources to be particularly useful in defining the kinds of interpersonal skills they expected in the course (Halpern, 1996, 1999; Hansburg & Silberman, 2005; Klaczynski, Gordon, & Fauth, 1997;). The authors provided the interpersonal skills model developed as a result of this literature in a previous publication; that publication (Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, & Johnson, 2009, pp. 49-50) suggests that the etiquette expected of students in an online course includes:

- respect for others (their viewpoints, their values, their beliefs);
- the right to disagree while demonstrating sensitivity to the viewpoints of others;

- taking responsibility for being involved in developing the issues and topics relevant to the course;
- active participation in all elements of the course;
- continual feedback to the instructors about the course, course assignments, and individual viewpoints;
- a commitment to the mutual exchange of ideas. This means we will not isolate definitive "answers" to the issues we raise but we will actively explore and respect the multiple sides to those issues, and
- a responsibility to police ourselves. We are attempting to develop a community and this requires trust. In order to develop trust, we must know that we can share our ideas and not be attacked. This also requires that we allow other class members the same trust and freedom we expect.

Intercultural sensitivity

Bennett (1993, 1998) outlines the following six developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity: (1) denial; (2) defense; (3) minimization; (4) acceptance; (5) adaptation; and (6) integration. As one can see from the levels of the model, movement along this continuum requires experience and practice within a somewhat protected environment. Again, much has been offered in the education literature to assist in developing courses (especially online) that foster, promote, and enhance cultural competence skills. Mangan (1995), for example, provided an early handbook for fostering such skills that focuses on both teacher attitudes and general guidelines for classroom and assignment development. These guidelines provide insight into both how one must think in regards to the classroom and what one should do within that classroom. More recently, Cooper, He, and Levin (2011) focused on developing critical cultural competence skills in teachers. Their guide offers connections to critical thinking, learning activities for educators to use in classrooms, and connections to parents.

The development of online education provides a unique platform (both in terms of challenges and opportunities) to promote multicultural competencies (Kisantas & Talleyrand, 2005). These authors promote a model of self-regulatory learning that assists the teacher in answering the following question, "How does one provide students with practice in developing these critical cultural competence skills?" (Kisantas & Talleyrand, 2005). The authors' goal, then, was to merge these best practice efforts for developing and enhancing critical cultural competence and prepare students for real-world interactions requiring such skills. To merge the acquisition of such skills with real world confidence that these skills can be successfully applied outside the classroom, the authors are focused on civic engagement in these contexts as the beginning point. Intercultural sensitivity, the authors believe, can be added with the tenets of positive youth development (Thomsen, 2002) and civic engagement (service-learning oriented work with the community), to accomplish the goal of nurturing, developing, and enhancing intercultural sensitivity and cross cultural competence.

Putting the concepts together

Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski (2011) suggest that critical reflection skills can be enhanced in such a way that teachers develop more effective multicultural competencies. Osborne, Kriese, and Tobey (2008) present a critical thinking model developed to assist students in articulating the relationships between their own views and the views of others. This is an important starting point in assisting students in developing the interpersonal skills that intercultural sensitivity requires. These researchers provide students with the following description of this four-step model:

- 1) Recitation: state known facts or opinions. A critical component of this step is to acknowledge what aspect(s) of what is being stated is factual and what is based on opinion.
- 2) Exploration: analyze the roots of those opinions or facts. This step requires digging below the surface of what is believed or known and working to discover the elements that have combined to result in that fact or opinion.
- 3) Understanding: involves an awareness of other views and a comprehension of the difference(s) between one's own opinion (and the facts or other opinions upon which that opinion is based) and the opinions of others.
- 4) Appreciation: means a full awareness of the differences between our views and opinions and those of others. To truly appreciate differences, we must be aware of the nature of those

differences. The active dialogue undertaken in the third step (understanding) should lead to an analysis of the opinion as recited by the other. The result should be a complete awareness of the similarities and differences between our own opinions (and the roots of those opinions) and those of the "other" (Osborne, Kriese, & Tobey, 2008, p. 47).

