

Ethnocentrism:

Can Diversity Courses Reduce It in Community Colleges Students?

How Would we Know?

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Ethnocentrism is a perspective of a person through which he or she believes that his or her own culture is superior to all others (Ethnocentrism). This is also an important concern in a globalized economy where people of many cultures both compete and co-operate in public and private spheres. Many conflicts arise because of the attitude that one's own culture is superior to others.

How does a teacher help students overcome such a narrow focus and attitudes of superiority through the content and practice of a college level course? This was my challenge. Kirkwood Community College already has developed an "assessment of diversity" form, usually administered at the end of the semester. I decided to administer the form at the beginning of the semester, as a kind of pre-test, and then toward the end, as a post-test. I wanted to see what kind of differences there would be from beginning to end.

By teaching three courses somewhat differently from each other, I was able to compare teaching methods as well as topics. This analysis is the result of my plan.

In the spring semester from mid January to mid May 2010 the three diversity courses I taught were:

- 1) Understanding Cultures – the Middle East;
- 2) Understanding Cultures – Sub-Saharan Africa; and
- 3) World Regional Geography.

Assessment of diversity

The statements in the assessment of diversity, a standardized form used in all the diversity courses, were the following:

- I better recognize and value the existence of different points of view.
- I have increased my knowledge of another culture or cultures.
- I have gained an appreciation of the importance of different cultural perspectives in shaping how people think and act.
- If I am working with people of a different cultural background, I will now be more likely to learn about their culture.
- I have developed better analytical and communicative skills when discussing issues of diversity.
- I learned to think critically about the issue of diversity.
- I have become more appreciative and tolerant of the variety of cultural expressions in our society today.

- If my views are in conflict with those of someone from a different culture or ethnic background, I will be more likely to listen to his or her point of view.
- When I meet people who are different from me, I will be less likely to feel judgmental about their differences.
- I gained an understanding about diversity issues that will help me to become a better citizen.

Understanding Cultures: the Middle East

Plan for assessing diversity awareness

I conducted two assessments of awareness of diversity; one on the first day of the second week of the course, when I thought the class had somewhat stabilized; the other four weeks before the final, when seven students were present. In the initial assessment, I told the students to read the sentence to reflect where they were as the course started. That is, leave out terms such as “better” and verbs that refer to the passage of time. Nineteen students took the initial assessment, while seven of took the final one. This was a big discrepancy, as will be seen when I consider the other two classes. The drastic change in the number of students taking the assessment unfortunately decreases its significance. Still, it is important to take the most extreme results seriously.

Required texts

I had taught the Middle East course every semester since Spring 2003, beginning before the war in Iraq started. The course content, student body, and my own understanding and knowledge

have changed considerably over these seven years. I began on a country-by-country basis, then moved to an overview by a historian and political analyst, James Gelvin, using his book, The Modern Middle East, a History. I had also used Karen Armstrong's book, Islam: A Short History, for a time. In the last couple of years I have used Reza Aslan's book no god but God and in the last year the Cleveland and Bunton book, A History of the Modern Middle East.

The Cleveland book is an excellently detailed history, but it is a history, focusing on political leaders and events of regional and global significance. I have found that students are interested in local folk culture, arts and literature, film, gender relations, health and education, and environmental concerns as well as political history. However, this became more emphatically clear to me through the use of this diversity assessment tool.

When I used the history in the fall of 2009, I did not get to the present in it – only to about 1970. This spring I decided to work the book from the present back into the recent past. I barely got back to the end point of the fall course – that is, about 1970 – although I presented in lecture a great amount of background information.

The structure of the course presentations

I used PowerPoint presentations with many pictures of people and places. The course was primarily lecture and whole class discussion. The only movie I showed (Frontline) occurred at the second session when I had to attend to previously arranged obligations.

The class was a morning class, meeting at 10 on Tuesdays, nine on Thursdays for two hours. For some students, especially those working night shifts, this presented a difficulty.

The class itself

I started out this spring with 26 students on the roster, although the greatest number in any class session was 20. Two never attended. Another attended only one class. A fourth did not start until the second week, yet another not until the end of the third week. Effectively the class started with 20 students. Counting those actually attending as the starting number, the fourteen, 70%, enrolled at the end was better than average. Of those 14, however, only six took the final exam and passed the course! This was a huge absence and failure rate, attributable to many factors beyond my control, but I did wonder what effect my teaching, the structure, or the time placement of the course had on the dropout rate.

