Cultivating Voice: First-Generation Students Seek Full Academic Citizenship in Multicultural Learning Communities

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Abstract Research has shown that first-generation, low-income college students experience both isolation and marginalization, especially during their first-year of college, which impacts their long-term persistence in higher education. In this article, I argue that learning community pedagogy designed with attention to multicultural curricula is one vehicle to address the challenges faced by these college students. Organized around the themes of identity, community, and agency, an interdisciplinary Multicultural Learning Voices Community (MLVC) was created at a large, public midwestern research university to provide TRiO students with challenging academic coursework that would connect with their lived experience and help them build bridges of social and academic integration during their critical first-year of college. This article presents qualitative data from a multiple case study of seven cohorts of the MLVC, which captures students’ perceptions of their experience.

Key words first-generation • learning community • multicultural • TRiO

For many first-generation, low-income students college is an unknown land at which they dream of arriving one distant day. Many of them, through no small effort, arrive at our door steps only to find college to be far less magical and much more confusing than they ever imagined. Not only must they quietly discover the unwritten rules and expectations implicit to academia, but often

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they must shed parts of themselves in order to do so. Law (1995), an academic, reflected on her own experiences as a first-generation student and described this divide between worlds:

At home I could never get myself to talk about books or ideas that never intersected with the lives of my mother, brother, and cousins and extended family. To talk about my studies seemed ridiculous and stuck up at best in a context that seemed as mistrustful of academia as academia was condescending to it. (p.4)

Her words capture the sharp divide between the home and school worlds of many first-generation students and also suggest that they may feel they come to college with experiences, ideas, and life-stories that are not valued by the academy. Despite all we know about engaging and involving students in learning, many first-generation students do not feel that they have the permission to engage in their learning authentically as their full selves. This divide between home and school worlds coupled with a sense of marginalization in the curriculum perpetuates the isolation that first-generation, low-income students, many of whom are also students of color and immigrants, feel on campus.

There has been much exploration about the positive impact of learning communities on college student experiences. Learning communities have emerged as one way in which to bring interdisciplinary, multicultural curricula into a structured space that allows diverse student groups to find a sense of belonging in the academy. Such curricular structures have created environments for more time on task and active and collaborative learning, often modeled by the faculty members who build connections between the social and academic realms of the students’ lives (Gablenick et al. 1990; Goodsell-Love 1999; Lennings and Ebbers 1999; Levine et al. 1999; Smith 1991).

There is a significant body of research on the benefits of learning communities and peer-group involvement with regard to increased retention (Tinto 1997), and learning communities have been cited as one of several effective practices for enhancing student engagement (Zhao and Kuh 2004). Factors that impact retention and engagement include the creation of safe space, the building of peer networks, and access to an interdisciplinary multicultural curriculum, all of which foster a sense of belonging to the institution (Astin 1993a; Cockerell et al. 2000; Kuh and Vesper 1997; Tinto et al. 1993). Most recently, studies at 2-year colleges have revealed that first-generation, low-income students who participated in learning communities were more engaged and more likely to persist from freshman to sophomore year than comparison group students (Engstrom and Tinto 2008).

The study presented in this article builds on Engstrom and Tinto’s (2008) research by examining the impact of learning-community design coupled with a multicultural curriculum specifically for first-year, first-generation college students at a 4-year research institution. Using student voices, this article describes their experiences in a learning community specifically designed to cultivate a space that allows them to practice full citizenship in the academy. The voices of these low-income, first-generation students make the argument for the development of intentional curricular opportunities that build bridges between the academy and the life-worlds of historically marginalized students.

For the purposes of this research, I use the terms space and place to refer to how students’ location or place in the world (Bruch et al. 2005) is impacted by their history, their demographics, and their relative proximity to power. I also use the term lived experience to embody how one’s life encompasses past experiences and one’s interpretation of these experiences in the context of implicit and explicit messages from the environment (schools, family, peers, culture, race, class, gender expectations) (Van Maanen 1990).
Central to this study are five themes that emerged from student voices captured in weekly reflective writings through the course of their enrollment in the MVLC during their first-year of college. The weekly writing responses were coded using a multiple case-study methodology validated by two coders. Seven separate cohorts of students, totaling 128 students, participated in this learning community between fall 2001 and fall 2007. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect students’ privacy, and quotes have been slightly edited for clarity.

