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Multicultural Education

Final Paper

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Culture at RSC

I spent last semester observing at the Regional Senior Center (RSC). The center focuses on “positive” aging that is desire rather than damage based. RSC employees and members give extra attention to the activities that they *are* able to do and rarely lament the aliments that accompany old age, save the occasional arthritis or memory joke cracked by some of the more vibrant seniors. RSC is a two-story building complete with a community, pantry, computer room, sewing room, health office, exercise room, garden, and more. The center is comprised of a multicultural group of seniors from diverse racial, geographic, economic, and religious backgrounds.

My experience at RSC was my first working with adults. Their previous learning experiences proved both valuable and challenging. Because all RSC members have had ample time to develop their opinions and ideas, they occasionally weren’t receptive to material that challenged their previously held beliefs. Throughout my placement at RSC I wondered how to effectively challenge hegemonic beliefs as well as the extent that culture influences a student’s education and day-to-day life.

The first experience I had with questions of culture and education was with Mrs. W, a member of RSC in her mid-70s. The first thing I noticed about Mrs. W was her eagerness to learn; when I sat down at her table with my notepad and pen she immediately mirrored my actions and pulled out her own yellow legal pad. She first asked me about aspects of a liberal arts education, specifically gender and sexuality studies. She had many concerns with the LGBTQ movement as she saw it as a choice and fundamentally sinful. Mrs. W was raised in a Christian family and had maintained her faith throughout her adult life. She expressed her displeasure at the “vilification of religion” by the federal government and was upset to see Christianity “pushed out of schools”.

Mrs. W has had more years to form her opinions on Gender and sexuality than I’ve been alive. An age difference can prove difficult when discussing issues with seniors. I occasionally felt like a neophyte when I compared my lived experience to the seniors’. As a result I was not initially sure how to engage in productive discussion with Mrs. W. Many of the points I wanted to make about the LGBTQ movement directly contrasted Mrs. W’s moral and cultural code.

To approach the problem of entrenched cultural viewpoints, an educator must recognize a student’s cultural background and partially work within that framework. It would not have been effective to simply tell Mrs. W that the LGBTQ movement wasn’t sinful and deserved respect and equality because it directly combatted her cultural background. Directly contrasting her cultural views is also impeded by age difference as confrontation might lead her to dismiss my views as callow and underdeveloped and it also might lead me to view her opinions as outdated and irrelevant in today’s society. To avoid this, I tried to work within a framework she was familiar with in order to subtly contrast her cultural views and encourage her to criticize her own conception of the world.

This method is a combination of the philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and Fernando Naiditch. 18th Century Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci supported a constant challenging of hegemonic beliefs. He defined culturally hegemonic beliefs as widely accepted common sense ‘truths’ that often go unchallenged. (Goldberg). Gramsci believed that promoting counter hegemonic beliefs was and effective method of education, "To criticize one's own conception of the world means to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world” (Gramsci, 324).

Promoting counter-hegemonic beliefs can be exceptionally difficult because counter-hegemonic ideas directly contrast ‘common sense’. The space between hegemony and counter hegemony is where Fernando Naiditch’s ideas of cultural awareness and framing become especially relevant. In a recent article, Naiditch told the story of Pedro, an 8-year-old ELL student who was labeled as learning disabled (LD) because of he struggled to read and participate in class. It was only after spending time with Pedro that he learned that Pedro’s home culture focused heavily on oral rather than written literacy, and that Pedro was not in fact LD. Pedro recognized that he didn’t have the same literacy as his classmates and often remained silent. Naiditch was able to work within this framework and encouraged Pedro to use his oral literacy in the classroom and to share his culture, which in turn translated into increased participation and increased written literacy (Naidtich, 26-9). Naiditch used Pedro’s culture as a stepping stone to a new culture.

What we can take away from Naiditch’s experience is the importance of using a student’s cultural background rather than assigning ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ideas when drafting curriculum. Pedro was labeled as disabled because no teacher took the time to work within his cultural framework and focus on his strengths. I realized I could use Mrs. W’s cultural background to start a conversation in which we could use familiar terms and ideas to promote new ideas as well as lightly criticize Christian hegemony. The passage in the Bible that forbids homosexuality is Leviticus 20:13. Over coffee, Mrs. W. and I began to discuss the other things forbidden by Leviticus such as eating pig (11:4), touching seafood without scales (11:10), worshipping less than 33 days after birthing a boy (12:4), tattoos (19:28), blasphemy (24:14) and much more. Many of these offenses are punishable by death. Neither Mrs. W. nor I could answer why certain parts of Leviticus ought to be interpreted as law while others ought to be ignored.

Though our discussion surely wasn’t an epiphany for Mrs. W, I do believe her conception of the world as well as her own culture was challenged. I didn’t expect Mrs. W. to suddenly change her views on LGBTQ rights and issues because combatting cultural hegemony is a multi-step process in which the first step is questioning one’s own belief system. However, I am sure that Mrs. W. engaged in that first step. Using the frameworks presented by Gramsci and Naiditch guided me to work within a culture Mrs. W was familiar with in order to challenge the hegemonic beliefs of that culture.

One must find a delicate balance of working within a familiar framework to teach. If an educator doesn’t present enough challenging information than adequate growth wont occur but too much challenging information can be polarizing. I hope someday to be able to try similar tactics with a variety of ages to determine any trends.

During my work at RSC this semester I often noticed that seniors would often sit with members who shared the same culture. This is not just unique to RSC, it is apparent in schools and workplaces across the country. I continue to question the implications of self-segregation as well as what role a multicultural educator ought to have in minimizing self-segregation. I don’t believe that it is inherently problematic; people often associate with those who have similar socio-cultural capital because of the frequency at which they interact. For instance, the Bible study group at RSC has formed many friendships because members share similar interests and time once a week. Light self-segregation can preserve culture as well. While it is important for students to be exposed to a variety of cultures, there needs to be a space in which they can maintain their own and feel comfortable. Self-segregation only becomes a problem if individuals shut themselves off from other groups and cultures.

Entrenched hegemonic views affect the self-segregation problem because many of the seniors have been participating in the same kind of circles their entire lives. It can be uncomfortable to force oneself into new scenarios but I think the leadership at RSC took active steps to circumvent this problem. RSC leadership fostered cross-cultural activities like writing, knitting, exercising, and gardening that provided many opportunities for seniors to make new connections.

The activities were an important part of crossing cultural lines, but it wasn’t the activities themselves that produced intellectual growth, it was peer-peer interaction. I asked every single RSC member, “Why do you continue to come to RSC?” and received a multitude of answers. One answer however came up in *every single* response: “The people! I come here for the people!”

There are similarities between the way RSC promotes multiculturalism and the way schools ought to promote it. Attribution of similarity was very helpful at RSC. Members would often share music, books, TV programs, and stories and establish commonality. One writing workshop involved sharing stories of childhood and extracting themes and motifs through poetry. All the seniors were given the same questions but encouraged to share their different responses in a group setting. They were able to identify with familiar stories and also given time to ask questions about unfamiliar concepts.

The activities brought them physically together, but examining the similarities and differences in the ways they completed the activities were what ultimately promoted multiculturalism. It is not enough to have a diverse group, because simply being together wont necessarily compel interaction. Activities tailored toward sharing do compel this interaction and at RSC this was evident. A healthy balance between attribution of similarity and recognition of difference provides a productive interpersonal environment.

Works Cited

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