Some of the factors beyond my control are the following. I had a larger percentage of students (at least 6 of 20 most active) who had seen military service or were preparing to enter the service. Some of them left the course to start service. Only one of these sought an incomplete, vowing to complete requirements as soon as possible. In addition, the gender balance was unbalanced. Five of the twenty-six were female. On the first day five of the twenty present were female. At the end only one female was in the class (she earned an A!). I find that gender balance contributes to the liveliness of the class.

What happened to them? One woman, a veteran, was in a car accident, and couldn't afford to continue. Another woman had children and didn't feel prepared for the material. Another had a serious asthma problem that kept her from starting on time, and a fourth, who was interested because she had a brother who was going to Afghanistan, stopped attending about when he was to leave. The men who dropped away had a variety of reasons, a few related to military

service. It was a class that seemed to be approaching a vanishing point. However, of the six who finished, three earned As and one a B.

Areas of progression and regression

There were three areas of significant progress, but three also of significant decline! The strengths were these:

- 1) "Increased my knowledge of (other) cultures,"
- 2) "More likely to listen to the ... point of view ... from someone from a different culture,"
and
- 3) "Gained an understanding of diversity issues that will help me to become a better citizen. "

The assessments that turned out worse were –

- 1) "Better recognize and value the existence of different points of view;"
- 2) "More likely to learn about ... the culture (of others);" and
- 3) Learning "to think critically about the issue of diversity."

As will be seen, this result was not as positive as in the classes I taught on Sub-Saharan Africa or on World Regional Geography.

Understanding Cultures: Sub Saharan Africa

I taught the Sub-Saharan class quite differently from the Mideast course. I used two main texts: one called Understanding Contemporary Africa, 4th edition, edited by April A. and Donald L.

Gordon, and the other Taking Sides-Clashing Views on African Issues, 3rd edition, edited by William G. Moseley. I also used five movies or videos, leading discussion on them and referring to them as we progressed through the course. The movies were

- 1) Yesterday, a South African rural woman suffering from HIV infection who wanted most of all to see that her daughter, Beauty, could get an education.
- 2) War Dance, about children in a Displaced Persons Camp in north Uganda, who competed successfully in a national music/dance competition.
- 3) A video about a Muslim woman in Nigeria who was condemned to stoning for bearing a child out of wedlock.
- 4) Pray the Devil Back to Hell, a movie about Muslim and Christian women successfully joining forces to stop a civil war in Liberia.
- 5) Cry Freedom, a movie about Steven Biko's work to end apartheid in South Africa.

The attrition in this class was much less, from 20, of whom no more than 17 ever attended at once, to ten at the end (59%), which is at the high end of the normal rate (40-60% of students completing is normal). One never attended. Two who eventually withdrew had not started until the third week. All of the students who stopped attending officially withdrew, so there were no Fs or FWs at the end, which is a first in my seven years of teaching at Kirkwood.

Diversity Assessment

In regard to the Diversity Assessment, fifteen filled out the form in the third week of the course, while nine (60%) completed it two weeks before the final. Thus the results of the beginning

and ending assessments are more comparable than in the Middle East course, where only 37% of the initial number (7 of 19) completed the ending assessment.

Results of assessment

The greatest change in the Sub Saharan class came in the category indicating an increase of knowledge of another culture. The change was from 1.87 to 1.10, a difference of 0.77.

The second greatest difference was in regard to working with people of another culture, when the students would be more likely to learn about their culture. The change was from 2.00 to 1.33, a difference of 0.67.

The third highest was in regard to developing better analytical and communicative skills when discussing issues of diversity. The change was from 2.29 to 1.67, a difference of 0.62. This was the one that scored lowest at the outset and lowest at the end also, but still a significant improvement in the confidence of students to be more analytical and better able to communicate about diversity issues.

The least change was in recognizing and valuing the existence of different points of view. This was the area in which students felt the most confident at the beginning, with a mean score of 1.47 at the outset and 1.22 at the end, for an improvement of 0.24. Interestingly, their sense of greater knowledge was stronger than their valuing of different cultures at the end. One student told me she could not answer the question at the end about better recognizing other points of view, because she had felt quite confident about that at the beginning of the course!

Summing up, the results show marked improvement in every category, with substantial gains in several areas. The films were a very valuable part of the course. I used them more than I originally intended. The only change I would make in the course would be to name in the syllabus the films I would use, and let go of the expectation for literature. The work on conflicting viewpoints was also a very valuable part of the course, as the students engaged with the issues, some quite sensitive, such as female genital cutting and AIDs, and with each other in small discussion groups. It helped to have a good balance of males and females in the class. Though a few students withdrew, the gender balance ended up exactly the same.

