Adding Culture Shock to an Introductory Diversity Course

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Abstract: The cultural diversity of the student population within K-12 classrooms has become ever-changing, but the cultural diversity of the teacher population within those classrooms has remained relatively stagnant. The purpose of this article was to outline the Cross-Cultural Simulation used the pre-service teacher candidates and to provide supporting evidence of its impact and effect on the pre-service teacher candidates. This study used a mixed methods approach with journal entries and inventories to determine the impact and effectiveness of the cross-cultural simulation. The results indicated that the participants felt the simulation allowed them to apply the classroom content within a direct learning experience.

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As the culture of the United States becomes more diverse, the cultural composition of the teacher profession has remained white female from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012). Given this cultural gap between teachers and students, the focus of teacher education programs has changed to include a diversity course in an attempt to bridge the gap. According to Wasonga (2005), who conducted a study with pre-service teachers in a mid-west university, a diversity course significantly increased knowledge and attitudes about multiculturalism, but the researcher suggested that more sustained interaction with diversity issues was needed to transform the gained knowledge and attitudes (i.e., theory) into practice.

One possible way for the pre-service teachers to transform the gained knowledge and attitudes into practice may be incorporation of simulations into the post-secondary classroom. Such simulations are used often in sociology courses to demonstrate various social issues, such as social stratification (e.g., Coghlan & Huggins, 2004). Dorn (1989) defines teaching simulations as a game with multiple players who operate within an explicit set of rules. To achieve the goal of the game or simulation, the players participate in role playing activities, which require peer interactions. Successful achievement of the goal depends on strategic planning and decision making, which are devised by the players. According to Dorn (1989), these teaching simulations can provide a direct learning experience that can increase student motivation. This direct learning experience can also provide insights into an unseen world for the students, especially those pre-service teachers with backgrounds different from their future classroom students.

Based on previous post-secondary experiences with pre-service teacher candidates, one of the most impactful teaching simulations was the Cross-Cultural Simulation. This simulation was based on Bafà Bafà, which is a learning simulation created by Dr. Garry Shirts nearly 30 years ago. Within the context of the simulation, group members were selected by the instructor, rules were outlined, and the ultimate goal was identified. The purpose of this article was to outline the Cross-Cultural Simulation and to provide supporting evidence of its impact and effect on pre-service teacher candidates.

METHODS

The research design for this study was an exploratory mixed methods design. Within this design, the qualitative data and results were built upon with a follow-up quantitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). This design allowed the researcher to determine the impact and the effectiveness of the Cross-Cultural Simulation on pre-service teachers within an introductory diversity course.
Participants

The College of Education is part of a four-year institution in the southeastern United States that is considered a master’s level school. Enrollment at the state university has increased over the past five years and has reached a maximum of 8,307 in the fall of 2011. The participants included members of an introductory diversity course, which was held during the fall (n = 27) and spring (n = 29) semesters. The purpose of this course was to prepare pre-service teacher candidates for teaching culturally diverse students in the K-12 setting. This diversity course was a required program component for all education majors within the College. Of the 56 participants, there were 41 (73.2%) females and 15 (26.8%) males. Regarding racial classification, there were 37 (66.1%) Whites, 15 (26.8%) Blacks, and 4 (7.1%) Hispanics. The ages ranged from 19 to 30. The majors included Early Childhood Education, Fine Arts Education, Foreign Language Education, Middle Grades Education, Physical Education, Secondary Education, and Special Education.

Intervention

The participants were divided into three random groups by the researcher. Each group was instructed to develop a culture within 20 minutes (i.e., name, object or idea that was highly valued by the culture, and language that consisted of at least 10 “words” or phrases). Each group was given their mode of communication (i.e., hands only, animal sounds, or written symbols only). After establishing their cultures in different rooms, each culture selected an “ambassador” to go and gather information about another culture group for a 5 minute time period. Upon returning to the home culture, the ambassador and the other group members discussed the name, language, and what is valued by each of the other culture. The ambassador procedure was repeated once more. Afterwards, the participants reconvened in the classroom so the participants could debrief and check their “answers” regarding each culture.

Measures

Journal Entries. At the end of class, the participants completed a journal entry to reflect upon what they learned through the simulation and list the similarities and differences of the other cultures compared to their own culture. The same data collection procedure was followed for the fall and spring classes. Each of the journal entries was read by the researcher, and emerging themes were identified.

