The Influence of Multicultural Learning Communities on the Intrapersonal Development of First-Generation College Students

Rashné Jehangir  Rhiannon Williams  Judith Jeske

This longitudinal study of first-generation, low-income students considers the impact of their participation in a multicultural learning community designed to combat the isolation and marginalization they experience at a large Midwestern research university. The study explores the extent to which multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy create avenues for intrapersonal self-authorship for historically marginalized students in a TRiO program. Findings indicate that intentionally drawing students’ lived experiences into the learning process and scaffolding opportunities to reflect on one’s multiple identities positively impacts development of the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship.

Students who are first in their family to attend college are a growing majority on college campuses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The collegiate body is changing; it is more and more representative of the browning of America and includes not only more students of color, but also more women, more students who are multilingual, large numbers of part-time students, adult learners, low-income students, immigrants, and first-generation college students (Choy, 2002; Horn, Berger, & Carroll 2004; Rendón, 1994; Takaki, 1993; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Yet, despite the shift in demographics, academic institutions, and particularly large research institutions, are not well prepared to serve and retain this heterogeneous group of students. They bring with them a wealth of lived experience, but enter a world that is often alien to them both in terms of context and expectations. By comparison, their traditional counterparts are students who enroll in college as full-time students immediately after high school graduation, are financially supported by their college-educated parents, and may work a limited number of hours (Choy; Warburton et al.).

This study investigated the experience of low-income, first-generation students in a multicultural learning community (MLC) specifically designed to combat the isolation and marginalization that they experience at a large Midwestern research university. Building on the work of Pizzolato (2003, 2005) and Torres and Hernandez (2007), a portion of the larger study is presented in this paper. It examines the extent to which a curricular design incorporating a multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy creates avenues for self-authorship for historically marginalized students in a TRiO Student Services program. TRiO Student Services programs are federally funded programs that serve first-generation, low-income students and students with disabilities as they transition to college. Housed within college campuses, TRiO programs offer intrusive advising, career development, and academic supports in the form of tutoring, peer assisted learning, and leadership opportunities (Council for Opportunity in Education

Rashné Jehangir is Assistant Professor of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning; Rhiannon Williams is Director of Assessment in Postsecondary Teaching and Learning; Judith Jeske was a McNair Scholar in 2008; each at the University of Minnesota.
The concept of self-authorship or holistic development was introduced by Kegan (1994) to explain the overlapping nature of an individual’s cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. Further work on the concept of self-authorship has been carried out by Baxter Magolda (2001, 2007). In her longitudinal work with White college students from a Midwestern college, the main questions asked were: How do I know? Who am I? and What relationships do I want? Research on these questions has built and further developed Kegan’s holistic development so as to more deeply understand the intersecting nature of an individual’s cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development.

The holistic development portion of the study examined how the curricular experience of the MLC impacted students’ intrapersonal, cognitive, and interpersonal development in the four phases of self-authorship: External formulae, crossroads, becoming an author of one’s own life, and internal formulae (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship is defined as “a relatively enduring way of orienting oneself toward provocative situations that includes recognizing the contextual nature of knowledge and balancing this understanding with one’s own internally defined beliefs, goals, and sense of self” (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 798; see also Baxter Magolda, 2001). This increased ability to make decisions is not only based on one’s internal values, but also begins to take into account the varied nature of knowledge and provides access to more tools that enable one to more efficiently navigate the complex intersection of postsecondary education and life beyond campus. With regard to the four phases of self-authorship, external formulae refer to a reliance on external authorities in evaluating ideas, developing relationships and framing one’s identity (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Crossroads refers to “an [evolving] awareness of dissatisfaction with following external formulas causing one to begin considering one’s one needs and perspectives” (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 559). Becoming an author of one’s life addresses the process of developing an “internally generated sense of self” (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p.12) by cultivating one’s values and identity, engaging in diverse interdependent relationships and interpreting knowledge as contextual. Internal formulae speak to the ability to successfully negotiate external influences and engage in life choices and build relationships that reflect one’s values and principles.

