

## **Teaching Diversity/Multicultural Education Courses in the Academy: Sharing the Voices of Six Professors**

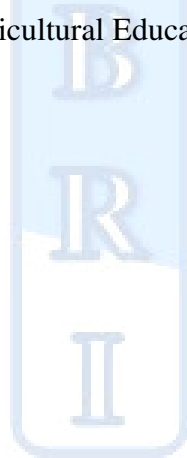
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### **Abstract**

There are many anecdotes about what Diversity/Multicultural Education (DME) professors endure while teaching these courses; however, limited research has been done on using the voices of professors to share their feelings about teaching diversity/multicultural education courses. This article will share the results of a qualitative study involving six DME professors about their stories of teaching diversity/multicultural education courses. Results of this study indicated that DME professors noted that gender and equity issues as well as student resistance were among the challenges that affected their course evaluations. Despite the challenges, DME professors continue to have positive feelings about teaching DME courses and that they accept the challenges involved in teaching DME courses.

Key Words: Diversity Courses, Multicultural Education Courses, Diversity Courses Challenges



## Sharing the Voices of Six Professors

Within many teacher education programs diversity and multicultural education (DME) courses have become required courses for graduate and undergraduate teacher education programs. These courses have proliferated as a result of changing student demographics, state certification requirements and or national accreditation such as the National Council for the Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE). In fact, 39 states require teacher education programs to prepare teachers to meet the needs of culturally, linguistically, ethnically, economically diverse (CLEED) classrooms. Although, much has been written about the need for such courses, very little has been written about challenges of teaching these courses from an instructor's perspective.

Within teacher education, it is an assumption that there is no difference between teaching DME courses and other foundations and methods courses. However, many DME professors know differently and yet, are often silenced within the academy when attempting to explain the difference. These instructors soon realize the awesome burden of teaching these courses and at the same time they are significantly responsible for imparting their subject matter content to students many of whom for the first time in their lives have had to discuss, confront and participate in discussions that challenged their beliefs systems about culturally, linguistically, economically, ethnically diverse issues. There are many anecdotes about what professors endure while teaching these courses; yet, very little research has been done on using the voices of professors to share their feelings about teaching ME courses.

Three research questions guided the study. These questions were:

1. What are the feelings of DME professors about teaching DME courses?
2. What are their challenges and likes about in teaching DME courses?
3. How do DME courses affect them?

As such this paper will share the results of a qualitative study involving six DME professors about their stories of teaching diversity/multicultural education classes at their respective institutions.

### The Study

**Participants.** The participants in this study were six university professors with more than 15 years of experience in teaching both graduate and undergraduate multicultural education courses. There were four females and two males in the study. The ethnicities of the participants were 4 African Americans, 1 Asian American and 1 European American. Two of the participants had 15 years of experience, one had 17, one had 30 and two had 35 or more years of experience teaching in the field of multicultural education. Six had formal training in ME as a part of their graduate experiences at the master's or doctoral level with two having an emphasis in multicultural education at the doctoral level, but studied some aspect of multicultural education during their graduate work. One developed a background in the issues through professional development. These professors have developed and taught multicultural graduate and undergraduate multicultural education courses at universities in California, Texas, Wisconsin, Washington, Louisiana and Illinois. They have taught at leading research I institutions, research II and teacher education institutions. All participants have developed DME

courses. One of the participants has developed and taught DME courses at two research I institutions, two have developed and taught at both research I and research II institutions and teacher education institutions, one has developed and taught at a research II institution only and one has developed and taught only at a teacher education institution. All of the participants have publications in the field of multicultural education. Their publications vary from refereed and non-refereed publications in the form of journal articles, books (edited and single authored), book chapters, newsletters and conference proceedings. The number of publications range from 10 to over 50 publications.