But do enhanced critical thinking skills lead to stronger interpersonal skills? Osborne et al. (2009) addressed this question in research in which students' progress on employing the levels of critical thinking were assessed in relationship to student scores on course etiquette in a course delivered completely online. The course etiquette involved course requirements centering on successful interpersonal skills. Naïve raters assessed students' use of the levels of critical thinking demonstrated through written responses to course assignments, and student use of the qualities of course etiquette (interpersonal skills) in course postings. There is a clear correlation between the two as students assessed by naïve raters as demonstrating the most successful use of interpersonal skills were also assessed by other naïve raters as demonstrating the highest levels of critical thinking in written course assignments (Osborne et al., 2009). Although this is correlational and not causal, the authors use this finding as a first step in building a case for the importance of critical thinking in enhancing interpersonal skills. Further research is needed to determine if this relationship is causal and, if it is, the direction of that causality.

The connection between critical thinking and the development of interpersonal skills in courses is obscured, however, by research showing that even providing students with training in interpersonal skills in online courses is not sufficient because these students lack real-world practice with these skills (Doo, 2006). Intercultural sensitivity and multicultural competence skills do not, usually, occur without nurturing and must be considered in a developmental context (Bennett, 1993; Bennett, 1998; Thomsen, 2002). A fundamental challenge to the educator, then, is to develop classroom experiences that "prepare" the student for cross cultural explorations beyond the classroom, and then to follow that training (preparation) with experiences beyond the classroom in which those skills can be practiced.

For this reason, Osborne, Kriese, and Tobey (2008) call for faculty to connect the growth of these skills to the real world via carefully constructed and guided civic engagement (service-learning) experiences. In other words, fostering these skills within the context of a structured classroom is an essential first step but should be followed with real-world experiences (still somewhat structured) via civic-engagement.

One critical focus of the development of cultural competence skills beyond the classroom is in understanding how people develop relationship and other social skills (Jalongo, 2008; Mishra, 2006; Nells et al., 2011). Experience plays a crucial role in the development of interpersonal relationships, especially when those relationships cross cultural boundaries. As already outlined, Bennett (1986, 1993) provides a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity that assumes that increasing one's experience of cultural differences can lead to a more sophisticated view of difference, and that this more sophisticated view enhances one's intercultural competence – leading, of course, to more effective intercultural relationships.

Method

The Course

The authors built and taught a course with the assumption that students would need to practice intercultural sensitivity skills. Personal biases and values are likely to affect the students' interactions with others. Raising issues without requiring students to explore their biases and values may reinforce prejudices by giving them voice without question. The themes in the course of: (1) social justice; (2) having a voice through vote; (3) condoning hatred through silence; (4) exploring image and stereotypical views of others; (5) environmental hatred; and (6) self-reference thinking assist students in exploring their role in the broader community.

Intercultural sensitivity skills will not develop in isolation, but can be fostered when they are nurtured and practiced. Wang (2011), for example, demonstrates that well-designed service-learning experiences can foster advancements on the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory. Students engaged in service-learning placements as part of a Fellowship program showed significant positive improvement on international

competency, especially in the areas of flexibility/openness, perceived acuity, and personal autonomy. Therefore, these skills can be fostered within a course or semester.

According to Thomsen (2002), research shows that teaching students to cope effectively with their emotions frees up working memory and enhances learning. This is referred to as "positive youth development." The authors glean from this assumption that it would be important to teach students to deal effectively with their emotions before placing them into emotionally-charged community-based civic engagement or multi or cross-cultural experiences (Owen, 2011), or expecting them to be multiculturally effective in study abroad placements or other courses that require critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and intercultural sensitivity. With the goal of developing these intercultural sensitivity skills in our students (building as a foundation, though, critical thinking and interpersonal skills), the authors developed an Internet course entitled the Politics and Psychology of Hatred. With this course, the authors set out, specifically, to assist students in uncovering, exploring, analyzing, and learning from their personal biases and values. The four-step critical thought model outlined above was used to facilitate this uncovering process. The students were enrolled in a team-taught Internet-based course taught by two of the authors of this paper. Students could be enrolled from anywhere but were predominantly from the Midwest and the South Central United States. Students ranged in age from 18 to 58, with the mean age being 26. Eleven of the 26 students were male, 70% of the students were Caucasian, 20% were Latino/Hispanic, and 10% were African American. These demographics are relatively consistent with the makeup of one of the academic institutions involved but more diverse than the demographics for the other institution involved. It is suspected that this may have to do with the topic of the course more than anything else.