The review of the literature provides context around the design and intention of the MLC and the conceptual framework that guided this portion of the study. The methodology section expands on the process through which the longitudinal interview data were analyzed using an adapted version of Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) holistic development matrix. Although the data analysis included all three dimensions of self-authorship, this paper specifically addresses intrapersonal development. Findings with regard to interpersonal and cognitive development are addressed in Jehangir et al. (2011).

The findings examine the extent to which participation in the learning community designed with a focus on multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy impacted the college trajectory of first-generation students. Specifically, how did the curriculum and pedagogy cultivate opportunities for students to engage in an examination of self in the context of intrapersonal development over time?

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS: OBSTACLES AND AVENUES TO SELF-AUTHORSHIP

Higher education scholars have argued that, although access to college for historically marginalized groups has increased, the modes
Learning Communities and Self-Authorship

of support that might connect, engage, and sustain them in their journey toward a degree remain weak at best (Aldeman, 2007; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Lederman (2008) argued that financial, academic, and cultural obstacles that first-generation students face applying to college do not disappear once they are admitted and to get to campus. Rather, colleges need to find ways to ease first-generation students’ transition to college and encourage them to cultivate a sense of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1998) that validates who they are, but also what they bring to the academy. For students who are on the fringe of academia, creating learning spaces that invite self-discovery and cultivate space and place without demanding a forced acculturation is critical (Jehangir, 2008, 2009, 2010; Rendón, 1994, 2009) to this process of integration.

The challenge for first-generation, low-income students—many of whom are also students of color and immigrants—is that the academic environment may do little to reflect their multiple identities or create avenues to explore beliefs in context of their lived experience and new life at school. In many cases, students live dual lives and cross the chasm between their home and school worlds in ways that limit the holistic development of a sense of personhood or self-authorship (Howard, 2001). Not surprisingly, this dichotomous existence is not sustainable and the promise of access to college is not realized. There is evidence, however, suggesting that students who are underrepresented in the academy and experience oppression and marginalization have a propensity to develop self-authorship earlier in their lives, before or during their 20s. Torres and Hernandez’s research (2007) with Latino/a students found that some students “built internal foundations that enabled them to maintain their internalized identities across diverse contexts” (as cited in Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 271). Pizzolato’s (2003) work on high-risk students found that the ability to explore self-authorship and multiple ways of knowing for students who were historically marginalized in higher education depended on their ability to develop coping mechanisms in college. Often their prior experience and “willingness to process provocative interpersonal experiences” (p. 797) prepared them well for developing self-authorship before and during their collegiate experience. First-generation students are often at a disadvantage when navigating the world of higher education because, unlike their traditional peers, they have not grown up in an environment that acculturates them to college. They cannot draw on the wisdom and guidance of their parents to interpret the nuances of college choices, financial aid forms, or implicit expectations of professors. Yet, in their multiple identities as immigrants, students of color, student–parents, workers, family care-takers, and cultural translators, they are often adept at tolerating ambiguity, and as Pizzolato’s work suggests, making sense of a new environment.

Creating learning environments that draw on first-generation students’ strengths as border crossers can serve to facilitate an awareness of this potential, which often goes unrecognized. Cultivating spaces that allow for reflection and attention to one’s development and personhood can be a compass by which to steer through the unknown territory of higher education and in doing so combat isolation and marginalization that prevent degree attainment and satisfaction in one’s educational pursuits. What then are learning environments that invite and sustain development of self-authorship for these students? Based on this study, we argue that a learning community design together with multicultural curriculum that reflects the lived experience of students is one vehicle toward self-authorship for first-
There is evidence from a variety of sources that suggest that interdisciplinary, collaborative, student-centered learning spaces can shape the process by which students grapple with how they know (cognitive), who they are (intrapersonal), and how they engage in relationships with others (interpersonal; Baxter Magolda, 2001). Research on interdisciplinary programs (Haynes, 2004, 2006) and immersion programs or study abroad opportunities (Yonkers-Talz, 2004) that invited students to look at issues from multiple lenses and vantage points suggests that they play a critical role in progression toward self-authorship. Similarly, research by Rendón (1994) demonstrated that students who have been historically marginalized in higher education need culturally validating experiences to mitigate the doubt and isolation that constrain them in college. In-class academic validation—that is, faculty and peers who “allow students to experience themselves as capable of learning” (Rendón, 1994, p. 40) and value their unique contributions—shapes how students begin to recognize the role of self and identity in learning. These studies highlight the value of interdisciplinary and experiential learning, supportive peer and faculty networks, and validating learning environments as components that create avenues to self-authorship. In the next section, we share evidence of how these components can be imbedded into multicultural learning communities.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES, MULTICULTURAL CURRICULUM, AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS AVENUES TO SELF-AUTHORSHIP