World Regional Geography

I used a World Regional Geography text (Pulsipher, 4th editions) for this course. Included in the materials is a DVD with fifteen-twenty minute segments depicting an area of concern in a country in each of ten regions of the world. I used most of these videos to provide the visual context for the course. I also used PowerPoint images offered by the publisher, interspersing them among lecture notes on the PowerPoint.

I also drew from the publisher's materials eight general topics of concern, from war and peace to water to nutrition. I asked each student to pick an area of interest to them, and then had them form groups to consider the topics and share ideas. They were to write five short papers, each on a different region of the world, by the end of the course. The limit was that no two students could pick the same specific theme within the topic. At the end of the course students were to make presentations particularly attending to information about their research trail. The correct attribution of resources was another important part of the course. Thus the course

was involving, with videos, small group discussion, and power points with many images we could discuss as a large class.

Assessment of diversity

The World Regional Geography course fell in the middle between the two Understanding Cultures courses, in terms of the response to the diversity assessment forms, with six of ten measures showing significant improvement, but not as much as in the Sub-Saharan Course.

In this course, thirty-two students took the initial assessment on the first day of the second week, while nineteen took the final one two weeks before the final. This was better than half the initial number, almost exactly the same percentage (59.4% compared to 60%) at the end as in the Sub-Saharan class.

Nine of ten measures showed a positive change. The one that declined slightly (from 1.73 to 1.79) had to do with appreciation and tolerance of the variety of cultural expressions in our own society. The course was not focused on our own society, except as one of eleven world regions.

The greatest change was in knowledge of another culture or cultures, from 1.81 to 1.40, a difference of .41. This is certainly appropriate given the global reach of the course and the students' own work on five themes within a topic. Second place for change was a three-way tie:

- 1) Likelihood for learning about the culture of another people (1.94 to 1.63, a difference of .31);

- 2) Thinking critically “about the issue of diversity” (1.94 to 1.63, also); and
- 3) (Gaining) an understanding about diversity issues to help become a better citizen (again, 1.94 to 1.63). This last one perhaps compensates for the negative result in regard to appreciation of variety.

Two other measures showed lesser, but still significant, improvement. One was the development of “better analytic and communicative skills “ (2.06 to 1.79, for a change of .27) and the other was when in situations of conflicting views with a person of another culture, a greater likelihood of listening to the other’s point of view (1.91 to 1.63.)

The measure that was lowest at the outset, thinking critically about diversity (2.16) was lowest at the end also, despite significant improvement. The measure that was best at the beginning, recognizing and valuing different points of view, although it improved (from 1.66 to 1.47), was not the highest at the end. Instead, increased knowledge was higher (going from 1.81 to 1.40, as mentioned above).

Combining all three classes

If we look at the three classes combined, we see that sixty-six students filled out the assessment of diversity form at the beginning, with thirty-five doing so at the end, slightly more than half (53%), low due to the attrition in the Mideast course.

The greatest change came in the category of increased knowledge (from 1.83 to 1.32, a difference of 0.51).

Second greatest change was in the category of listening to the point of view of someone from another culture (2.00 to 1.60, a difference of 0.40).

Third was in gaining an understanding of diversity issues to become a better citizen (1.94 to 1.57, a difference of 0.37).

In no category was there a decline in the score when combining the results from all three classes.

The category with the lowest score at the outset for all three classes together was in regard to thinking critically about diversity (2.08). This improved to 1.83, a difference of 0.25. It was still the lowest score for any measure, largely because of the Mideast class, where the score declined from 1.95 to 2.14. This is in stark contrast to the Sub-Saharan class, where the result in the beginning assessment for this statement was 2.07 but the ending assessment was 1.56, a change of .51!

Changes called for

This certainly suggests that a change in teaching the Mideast class is called for. More conflicting views to discuss, more movies or videos to consider, and less straight history would very likely improve the assessment of diversity measures. At least it is worth trying. It is difficult to discard teaching methods, but in this case it is not so much discarding, but adapting one course to a method I am already using in a different course!

Reflecting on the difference, I realize that the Mideast course was begun and progressed in a different era, or mini-era. That is, it began before the war in Iraq and continued during the

Bush administration. Now it is seeking a new identity in a period of conflict in Afghanistan in the Obama administration. When the course began, there were no veterans. Now there are many, as well as many preparing to go to Iraq or Afghanistan. In 2003 the economy had recovered from the dot.com crisis and had not yet faced the deep 2008 recession and, locally in eastern Iowa, the 2008 flood. Now all those factors are present. So, for several reasons, the course must adapt to a changed environment.

