Planting a New Kind of Teacher: The Cultures and Communities/ MPS Experiment

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Abstract

In this article a university professor and two Milwaukee Public School teachers describe a unique experiment in K–16 collaboration. The public school "Teachers-in-Residence" undertake a two-year stint at a university program dedicated to mainstreaming multiculturalism in undergraduate education, and help create courses for future urban educators. University liberal arts and art faculty work closely with the teachers, improving teacher preparation across the disciplines and creating connections to public schools, at the same time providing the Teachers-in-Residence with challenging opportunities for professional growth.

A Note to Readers: This is a collaboratively written essay, but to maintain the distinctiveness of our voices we have indicated primary authorship of sections by using our initials.

GJ: Everyone agrees that public school systems and higher education institutions should collaborate to improve the training of future teachers. What innovative forms can that collaboration take? How can we tear down the traditional barriers between K–12 teachers and university liberal arts faculty? Can such partnerships fundamentally change the way we educate preprofessional education students? These are some of the questions we faced when we undertook a partnership linking the Cultures and Communities (CC) program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), the UWM School of Education (SOE), and the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system. Cultures and Communities, the program I direct, is an undergraduate General Education curriculum initiative designed to foster more course work in diversity and multiculturalism, global awareness, and community engagement (all UWM undergraduates must complete 21 credit hours of GE classes). The emphases of CC's program seemed particularly relevant to the training of future urban educators (For an account of the program's initial development, see Jay, "The Community in the Classroom.") The way to make the connection, however, was not clear until the School of Education, through a Title II grant, began the unique Teachers-in-Residence (TIR) partnership, which brings a cohort of veteran MPS teachers to the UWM campus for two-year, full-time appointments. TIRs are offered a variety of possible assignments, including our CC initiative, and so in August 2000, Tom Brown and Darrell Terrell joined us as members of the CC team.

At CC, the TIRs work side by side with faculty and staff in the creation and implementation of new undergraduate courses in the liberal and fine arts. Through this collaboration, teacher education majors have an opportunity to choose GE courses especially relevant to their career plans, and to enjoy the benefit of having veteran MPS teachers helping to design and co-teach many of these classes. UWM may be one of the few higher education institutions in the United States where public school teachers join university faculty in the classroom as colleagues and partners working in a common effort to improve the training of the next generation of urban teachers.

This essay focuses primarily on the lessons learned during a year in which we twice piloted the proposed CC core course on "Multicultural America," taught initially through the Department of English (and now co-listed with History). In each semester we enrolled approximately 25 students, most of whom were preparing to apply for junior-year admission to the School of Education. This course carried both Humanities and Cultural Diversity General Education accreditation. It uses materials from literature, history, and the media to explore the meaning of multicultural experience in the United States. During these semesters we came to adopt our core principles of collaborative procedure: plan, implement, reflect, revise. At weekly review sessions the whole team participated in critical discussions of what was taking place in the class, structuring our thinking by this four-step model. Additionally, a consensus quickly emerged that we had to model what we expected the students to do—to risk themselves in order to challenge the assumptions they had brought into the classroom. We all had to ask: "What are our biases? What are our strengths? What prevents us from hearing one another? How must we change in order to make radical educational change possible?"

Seeding the Change: Where We Began

TB: I began work at Cultures and Communities with great anticipation and many reservations. Would I have anything to add to this project? I had 22 years of successful teaching, 10 of those in urban classrooms. As a liberal white male, I wondered, what do I know about diversity, race, and cross-cultural communication? I had plenty of experience and was open to change, and knew I would be challenged to demonstrate the relevance of my knowledge. Elementary school teachers are not often afforded the luxury of stepping back to analyze what they do and why. Much of what we know about teaching and learning is tacit knowledge. We know what we should do but cannot always explain why. Finally, I was not at all sure how the knowledge I had gained from years of teaching would help when it came to tackling the hard questions of diversity and cultural understanding.

I was also concerned about respect. Would I be treated as a fellow intellectual with ideas based on my experience—ideas that can add to the quality of teacher education? What attitudes could I expect from the faculty, the students, the institution? What would they expect from me? After all, my original TIR assignment had been to another program, and when that had not worked out I was assigned to this position despite my wishes and without additional consultation. I did not know anything about the Cultures

and Communities Program or what my job there would be. Darrell and I had met during the summer TIR leadership session, where we talked briefly of what the future might bring. Once the general TIR orientation ended in August, Darrell and I were sent off to meet the Cultures and Communities staff, who in fact had no idea we were coming.

DT: I approached this role with great enthusiasm. It seems no one knew exactly what Tom and I were supposed to do. We were told what we were expected to accomplish—to improve the preparation of students planning to enter into the School of Education. The School had just adopted a set of "Core Values" for all teacher education programs, including educational equity, learner-directed teaching, solid content knowledge, advocacy for all children, community partnership, and heightened professionalism.