How we teach and what we teach in our classrooms plays a critical role in inviting students into the process of knowledge construction as partners versus passive bystanders (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Learning community structures, multicultural curricula, and critical pedagogy are intersecting frameworks of theory and praxis that invite students to begin examining the connection between identity, relationship, and knowledge. There are varied definitions of learning communities as they currently exist in higher education. The following definition captures the key elements of learning communities as they apply to this study:

Learning communities, as we define them, purposely restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that the students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. Learning communities are usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 5)

As this definition suggests, learning communities embody elements of curricular design that serve to engage students in the process toward self-authorship. Research on learning communities, on a range of campuses from four-year colleges to two-year colleges on both residential and commuter campuses, has suggested that curriculum delivery with intentional interdisciplinary linkages may enhance the learning experience of underrepresented student groups, including students of color and students with disabilities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Levine, Smith, Tinto & Gardner, 1999; Smith, 1991).

Multicultural curriculum coupled with learning community structures extends the capacity to engage students in considering the role of citizenship, critical thinking, and complex problem solving. Critical multicultural educators have argued that the educational reform movement needs to challenge inequities
at ideological, institutional, and interpersonal levels so that students have an opportunity to learn from multiple perspectives and positions (Banks, 2001; Sleeter, 1995). Particularly for first-generation, low-income students, multicultural curriculum not only affirms students on many levels, but also affirms that their lived experiences are forms of knowledge (Clark, 1993).

The other common denominator in learning experiences that employ multicultural curriculum, learning community design, or other forms of interdisciplinary immersion is the opportunity for students to experience disequilibrium. Baxter Magolda (2001) argued that the journey toward self-authorship requires a catalyst that disrupts students' equilibrium in ways that push them to reexamine or construct new self-concepts and ways of viewing the world. Learning communities and multicultural curriculum work together to create a space in which students feel valued and heard, but also capitalize on this sense of trust to ask difficult questions of each other and of themselves.

The theoretical frame of this study is built on the relationship between learning community design, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy raises questions about “the influence of race, class and gender (and their intersections), how power relations advance the interest of one group while oppressing those of other groups, and the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge” (Merriam et al., 2002, p. 10). Although critical pedagogy and multicultural education are not one and the same, scholars have argued that they share a “common political project” (Sleeter & Grant, 1995, p. 8) and are complementary approaches to critiquing inequities in educational systems (Darder, 1995; Gay, 1995). Both employ pedagogical approaches that challenge the claim of neutrality in education and work to create opportunity for voice and empowerment of historically marginalized students (Banks, 2001; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989). Critical pedagogy is a worthy lens for this study because it recognizes that contrary to traditional positions, educational institutions may “actually work against the interests of those students who are most needy in society” (Darder, 1995, p. 329). In recognizing that educational experiences are deeply impacted by economics and access to cultural capital, this framework acknowledges that the isolation and marginalization of first-generation college students shapes their learning experiences. Recognizing the historic contexts that limit educational success for all students, critical pedagogy also argues that multicultural curriculum can be created to reflect the “cognitive, motivational and relational styles” (Darder, 1995, p. 334) of nondominant students. Also, the classroom experience can serve as a learning community to integrate activities and opportunities that honor student's stories in ways that allow them to gain voice and empowerment and move toward self-authorship (Jehangir, 2010).

