The Retention Divide: Building New Cultural Bridges

Do you find it challenging to connect with students? If so, you are not alone. As an instructor, I have grappled with the same challenge. The sea of faces in our courses can quickly become a melting pot of frustration when we overlook the impact of culture on the classroom experience. Consequently, this conundrum serves as the premise of this topic and why I am committed to increasing my cultural aptitude to create a classroom culture that is conducive to every student.

Cultural History

The current state of integrating culture into the classroom stems from the historical context of the education system. In the past, students were not allowed to learn together because of the color of their skin. This divide not only impacted society, but significantly influenced and altered how educators embraced or avoided teaching students from different cultural backgrounds. As an effort to change the former education system, *Brown v. Board of Education* put an end to decades of racial segregation in American schools. The divide was legally ended, but new challenges emerged. How do we bridge the cultural divide between instructors and students?

Every student that enters the physical or virtual doors of our courses does so with a cultural history that impacts his or her learning experience. Our role as instructors is to help foster an academic experience that not only leads to success, but equips students with transferable skills they can use to make a positive impact in society. When we fail to address the topic of culture, the implications are reflected in the retention of students at our community colleges.

Bridging Cultures

Diminishing retention returns is a recurring topic in scholarly discourse. The topic of retention within the context of community colleges is particularly viable because student demographics continue to diversify. The importance of identifying and implementing effective strategies to address the retention divide is an ongoing challenge that faces community college practitioners. Research suggests that factors such as mentoring, financial aid, family support, and an institution's culture can positively impact student persistence, which led to my desire to further explore this topic.

As a possible antidote to the systemic issues impacting higher education, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, American pedagogical theorist and teacher educator, coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy*. The premise of *cultural relevant pedagogy* is that students must experience academic success, maintain cultural competence, and develop critical consciousness to be socially successful inside and outside the classroom.

Academic Success

Students must learn to choose academic excellence and recognize the need for technological, political, and social skills to be successful in society. In my courses, I express to students that their best effort is expected and that each student is capable of producing quality work. Opportunities for students to enhance their technical aptitude are plentiful through various assignments that require submissions via the course management system and the use of internet sources for scholarly research and practical application.

Social skills are developed through group assignments, informational interviews, and job shadowing opportunities. In one of my class activities, students are assigned to groups and are given case studies on different study strategies. Group members must help each other identify effective study strategies to be successful students. During the activity, students discover they are enrolled in similar courses as other students in their group; this creates a sense of community that extends beyond the course. This community and support system helps students obtain academic success.

Cultural Competence

The student demographics of my courses vary. To help bridge the cultural divide, I frequently use group activities and pair work to encourage cross-cultural communication. Using the responses from a personal narrative activity assigned and completed by students during the first week of the course, I create "culture clusters" for group work activities. I group students based on the cultural references noted in their narratives. I have found that "culture clusters" keep students from grouping with the peers they sit close to in class. "Culture clusters" include categories such as first-generation students, students who work full-time, students who are parents, students with disabilities, and students of various religions. I use culture categories to create groups that allow for different cultural perspectives to be shared and hopefully understood. I have found that "culture clusters" develop a welcoming learning community within my courses. In addition, the opportunity for students to learn with and from their peers fosters social skills that are transferable to non-academic settings.

Critical Consciousness

To develop critical consciousness, instructors should encourage students to get involved in their local communities. Students must also learn to critically engage the world and challenge negative narratives towards marginalized groups. The development of critical-thinking skills is a continuous process. During the career exploration section of my courses, I discuss the importance of financial security and choosing careers that fit students' personalities and work values. In previous weeks, students complete various self-assessments—Holland Codes, Interest Profiler Inventory, and Work Values Sorter—to help them identify careers that coincide with their personalities and values. Once careers are identified, students must develop plans that explain how the careers they selected meet the needs of their communities. I refer them to VolunteerMatch.org to locate potential areas of service needed in their communities. The goal of career exploration is to help students identify careers that encourage civic engagement. I remind students that every career path should positively impact and help others.

Instructors have the ability to help students view their future careers as a way to positively impact the lives of others. The career exploration approach described above can be applied to most disciplines because the focus extends beyond the individual. Math instructors can use equations to help students analyze the variance in grocery costs in different zip codes, while English instructors can discuss the impact of literacy on employment opportunities for various ethnic groups.

Culturally Competent Instruction

There are various strategies instructors can employ in the classroom to increase their own cultural competency. At the beginning of every semester I require my students to write personal narratives that describe their unique cultures. The narratives allow me to understand who my students are and how their cultures impact their classroom engagement. For instance, in one personal narrative an international student wrote about how her culture impacts her willingness to speak out in class. The personal narrative helped me understand that the student wasn't disengaged, but rather that her culture discourages public speaking. Course assignments that allow personal reflection help instructors understand how various classroom activities can positively or negatively affect students.

Culturally competent instruction must consider that culturally relevant pedagogy is not restricted to race. Culture also includes language and social norms. Every culture includes sub-cultures that should be considered as well. English instructors can use song lyrics from various music genres to teach grammar, verbs, similes, and hyperboles, and math instructors can assign socioeconomic group assignments to teach budgeting and encourage financial literacy.

Conclusion

Classroom activities that incorporate culture help eradicate racial classism. Isolating marginalized students in our courses cannot persist if we want to bridge the cultural divide. The use of "them" and "they" language when referring to minority students weakens the bridge. In turn, the impact of our personal biases affects the bridge between the student and content and the student and instructor.

To increase our cultural competency, we must remember three things. First, *know your audience*. We must recognize that every student is not the same. Every background differs, and each racial group has subcultures that influence their experience. Take time to get to know your students. Icebreakers are a great way to engage students during the first class of the semester. Also, incorporate assignments that allow for personal reflection. Second, *remain teachable*. As instructors, we can learn from our students. Seek opportunities for professional development. Do not allow complacency to stifle your growth and development. Third, *develop new narratives*. We must acknowledge and confront the personal biases we bring into the classroom. The lens through which we view our students impacts—positively or negatively—the learning environment.

I hope that you will embrace the importance of culturally competent instruction and continue to build new cultural bridges in each of your courses.

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