Overview of the Multicultural Voices Learning Community

The Multicultural Voices Learning Community (MVLC) is offered at a large, mid-western, land-grant university located in the heart of a large metropolitan area. This learning community is housed organizationally in one of eight first-year admitting colleges at this institution. The MVLC was designed in conjunction with a TRiO Student Support Services program with the specific intent of challenging the isolation and marginalization experienced by first-generation, low-income students. TRiO programs nation-wide are federally funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The TRIO program has been funded since 1976 with a mission to serve low-income and first-generation students and students with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education requires that at least two-thirds of these participants be both first-generation and low-income. Students in the MVLC are all first-year students who receive advising and academic support through the TRIO Student Support Services program (SSS). This particular TRiO SSS program serves 250 students annually, and 85% of the students qualify for two of the required criteria: first-generation, low-income, or disabled students. The remaining 15% of participants meet one of the aforementioned criteria. The SSS program is a multidimensional program which provides academic support, supplemental study groups, learning communities, and leadership development for first-generation college students who seek admission in this program.

Specifically, the MVLC consisted of three academic courses: a social science course with a focus on race, class, and gender in the U.S.; a humanities course with a focus on creativity and art; and a freshman composition course. Each cohort of 18–20 students was concurrently registered for all three courses each semester. The themes of identity, community and social agency served as the underpinnings of the curriculum and allowed the three faculty members, together with the students, to find points of integration in activities, assignments, and readings across the three courses.

Rationale and Program Design

The design of the MVLC sought to acknowledge the tightening of admission policies at our institution and across the nation and recognized that access to college without support is not real access (Adelman 2007; Engstrom and Tinto 2008). This lack of support for sustaining the promise of access reinforces the need to create intentional spaces for low-income, first-generation students, particularly at land-grant universities. With input from both students in fall 2001 and the TRIO Student Support Services Program staff, three faculty members designed the MVLC as an innovative model for multicultural education.

Creating opportunities through which students are invited to construct knowledge requires both a curriculum that speaks to their lived experiences and a pedagogical approach that invites reflection, community building, and trust. This type of space can also foster a stronger institutional connection which translates into higher persistence for
those students who are most at risk of dropping out after their first-year of college. This deeper institutional connection is not built solely as a result of stronger social networks; it also depends upon the combined impact of social and academic integration (Tinto 1998).

Our challenge was to find ways simultaneously to challenge and support students who often feel isolated and marginalized in the academy. They need to have bridges that help them cross the divide between their home worlds (Howard 2001) and the academic world. These bridges need to represent a two-way process that invites students into the academic realm without demanding a type of assimilation that makes it impossible for them to return to their home worlds. In addition, curricula that acknowledge these students’ input and experiences as valuable to the academy can serve to foster a sense of belonging and connection which is critical to their academic integration (Rendón 1992, 1994; Tinto 1987).

The Framework of Critical Pedagogy

Three themes shaped the curricular and pedagogical design of this learning community. These themes—identity, community and agency—were derived from a critical pedagogy framework. Giroux (1994) argued that “critical pedagogy signals how questions of audience, voice, power and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities. . . . Pedagogy in the critical sense illuminates the relationship between knowledge, authority and power” (p. 30).

Specifically, there are several reasons which make critical pedagogy a useful theoretical response to the problem of isolation and marginalization. First, critical pedagogy attempts to create new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on “breaking down disciplines and creating interdisciplinary knowledge” (Giroux 2004, What is Critical Pedagogy Section, para 2.). Second, critical pedagogy raises questions of power in education by challenging the notion of educational neutrality. Third, it invites the voices of marginalized groups into a dialogue that allows them to consider, evaluate, apply, reflect upon and make connections between theoretical positions about race, class and gender, and their own lived experiences. This reflective process invites students to engage in social change. The themes of identity, community, and agency provide a foundation for this learning community in two ways. They are extensions of critical pedagogy, the conceptual lens through which this learning community was designed; and they shaped the creation of the thematically connected curricula for the MVLC. Working definitions of each of these themes are provided here.

Identity refers to the examination of self, the identities of others, and the exploration of identity in social–political and historical contexts, media, and art forms. The examination of self requires reflection and the development of skills to position and re-position one’s self in the context of multiple identities and issues raised in the MVLC.

Community refers to the active development of place and belonging within the learning community courses. Development of community requires consideration of students’ perceptions of what it means to be a community as well as inviting students to contribute, critique, and examine forces that impede as well as enhance the growth of the community. Developing community asks students to engage in constructing knowledge, building relationships, and taking ownership of the learning processes.

Finally, agency refers to the process by which engagement in a learning community and around multicultural issues encourages and empowers students to examine issues of social
change and civic engagement in the context of their own experiences and the experiences of others with the intent to advocate actively for social change.