DESIGN AND RATIONALE: THE MULTICULTURAL VOICES LEARNING COMMUNITY

Designed in fall 2001 by three faculty members, the MLC was composed of three courses linked together by the themes of identity, community, and social agency. The intent of this learning community was to create a curricular structure and curriculum that challenged the isolation and marginalization that many first-generation students feel, particularly on large, predominantly White campuses (Jehangir, 2008; Jehangir, 2009). The three credit-bearing courses included a first-year composition course, a creative arts humanities course, and a social science course that focused on issues of race, class, gender,
and inequality in the United States. Each course satisfied a university liberal education requirement and students were required to concurrently enroll in all three classes during a given semester. Students in the TRiO Student Support Services Program had the opportunity to select this learning community from a series of other learning community offerings. The MLC was offered seven times between fall 2001 and spring 2007. Enrollment was limited to 24 students. The three instructors incorporated the themes of identity, community, and social agency in the curriculum of the three separate courses by creating assignments or facilitating classroom discussion that often dovetailed each other. As a result, students often discussed materials or concepts raised in one class in the other two classes (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006). The interdisciplinary thematic connections across classes and the time spent together each week sought to cultivate social and academic integration for the students enrolled in the MLC.

**METHODS AND ANALYSIS**

As mentioned, our investigation is a part of a larger qualitative longitudinal inquiry aimed at examining the impact of multicultural learning communities on the college trajectory of first-generation students at a predominantly White institution. For this particular portion of the analysis, we use an adapted version of Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) holistic development matrix to frame the lens we placed on the data from 24 longitudinal, semistructured interviews of former MLC students.

**Context and Participant Selection**

The research presented in this paper was conducted at a large, Midwestern, public research institution. Students were recruited using a purposeful sample. Juniors, seniors, or recent graduates who had participated in the MLC between 2001 and 2005 were sent a letter and an e-mail asking if they would like to participate in the study. Specifically, the letter asked students to participate in a 45-to-60-minute interview on campus to discuss their experiences in the MLC. The final sample comprised 24 students, varying in race and gender. Our sample included 40% men and 60% women. Racially, the sample was majority non-White, with students identifying as White \((n = 5)\), Black \((n = 14)\) four of whom were of East African descent, Asian \((n = 3)\), biracial \((n = 2)\), and Hispanic \((n = 1)\). Twenty-three of the individuals interviewed were still enrolled at the university or had recently graduated. Only one interviewee had dropped out of the university (Jehangir, 2010).

**Data Collection Procedures**

We collected our empirical evidence using, in most cases, face-to-face interviews, each lasted approximately 50 minutes. In three instances, interviews were conducted over the phone. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semistructured format, which was chosen to allow for flexibility in the interview questioning. Three graduate students working with the principal investigator interviewed MLC participants to garner rich, qualitative data about their experience in the MLC and college experiences 3 to 4 years after participation. Each interview was recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Although each student was asked the same questions, the semistructured interview method allowed for the researcher to probe and ask follow-up questions to gain more insight into the student’s unique experience within and beyond the MLC. Our interview questions covered four specific areas: Student’s MLC experience, their university experience outside of the MLC, involvement in extracurricular activities, and their future goals. Overall, we sought to gain an understanding as to how they thought the MLC experience had affected their university experience.
Learning Communities and Self-Authorship

Analysis

We examined each of the interviews using narrative and case study data analysis procedures. The initial analysis involved a team of three individuals including the principal investigator, a graduate student, and an undergraduate research assistant who was a first-generation student at another institution. The analysis process involved three separate phases. In phase one, our team engaged in a process of meaning making by individually creating cases for eight randomly selected interview transcripts. Our discussion around the categories started with one participant’s text, creating categories from the individual case, then cross-checking the developed categories with the other participant texts (Flick, 1998). This process continued until as a team we saw no more emerging categories. From our first round of thematic coding there emerged ten categories or themes. Through this case analysis process, our team found four themes that were particularly salient to developing a sense of personhood, namely, (a) disequilibrium, (b) academic identity, (c) claiming self, and (d) critiques. Insights into students’ processes of reflecting, knowing, and self-understanding during the MLC and throughout the rest of their time at the university led to a shared belief around the interrelatedness of these particular themes and the self-authoring process. Using the self-authorship conceptual lens allowed our study to move “from the trenches to a more conceptual view of the landscape” and provide a theoretical grounding for the experiences of the students (Merriam, 1998, p. 187).