Table 1 - Teaching Experiences of Participants

Participant #	Name	Ethnicity	Years of Teaching
1	John	African American	15
2	Jean	African American	15
3	Jan	African American	17
4	June	Asian American	25
5	Janie	European American	35
6	James	African American	37

**Courses Taught.** The participants have taught a variety of DME courses. These graduate and undergraduate courses include:

1. Multicultural Ed. and Ed. Admin.
2. Diversity Issues in Higher Ed.
3. Development of Cross-Cultural Competencies
4. Equity Issues in Higher Education
5. School and Community Relations
6. Multicultural Education: Introductory Class
7. Multicultural Education: Issues and Practices
8. Foundations of Education in a Multicultural Society
9. Special Education for Diverse Students
10. Cultural Foundations of Education
11. Cultural Pluralism in Agriculture

**Interest in DME Field.** The participants’ interest in the field of multicultural education had various beginnings. For example, June’s interest began when she was a first grade teacher in an inner city school and was that she had biases. Jan’s interest started when she was bussed into the “White” high school and later on it was further impacted when she became an administrator for a diversity service department at her institution. John, on the other hand, got interested in the field through his undergraduate teaching. While he was trained in cultural foundations, his first job in higher education was teaching an undergraduate multicultural education course and a graduate cultural foundations course. He stated that his role as a college administrator focused him to help faculty members address issues of diversity.

Jean stated that she realized that she lacked a systematic knowledge base about differences in her classrooms as a special education teacher. For Janet, it was her family that includes multiracial adopted children who are African American, Vietnamese and Mexican American and that she lived and worked in rural and urban neighborhoods in

Detroit, Michigan and in California. Also, her doctoral work that focused on a cross-national study of educators attitudes toward multicultural education enhanced her interests as well.

James became interested in the field as an Agricultural teacher, but developed more scholarly approaches to the discipline while working with his wife in her field of multicultural education. In addition, his teaching discipline became concern with the preparation of Agricultural teachers and to increase the number of diverse students in agricultural related classes in high school.

### **Impact of Gender and Ethnicity on Course Delivery**

**Gender.** In regards to gender, the participants felt that gender impacted their course delivery. June and Janie said that they used their mothering experiences in their courses and that being a mother has impacted their development as a teacher. Janie stated that she is a nurturer yet she demands respect. She did not want nurture to be perceived that she would not provide students frank feedback. Jean looked at gender differently when she stated that her gender like culture, all of it impacts how she teaches. John and James believed that gender always has an impact on teaching. Jan was very explicit when she describe several incidents how gender impacted her teaching. She shared how White males challenged her authority and how White females challenged her instructional authority. Students made comments that she was an angry Black female who had the audacity to demand that they (White students) comply the rules.

**Ethnicity.** In response to the impact of ethnicity on course delivery, all of the respondents noted that their ethnicity was a factor. Janie stated that students judged her as a White female while June said that as a woman of color, she used her life experiences to enrich the theoretical aspects of her teaching. Jan indicated that her ethnicity played a role in her student resistance. Jean felt that her ethnicity affected her philosophy and that her phenotype had a definite impact on her teaching. John and James concurred with others that ethnicity affected delivery.

### **Student Resistance, Course Challenges and Evaluations**

**Student Resistance.** For many of the participants, student resistance was captured in two words, “student fears.” Sometimes this “fear” is equated with anger and students attitudes that I will not learn from you. This fear of the concepts that they are learning are baseless and unflattering that makes White people responsible for whatever was done to people of color rather than looking at the fact that Whites are where they are today because of merit. They also felt that students had a lack of understanding of “White privilege” and that they had a fear of personal change. In fact, James shared the story about one student making a “noose” in class and thought nothing about making or hanging a “noose.”

**Challenges.** Participants described challenges as dealing with student resistance, helping student understand White privilege and teaching students how to value differences. Not only was it a challenged to assist White students, but Jan found it challenging to help students of color put “slavery and oppression” into context as they analyze their own educational and social status. For Jean, it was a challenge to help

students “value differences.” One of Janie’s challenges was that students questioned her credibility as a White female teacher educator teaching ME courses. She also found that students questioned the relevance of ME and their own inability to examine their own bias. June found the teaching of cultural competencies to her students was one of the greatest challenges.