Each of these dimensions is an extension of critical pedagogy because they all reflect an engagement in the process of examining self, considering self and others in the context of community, and exploring ways in which newly constructed knowledge emerging from this dialogue can be applied to impact social change. Most importantly, the examination of these issues is situated around the deconstruction of power and invites students to consider the influence of intersections of race, class, and gender and the way the dynamics of power play out to the advantage of some groups over others.

Enacting Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom

Each of the three courses in the learning community addressed the themes of identity, community, and social agency. At several points in the semester the instructors created assignments, activities, and projects that asked students to think about the intersection of these themes within and across classes. The curricula for all three classes included theoretical articles, first person narratives, and art (visual, dance, theatrical, and musical) that explored issues of race, class, gender, disability, and homophobia in the U.S.. Students were consistently asked not only to consider this material in the context of their own experiences but also to consider the experience, perspectives, and positions that were different from their own. At least three times in the semester all instructors and students met together in one classroom and engaged in a reflective activity around these themes. For example, in the first week of class, both students and faculty members were asked to reflect on the meaning and history of their names. One student reflected on this activity in this way:

The activity that made me feel welcome was when we talked about the history of our names. This was something that I had never done before. I didn't even know the history of my name, but listening to everyone else's history give me a sense of who they were. Many people had stories behind their names. Their names represented something that was important in their lives. And even those of us who didn't know the history of our names wanted to learn it after that. Now I want to know more about my own name. This made me feel welcome because I felt important. I felt that anyone who wanted to know about my name must want to know about me. So, for me that was an excellent icebreaker. (Sasha, fall 2004)

This exercise illustrates one way in which students' life experiences were brought to the center of the learning community.

Each semester also culminated in a capstone project that centered on the art class but required uses of concepts and themes from all three courses. The capstone projects included a public group performance or a large scale mural which students created together based on the themes, ideas, and work completed in all three courses. Several of these murals are on display in public and classroom spaces throughout the college.

The journey to the end of each of the semesters was bumpy, complicated, challenging, and thoroughly engaging. The next section describes this journey from the students' perspectives. Five general themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of students' weekly reflective writing. The weekly reflective writing sought to capture students' perceptions of their MVLC experience as they progressed through the semester. The themes and the student quotes include voices from fall 2001–fall 2007.
The Study and Data Collection

This study employed an interpretive multiple-case study approach to capture students’ perception of their learning experience in process, i.e., as they responded to weekly reflective writing prompts. The use of reflective writing as personal documents was particularly appropriate for this study because they capture the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of the participants and they reflect “the participants’ perspective which is what most qualitative data is [sic] seeking to do” (Merriam 1998, p.116). The prompts asked questions about students’ experience in the MVLC in the context of the three themes of identity, community, and agency. The decision to use weekly writing was intentionally made so as to capture students’ experience while it was happening, rather than only retrospectively at the end of the semester. All student writing was coded using the process of categorical aggregation that yielded categories of themes (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 350). Data were then tabulated under the themes and sub-themes and cross-referenced by student race (R), gender (G), a numerical student code (STC), and week in the semester (WK). Data was coded by two readers to ensure rater reliability or “investigator triangulation” (Stake 2001). This study had been approved by the institutional Human Subjects Review Board.

First-year TRiO students elected to register for the Multicultural Voices Learning Community during orientation in the fall semesters or pre-registration meetings in the spring semester. They were requested to sign consent forms to give instructors permission to keep copies of their written work for the duration of the study. Over the course of seven cohorts 128 students have participated in the MVLC. Females outnumbered males overall by almost two to one: 84 females (65%) to 44 males (34%). Race broke down across cohorts as follows: 42.9% African American, 29.7% Asian American, 10.9% White, 8.6% Hispanic, 5.4% Native American, and three students listing no racial data. One interesting trend evident in the racial data is the decline in enrollment of African American students. Enrollment of African American students declined from 50% in the fall 2001 cohort to 10.5% in the fall 2007 cohort while students listing Asian as their race increased during the same period from 20% to 57.8%. This trend is reflective of changing admission demographics across the University.

While the intent of this study was not to interpret persistence, it is informative to look at patterns of persistence for MVLC participants Overall persistence data from the first semester to the second semester was 82.5%, and from the first-year to the second year it was 64.5% (Note: at the time of writing, the second year persistence data of the final cohort, fall 2007, was unknown and thus excluded when calculating persistence data between first and second year). The persistence data shared here tell part of the story, but what occurs behind those numbers is illuminated best by the students’ voices. The next section highlights these voices in the context of the five themes that emerged from analysis of their reflective writings.

Findings: Student Voices

Finding Place

Finding Place is one meta-theme characterizing the experience of MVLC students, who were able to discover a space of belonging both literally and figuratively. As Rhian’s quote
below suggests, the experience of low-income, first-generation students, many of whom are students of color, can be characterized as a lonely experience.