In phase two, our team used Baxter Magolda’s (2001) self-authorship theoretical framework and, more specifically, Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) matrix of holistic development framework as a tool for analysis of four salient themes relating to the self-authoring process. Applying these frameworks to the development of first-generation students in context of the curricular intervention found congruence in ways in which development was operationalized along the developmental stages of self-authorship: (a) External formulae, (b) crossroads, (c) becoming author of one’s life, and (d) internal foundations. This congruence was particularly evident with regard to external formulae and crossroads. However, given the focus on first-generation students and multicultural learning communities as the curricular context for facilitating self-authorship, the study also yielded additional data that added to the understanding of holistic development for this particular student population. A few additions were made to the crossroads stage, one being MLC students’ recognition of voice as a powerful tool for self and others. In the becoming author of one’s life stage, there were several additions made, such as MLC students regularly practicing self-reflection to inform choices, engaging in advocacy for self and others, and making meaning based on deconstructing personal experiences in the context of knowledge. Similarly, additions were made to internal foundations; one example of this was MLC students engaging in choices and actions that reflect congruence among one’s multiple identities. As such, from our second phase of analysis, a revised matrix based upon data collected from the 24 first-generation students was developed.

In phase three, this revised version of Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) matrix was used as a lens from which to analyze and code the interview data. For this article, we focus on intrapersonal development and the findings address student development in this dimension from crossroads to internal foundations.

Trustworthiness

As with many qualitative approaches, the
process of auditing is highly encouraged to ensure trustworthiness. We followed a discovery-oriented auditing approach, “each step in organizing the data involved a consensus process between the raters” (Yeh & Inman, 2007, p. 393). Through each step of the data analysis process, we individually carried out the step and then came together to discuss and arrive at a consensus. Between the three members of the research team we had a 65% agreement and 89% agreement between two of the three coders. Where disagreement occurred, all three researchers presented their point of view and discussed the presented points of view until all three researchers agreed on one code.

**FINDINGS**

The findings of this study suggest that students who participated in the MLC possessed self-authoring ways of knowing and, although the degree to which these ways of knowing varied, analysis of students’ narratives demonstrated how they moved from crossroads, to becoming an author of one’s life, and toward internal foundation. The experience in the MLC cannot and was not expected to be the sole influence in developing self-authorship; however, in many cases, students’ narratives revealed ways in which this early experience influenced, shaped, or facilitated awareness and movement toward self-authorship. In many cases, students’ reflections of their first year specifically named the role that the MLC experience played in the three different dimensions of their self-authoring process. The results are presented with attention to the intrapersonal dimension. Findings for the interpersonal and cognitive dimensions can be found in a publication by Jehangir and others (2011). It is also important to note that an overarching theme of disequilibrium emerged as central to the development of self-authorship. Reflection on this dissonance and the provocative moments (Pizzolato, 2005) that gave rise to it, were critical to students’ movement from one phase of self-authorship to another.

**Intrapersonal Dimension**

Central to the intrapersonal dimension is the question “Who am I?” For first-generation students, responses to this question were complex and multifaceted as they grappled with unearthing their many identities. For many students, race was the most salient marker of identity, but even so, race was imbedded in the context of ethnicity, immigrant status, and the burden and privilege of being first in their family to attend college.

At the time of the interviews, all students had moved beyond external formulae in the context of their intrapersonal development. Students who were in the crossroads phase had an awareness of how stereotypes influenced their view of themselves and how others viewed them. Many were in the process of making meaning of this awareness and began drawing on their own lived experience and the experiences of their peers to challenge stereotypes and claim themselves.