Linking The Combined Skills to Assignment Development

Thomsen (2002) describes five aspects of positive youth development (what the authors see as another way of describing the outcome of multicultural effectiveness). Again, this approach was chosen because the authors believe Thomsen's work provides specific guidance on how to develop assignments to enhance such skills. Attention is now turned, then, to each of these dimensions with a brief discussion of a course assignment designed specifically to aid development of each skill.

Connection

Connection includes connecting self to community. Clearly, this can be done with community placements. It might be wise, however, to have students reflect on their connection to the broader community before placing them into that community. *Connection* means that students must connect with others who are different from them. In order to do this, the authors require the students to reach consensus on how to define "middle class mentality." They must post that definition to the course site. They are required, in their responses on the course site, to be sure to include answers to the following questions:

- (1) Can anyone "become" middle class?
- (2) Why or why not?
- (3) What different aspects of society does the middle class mentality permeate?
- (4) How is the concept of middle class mentality linked to legal issues such as immigration laws, welfare policies, and access to resources for higher education?

This assignment was designed to assist the students in getting outside of themselves and truly connecting with the other students in the class and others in the world who are coming from a different place (both physically and psychologically) than they are.

Confidence

Confidence involves believing that "real" problems can be addressed and that those problems can be resolved or that the student can be a vital contributor to the resolution of any such problems. Students must have experience with problem solving before they can have confidence that the community problems they will face can be resolved. Confidence comes through experience. We should not expect students to be confident in their ability to interact with culturally diverse others when they have very little experience in doing so. As Zajonc (1965) suggested long ago, people confronted with unfamiliar

situations will revert to dominant ways of responding. If those dominant ways of responding are beneficial to the interaction, success in that interaction will be enhanced. If, however, the dominant response is not beneficial or is in direct conflict with the cultural behavior or value of the other, conflict will result. Students cannot have confidence in the real world with a skill that has not been reinforced in the more "secure" environment of the classroom. By struggling through these assignments (and many students contact the instructors and claim they cannot reach agreement and are unable to build consensus in their group), students gain confidence that they can work with others in ways that they never thought possible.

Competence

Competence involves recognition on the part of the student that he/she has the actual skills or abilities needed to be an effective part of the solution to whatever problem is being confronted. Again, the authors would argue that students must be given experiences with this competence before being placed into the community. Competence is fostered in the course through repetition and consistent linkages between student assignment posts and levels of the critical thought model. One student, for example, was struggling to understand why his scores on assignments were not higher. In his queries he discussed how long his assignments were, how many references he included, and how many responses he was writing to other students. Despite much dialogue, the only thing that seemed to work was clearly linking responses to the levels of critical thought. The authors' post to him stated:

"It seems to us that you are assuming that your grades should continue to go up (when the lowest score on any assignment is a 92%) because you include more and more references and such. This is not how assignments are scored. In terms of all posts and for an understanding of grading, all students have been directed to look to the critical thought model. Our assessment is that you do not show an advanced understanding and appreciation of the views of others – levels 3 and 4 of the Critical Thought model – that would warrant higher scores. As your ability to demonstrate these higher levels goes up, so, too, will your scores. Look, again, at the syllabus definitions for each level and make additional efforts to show those higher levels and your assignment scores should go up."

His remaining assignments demonstrated significant advancement on the critical thought model and his scores continued to improve. Competence, then, comes from the repetition and the consistent use of the model as a frame of reference.