See where I'm from there are not many opportunities, so when I was given a scholarship to attend the University, I was given the opportunity of a life time. It is very important to me that I succeed at this college because I want to be able to get that good paying job so that my mom won’t have to struggle anymore. I want to be able to set the bar and show people that it isn’t impossible for an inner city kid who came from a low class family to be able to graduate from a four year college. I want to be the one who changes the normal flow of things and shake things up a little. I want to be able to help change the lives of people who are just like me who came from nothing but is working hard to become something great. With that said, college for me is the lonely way. (Rhian, spring 2007)

The isolation of first-generation college students is typified by a limited understanding of the collegiate environment and its expectations (Bui 2002), inadequate family support (Terenzini et al. 1996), and a disconnect between their home and academic worlds (Rendón 1994, 1996; Rodríguez 1982).

Many students commented on how validating it was to be asked about themselves as individuals and to hear about the identities of their peers. Students noted that this process of being recognized and valued was central to finding place. Rendón’s (1992) research on first-generation students reflects the importance of this type of validation for this group of students. Rendón found that students who have “validating encounters,” that is, positive experiences with other students, faculty members, and staff, felt affirmed about their place in higher education, thus confirming the importance of finding place at an individual level. Jun ren expressed this sense of validation when she wrote:

Being in the learning community, I feel like ‘oh I know all these people’! My classmates are people just like me; they struggle, they are ambitious to strive in life, and they have motivation and reasons to keep going to school. I’ve been around my classmates for a whole semester now, and I feel like we’ve become a family of our own. Somehow, we’ve all intertwined into each other’s life. Some of us were strangers when we first joined the community, but now we’re all friends or acquaintances. Everyone was a stranger to me, I remember feeling intimidated—“Oh these people are all so smart and they all know each other”! I felt so isolated. One-by-one, I opened up and slowly gotten to know everyone. (Jun ren, spring 2007)

Students also found a sense of “family” within their community of diverse peers. Many students characterized this experience as a normalizing one, in which peers filled in gaps in their learning, asked questions that they had wondered about themselves, or expressed confusion about the same problems with which they grappled. Given Astin’s (1993b) longitudinal study of 25,000 students, which revealed that peer group was the most powerful influence on academic and personal development, it is not surprising to see that peer group, also in this instance, had a significant impact on their sense of finding place. One student captured the normalizing process of having her learning experience reinforced by her peers:

I’ve learned that we as students, we may act like our lives are going good, but deep down inside there’s a part of us that holds us down. Everyone’s life, there has to be ups and down. No one’s life is perfect. As I look at other classmates’ projects, I can feel how they feel because we have the same issues and we’ve been through it. We’re
been in the same position in life. I know now, that I’m not going through this alone. There’s people out there that is in the same position as I am. (Xuan, fall 2005)

Stories and first person narratives presented in the learning community curriculum or shared in the classroom invited students to inhabit both the worlds that they deeply understood and those that they had never encountered. For students in the MVLC, the sharing of stories about their experiences, both those prompted by engagement with the curriculum and those elicited by peers, created a sense of place in which they were understood. The diversity of this peer group and the role this heterogeneity played in enhancing students’ connections with each other underscore the value of both diversity and a multicultural curriculum in allowing students to find place. Jake’s comment illustrated the value of storytelling and the trust it engendered in the learning process:

I guess the activity that really stood out to me was when we were sharing our extensions. It was really interesting because I took my work seriously because I was really trying to let loose and let others through my wall of insecurities. What I realized while we were sharing was that we all had a lot in common. We were all scared to let our parents down. Most of our parents were immigrants and I guess we were always working to keep the family together. It was weird because we knew how it felt to lose somebody through deportation. Jenny, had lost a cousin, I had lost a brother and Ayan’s brother was still in Africa. I really learned a lot through their experiences.

(Jake, fall 2004)

Finding Voice, Finding Self

To find voice is to discover a capacity to engage in self-expression and, in doing so, to construct knowledge. It is to engage in the world of ideas, concepts, and feelings, both cognitive and affective, and to find ways to articulate one’s place in that world. Finding voice is irrevocably tied to the notion of self within community, because one’s voice does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is embedded in and impacted by context, language, and position of the speaker and by the community in which he or she must speak. India’s comments captured how her voice was tied to her reflection of self within the community:

During my time in this small learning community I have found out many of things about myself. I have found parts of my identity that I didn’t know I had. I have found my drive in life; I want to make a life for myself. I have began my quest for happiness and comfort, I want to have a career that I am passionate about and a family that depends on me. I want so many things in my life and the first step is my education.