Cooper, a biracial student, addressed how aspects of the curriculum, including discussion of racial formations and creating visual photomontages of one’s identity, in the MLC classes prompted discussions that made him aware of stereotypes with regard to his own identity as a biracial person. He said:

I know it made me really kind of aware of my identity, of this group that I’m in, cause like ethnically my mom’s German and my Dad’s Hispanic. And you kinda get stuck in this, “Well, I look White.” And nobody knows that I’m Hispanic unless and I tell them. People look at me and are like, “Are you Jewish?” “No, I’m not, I have curly hair from my mom, and . . . I’m half Mexican, I just don’t look like it.” It kinda puts you in this weird
category of how should I feel about, inequality and things like that. Because a lot of times you just meet people that are really racist or people that just have all this crap to say about something that's your culture. And, they're like, "Well it's OK, you look White." And I became aware of how other people behave too. Cause you get to talk about it in class. I wanted to be recognized—it matters if you're in between, regardless of what you look like.

Cooper’s captured the dilemmas of being at crossroads, where new awareness of stereotypes pushed him to make sense of his multiple identities and challenge various labels placed on him by others.

Anna, a Latina student, addressed how early opportunities to examine herself in the context of classroom space and curriculum gave her an opportunity to consider her personal strengths and weaknesses. Reflecting on the curriculum and pedagogy in the MLC, she said:

I think because there was an emphasis put on like the professors getting to know us and that kind of empowered us to come out more and to display our characteristics more and to know what makes us mad, what makes us sad, we were allowed to be ourselves. That helped us; we were allowed to be us, and to find out what worked for us and what didn't work for us.

Her comments speak to the extent to which she felt that the environment was one where she could be herself and make discerning choices about her learning preferences. Arriving at this place is particularly relevant to the first-generation experience and intrapersonal development because it marked both awareness and value of self-reflection and engagement with one’s own disequilibrium. Both Anna and Cooper reflected on how this conscious engagement with one’s varied and complex selves seemed to be a critical component in moving toward becoming an author of one’s life.

Ruben, an African-American student, reflected back on the safety of the learning community and how it contrasts with his current experience in graduate school. He was aware of stereotypes about Black males in academia and felt the pressure to represent his race, but also fit into the culture of graduate school. He grappled with trying to find a balance between his identity as an emerging scholar and his identity as a person of color in an environment that seems to question his place in it.

I take that Multicultural Learning Community with me now because as I sit here in graduate school it is hard being an African-American. As a Black male out here, and in a graduate program, so often, it’s not just about being by yourself. Now in graduate school from 8-8, I am with my cohort, we’re doing practicum and then from here I go straight to school. Anytime that I go out, we’re doing happy hour with the cohort and I feel like Ruben is being suffocated, like I am not allowed to be me because I always have to talk like scholarly. I always... you know what I mean... I can’t mess around too much. I felt like I had two identities... That’s exactly how I felt. I am 23; everybody else is 26 or 27 and I like to have fun, I am a goofy child, I don’t want to be too immature. But there is a reason why you are out there, maybe they need to hear that goofy voice. And that is something that I will always take with me in everything I do, and you know, just don’t tell me that I should apologize for being me, no matter what it is.

Ruben’s statement suggested that he had an awareness of these stereotypes, but is beginning to deconstruct these ideas and cannot allow himself to be “suffocated” under the weight of them. Despite this dissonance with this public versus private sense of self, his ability to engage in reflection demonstrated not only his awareness of stereotypes (Torres & Hernandez,
but his understanding of his own voice as a power tool for self-advocacy. Davu, an African immigrant student, also addressed how exploring issues of race, class, and identity together with repeated opportunities for written reflection allowed him to work through the anger he felt about inequities in the academic milieu. He recalled:

Every week you had to write and do the weekly response. And you’d sit there and literally think about the class and what everybody talked about and I’d write an angry response. And I still, to this day, I have all of my responses for every week and when I go through my boxes where I keep all my papers I would literally read it in and out. I realized that like, dang, I was an angry! By now, I know why I was angry. It was interesting to actually see my anger written out in words, written out in the papers and the issues I took. The first year literally showed the path, because I [began] to figure out who I was and as a person, as a student, and you know as a citizen. It paved a way for my major, what I wanted to do, the issues I cared about, or hold deeply and it just brought out my inner personality. So, it helped me figure out myself.

