

Instilling Diversity Awareness



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Abstract

The focus of this exploratory research was study the effectiveness of interceptive diversity awareness in criminal justice students. Using post-test survey compared to the pretest results of the same survey, a comparison of the means test indicated that the intervention of a professional speaker increased their sense of diversity awareness, indicating the value of diversity awareness as valuable content in educational programs.

Introduction

Perhaps more so than any other field, graduates of criminal justice programs will interact with diverse populations after entering the workforce, including clients across the spectrums of age, race, socio-economic status, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion in addition to individuals with a variety of physical and psychological disabilities. Criminal justice graduates will work with a number of groups, including arrestees, inmates, probationers, drug addicts, and veterans, which are particularly likely to have experienced discrimination in the past [1-3] and be sensitive to offensive behaviors [3]. As primary goal of universities is to prepare their students to enter the workforce [4], it is imperative to instill within these students a desire to speak, behave, and think in a way supportive of diversity. Changing national demographics necessitates a workforce proficient in working diverse populations. As such, it is essential for university students to be exposed others who are dissimilar to themselves [5] and prepare to become champions of diversity rather than simply aware of it.

Students who learn to recognize and appreciate differences within a community and hold a keen understanding of different subcultures are likely to be more successful after leaving the ivory tower [6], yet faculty often struggle with criminal justice students resistant to alternative viewpoints and lifestyles [1]. Faculty must develop methods to demonstrate the utility of diversity in a society and dispel the notion that diversity-based education is a hindrance to their academic pursuits. It is their responsibility to develop simple strategies for recognizing and infusing diversity within the curriculum-moving beyond simple

diversity statements in syllabi and imbuing diversity within coursework and other academic activities. A diversity awareness activity designed to assist students in developing a tolerance for individuals who are unlike themselves was implemented within a transfer student learning community. This activity is thoroughly described herein so that other instructors may replicate the activity and analyses offering support of its effectiveness are detailed.

Diversity Awareness in the Collegiate Setting

Diversity suggests more than simple tolerance for those who share different traits from one's own; it is a set of conscious practices that include: understanding and appreciating the interdependence of humanity, cultures, and the natural environment; practicing mutual respect for qualities and experiences that are different; understanding different ways of being and ways of knowing; recognizing that personal, cultural, and institutionalized discrimination creates and sustains privileges for some while creating and sustaining disadvantages for others; and building alliances across differences to that people can work together to eradicate all forms of discrimination [7]. Being aware of diversity-that those around you are shaped by different cultures, religious beliefs, gender constructs, and race experiences-is important to not only creating supportive environments but also to creating a culture in which hatred and mistrust gives way to understanding. Individuals' levels of diversity awareness are shaped by the family environment, child-rearing practices, morals, and self-concept [1,2]. Studies show that a statistically significant relationship exists between

overall self-concept and cultural diversity awareness [1-3], demonstrating that a person's diversity awareness level is impacted by both their personal, educational, and professional experiences.

It is crucial to examine the development of diversity awareness at the individual level, because the way in which individuals identify with their own cultural heritage often affects their tolerance of, or acceptance of, those who are culturally different from themselves [8]. One way to examine how individuals are shaped with regard to diversity awareness is to inspect their "cultural puzzle,"

Described as the examination of cultural to:

- a) Raise self-awareness regarding perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors;
- b) Heritage in order increase cross-cultural communication;
- c) Improve authentic cross-cultural knowledge; and
- d) Create a cohesive community and environment [8].

The development of the cultural puzzle is achieved by extensively interviewing multi-generational family members, determine personal biases and cultural roots, and reflecting on how exposure to the family's collective roots and biases impacted their level of diversity awareness and acceptance. By uncovering the sources of weaknesses in people's diversity awareness or acceptance, [8] cultural puzzle helps people to know where they need to exert more effort in order to become more tolerant, and why any shortcomings may exist. This may not change selfish tendencies, but helps individuals make sense of their own experiences and decisions, and perhaps identify solutions for change [9].