(India, fall 2005)

This process of finding voice and finding self is demonstrated as students grapple with understanding, questioning, and articulating their own self-identity. Expressing identity is of particular importance for first-year, first-generation students, many of whom seek to hide rather than reveal their multiple identities in an effort to fit into the picture of a “typical college student.” To give voice to one’s identity is to lay claim to a stronger sense of self and in doing so to gain confidence to express ideas, engage in dialogue, and develop a capacity for self-authorship (Baxter Magolda 2003). For many students this process of actively expressing who they are and what they think is a new and
empowering experience (Ortiz 2000). Nicholas described this process of engaging in self-authorship:

After doing reflection writings and discussing them, it gave me an urge to write down my feelings. And then I kept wondering... What are my feelings? Why am I here? So it was interesting for me to share my deep inner feelings with my partners, because I had gotten to see how differently they write compared to me. People are insecure. Am I insecure? I hope not. I hope I'm bright and reasonable. (Nicholas, fall 2004)

Finding voice and self is developed as students engage in discourse with each other. Baxter Magolda (2003) wrote that the “concept of self-authorship is not self-centered but rather a mutual reciprocal dynamic of relations with others” (p. 234). Two students described how they grappled with coming to an understanding of the complexity of race relations and how this intersects with their daily lives:

My thoughts, reactions and feelings to the film Skin Deep varied. My first thought upon reflection is how badly I felt for the White people in the group. It isn’t as easy for them as we want to think. We look back at our pasts and see pain and suffering at the hands of the White people. This pain and suffering is our security—well this isn’t my fault, it was incited by the White man doing this. (Mallory, fall 2004)

Getting back to myself, I just do not quite understand how my opinions change so frequently about different races, especially White people. I am not a racist person but I do seem to hold grudges. I see or hear someone make a racist remark, or move across the street because they see me, or clutch their purse at my brothers or even look at my I.D. and say, “you go to the University?” Those types of things just make me so upset that it is hard for me to not think things that my grandmother and father constantly say about White people that I know do not apply to all of them. .... I guess it’s a struggle. (Ananda, fall 2004)

Voice brings one’s past experiences into the open; it invites understanding or critique and engages the speaker in the effort of meaning-making. For many students, this aspect of finding voice involved great risk because they were not only de-constructing their worldview but also engaging their friends or, more daunting still, their families in this process of de-construction.

Clearly none of these processes of finding voice, finding self, or even finding place was without struggle and conflict. While conflict is often perceived as negative, I suggest that it is an intrinsic part of understanding self and community and impacting change. The next meta-theme, conflict as a catalyst, will address the role that conflict played in the students’ MVLC experience.

Conflict as Catalyst

Transition to college is a period of growing pains. In the MVLC, the nature of this transition often involved conflict. This conflict was not only tied to grappling cognitively with new concepts or challenging social issues, but also to dealing with internal disequilibrium. While the process of engaging with this conflict was not easy, many students like Christina began to recognize the value in disagreement and both the questions and answers it yielded:

Not only did I learn about myself, I learned about each and everyone in class. We are all so much alike, yet we are all so very different. I need to keep in mind that we all
come from various backgrounds, growing up with different people and different morals, which made for different thoughts and ideas. We all have so much to offer, and at times it may be hard to incorporate everyone’s ideas, but everyone’s ideas need to be considered. Always remember two heads is always better than one. I also think its okay at times to disagree; this is where discussion comes in. Controversy can work a problem out in more ways than one. (Christina, fall 2001)

Students most often expressed a sense of personal conflict or dissonance as they worked to define their sense of self. Part of this conflict was expressed in the ways that students came face-to-face with the question, “Who am I?”. Although the process of re-examining self was a challenge, most students commented on how the disequilibrium they experienced allowed them to question themselves and create a more clearly defined and deeper sense of self. Tatum’s (1996) research on identity development in multicultural courses demonstrates that multicultural curriculum and process-oriented teaching does not necessarily push students through all the stages of identity development, but it does bring them closer to understanding who they are. One student reflected on this ongoing journey in the context of her identity:

I think our work, readings, activities, and studies of race has impacted my understanding of myself way better than before. Because as I grew up into my early teenager years until now, I always hated it to be known that I was Hmong because there were always things happening in communities that always had something involving the Hmong people. Whether it was shootings, gang fighting, club fights, homicides, and so on, I was ashamed of being Hmong. I often told myself that I didn’t want to be Hmong because there was always a Hmong person somewhere that was always in a conflict with another Hmong person and in the end, it always came with a shooting, drive bys and so on. I didn’t even think I was Hmong because I was just so embarrassed and ashamed to my own culture, my heritage that I disowned my ethnicity. All that we have done this semester about race, identity, and so on, I now am starting to re-accept myself to my ethnicity, to being Hmong, though I am so Americanized and also different to how others see me as. I am willing to change to see if I can accept myself of who I really am. (Xue, fall 2004)

Disequilibrium occurred not only in terms of identity development but also in group process. Though challenging, conflict did appear to have a central role in moving students closer to understanding self and others. A student’s comments describe the conflict involved in negotiating the collective mural capstone project and the ways in which the group arrived at a new understanding.