Davu’s comments speak to his growing ability to engage in new realizations about himself and, like Ruben, he began to use this self-reflection to cultivate a sense of advocacy and voice about his place in the world and move from crossroads to becoming the author of one’s own life.

Zahara, one student who had also entered the becoming the author of one’s own life phase, demonstrated further development along the dimension of intrapersonal self-authorship. She unpacked her complex identity as a light-skinned Black woman. Reflecting back on provocative classroom discussions about skin color, gender, power, and place, she considered how this early experience in meaning making facilitated claiming self in the context of layered identity issues. She stated:

I guess I know I had a point there where I was just [struggling] with who I was period. I guess like I said, like it made me understand myself more, like it’s okay with being who I am, like coming to grips with just personally, I’m Black, but I don’t look Black. You know what I mean, that whole issue of being light skin African-American. But we had this conversation as a matter of fact in the multicultural class, about fitting into a culture that is not your culture, you know what I mean. Like even being Black you still have prejudice within the black community so, not only do I fight, not only do I have issues as far as maybe being a part of or fitting in, issues with you know what my body is supposed to look like, body image and things like that, I also have issues within my own community. As far as I am not Black enough, you know maybe I don’t talk like them, maybe now I am educated, now you know I am better than them. You know it depends like . . . like having long hair and not having short kinky hair. For me it is about getting to know myself and being okay with who I am.

Zahara’s statement reflected the dissonance she had to reconcile not only with regard to her physical appearance and body image, but also her place in education. Although aware of racial stereotypes, Zahara tackled the issue of intragroup stereotypes based on skin color, as well as the ways in which education has contributed to creating a deeper chasm between her and her community. In an effort to make sense of this conflicted situation, Zahara deconstructed both the historical reasons for her ambiguous place in her community and articulated the importance of claiming and embracing all parts of herself. As part of self-authoring her life, Zahara reflected back to how discussions and curriculum in her first year of college pushed her to explore and
bridge the dichotomies in her lived experience. She remembers,

We did a lot of more reflective things, we used music, and we used poetry. So it was like, one class [in the MLC] stirred us up for different issues within multicultural, family, historical issues and then the other class made us feel them. For one activity and we had to pick a poem that represented who we were. And I picked one by Maya Angelou and it was called “Still I Rise.” When I first got to college, I found that poem represented so much of who I was because I already was fighting adversity, you know, the whole resilience issue, coming from an inner-city community and not starting school right away and just, family issues. When I read that poem, you know, she was basically was describing like, no matter what happens I still rise. I even cried when I did the performance in class, because the poem touched me so deep that I was like wow, this poem represents who I am. And I think that is what MLC classes did, it brought out a better you—like you were able to understand yourself. Even then in that period I was trying to find who I was even in my life. So I think the learning community pulled emotions out of us, and pulled things out of us that we didn’t know were actually there.

Reflecting on this earlier sense of divided identity, Zahara voiced how pedagogy that invited students to explore their experience in context of academic materials impacted her ability to engage in advocacy for herself—there is a realization and growing comfort within her to integrate these multiple aspects of her identity rather than chose between them.

Paul, an African immigrant student, went a step further in his process of becoming the author of one’s life by considering his multiple life roles, reflecting on the complexity of his identity, and acknowledging his varied selves.

Well, I guess my idea of identity. I guess it goes back to what your definition of identity, is. I guess I would be more leaning more towards perception and ideas about certain culture or just a certain reality, whereas before the MLC my reality was different as compared to my experience. Having experienced that class, my reality became something else. I identify myself as a lot of things, based on what I am involved in, based on what I have going on in my life, based on where I am at, I mean so, it, so my identity is very diversified. Like I can be a Liberian today, and African-American tomorrow, I can be a Black person, I can be a Christian, I can be a meditating person, I can be a Frat boy tomorrow, and I can be a soccer player too . . . so it’s like, so many words, I mean, just I can be a student tomorrow, my identities, I identify myself as a lot of things but at the same time too . . . . I am just Paul, that’s who I am— Paul.