On the other hand, the Sub Saharan course is new, now just in its second year. In the first year, eight students enrolled, with just four finishing. This year was much better with 20 enrolling and ten finishing – same proportion, but better numbers. The course benefited in many ways by dealing with a part of the world that is suffering but not a place where we have been drawn into a war under often dubious and certainly contentious circumstances. Africa is also a part of the world where Americans of many generations standing can find their roots. It has an intrinsic interest for the purposes of sorting out identity and relationship issues for whites and blacks, as well of those of other backgrounds who seek to understand the relations between African and American society.

Conclusion

To conclude my thoughts on this consideration of diversity, the Sub-Saharan course was certainly a success in regard to growth in awareness and response to diversity, and should be emulated. A clear candidate for such emulation is the Mideast course, which plainly ran into trouble this semester for a variety of reasons, including the method I was using.

The World Regional course must also be considered a success in regard to improving students' response to diversity, as there were several areas of considerable improvement, and only one in which there was backsliding. That is the area I might pay more attention to: bringing the content relating to other parts of the world back to focus on cultural expressions in our own society. The measure indicating greater appreciation of the variety of cultural expressions in our own society today fell from third to ninth in a ranking of the ten measures, though the numerical measure was a decline of only 0.06. The improvement in the other measures disguised the drop in rank of this one. Thus, it is an area to focus on in subsequent renditions of this course.

Ethnocentrism reconsidered

Did the courses I taught in the spring of 2010 address the students' ethnocentrism? On the whole I would say that they did quite well. Leading the way was the course on Sub-Saharan Africa, in which there was a positive change in every assessment of diversity, which I take to be a measure of ethnocentrism. I would make few changes in that course. World Regional Geography came in second. The one change I would make there is to week to relate the material to our own culture, to weave it all together into a basket the students could take home in their lives. The Middle East course needs a dramatic overhaul, moving in the direction of the Sub Saharan model. The use of three resources:

- a Taking Sides book to encourage debate about different viewpoints,
- a text that emphasizes the contemporary Middle East, rather than the history alone, and

- the use of a few movies

would all help, and is the direction I will move in.

Proof of the pudding

Despite the positive direction of the assessments and the feedback it offers me, the proof of the courses will be in the lives the students and I lead. Will they in fact be less ethnocentric and more open to diversity as the years roll on? That is the subject of another study, beyond the scope of this report.

Pre - Post Test Results Academic Diversity Classes - Jeremy Brigham - 2010SP

Count	19	7		15	9		32	19		66	35	
Test Status	Pre	Post		Pre	Post		Pre	Post		Pre	Post	
Course	Mideast	Mideast	Mideast	Sub Saharan	Sub Saharan	Sub Saharan	World Regional	World Regional	World Regional	Total	Total	Total
Statistic	Mean	Mean	Difference	Mean	Mean		Mean	Mean		Mean	Mean	
I better recognize and value the existence of different points of view.	1.68	2.00	-0.32	1.47	1.22	0.24	1.66	1.47	0.18	1.62	1.51	0.11
I have increased my knowledge of another culture or cultures.	1.84	1.43	0.41	1.87	1.10	0.77	1.81	1.40	0.41	1.83	1.32	0.51
I have gained an appreciation for the importance of different cultural perspectives in shaping how people think and act.	1.84	2.00	-0.16	1.53	1.22	0.31	1.69	1.58	0.11	1.70	1.57	0.13
If I am working with people of a different cultural background, I will now be more likely to learn about their culture.	1.79	2.00	-0.21	2.00	1.33	0.67	1.94	1.63	0.31	1.91	1.63	0.28
I have developed better analytical and communicative skills when discussing issues of diversity.	1.89	1.86	0.04	2.29	1.67	0.62	2.06	1.79	0.27	2.06	1.77	0.29
I learned to think critically about the issue of diversity.	1.95	2.14	-0.20	2.07	1.56	0.51	2.16	1.84	0.31	2.08	1.83	0.25
I have become more appreciative and tolerant of the variety of cultural expressions in our society today.	2.16	2.14	0.02	1.87	1.33	0.53	1.73	1.79	-0.06	1.89	1.74	0.15
If my views are in conflict with those of someone from a different culture or ethnic background, I will be more likely to listen to his or her point of view.	2.26	1.86	0.41	1.87	1.33	0.53	1.91	1.63	0.27	2.00	1.60	0.40
When I meet people who are different from me, I will be less likely to feel judgemental about their differences.	2.11	2.14	-0.04	1.87	1.44	0.42	1.81	1.74	0.07	1.91	1.74	0.16
I gained an understanding about diversity issues that will help me to become a better citizen.	2.00	1.86	0.14	1.87	1.22	0.64	1.94	1.63	0.31	1.94	1.57	0.37

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