Today was a struggle. The class yet again couldn’t come to one decision. Everyone disagreed about the way the mural should look. There were some that took part and contributed their ideas, but some didn’t like it and some did. In this process, it begins to be harder and harder because not everyone is on the right pathway to the same topic. Working in my group again, we didn’t know what should be done and how it should be done. My group was a on a different pathway, but eventually started over to make it better for everyone right now. The mural topic choice is going nowhere. Everyone is still disagreeing and things are looking way out of proportion. I believe and think that because we are all so different from each other, we all can’t set aside our differences and work with what is important. Everyone sees things differently and no one likes to see anything else in another perspective. (Xue, fall 2004)

Referring to the phenomenon of “constructive controversy,” Johnson et al. (2000) argued that helping students use conflict as a tool for learning puts them in the driver’s seat and
increases curiosity, critical thinking, and the ability to examine complex problems creatively. Students in the MVLC repeatedly mentioned how disagreements played a positive role in their learning once they became accustomed to engaging in a trusting, respectful discourse with peers. Ananda’s comment reflects the process she went through as a learner and collaborator and what she came to understand about both the challenges and the value of engaged conflict:

One way that I can learn from making the mural and apply it to the rest of my education is that if things do not work out right away it is ok to be frustrated. There were plenty of times where I really wanted to give up because I did not think that we would ever come to an agreement. It seems like even though we all disagreed about one part of the mural, as a whole there is not one part of the mural that I would change. I think we were all able to successfully apply what we learned in class and come together. I think I have learned to be more patient and also to trust other people more in the process of making the mural. As the mural began to become complete there was a part of me that wish I would had not spent so much time worrying and feeling discouraged in the first place. (Ananda, fall 2004)

The meta-theme of conflict as catalyst has both negative and positive aspects. The challenges of the negative aspects, such as strained group dynamics, could have outweighed the positive impacts, had they not been managed and facilitated. This possibility raises important questions for pedagogy and practice in learning communities and can indicate to us that, as Lu (1992) put it, “we need to gather more oppositional and alternative accounts from a new generation of students who can speak about the successes and challenges of classrooms which recognize the positive uses of conflict and struggle” (p. 910).

Bridge-Building

Bridge-building is best defined as the process by which students make both connections and contributions to the learning community with regard to their home-worlds, the curriculum, and their peers. The metaphor of the bridge shows that these connections allowed students to traverse multiple paths in their learning journey so that it involved deeper, “shared” (Tinto 1997) or more “intentional” (Baxter Magolda 2002) learning. Bridge building was reflected in three different ways: bridges between experiences and school, cognitive bridges, and bridges between and among peers. Paul commented on the process of bridge building when he expressed how eye-opening it is to see issues from the eyes of his peers and how their insights impacted his learning:

Today was my first time seeing such a meaningful interpretation from my classmates. They are all thinking and connecting that process into this class. I also learned that there weren’t any wrong answers as each of the interpretation from every student in the room. People view things in so many different ways, and that doesn’t make John right over Marie. The both of them are just connecting with a different perspective. It started getting even more interesting when students were linking their art piece with their personal struggle. (Paul, fall 2004)

The journey of first-generation college students involves crossing a particularly precarious bridge between the home world and the world of the university. To assist with this transition, the MVLC sought to create a bridge that allowed students not only to enter
the academy but also to bring the lessons and experiences of their home worlds into their academic space. Paul expressed this in the following quote:

So far from what I understand from this community is; every new immigrant that came into the United States had some difficult times to assimilate to the so-called American institutionalized system. A lot of us immigrants find it very tough to assimilate to the American culture because we giving up so much of our cultural and identity. Yet we are doing this with the hope that life would be easier and our journey in this country would be well. Learning how the American system operates was a success for me in this community because I have set some goals and how to deal with such situations. (Paul, fall 2004)

The connected curriculum also created cognitive bridges of learning for students. The curricula in all three courses reflected students’ lived experiences so that they could begin applying and analyzing the learning in the context of their life worlds and vice-versa. Thematic connections among the courses allowed students to engage in critical thinking about issues of self and community as well as to understand “isms” across disciplines and compare and contrast different viewpoints.