Compassion

With compassion students learn to care about others. This focus on what we consider to be the "others" (put in quotes to recognize that this is a generic person who may or may not be present in the current situation) is not automatic. Well-designed service-learning experiences, for example, can result in students becoming more externally focused (Osborne & Renick, 2006). The authors' goal is to build compassion by requiring students to think about and relate to others. To connect students to others (in particular the magnitude of hate in the world while still thinking about what they, personally, can do about it), the authors use an assignment that connects them to the website for the Southern Poverty Law Center. In the assignment, "What Can I do About This Stuff?!", students are asked to:

- a. Go to the Website for the Southern Poverty Law Center: <http://www.splcenter.org/>.
- b. Spend some time "surfing" the site and reviewing resources for understanding hate. Choose three links that you explored that you want to discuss.
- c. Describe the links you chose and why you are choosing to discuss them?
- d. What did you learn by exploring these links?
- e. What two things do you think you could do in your own life to use the points you have outlined above to make changes in how you deal with others?

Several quotes from recent student posts in response to this assignment best sum up how this assignment fosters compassion:

"First, I could be more **aware** of hate activities. Sometimes I am in such a hurry and oblivious to what's going on around me. I am finding it is more important to be aware of what's going on. I can point out acts of hate or acts of racism. The other day I heard a mom say to someone that her child does not like to see a certain race on TV and if he does he says "mommy the monkeys are on tv"... I was shocked. I am ashamed to say I did not stop and say anything to her or her child. I was not feeling good and was not up for a argument, but that is no excuse. So I learned and am learning I need to and I can start speaking out and saying something. It goes farther than learning, but **doing**. Doing is the hard part. **I can learn all day long, but unless I incorporate it into my life, it does no one, not even me any good.**" (BNS, April 2013).

"The statistics were an alarming wakeup call for me. I knew that some extremist groups were alive and well in the US, but had no idea that there had been an 813% increase in antigovernment extremists since Obama's election and a 67% increase in hate groups since 2000. Previously, I had been under the impression that the "good side" was winning and we were slowly whittling away at the number of people that embrace extreme hatred and intolerance; however, the article's statistics burst that bubble and paint an entirely different picture about what's happening in our country. Wow...I chose the immigrant justice link because all four of my grandparents were born outside of the US and I think people forget that all of us [are] the descendants of American immigrants. Growing up in Texas, I wasn't blind of the fact that immigrants often do the hardest work for the least amount of money and are often taken advantage of by their employers. The article's most poignant illustration of the injustice immigrants endured was that of the bean picker whose life savings was taken during a traffic stop. To me, personal examples like this strike an emotional chord and are almost a call to action because the government action is so clearly unjust, shameful and flat out wrong. I learned that specifying a specific example of injustice is a much more effective way to reach an audience than making general statements because of the personal or emotional connection to the situation." (JHO, April 2013).

Character

Character traits must also be modeled, practiced, and reinforced. Character refers to qualities that promote an awareness of others rather than hinder it. Examples would be sensitivity, sociocentrism in contrast to egocentrism, and so on. Character is demonstrated through an assignment called 'The Diversity Philosophy.' Using a survey developed by Thomas and Butler (2000), students must assess their philosophy about the concept of diversity. Questions include issues of socioeconomic, race, and religion. Student responses categorize their diversity philosophy on a continuum from assimilation to multiculturalism. Students have to categorize their responses by placing them into one of these four categories: (1) assimilation; (2) tolerance; (3) multiculturalism; and (4) inclusiveness. They are then asked to reflect on those placements, what those placements say about them, and why they think they might have given the answer they did. It is important that students understand the definitions of each of these categories, so Thomas and Butler's definitions are provided (reproduced from Thomas, 2012):