Follow-Up Measure. As a follow-up, the spring semester participants were administered a pretest at the beginning of the semester and a posttest at the end of the 16-week semester. The measure used for the pre- and posttest was the Inventory of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (Cushman, 1986), which was developed by Dr. Kenneth Cushman at Kent State University. The purpose of this measure was for the participants to self-assess their intercultural experiences. As a participant in the diversity course, it was hoped that the level of sensitivity would increase over time as a result of the content and learning experiences presented throughout the course. The total score can range from 32 to 224. The measure had 32 items which were subdivided into five subscales. For each statement, the participants were asked to select a number that best corresponds to their level of agreement with each statement. The response scale ranged from 1 to 7 with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 7 being “Strongly Agree”. The scale descriptions were as follows:

The Cultural Integration (C) Scale contained 10 items and assessed the degree to which the individual integrates elements from other cultures into his or her daily lives. The Behavioral (B) Scale contained six items and assessed the degree to which the individual exhibits comfortable behavior when interacting with other cultures. The Intellectual Interaction (I) Scale contained six items and assessed the degree to which the individual seeks knowledge of other cultures. The Attitude Toward Others (A) Scale contained five items and assessed the degree to which the individual opens up with others. The Empathy (E) Scale contained five items and assessed the degree to which the individual identifies with the feelings of others.

Reliability analysis was conducted to determine if the items within the inventory provided an internally consistent measurement. A Cronbach’s alpha of .50 or greater was established as the criterion for reliability (Thurstone, 1951). The alpha coefficient for the pretest was .71, and the alpha coefficient for the posttest was .74. The results suggested that this measure was an internally consistent measure.

In addition to this measure, at the end of the posttest, there were three questions. The first question asked the participants to rate whether the classroom activity was valuable for applying the classroom content on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being “Most Valuable”. There were 14 different classroom activities, which were incorporated during the semester long course, and the Cross-Cultural Simulation was 1 of the 14 listed activities. The second question asked the participants to select a favorite classroom activity, and the third question asked them to give a rationale for selecting the favorite activity.
FINDINGS

Journal Entries

Some participants commented on the difficulty of creating a new culture. "Today I learned just how difficult it is to learn a new culture from scratch!" (Participant A). Other participants commented that the activity required higher order thinking skills. "Having strict rules on how to communicate made everyone think outside the norm..." (Participant K).

One of my goals for the activity was to illustrate and bring to life the various concepts that had been discussed during the first half of the course. It is difficult for the majority of the participants to discuss and understand culture shock since a good proportion of the participants were part of a military family. "By doing this simulation it helped open my eyes more to the fact how other might feel when they are not the majority culture" (Participant L). "It's nearly impossible to automatically relate to someone outside your culture" (Participant M). The simulation puts everyone on the same page and depicts the importance of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. "there must be some level of understanding between two culturally different groups in order to create an easier learning environment" (Participant N). "Through trial and error communication could be accomplished. You shouldn't think that the other culture is stupid for not understanding you because they probably think the same of you." (Participant D). When the participants commented on the value of prior cultural knowledge, the value and importance of the diversity course was evident. "After Tori came to our group and spoke her animal language, it was easier for me to understand her culture when I went to their group" (Participant O). One specific example was a previous discussion that had occurred during class about searching for commonalities when one interacts with a new culture. "I was looking for something in common with them, and when I didn't get it, I was totally at a loss." (Participant R).

Both groups of participants commented on the serious issue that plagues society and the classroom – miscommunication. "It is very easy to misunderstand the languages of other cultures and this is where hostility may come into play." (Participant S). "We should not be so quick to interpret another culture without understanding it fully. For example, the symbols culture used a "bird" symbol to simply mean 'good-bye', and the hands group used a punching fist to simply say their name. However, the animals group viewed both gestures as signs of meanness" (Participant E). Another issue was the lack of word translation between the cultures. 

"...some words or phrases do not necessarily translate into another type of language" (Participant T). Some participants commented on the fact that one culture did not have a word for eating so it was assumed that they did not eat. This miscommunication or lack of communication primarily deals with the more subjective aspects of a culture that are not readily visible. "...the hardest [phrases] came to be understanding the exact deities that the cultures valued" (Participant H).

Some participants commented that they learned how easily it can be to offend another culture. "...you must be careful and considerate of what you say or do in other cultures as some cultures may become offended" (Participant C). Other participants discussed how one could intimidate people from another culture. "When the person from the animal sounds group tried talking with my group they didn't show much emotion. They also didn't seem interested in finding out what our language was. I learned from this that sometimes when cultures are extremely diverse people are afraid to participate in it" (Participant J). One participant summed up the situation. "It's a compromise to achieve the most effective communication" (Participant W).