Other than the development of "cultural puzzles," one of the main areas of research under the diversity awareness umbrella is how such awareness affects teaching. Much attention is paid to how the diversity awareness level of a secondary-education instructor impacts the diversity development of their students. Garmon [10] shows six dimensions of an instructor's attitude towards diversity:

- a) Their disposition and level of openness,
- b) Self-awareness/self-reflectiveness,
- c) Commitment to social justice,
- d) Intercultural experiences,
- e) Educational experiences, and
- f) Support group experiences.

Since a teacher's own diversity proficiency inherently reflects on the amount of awareness they can teach their students, it is important for instructors to be aware of possible shortcomings

and work on improving them in order to provide a more cohesive classroom environment [8,10]. Beyond the need for instructors to be informed is the need for them to be able to instill the same level of awareness and tolerance in their students. Culture is complex, including linguistics, communication, traditions, belief systems, morals, and values, and necessitates educational activities beyond standard discussions of cultural foods, clothing, and holidays [6].

Older students, in particular, benefit from diversity awareness education. Universities across the United States offering degrees in education are required to address Diversity Standards as part of pre-service teachers' formal training (see Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium [INSTASC] and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP] Standards). General diversity courses are standard in most pre-service education programs and are aimed at providing pre-service students with the tools needed to address the challenges associated with educating students from different cultural backgrounds. In multiple studies [11], students were surveyed both before and after the completion of a general diversity course to determine the impact on their levels of awareness for minority groups. The results showed that diversity courses provided students with information that raised their awareness of white privilege, racism, heterosexual privilege. The courses also lowered students' prejudice levels against lesbians and gay men, and increased their support of affirmative action and same sex marriage. Students who completed the course also expressed a higher level of white guilt at the end of the term. Therefore, diversity awareness in the collegiate setting can help students become more aware of their shortcomings and prejudices, assist students in making the appropriate changes in their views or behaviors, and foster a more understanding and supportive education community.

The lessons learned in diversity courses help individuals as they enter the workforce, but they are not mandated nor frequently implemented in service degree programs such as criminal justice or criminology. Generally, individuals who exhibit higher levels of diversity awareness report being more comfortable once they enter the workforce and are more successful in their careers [2]. There seems to be a group-level affect as well in that the gender and racial diversity level of a business has a statistically significant relationship with increased sales revenue, repeat customers, greater market shares, and greater relative profits [12]. Despite this, policymakers and designers of curricula have exercised caution when developing required undergraduate diversity courses and exercises. The first steps towards ensuring cross-cultural proficiency is for all individuals pursuing higher education to recognize that cultural differences exist, value those differences, and be sensitive to those dynamics that are likely to emerge when people from different cultures interact [13]. Through awareness of one's own diversity and sensitivity shortcomings (via the "cultural puzzle"

or similar exercise), people can begin to curb the presence of tokenism, hierarchies, policing, and discrimination that often make multi-cultural collaborations so difficult [13]. It is crucial that those preparing to work in the criminal justice system have access to diversity awareness classes and those universities foster environments supportive of different morals, cultural norms, beliefs, and family structure.

Developing Diversity Awareness among Collegiate Students

As the importance of diversity awareness coursework in higher education programs likely to deal with a diverse community (e.g., criminal justice) is readily apparent, we describe a basic intervention implemented within a transfer student learning community. A learning community is a cutting-edge academic undergraduate learning program that strives to promote student success [8] Huerta, 2004. Learning communities are able to help students adjust to their university, which enables them to cut down on the “lost and isolated” feeling that is common among students at a new university. Learning communities’ transform the way students live, learn, and succeed in their academic endeavors. They are credited with the mental and emotional health of students and an increase in grades, retention and graduation Lord, 2012. Finley, 2008 Learning communities help students transition through academic and social challenges by providing small, supportive living and learning environments.