- *Essentialism/Assimilation*: "The practice of categorizing a group based on artificial social constructions that impart an 'essence' of that group, which homogenizes the group and effaces individuality and differences. This ... implies that we are forming conclusions, relationships, and other cultural ties based only on the essential elements, as determined by 'us.' It also implies that there is some minimal level of understanding that applies to groups." (p. 47)
- *Tolerance*: "There is an acceptance and open-mindedness of different practices, attitudes, and cultures but does not necessarily mean agreement with the differences. The word implies an acknowledgement, or an acceptance. However the word does not necessarily acknowledge an appreciate[ion] of differences and usually consists of only surface level information and commitment." (p. 48)
- *Multiculturalism*: "The practice of acknowledging and respecting the various cultures, religions, races, ethnicities, attitudes and opinions within an environment. The word does not imply that there is any intentionality occurring and primarily works from a group, versus individual, orientation." (p. 48)

- *Inclusiveness*: "The practice of emphasizing our uniqueness in promoting the reality that each voice, when valued, respected and expected to, will provide positive contributions to the community." (p. 48)

Again, several quotes from students best demonstrate the impact of this assignment:

"I think if I could change something about my score, I would like to be more understanding of those who would be considered poor. I do realize that there are circumstances that simply place some people in an unfortunate position. I believe that one of my biggest problems is the cynical attitude I get toward the public through my work. Many times I only see the ugly side of the public. I see people who take no interest in contributing to society, but want society to contribute a great deal to them. Another contributing factor to this area for improvement is my family background. Without going into great detail, I have seen how hard work can create success in a capitalist society. Saying that, I do want be more open minded and accepting of the less privileged portion of society. I would like to do more to promote the assistance and education of this part of our culture so that they might succeed and be able to help others to." (EMW, March 2013).

"I think it was interesting that I scored the same under 'Inclusive,' and 'Assimilation.' It may seem to many that those two options are paradoxical, and while in some cases they are, in other cases I do not think they are (or need to be). For example, I do indeed believe in absolute, universal, and unchanging truth (question 4), and I also believe that we should all learn from each other (question 1). Those two things, to some, might seem to butt heads, as if there is one truth, why would we need to learn from others? However, though I think there is universal truth, this doesn't mean that people aren't different, don't feel different things, or think differently. I think there are universal rights and wrongs, and those do not actually vary among different cultures or people groups (even though they vary in practice), but at the same time, I think it's important to learn from others, because we are all different, and have different perspectives." (EHB, March 2013).

"In all honesty, I cannot claim that I've always appreciated multiculturalism and inclusiveness. My parents had to learn to assimilate and conform to the American culture, as being a Mexican in the 50's and 60's was not always a positive thing. This then skewed my way of thinking and acting growing up and can remember feeling embarrassed of being Mexican. It wasn't until later that I learned to embrace my dual nationality and made me learn that it was a good thing to appreciate different cultures. I believe that what helped me in this area were two things. The first contributing factor was motherhood. It is seems so cliché, and even more so as I am writing this, but it is true when I say that it changed my whole perspective. I went from being a young, immature, egocentric person to someone who was suddenly empathetic with people. It is as if someone turned on a switch! I would always put myself in someone's shoes and think, "what if that was my daughter" or "that could be my son". Having children taught me to appreciate the individual differences in people." (CGG, March 2013).

Data on student effectiveness in using the Active Learning Model was gathered at three points across the semester. At each point student postings in response to assignments were pulled from the site and placed into a questionnaire. These questionnaires were sent to participants who rated postings (their own and others) on each level of the Active Learning Model. The authors hypothesized that:

- ♦ (1) students would rate themselves higher on each aspect of the model at time 1 than the readers;
- ♦ (2) self-ratings would go down at time 2;
- ♦ (3) self-ratings would increase again at time 3, but other ratings of those posts would also increase.

Raters were given a brief definition for each level of the model (as were students), and each was asked to assess the student post on each level using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree that the post clearly demonstrates this level*) to 5 (*strongly agree that the post demonstrates this level*).

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, self-other ratings differed significantly at the beginning of the semester but converged by the end of the semester.

Table 1.

Self-Other Differences in Ratings of Model Use At Three Times in the Semester.

