

Chapter 16

Challenges and Benefits of Multi-Cultural Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In an average semester, five or more countries will be represented in the typical information technology classroom. This diversity requires fleetness to develop trust, awareness of our cultural differences and requirements, and students' free participation. It also requires understanding of components of self-esteem and how it relates to learning; bricolage and when to deviate from planned activities; and many forms of experiential learning. This chapter develops these concepts and demonstrates how to effectively weave them together in engaging students from many cultures. The benefits of the work this effort involves many students who learn today and apply tomorrow in internships, and who, years later, return with tales of successes that build on foundations of concepts and techniques learned in such courses.

INTRODUCTION

A multi-cultural class is one of verbal accents, limited vocabularies, and reticence to share. The effectiveness of methods for handling these occurrences depends on the group and, sometimes the culture of the individual but often requires different methods by semester, culture, age of student, and even, individual. So, one challenge to today's college teacher and, probably anyone with millennial and adult learners needs to be one of flexibility and bricolage, that is, ability to improvise on the spot with little preparation but significant effectiveness.

Multi-cultural students enter graduate programs with different levels of preparation (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A significant body of work suggests methods for dealing with student differences in gender, class, ethnicity, race, and language (cf. Gay, 2010, 2013, 2015; Kohli et al., 2016). However, many students from international, rural, or different socio-economic backgrounds from their educational cohort often have less math, computer, or functional (e.g., finance) experience than their peers (Greiner, 2013). Further, this prior research relates to teacher-focused rather than student-focused solutions, implying that one-size-fits-all in dealing with individual differences (Greiner, 2013; Leonard & Mitchell, 2017).

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Teachers teach students not only in groups, but also as individuals (Greiner, 2013). Knowing when the group grasps concepts and can move as one is as important as knowing when a student is lost and why (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). As a result of these needs, teaching effectiveness is elusive and is derived from knowledge and application of principles from theory that can be difficult in practice. A key point is that to learn new ideas, one must fail, for through failure, we learn (Smiles as quoted in Edwards, 2012). Yet, when the failure is because of a lack of adequate background and not because of a fundamental mental inability to grasp concepts, the need to digress to teaching individual needs emerges. The extent to which a teacher digresses from a class plan relates to the number and types of student needs. The departure from the planned discussion may be minor, such as defining a term in more depth, or it may be major, resulting in a complete redefinition of a course. Both digressions require bricolage, or improvisation, but the more major the divergence from planned activities, the more the bricolage requires adaptation to individual student needs that best reinforce basic course concepts. These challenges in teaching are not small and, in on-line courses are far more difficult to discern until assignments or quizzes are graded (Holly, 1987).

Two types of benefits accrue from successfully addressing the challenges and difficulties relating to multi-cultural difficulties in the classroom. The first type of benefits relate to students. Students benefit by learning coping skills and ways of obtaining help when they recognize the type of problem they are having. Students, as a result of custom treatment, learn what they were supposed to learn from the course.

The second type of benefits relate to the teachers. The teachers gain practice and expertise in improvisational skills, thus, becoming more expert for the next group of multi-cultural students. Second, as new techniques become known, the teachers can practice on students (with their knowledge), trusting in the process and, if it fails, can return to previously successful techniques so that students can still learn needed outcomes.

This paper is not research, per se. Rather, it is a discussion of aspects of 40+ years of teaching multi-cultural students in five countries and how to determine the need for different levels of bricolage, selecting from among different types of experiential exercises based on the technical-pedagogical-content knowledge model of lesson planning (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

The aspects of teaching include the need for student self-esteem and trust (Holly, 1987; Ryan et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Attention to student self-esteem and trust development is critical to their experimentation with new ways of thinking and new techniques that allow them to fail, and thus learn the new practices. Then, by succeeding, their self-esteem is reinforced and can increase; conversely, failure in the classroom, can lead to lower self-esteem (Holly, 1987).

Next, the need for bricolage in dealing with diversions from planned classroom work and methods for dealing with those diversions is developed. Trust and self-esteem are necessary, but insufficient conditions in teaching any students (Holly, 1987; Smith et al., 2014). Language or other skills may also be insufficient for understanding subject presentations, especially with multi-cultural students. When that occurs, bricolage, or improvisation is sometimes needed, requiring complete replacement of planned materials (Ben-Ari, 2001).

The learning theories and practices relating to different types and levels of experiential exercises and how to select from among them are described. These experiential exercises would then be used to replace the planned materials. Thus, this paper discusses challenges in multi-cultural aspects of teaching and the benefits that accrue as a result of successfully dealing with those challenges, both on a daily basis and over years of seeing students succeed as a result of encouraging students from other cultures to engage in their learning processes.

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