**Course Evaluations.** Opinions vary among participants. They stated that their evaluations have been challenging, usually quite good to open-ended and direct. Jean stated that she usually get good or horrible. As Jan explained that the evaluations are good except by those students who struggled with accepting some of the more “non-flattering concepts such as racism, oppression and White privileged. She said that sometimes she is called racist for spending time on such discussion. James stated while his evaluation were high, in fact, his is one of the highest in the department, some of his colleagues were the lowest.

### **Personal Changes and Memorable Moments**

**Personal Changes.** Teaching DME course has caused professors to change as well. These changes ranged from deepening their commitment to social, economic and environmental justice to creating a desire to learn more about teaching DME issues. These changes have helped them become more responsive to differences. Participants wanted to increase their desire to learn more about themselves and the subject matter and about the barriers to understand cultural impacts and cultural communication.

**Memorable Moments.** All participants had some memorable moments about teaching DME courses. Jean enjoyed seeing students experience the “ah-hah” moments that assisted them in wearing a new set of lenses. While John said that his moments were when students come back and describe experiences that they have used to assist students. June sees these moments as when students see their own prejudices, when new teachers begin to believe in students of color and see her students reach out to students of color and their families. Janie said that there were so many that she could write a book. Jan always have memorable moments when she, like Jean, see her students having the “light blub” moments such as they really understand concepts such as internalized oppression. Also she said that she likes it when her students of color realize the true meaning of internalized oppressions and how it has been perpetuated in their own lives. James stated that hearing students say that they need more courses like this and that these courses should be required for all students.

### **Critical Analysis of Three Themes**

There are three overarching themes that emerged from the content analysis of the voices of these six participants. These themes were resistance, gender and ethnicity and their personal commitment. These will be discussed in this section.

**Resistance.** The theme of student resistance was prevalent in many of their comments even when the comments were on other issues such as gender, ethnicity, teaching issues such as White privileged or on student evaluation. Higginbotham’s definition of resistance best describes what the participants felt. This definition states

resistance is an oppositional behavior of an individual or group of individuals to another individual, idea, action which usually occurs in an interactive environment involving power relationships (domination/subjugation). Embedded within the concept is the idea of acceptance and/or change. Resistance is manifest as active, passive, or as even absent. It is evident that the students that were discussed by these participants were demonstrating that oppositional behavior and that it was active, as Jan noted and even passive as Jean noted as well with her students saying that they liked the class and after reading her class evaluations she noted that they only pretended.

Looking further, the participants noted what Rodirquez (1998) identifies as ideological resistance. This resistance refers to feelings of disbelief, defensiveness, guilt, and shame that European preservice teachers and inservice teachers experience when they are asked to confront racism and other oppressive social norms in class discussions. Jan captures the point when she states that:

White males often challenged my instructional authority or my knowledge base.  
White females often challenged the amount and type of homework assignments.  
Some did not even want to buy the textbook! They seem to think I was somehow being an overbearing, angry Black female who had the audacity to demand their compliance to rules with which they did not agree.

**Gender and Ethnicity.** Although gender was not as prevalent as resistance, and the notion that two of the participants associated gender with mothering skills, the African American participants made more explicit comments about gender. In fact, Jan denoted that gender was of great concern to her, especially when challenged by White females and males regarding her knowledge and her work expectancy. However, she was keenly aware that it was hard to make a clear distinction between gender and ethnicity as the two were linked together. Houston (2005) captures the essence of Jan's concern about gender when she states that "student ratings of professors may be biased against women in subtle but significant ways." Furthermore, stereotyped expectations of women (to be nurturing and warm) overlap very little with expectations of professors to be knowledgeable and competent.