Self-Other	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Difference (Overall)	1.833*	-.17	-.17
Difference for Recitation	2.33* (3.5 – 1.17)	.83* (2.33 – 1.5)	0.0 (3.5 – 3.5)
Diff. for Exploration	2.00* (4.0 – 2.0)	.17 (2.17 – 2.0)	-.34 (3.83 – 4.17)
Diff. for Understanding	2.67* (4.17 – 1.5)	.50 (2.0 – 1.5)	.17 (4.17 – 4.0)
Diff. for Appreciation	2.00* (3.5 – 1.5)	.83* (2.67 – 1.83)	-.17 (3.83 – 4.0)

Note 1: Negative Number Indicates Other Rating Higher Than Self Rating

Note 2: Numbers in parentheses indicate "self" minus "reader" ratings

Note 3: * indicates significant differences at $p < .05$ level.

The authors interpret these results to suggest that students over evaluated their effectiveness in using the four levels of the critical thought model early in the semester. This interpretation is reinforced by the consistently lower ratings given to student posts by the raters in comparison to self-ratings. What is most interesting, however, is that these differences diminish by the end of the semester. They do not decrease because students are rating themselves lower at the end of the semester. They appear to go away because students do, indeed, become more effective in using the model and recognizing the level at which they have demonstrated such use. The rater's evaluation of student use of the model, then, concurs by the end of the semester. It is the authors' belief that this increased effectiveness in use of the model – which, ultimately, reflects an enhanced multicultural awareness – is the result of advancing student critical thinking skills (e.g., the increasing levels of the critical thought model), emphasizing more effective interpersonal skills (e.g., consistent following of course etiquette), and increasing development of intercultural sensitivity (e.g., diversity philosophy assignment, tolerance for ambiguity assignment, etc.).

Discussion

The authors recognize that the exploration of the assignments in the course and the qualities of positive youth development, intercultural sensitivity, and multicultural effectiveness are, at this point, mostly anecdotal. The authors offer the data from the self-other ratings of usage of the four levels of the critical thought model as a first attempt to demonstrate that students can improve on these skills throughout a semester. These levels – (1) denial; (2) defense; (3) minimization; (4) acceptance; (5) adaptation; and (6) integration – are similar to the kind of adjustment that most people make to any identity-altering event such as the loss of a loved one (Kubler-Ross, 2005). They are also similar to the adaptations that immigrants and refugees must make to host countries (Berry, 1997) and that international students make (Zeynep & Falbo, 2008).

In addition, earlier work was referenced in which several of the authors demonstrated a linkage between improvements in critical thinking skills and interpersonal skills. The authors' goal, here, was to bring this work together in a beginning attempt to document the relationships between critical thinking, interpersonal skills, intercultural sensitivity, and, ultimately, multicultural effectiveness. More research is needed with pre-post assessments of these skills in order to gain confidence that the course and the assignments aid in the development of these competencies.

The purpose of this paper was to outline possible connections between critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and intercultural sensitivity. Additionally, the authors hoped to explain how the course was structured and why, and to lay the foundation for future efforts to assess the causal relationships.

At the core of this paper is the notion that cross-cultural competency or intercultural sensitivity is not something that most students bring with them to the university. This is not due to anything purposeful or nefarious. It is due to the developmental nature of these skills (Bennett, 1993). Before expecting students, then, to leave the university with the ability to engage successfully in cross-cultural interactions or to demonstrate intercultural sensitivity, they must be given opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

Of course, research is needed to determine: (1) the validity of assumptions made about cross-cultural competency and intercultural sensitivity students possess upon entrance to the university; (2) if progress can be made on the developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity as outlined by Bennett; (3) the types of course assignments (such as those outlined above), which promote movement along the intercultural sensitivity developmental continuum; (4) the degree to which developmental progress in intercultural sensitivity demonstrated in the classroom transfers to the real world; and (5) whether progress in intercultural sensitivity, brought about through higher education, persists across time as individuals connect with the broader world outside academia.

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