The participants used first impressions and emotional responses to evaluate the other cultures (e.g., almost hostile, more welcoming, less friendly, judging, or pointing at you). "...it showed how people work together within their culture and how they perceive new people" (Participant G). Many of the participants commented on the lack of emotion, facial expression, or body language from the other culture (i.e., ethnocentrism). The simulation appealed to the emotions of the participants (i.e., first stage of cross-cultural interaction). For example, the written symbols groups "valued material things like ice cream", but the hands group "valued action such as peace" (Participant S). Another participant commented that both the animal sounds and hands groups had "moralistic values" (Participant P). Another participant commented on the "quick and to the point" communication versus the other culture's "lengthier" communication (Participant I). Many participants commented on the animal sounds group who had a leader, but their group who communicated with hands only did not have a leader. "All were equal...sat in a row together"; however, the animal sounds group "mimicked whatever sounds the leader makes...sat at a table with leader at the front of the room" (Participant K).

It is interesting to note that the spring semester course took a different approach. It was considered a challenge for them to "figure" out the other culture. The participants
commented on the interaction. “I enjoyed doing this exercise because it got me out of my comfort zone and connect with people/classmates” (Participant U). Where the participants in the fall semester course tended to make the ambassador trips short and brief (i.e., usually less than 3 minutes), the spring semester participants stayed in the other culture until the researcher came to tell them to return to the home culture. Because they spent so much time with the other cultures, none of the participants commented that they felt any of the other courses were unfriendly compared to the participants in the fall semester. Therefore, the spring semester participants were able to learn the name, language, and value of each culture, but the fall semester participants only learned a portion of one culture. This occurrence supported the notion about the important of open-mindedness.

Inventory of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

The pre- and posttest of the Inventory of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (Cushner, 1986) were completed by 28 of the 29 students in the spring class. The pre-test total scores ranged from 120 to 176 with a mean of 149.59 and a standard deviation of 16.88. Since there was a large amount of variation in the scores, the median was calculated since the distribution of scores was skewed. The median was 150. The posttest total scores ranged from 115 to 181 with a mean of 151.79 and a standard deviation of 18.06. The median was 155.

A repeated measure analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant change from the pre- and posttest. There was not a statistically significant change from the pre- to posttest score, F(1, 27) = 1.77; p = .20; η² = .06. Despite the lack of significance, the median score increased from 150 to 155. In addition, 18 of the 28 participants increased their total score an average of 8.67 points. Of those 18 participants, 6 participants had their total score increase 11 or more points. When examining the individual subscales, the scores were relatively unchanged, except for the medians of the Cultural Integration Scale, which increased 5.5 points. Table 1 displays the means and medians for the five subscales.

Follow-Up Questions

On a four-point scale, the Cross-Cultural Simulation was rated as a 3.63 with a standard deviation of 0.57. This rating indicated the participants felt the learning experience was valuable for applying the content. The responses ranged from 2 to 4 with 18 of the 28 respondents rating the classroom activity as “most valuable” for applying the classroom content.

When asked to select a favorite activity, the Cross-Cultural Simulation was one of the top two classroom activities that the participants indicated as their favorite activity among all of the classroom activities during the semester long course. When asked to offer a rationale for selecting their favorite selection, one participant stated it was a “memorable learning experience. We got to experience what it’s like to be among people who don’t share our culture or language and we had to learn to communicate with them.” Another participant responded “It was really effective to show how language and means of communication affect people as a whole and how it relates to outside cultures.”

IMPLICATIONS

The journal entry responses lend evidence to the impact of the cross-cultural simulation. The individual statements allowed the researcher to document that the participants were connecting the presented course content to the direct learning experience. Despite differences among the fall and spring semester courses, both groups of participants were able to experience the frustration of cultural shock. Many of the students within this state university have military connections and have lived within various cultures. This activity provided a level playing field for all participants so they could experience what it would be like to walk in the shoes of someone from another culture than their own.

Even though, the overall score on the posttest did not significantly increase, the course content and activities, which included the Cross-Cultural Simulation, did increase the students’ ability to integrate cultural elements into their daily lives based on the change in medians. This integration could include trying new foods, traveling abroad, or meeting people with different cultural backgrounds. These experiences have the potential to impact student learning in the K-12 classroom. Since the majority of the teachers in today’s classrooms tend to have homogenous backgrounds, it is essential for pre-service teachers to experience how to integrate different cultural elements into the classroom.

In addition to providing a student-centered learning activity, activities, these teaching simulations allow post-secondary instructors to model appropriate and effective teaching methods. The pre-service teachers can see the application of a specific theory or concept instead of just reading about it in a book or hearing a lecture during class. In turn, this exposure to such methods would increase the likelihood of implementation into the K-12 classroom; therefore, their future students can benefit from the years of educational research. Thus, the theory can be put into practice.
REFERENCES