Educational and professional facilities should strive to create environments where participation in diversity awareness activities is encouraged and routine [14]; the fifty student learning community setting is as ideal opportunity and environment for this form of curricular enhancement, but analogous programming would likely fit well within other frameworks. In order to determine whether there was a significant difference in diversity awareness prior to and following the intervention exercise, student responses to a number of diversity questions were collected on a pretest survey designed and later (in a scrambled order).

The Intervention

The 75-minute presentation (the intervention) was given by a facilitator (Hutchison; whose work is cited here) who is the author of numerous articles and books on diversity and inclusion. He is well-known for his work in cross-cultural education. The presenter spoke about the necessity for recognizing the need to be aware of all subgroups in our criminal justice client base. He addressed several issues, including the following topics, based on his books: “Understanding the Nature of Difference,” and “Precautions on Categorizations and Potential Stereotyping.” A follow-up discussion was conducted by the professor one week after the post-test in order to generate ideas and obtain feedback about the instrument [14-17].

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of fifty students participated in the exercise and completed the survey instrumentation. There were no drop-outs and all in the class completed the two documents. The respondents were European American (70%) and African American (30%) of the population, in proportions reflecting the demographics of the school and major. Males were slightly more common in the sample (60%), consistent with the profile of the major but not the university (females make up 51% of the university). The majority of participants were under 24 years old (84%).

The Survey

The survey instrument, developed by Dowlin (Appendix A), is designed to provide insight into the degree of awareness persons have of others different from themselves. It includes a series of thirty statements related to diversity such as “I accept responsibility for challenging hatred and mistreatment of people of other races” and “I can tolerate or put up with people whose values are different from my own.” Respondents are asked to rate their agreement with each statement via choosing one of five ordinal Likert-type responses (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). The instrument was used in both the pre-test and post-test; the order of statements was scrambled in the post-test but the wording of individual items remained the same. A diversity awareness scale measure was created by averaging the thirty items; higher scores on the scale represent a greater appreciation for diversity. Reliability of the diversity awareness scale was acceptable in both the pre-test (.98) and post-test (.97), consistent with values reported in other studies Dowlin (Appendix A).

Results

Analysis

Cross tabulated results failed to show a relationship between age, race, or gender and diversity awareness. A two tailed t-test was conducted after each respondent received an average diversity awareness score each for time 1 and time 2. Results of the t-test indicated a significant difference between time 1 and time 2 ($p=.0001$). The t-value for time 1 was a mean of 36 and the t-value for time 2 was a mean of 40. Therefore, respondents showed a slightly increased level of diversity awareness after the intervention.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Appendix B depicts values of the scaled points. In this study, the students’ awareness of diversity increased slightly from the high 30s to 40 after the intervention. Based upon the analyses used to scale this instrument, students indicated an overall *acceptance level of awareness* in the pretest-an outcome of 36. The respondents reported a level of sensitivity and understanding of other lifestyles and values of groups that

are different from them and find that these differences are something that is positive and can be a source of learning. As a result of the presentation, the respondents reported an overall score of 40 in the post-test which can be seen from Appendix B to be *respect level of awareness*. Based upon scores in the post-test, students hold others different from themselves in high esteem and seek out positive exchanges and welcome chances to take part in activities which will expand their worldview (an *affirmation, solidarity, and critique level of awareness*). Although students made progress from acceptance to a respect towards others who are unlike themselves, the goal of this exercise is to promote cross-cultural awareness and proficiency. (Based upon this research instrument, the ultimate goal is to progress in their diversity awareness by being proactive in seeking out occasions to engage in interactions with those who are unlike themselves, and ultimately reaching the score of 50 or higher).

This research involved a small, non-random population of students in a required criminal justice course. The results should be viewed as a starting place for more extensive study of diversity awareness and practice in future studies. As a recommendation, this research indicates the importance of the inclusion of diversity issues in criminal justice programs. Possibly, ethics of criminal justice courses that reflect issues of diversity ought to be a requirement for all students majoring in criminal justice.

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