After our discussion of the Core Values during the orientation program, Tom and I knew we were in substantial agreement with them, and excited about the prospect of putting them into practice. We also knew, from critical reflection, that we had a strong foundation of skills, talents, and experience to rely on in accomplishing the task. In the summer of 1997 I had received my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from UWM. This degree emphasized "urban education leadership development," and so challenged me to extend and refine the skills I had developed in the classroom. Most recently I had been an arts teacher at an African American immersion middle school, and helped author an article on interdisciplinary teaching of the Harlem Renaissance. Now, as a TIR, I felt that God had put me in the right spot to model what good teaching is (the Core Values) and to create change.[1]

Becoming Culturally Responsive Teachers

> "Responsive simply means reacting appropriately in the instructional context. The teaching effectiveness literature informs us that a responsive teacher is sensitive to the needs, interests, learning preferences, and abilities of their students" (Armento et al. 2000).

TB: I know that I am most effective when I am responsive to the needs of my students. My role is twofold. I am here representing what I know about the students in the Milwaukee Public Schools and their needs. I am also at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee representing my knowledge to the students taking Cultures and Communities courses. How can I do both effectively? From the beginning I was encouraged by my partners to share what I know and who I am. We all recognized that culturally responsive teaching begins with critical self-awareness. How can you know somebody else if you do not know yourself?

[1] Major influences on my thoughts about change include Michael Fullan, *Change Forces*; Linda Lambert, *The Constructivist Leader*, and Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn.*

A breakthrough came when I spoke to the class for the first time. I knew, as I began to speak, that my words were true and passionate. I told them of my initial missionary zeal when I first anticipated teaching in MPS. I told them about a professor who warned me that we should not go to the urban classroom expecting to change the lives of our children. "We don't need any more missionaries!" she said. I made the same sincere injunction to the students in "Multicultural America," telling them that MPS students do not need any more missionaries. The missionary has no respect for the culture of "the other," but rather expects conversion to some "standard" idea of "civilization." Such an attitude is condescending and disrespectful, and students can feel it right away. Instead, they need teachers who make a sincere effort to understand the cultural diversity of their students, and to see the world from the student's point of view. *You don't have to be like them, you just have to like being with them.* I realized, as I spoke, that my passion mattered as much as my words as I demonstrated exactly what I was asking the students to do. One student confirmed this when she wrote in her journal:

> *I remember that Tom said something like, "Don't go into teaching expecting to be a missionary." I couldn't help but think of that when I was tutoring because some days you just can't get through to help the kids no matter what you do.... It really made me justify why I want to become a teacher.... (Student journal entry, Dec. 12, 2000).*

DT: These kids were too quiet for me. I am used to the middle schoolers' noise level. I felt like running on top of the tables to see if these kids were alive. Little did I know this quietness represented a new challenge for me. I have successfully dealt with urban African American adolescents in situations I needed to control. With the middle-class white students at the university who are young adults, however, I needed to make sure to awake their awareness and to work with their perception of me. What did I represent to them? Was I, to them, the face of the angry urban child? "You represent the dominant culture," I said to them. "How are you going to teach me?" Perhaps it was this perception and this underlying question that explained their initial quietude.

Combining academic and literary readings on multiculturalism with discussions of teaching, Tom and I led the students in conversations that bridged both theory and practice. In the classroom we all had to learn to model, and practice, the ideas of cross-cultural communication that we espoused in theory. Rather than only having our conversations about racism during crisis moments after riots or shootings, we need to face racism every day, for it affects every aspect of our ordinary lives. Such conversations usually begin awkwardly, and can be painful, but we found that students hungered for candid and honest talk about the differences that separated us. As I built my dialogues with these predominantly white students (so different from the middle-schoolers I had taught at Malcolm X Academy), I learned that I could not be my natural Black self. Cultural responsiveness means that, in this setting, I have to watch my mouth. The words that come out must be edited—otherwise I will not only be misunderstood, I will also keep racism alive.

TB, GJ, DT: Culturally responsive teaching, then, must include listening carefully to the voices of others—for the teacher, that means designing a set of assignments and activities that brings those voices into the learning dialogue. Traditional lecture was kept to a minimum. Small- and large-group discussion, electronic chats, multimedia presentations, speakers, field trips into the community, and readings were done in a developmentally sensitive manner. We knew we were on the right track when we got the following comment: "I love coming to this class. You never know what is going to happen." From time to time we also asked students to answer questions such as: "How would you assess your own efforts and learning this week?" We also asked them to evaluate the class and the instructors at various intervals during the semester.