All participants believed that ethnicity impacted delivery. Such a belief concurs with what others have said in the field. Yet, we question that if this is such an issue, then, it poses great threat to faculty. In fact a recent review of research by Huston (2005) noted the research by Hamermesh & Parker (2005) that stated that they found lower ratings for final course evaluation for female minority faculty members, but not for male minority instructors. Interestingly, the two African male participants in this study acknowledged that they had higher evaluations than their female counterparts in their departments. According to their study, women instructors received significantly lower course evaluations than male instructors (nearly one-half standard deviation lower), and faculty of color received lower course evaluations than White faculty. When they looked at race and gender, they found that that female faculty of color received lower course evaluations. There seems to be both qualitative and empirical research to support the notion that gender and ethnicity can impact course ratings as this was evident by the qualitative findings in this study.

**Personal Feelings.** From the evidence presented here, it seems that these professors enjoyed teaching DME courses and that they want to improve their ability to teach these courses. They realize that there are challenges but these challenges have not deterred them



from changing their teachings as to not confront student behaviors and attitudes. Given their length of service in teaching these courses gives a clear message that teaching these courses requires commitment, cultural understanding, care and a critical consciousness. Such traits concur with the work of Geneva Gay (2003) and her students in their journey to become multicultural educators. In the foreword of Gay's book, she emphasizes that helping students understand the journey is paramount to them staying in the profession. While many young multicultural educators may not have the context of social issues as the 60's and 70's (the civil rights era), they must understand the social contexts and the struggles of preparing educators to be critical observers and participate in what Sleeter and Grant (1999) entitles, multicultural education that is social reconstructionist. This is what Jan means when she describes students being supportive of DME are students who have:

...attitudes and behavior that show a willingness to explore cultural topics (historical and current), even if they are new and perhaps disturbing, in an effort to better understand the world today and our shared places in it.

### **Personal Response**

As participant observers, in sharing our voice to this research, we concur with the participants in this study. Yet, we would like to further reiterate the issue about student evaluations and make several recommendations. Since the participants in this study had at least 15 years of experience and all but one is a tenured professor, we think that more studies should be conducted on the weight of student evaluations for non-tenured professors and the need for department and tenure review committees to understand this plight for faculty members.

Over the past twenty years, we have seen a difference in student attitudes about diversity. The climate seem less tolerant in my institution, yet, when we talk to DME colleagues at American Vocational Association, Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANNERS) National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), American Educational Research Association (AERA), younger faculty members are concern about how they can improve their teaching evaluations. In fact, one colleague was denied tenure due to low student evaluations when she demonstrated a quality research and publication record, won a teaching award and had national leadership. Such weighting of student evaluations concerns us as scholars in the field. To that end, we believe that it is imperative that we have a national study on that issue.

The second response is to teach young faculty members how to design their evaluation instrument as to have a composite score of their teaching evaluation. For example, redesign the evaluation peer with a content analysis of open-ended questions. Thirdly, faculty should have peer-evaluation and develop a means to inform department heads and review committee about the challenges as well as help them to understand student resistance. This should be done in a pro-active manner, rather than reactive.

### **Summary**

It is no doubt that these DME professors have developed a repertoire of skills to continue teaching DME courses as their longevity ranges from 15 years to 37 years. They realize that teaching these courses have challenges, yet there are memorable moments that provide the support and desire to continue to teach DME courses. They have taught at a multiplicity of institutions and use their own personal experiences that are laced with the scholarship of their discipline. They are passionate about their teaching and Janie says:

... I want my students to believe that there is a reason to hope for a more just society and that they are a part of the solution to the dire problems that we are facings in the nation and world.

In summary, DME professors have positive feelings about teaching DME courses and they accept the challenges. DME professors noted that these courses affect them personally and professionally; yet, they continue to teach them and said that they will accept each course with a new set of students as challenges.

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