Finally, students engaged in interpersonal bridge-building by engaging with their peers in personal and social ways. These connections among the students impacted them in two critical ways. First, students developed relationships with people from diverse racial and ethnic cultures and religious backgrounds. Second, studying material from a multicultural perspective is one thing, but experiencing that learning with culturally diverse peers who are part of one’s learning community is quite another. The importance of this dual combination has been demonstrated in the research of Gurin et al. (2002) and Marin (2000). Bridge building facilitates meaning making and helps students ask big questions that allow them to think about avenues for potential transformation of self and community. Each of the aforementioned general themes culminates in the final theme of transformational learning.

Transformational Learning

While all the themes reflect processes that are dynamic and evolving, the theme of transformational learning is particularly fluid because students acknowledge the challenges of taking what they have learned and translating it into action. Given the complexity imbedded in the word transformation, it is important to specify that this meta-theme refers to the ways in which students were considering action around social change in context of their identity and community.

Transformational learning is perhaps the most complex of the themes because in many ways it embodies the work in which students engage throughout the semester but also recognizes that the process is by no means complete. Clark (1993) suggested that “transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterwards, in ways they and others can recognize” (p. 47). When students speak of changes in their perceptions of self, community, and capacity to impact social change, they are doing so in the context of their journey.

Mezirow (1997) argued that meaningful transformational learning involves three steps: “critical reflection of one’s assumptions, discourse to validate the critically reflective insight, and action” (60). The transformation that occurred for many students was one of greater self-awareness, which allowed them to examine and question their sense of self. With regard to critical reflection, many students had moved away from dichotomous
thinking to thinking about complex social issues. They also began to name and acknowledge their multiple selves, and some students came to acknowledge their role in perpetuating "isms". In discourse with their peers, transformation was reflected in students' ability to acknowledge and empathize with the experiences of others, express their own ideas, and engage in collective meaning-making with issues that may have previously divided them. Students also commented on the role of disagreement, debate, and discussion as critical to deeper learning; and they noted that this had been a new discovery for them. Finally, several students reflected on the actions they had taken, and some discussed future goals to challenge oppression in their lives and the lives of others.

Our work in class about identity and race has impacted me in a way that I want to go out there and educate people about what my country is all about. There are so many false notions going around not only about my country, but also about all the different races there are in the world. I feel that I have to take the initiative to go around and learn about them whether it be going to a cultural event or talking to one of my friends parents about their culture. (Jake, fall 2004)

It was difficult, however, to ascertain how students' agency would continue after the MVLC ended and whether actions toward social change really continue to take place. The dynamic nature of this theme represents the students' developmental journey and recognizes that one is never fully transformed; rather it is a process of growth that is not linear. One student expressed the nature of this process when she wrote,

I honestly feel as though the changes brought forth by these people or the newly created family are unknown to me at this point there are definitely things that have most likely change about me, but the forces behind them are un -known. I think this should be something that is asked of us upon graduating from the U or after we transfer, by then we should be able to see the changes and point out the experiences that help get us there. (Shireesha, fall 2005)

Implications for Practice

While each of these meta-themes illustrates the central aspects of the MVLC experience for first-generation college students, they also address issues that actively work to challenge isolation and marginalization. The five meta-themes: finding place, finding voice, bridge building, conflict as catalyst, and transformational learning suggest the following implications for classroom practice and curricular design.

Collectively Establish Clear Expectations

Communities are not naturally formed simply by linking courses and putting students in the same room together. The efforts required in developing community are well evidenced in the data and reflected in the meta-themes of finding place, conflict as catalyst, and bridge-building. Rather than pre-suppose that "community" means the same thing to all people, the act of defining, debating, and discussing the nature of community allows students to name what they value. It also allows students the flexibility to represent multiple cultural contexts and experiences in developing their vision of a shared community. Students need to be asked to consider first what kind of "place" of learning they seek to inhabit and then how
they might commit to sustaining this place. Central to the process is the effort to ensure that community building was purposeful and each student was invited to have a stake in its development.

Create Opportunities for Process-Based Learning

Understanding of self and others, working collaboratively, and considering ways of impacting social change are dynamic processes that were constantly in motion. Students went through different stages in this process; and the meta-themes of conflict as catalyst and transformation learning best capture the necessity of providing students with avenues for actively grappling with their confusion and questions about self, others, power and change. These avenues were embedded in the curriculum, both in terms of course materials and also in the ways in which students were invited to recognize dissonance as part of their learning. Grappling with this dissonance and encouraging student self-reflection is essential to process-based learning. Process-based learning also refers to ways in which students are asked to think about not only what they are learning but also how they are learning.