It was apparent through the early discussions among students that they were in need of a historical perspective. After the addition of Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, typical student comments were, "Wow! We did not know that! Why didn't they teach this stuff to us in high school?" We talked some about how community pressures often censor what gets covered in history classes, watering down conflicts or emphasizing feel-good events. One student asked "Do you think they would let us teach these topics?" after a unit on how European invaders had treated Native Americans. We responded in part that while we are not responsible for what happened in the past, we are responsible for the present, and accountable to the children of the future.

The team also began to see the importance of raising student consciousness about white privilege, as a first step in preparing them to think critically about multiculturalism, and so we added readings and a video about whiteness to the syllabus (see the work of Christine Sleeter and Peggy McIntosh). Many white students do not think they have a cultural identity. When they become teachers, they may tend to see students of color as "the other," as the ones who have a different culture that is damaged and needs fixing (and hence the missionary attitude). We have to be candid about the problems involved in preparing mainly white students to be the teachers in schools where the majority of students are of color (see the work of Christine Sleeter). This does not mean instilling guilt, but rather in growing a critical consciousness of one's own position in the world.

Reflect to Grow: Trusting the Dialogue

TB: Raising student consciousness about race and white privilege requires building relationships of trust—among the students as well as between the students and the teachers. This process begins with each of us recognizing from where we begin, and with not immediately judging others who begin from another place. The classroom must be made a safe place for explorations of sensitive issues about cultural identity, and teachers have an enormous responsibility for designing a pedagogy that creates this space. There will, there must, be conflict, and not just "celebration of diversity." But teachers must guide conflict toward productive self-reflection as well as recognition and respect for other people's lives, experiences, values, and beliefs. Dialogue must be built on trust.

Students entering UWM often find it is one of the few places where a dialogue on race and cultural identity can be held. This discussion, to be fruitful, requires skill in cross-cultural communication. For most of our students this will be their first time having such a conversation. Our student body reflects the separation and segregation prevalent in the society around us, and particularly in Wisconsin. The public schools in the city of Milwaukee are now "majority minority," while the vast majority of schools in the rest of the state are overwhelmingly white. Thus whether they are from the city, the suburbs, or the towns, students coming to UWM have little experience in diversity.

To be effective, dialogues on diversity need to provide the right combination of challenge and support. A student commented, after many discussions around the subject of racism as it affects African-Americans and whites, "Why are we still kicking a dead horse?" Darrell responded by saying, "This dead horse is a metaphor for what is real. There are viewpoints that racism is dead. There are viewpoints that it is not dead. This is where we need to learn to ask the right questions." Student discussion was heated, with no final conclusions made but awareness of multiple valid perspectives was raised. By listening to others, students came to see how particular opinions had roots in particular life experiences. Our understanding is that, for us to progress, final answers are not required. Instead, the essential thing is the ability to communicate across the differences that separate us. Academic content knowledge can then be keyed to providing better concepts and information to enable each student to find his or her own answers—to become critical thinkers who link knowledge and reality in complex ways.

TB, GJ, DT: We also built trust among ourselves as an instructional team (which included Assistant Director Sandra Jones and our Teaching Assistant Suzanne Leonard). As TIRs we continued to assist in the course development through weekly staff meetings where we felt free to critique our own performance as well as that of the other faculty. In class we participated in discussion and made presentations, and in our personal journaling and critique sessions we reflected on our performance, our successes and failures, and pinpointed issues we needed to work on further. A key to the success of this process was its collaborative nature: we read and shared each other's critiques, and we also had comments on them from the TIR program faculty (principally Professor Ken Howey).

Since we believed that the experience of the students must include systematic reflection, analytic response to readings and class experiences was the essential learning tool in the course. We set up a system where, through BlackBoard (an internet-based courseware program), students would post their reflections and respond to the postings of their classmates. Each instructor took a portion of the students and made on-line responses as well. We provided questions and included expectations before each assignment. Small and large in-class group discussion complemented the writing. The use of on-line discussions enabled us to track the patterns of student thought, pick up on crucial issues that were arising, and provide timely feedback. Online discussion, like other aspects of the courses, went through a developmental

process. At first we and the other instructors participated in the weekly internet forums. But quickly we found that instructor comments tended to freeze discussions, which then tended to be flat with one or no responses. Our solution was to withdraw from the public forums but maintain email as a way of giving feedback to individual students. Consequently, the discussion during the second semester was richer and deeper, as the forums became learner-centered and students felt a sense of ownership of them. Many students found the online forums a safer space for expressing controversial or emotionally loaded thoughts, and we witnessed a number of breakthroughs as students took risks with their postings. Happily, this did not include "flaming" or attacks, partly because we emphasized a pedagogy of respect in setting the rules for the forums.

