

From the Personal to the Political: Measuring and Facilitating Student Understanding of Identity and Intersectionality

Rosemary Keefe, Professor of English and Women's Studies, UW-Superior

Abstract

Research Question: *What collaborative learning techniques facilitate students' understanding of self-identity and the intersections of identities that determine power and privilege in American society?*

My systematic inquiry into student learning in a first-year seminar titled "RAINBOW IDENTITIES" explores definitions of identity ("What is?") and collaborative pedagogies ("What works?"). It was a section of English 228 Multi-Ethnic Literature, one of ten first-year seminars. It also fulfills university general education requirements in literature and diversity.

My goals were (1) to understand how students envisioned both individual and group identities and the intersections of identities that determine power/privilege in American society such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, family attitudes, religion, age, and dis/ability; and (2) to determine which collaborative learning strategies facilitated their growth in recognizing themselves as members of privileged or oppressed groups along stages in social identity development. My inquiry relied on "classic" studies of cognitive development as well as scales of diversity awareness.

My course was designed using Dee Fink's steps for significant learning: designing learning goals, methods of assessing achievement of goals, increasingly complex and challenging collaborative learning techniques, and assigning increasingly challenging literature. Readings were chosen to appeal to real life concerns of first-year students. They introduced culturally and ethnically diverse characters faced with moral and social dilemmas that may confront college students. Student reflections on the literature and their identification with characters in large and small group class discussions, online interactions, and reflective writing in and out of class helped to make student growth in learning visible. My collected data for the inquiry include pre and post surveys of attitudes, answers to online questions, frequent written reflections on learning, final evaluations of learning goals and collaborative exercises, and midterm and final essay examination questions designed to enable students to reflect on their growth in awareness in individual and group identities and cultures.

My preliminary findings indicate that my first-year seminar students enjoyed informal, ungraded collaborative exercises which allowed them to tell their own stories and learn about their classmates. They attested that their freedom to express themselves allowed them to grow in consciousness of self and others. But collaborative projects being graded that involved more challenging analysis of literary elements elicited some passive resistance. Finally, I will identify (1) stages of student growth in consciousness of identity and (2) specific collaborative learning strategies, such as consciousness raising, which best promote growth in identity awareness.

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