Reflective assignments also give students the time to articulate their reactions, thoughts, and feelings about complex multicultural issues which can then be used as a springboard for further classroom discussion; it is often a safer way for students to practice articulating their thoughts before expressing them verbally in discussion with their peers.

Develop Opportunities for Students to be Teachers

While it is important for a successful learning community to be well-structured with strong thematic connections among courses, it is also important to leave space in the curriculum and classroom for student-driven interests and issues. The meta-themes of finding place, finding voice, and finding self demonstrate the value of students as teachers. Part of finding place and voice in the construction of knowledge is an opportunity to engage in these practices in the classroom. Flexible structure also leaves space open for students to bring issues of importance to the table and invites discussion of their lived experiences within the discussion of a theoretical or disciplinary issue.

When students become teachers, they invite other students into meaning-making such that the knowledge is not somewhere out there; it is instead something to which they contribute and which they build together. When marginalized students are empowered to give voice to their ideas and to do this without filtering out their life experiences, they move out of the periphery of the academy. They learn to take ownership of their place and see that their voices belong in the academy.

Give Attention to Both Affective and Cognitive Ways of Knowing

Learning that allows for both cognitive and affective knowing is a powerful way for students to bring their own knowledge into the classroom and become “connected knowers” (Clinchy 2000). This connected knowing acknowledges that students’ learning is not separate from their lives, their feelings, or their struggles; rather, the affective side is encompassed in the learning. Students’ ability to examine difficult multicultural issues is often enhanced by applying it or comparing it to their own experiences and hearing their peers do the same. This type of learning acknowledges the subjective and challenges students to recognize that building an understanding about any issue takes work and often involves conflict. As seen in each of the five general themes, students described how
attention to their own affective reactions as well as those of others impacted and heightened their understanding of self and other. The bridge between affective and cognitive knowing gives students a deeper understanding of conceptual issues because the stories and life experiences are either reflective of or contrary to the material being studied in the classroom. Consequently, students are actively engaged in critical thinking to make sense of multiple perspectives. Also, the inclusion of affective voices and stories serves to empower students as knowers rather than as passive learners in the classroom.

Model and Discuss the Use of Constructive Conflict

A multicultural curriculum in a learning community format with a diverse group creates many learning opportunities; but it can also result in misdirected anger, airing of ignorance, resistance, and the formation of cliques. While the intent is not to micro-manage each student's comments, there is a need to create a structure that shapes how students will engage with each other. It is equally important for the faculty members to model appropriate ways to engage in constructive disagreement. In the MVLC students worked to create ground rules for communication and were also required to give each other feedback in the form of group assessments and written comments in each course. The theme of conflict as catalyst demonstrates how the students experienced conflict at internal, external and interpersonal levels. This conflict is at first disconcerting, because students are often coming to their learning from dichotomous perspectives. They expect questions to have right or wrong answers and are challenged when they have to navigate through multiple perspectives. Conflict also causes internal disequilibrium, and students find themselves re-examining their self-perceptions.

Given these dilemmas, it is important to articulate the value of disequilibrium and to prepare students for its inevitable presence in the classroom. Early and repeated efforts to facilitate sharing that is respectful and meaningful, but not completely without boundaries, is an important aspect of practicing community. The use of reflective praxis in the pedagogy played a role in raising conflict as a tool to position and re-position students' thinking about difficult issues and engage them in meaning-making rather than parroting material from the textbook.

Finally, teaching in such a community invites the faculty members to take the same risks that we are asking of our students; in doing this we learn with the students, allow them to teach us, and reflect our own sense of belonging in the learning community.

As the students’ voices suggest, their participation in the MVLC gave them a positive start to college. It is unclear, however, if this sense of empowerment will have any long term impact on their persistence in college. To address these questions, a second study is currently underway and involves interviews with these students 3 to 4-years after their participation in the Multicultural Voice Learning Community. Renshaw (2003) argued that,

... community is an elusive phenomenon, yet it is deployed broadly across institutions... to provide[s] a normative vision of best practice. Our role as educators is principally to clarify what is worthwhile learning and what sort of communities we should be learning for and within. (p.368)

Conclusion

Learning community design, critical pedagogy, and multicultural curricula are not panaceas for first-generation students; but we have had indications of the success and importance
creating learning environments that allow students to cultivate a sense of belonging and voice in the academy. What learning communities do offer is a way for us to use an intersecting approach to practice a culture of authentic engagement for students and for ourselves as co-learners in the process. The intent of this pedagogical design was not to magically remove all obstacles for students but rather to collectively create a learning space that allowed students and teachers to examine, deconstruct, and negotiate complex issues both from disciplinary stances and in context of our lived experiences.

References