Growing through Experience: Service Learning

TB, GJ, DT: One key requirement for "Multicultural America" was service learning. The instructional team believed in the potential power of service learning to integrate community-based learning experiences with academic course material. Initially students were assigned 20 hours of service learning as part of their course requirements. This work was substituted for the final exam. The UWM Institute for Service Learning assisted in placing the students in a variety of community settings where we believed student learning would be deepened and community needs met. The Teachers in Residence assisted students in troubleshooting their placement problems. Two in-class discussions were held and students were invited to write about their experiences in lieu of the critical reflection assigned during any week.

TB, DT: We were asked to assume responsibility for developing the service learning aspects of the course for the second semester. Our experience during the first semester led to a number of changes. Successful service learning experiences, we came to see, depend on four critical elements: preparation, meaningful action, reflection, and evaluation.

We changed the kind of placements offered. We decided that adult-to-adult contact was the best route toward creating boundary-crossing, cross-cultural communication. In school or tutoring situations, students might tend to see themselves as superior or more knowledgeable or more in control (and thus back in the missionary role). We also chose sites where the students would engage in issues of social justice. We sought to put them into activities and organizations that would help them get to know the community, its people, and its real-life concerns—and so also to challenge them to reflect on their own background and identity as they came to develop new relationships with people whose lives were not like their own. The knowledge gained from these experiences could then be a vital asset to students as they worked on preparing themselves for jobs as teachers in these communities, from curriculum preparation to student relationships to the need for more diverse academic content.

Though there was strong majority support in the final course evaluations for retaining the service learning requirement, one of the most common criticisms from the first semester students was that the service learning hours were too long, so we reduced

them to 15 hours (including time spent making initial contacts). To ensure that there was systematic reflection directed at the service learning experience, we designed three in-class discussions and three guided on-line postings. We used a sequence of guided reflection beginning with preconceptions, followed by description of setting, then identifying issues and relating them to course objectives, and finally identifying solutions and future actions. The final assignment asked for a lengthier written reflection that combined the questions guiding the previous work and asked students to tie their service learning experience to the goals and concepts of the course.

Dream to Grow

TB, DT: The work we did in helping to create UWM's "Multicultural America" course represented a unique partnership between the school system, the community, and the university. This experience has led us to expand our vision for what teacher preparation requires, and to dream about how changes in schools need to take place.

It is indeed essential that the university and community become one, and together sponsor relevant solutions in teaching and learning. One of our ideas is the creation of many mini-laboratories throughout the city. These laboratories would be test sites for dreamers like us to fashion their ideas into action. Dynamic partnerships involving faculty, teachers, parents, and students can be places where dialogue and trust are built, knowledge generated, and learning accelerated. Ultimately the goal is to develop the full potential of our society, recognizing our common fate as well as our diversity.

For example, a professor in the History department partners with a year-round school to offer an oral history experience for students during the interim between school sessions. Diverse "common" people will have a chance to tell their stories. There will be a chance to create familiarity and counter uncertainties. All people struggle at times, and, as we found out, most ethnic and racial groups have stories of migration and immigration that can be compared in fascinating ways. Beginning with a commonality such as this draws participants together. People feel empowered when they can tell their stories, and people gain cross-cultural communication skills as they learn to listen to others. The separation and segregation plaguing our society can be addressed in part through such explorations of our stories.

We would like to see a further expansion of the work to reform teacher preparation. We envision a preparation that equips teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds. The education students must believe that the children with whom they work are people like themselves, not problems to be solved. We believe that this kind of education for future teachers must begin with the General Education courses taken by students as they begin their university studies, which is why the Cultures and Communities program focuses its offerings at that level. We believe that education majors need to be challenged into a new way of thinking and acting that will help them avoid being guilty of "drive-by teaching."

When we dream together, we grow together.

Conclusion

GJ: My collaborative experience with Tom and Darrell ranks as among the most rewarding professional experiences of my career, and one from which I will continue to learn for years to come. Unfortunately, the financial cost of the TIR program will probably doom it in the long run, especially given the extreme budget pressures currently placed on most public school systems in the United States. Maybe we are just dreaming to think that we could institutionalize an arrangement in which public school teachers and university faculty can engage in sustained collaborative research and teaching, but wouldn't it be wonderful?

"Multicultural America" has gone on to its own institutionalization as a new, interdisciplinary course for Freshmen and Sophomores, with teaching responsibilities rotated among a number of faculty and graduate students in different departments. The Cultures and Communities Program proposes to make this class the core requirement for its planned General Education track, which has moved substantially through the process of bureaucratic approval at UWM. Linking the track to the curriculum of the School of Education has proven difficult, however, given the rigid schema of requirements in the various SOE degree programs and mandates from the state Department of Public Instruction. We will have to work hard in the coming years to make the fit work. In the meantime we remain committed to our partnership with the SOE, which has helped in so many ways to launch the Cultures and Communities idea.

(Note: For more extensive information on the CC program, visit our website at http://www.cc.uwm.edu)

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