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Enhancing the Learning Experience: Cultural Competency in a Diverse Classroom

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Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination

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Last semester I spent two weeks in Zambia teaching a Doctor of Ministry course to students from eight different African countries. This was an important experience for me because it magnified many of the similar cross or intercultural exchanges that I have experienced in the classroom here in the US. Of concern to me was the notion of cultural competency in order to have a creative classroom experience that enhanced students' learning. Cultural competency may be defined simply as "the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own." It has also been defined as "the ability of a person to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people of various cultural backgrounds." The first definition is a bit too utilitarian for me. It is measured simply by teaching students, and students learn all kinds of things from us—including sometimes what they do not want to be like. The second is a better definition, since the focus is on the interaction between the teacher and students. I think it is important to study our students and learn as much as possible about them, in order to build rapport with them and creatively relate our course content to their lives and contexts.

As I prepared for this experience in Zambia, there were many contextual aspects to consider.

First, I was clearly an outsider. Even upon arrival at the international airport, individuals looked at me and could tell I was not only different, but also an outsider. Many of the students came from countries that suffered under the yoke of colonialism, and much of my training in the Academy has sensitized me to its effects and the necessary work of conscientization among the oppressed.

Secondly, I had to consider how distance would affect us. In African countries, students are generally used to getting to know the instructor and spending time with them. I had met the students virtually via online discussion boards, but their cultures require a person-to-person engagement. Several students had limited internet services and/or sporadic cellular services. Sometimes their cities experienced brownouts or blackouts that limited their online engagement and even their submission of assignments in a timely manner. Being present with the students made a difference and they made it known to me how much they appreciated me being there in person.

This type of situation can be frustrating. Conflict may arise unnecessarily. My ethnic background is that I am Latinx and specifically of Honduran heritage. I have also been immersed in North American education culture for most of my adult life. The Academy has its own culture and expectations. I constantly asked myself how I was to navigate these cultural differences and build bridges to students with completely different experiences and expectations in the classroom.

The heart of the matter was that I first had to get over myself. I am Latinx, but even among my community I have always heard things like *“hay que mejorar la raza”* (“we must improve the race,” meaning we must act European and live among “whiter” races); or *“trabajar como negro para vivir como blanco”* (“working like a black person in order to live like a white person,” implying that white people always live better than black people). Work among people from different ethnic identities and cultures requires humility. We must have a posture of asking questions and learning from the other—not passing judgment. We must become students of our students.

I went into the Academy to be ever inquisitive, to seek out new experiences, to have new ideas, and to somehow make this a better world. This meant that I also had to move beyond my own stereotypes of Africa. Colonizers referred to it as “the dark continent.” One of the first references I had to Africa was seeing hunger portrayed on television through human disasters in Ethiopia and Somalia. More recently, a president referred to countries outside the US as “s—hole countries.” Our mental sketches and mental images need deconstruction. But deconstruction is the easiest part of the process. Anyone can tear down, criticize, or point out flaws and errors. The hard part is to reconstruct a new just and fair structure or mental scheme once the previous ones have been torn down.

As for creativity, on the first day of class I asked my students to create a list of positive African values and ideals that they strove to live for. Among the many things they shared were Ubuntu and music. Ubuntu is a South African term that means “I am because you are,” or “humanity

towards others.” It is a philosophy adopted by many people of Africa that emphasizes relationships, listening, and being heard. Ubuntu gives them a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment in their relationships with others. Music stood out to me because music is everywhere in Africa. Through drums, in their ministries, and in their homes, my students in Zambia love music. I asked myself how I could use these values to create a classroom environment that would appeal to my students.

Our classrooms in North America tend to be cold, dry, and stale. We tend to see education as disseminating the right information so the students can think the right way and act the right way in this world. It is a manner of doing education that prioritizes intellectual ability to the detriment of students from different cultures. The students in Zambia appeared to be pointing me in a direction through Ubuntu that was warm, relational, and alive. The concern was not only in receiving the right information or learning the right way of doing things, but in being in the world and being in right relationship with one another. Music accentuated the quality of pathos, in the sense of evoking emotions or affections that seemed to satisfy a desire to be in right relationship with one another. After finding out what the students valued, I decided to tweak my lesson plans and include activities that were more dialogical and that included music. In my following blogs, I will continue discussing specific ways in which Ubuntu and music helped establish a positive rapport with my students from African countries.

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