Incorporating Culturally Responsive Education in Social Work Curriculum
An Action Research Study Drawing on Spirituality and Culture

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Purpose of the Study
Introduce culturally responsive pedagogical strategies in a social work course to increase student self-awareness of cultural and spiritual issues.

Defining Culturally Responsive Education

- Recognizes the role culture and privilege play in marginalizing educators and learners
- Challenges the power structures embedded in the traditional classroom
- Deconstructs conventional ways of teaching in favor of creating space for learners to make meaning of lived experiences
- Attends to educators’ and learners’ cultural self-awareness and positionality

Sources: Guy, 1999; Shahjahan, 2004; Tadell, 2003

Research Question
“How did strategies introduced throughout the semester affect students’ learning about cultural and spiritual issues, particularly in relation to those who are very different from themselves?”
Focus of the Literature Review: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

- Theoretical underpinnings of the study
  - Poststructural & Intersectional Feminist Perspectives
  - Focus on 5 areas: knowledge construction, voice, positionality, authority and shifting identity
- Discourses informing culturally responsive education
  - Multicultural Education
  - Critical Multiculturalism
  - Antiracist Education
- Discourses on spirituality and religion in Adult Education and Social Work

Methodology: Qualitative Action Research

- Knowledge production through interaction, reflection, and interpretation
- Research done with a group instead of on a group
- Often called “practitioner research”
- Links research with action for social change
- Four stages: planning, acting, observing, reflecting
- Cyclical, not linear process
Sources: Jacobson, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999

Critical Action Research

- Focuses on development of critical consciousness and commitment to social change
- Addresses power differentials between the researcher and participants
- Emphasizes the participatory role of researcher in knowledge construction
Sources: McIntyre, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 1999

Participants

Context:
- Social work class focused on teaching group development, group dynamics, and skills for working with groups
Participants:
- 9 students: 8 females (juniors); 1 male (senior)
- All White, Euro-American
Methods of Data Collection

- Focus groups – initial and final
- Survey
- Online asynchronous communication
- Audiotaping
- Critical Incident Questionnaires
- Reflective journals
- Field notes

Presentation of Findings

- Presented in the context of the stages of action research as the study unfolded: planning, acting, observing and reflecting
- Highlight the parallel nature of the stages of group development

Planning Stage

3 themes that emerged from initial focus groups:

- Initial understanding of cultural competence
- Focus on “the other” with limited sense of their own culture
- Initially framing spirituality as religion

Acting Stage

- Major findings as described in 3-4 week intervals and strategies implemented during each time period:
  - Week 1-3 Constructing the learning environment
    - Focus groups, questionnaire
  - Week 4-7 Confronting racism and power relations
    - Video, CIQ, Marbley Reading
  - Week 8-11 Expanding awareness of Spirituality
    - Online journaling, sharing symbols, Wuthnow reading
  - Week 12-15 Making Connections to Social Work practice
    - Hays reading, Cervantes reading, focus group, questionnaire
Observing Stage

Reflection was incorporated in the overall research process. The final focus group and overall reflection revealed 3 themes:

- Moving beyond Christianity
- New learning about cultural competence for social work practice
- Culturally responsive education as drawing on the multiple domains of learning

Looking at the Study in the Frame of the Overall Knowledge Construction

• The evolving nature of learning
• Gender as the invisible presence
• Drawing on multiple domains of learning to increase culturally responsive education

Implications of the Study

Five implications that inform the fields of adult education and social work:

1. Importance of hearing other’s voices
2. Value of group process
3. Importance of ongoing support
4. Value of creating space
5. Value of technology

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

**Strengths**

- Methodology
- Pedagogical strategies
- Benefit to the students
- Improved practice

**Limitations**

- Time management
- Size and diversity of the group
- Role of the researcher
- Degrees of social consciousness
- Generalizability of action research
### Recommendations for Future Research

- Continue the study in other social work classes with the participant group to move toward social action
- Incorporate attention to gender and gender dynamics
- Include People of Color in the study
- Integrate assignments and curriculum content with the strategies rather than “add on”

### Significance to Adult Education

- Reinforced strategies suggested in the literature of using multiple modalities to bring the voices of “the other” into the classroom
- Suggests more attention to group dynamics and group process in conversation on culturally responsive education
- Technology can enhance the use of mentoring communities and encourage deeper expression of emotion and meaning making

### Significance to Social Work

- Suggests use of mezzo practice skills class to enhance culturally responsive teaching
- Supports concept of “creating space”, and helping students contextualize their learning
- Offers empirical evidence of ways to expand students’ awareness of spirituality toward a more global level