Resisting external efforts to pigeon hole him, Paul acknowledged that claiming one’s identity is elusive, but got closer to recognizing the fluidity and interrelatedness of his many selves. Like Paul, Shani, another African immigrant student, commented on how class discussions created avenues for students to engage in meaning making of their “identities” by deconstructing personal experience in context of course materials:

We obviously discussed the readings, but I think that we gave meaning to the readings by talking about ourselves. I have never sort of had an academic space where I could talk about the Hijab, or my identities a Muslim Somali woman, or even my identity in this country as a refugee. So, I guess it is something that I just have never had in an academic setting. I’m glad that I was able to experience it so early on in my college experience and it’s just something that I am not shy talking about.
A few students stood at the threshold of internal foundations, and arriving at this point was shaped by their ability to articulate the way in which critical moments in their first year served as a catalyst for their movement from crossroads to becoming an author and beyond. Lauren came to college in her mid-20s—a married student, her life choices and decisions were driven by her spouse’s preferences and her interpretation of her religious beliefs. The learning community experience was often challenging for her because the curriculum and her peers raised questions that she had not considered before coming to college. She described feeling moments of resistance and frustration, but also how these moments moved her to a better understanding of herself and others. She stated:

I think, for me, it really helped me get in touch with myself as an individual. Even though we were on a collective level, it helped you look at yourself, consider what you think about life, where you stand in this world, and things like that... but also, how you choose to express yourself. So it was kind of almost like a personal awareness thing for me. And so, it really... made me feel like I can take risks... and okay... going from a major in business law and having a love for numbers and all this other stuff. It made me feel more confident in taking more risks in the artistic side, the more free side. You know, like, and so that’s why I did end up choosing to go to Europe. The change in my thinking, it just made me feel so good, and so liberated. Rather than, “Well, I’m just going to go get this kind of a degree so I can make all this kind of money.” No, I wanted to be in touch with what I’m doing, and that is kind of what happened for me.

For Lauren, a biracial student, her life was one of consistency or complacency; she had never been in situations or had experiences where her ways of knowing had been challenged. Being in the learning community challenged both her notion of self and her interpretation of the world around her. She was able to translate her disequilibrium into a more reflective understanding of who she was or hoped to be. Her movement from becoming an author to internal foundation is reflected in her ability to not only recognize and deconstruct her personal experiences in context of new knowledge but also to act on this new information to refashion her life direction. She described this process:

Like I mentioned, I felt liberated completely. And that’s just my personal experience probably because of my age, and my circumstances at home. And, when I returned back to college and was able to... I don’t even know how to explain it, but... identify with myself... almost finding myself at a very late time in my life, and in such a comfortable way where I felt lucky. Because I know it was a trial thing or something, I don’t know the study? So, I realized that... I married my husband out of high school, well not out of high school but my high school sweetheart. So my life as it was taking a turn to focus more on Lauren, what she is, and what she wants to do in life, and skills and talents. I began to see myself as an individual, and not as part of someone else. And so, the liberation that happened with me gave me the courage to step out, and like I said, go to Europe and study, even though we disagreed about it. Which led eventually to my divorce, which I saw coming. When I came back to college... it was like... you know, I had to make a choice for myself, or to live for like social status or something.

Lauren was able to move from a place of constraint based on external formulae, where her life decisions were predicated on people and perspectives outside herself, to a place where her choices and actions reflected congruence...
with her multiple identities. She also was no longer intimidated by difference, but rather was able to navigate through the turbulence of new ideas to come to a clearer understanding of herself as a complex individual. More important, she was able to act on this new knowledge to make life choices, such as going to Europe or getting divorced, that moved her further away from her comfort zone but closer to a stronger sense of self.

For the few students who had arrived at the internal foundations phase, they clearly expressed comfort with embedding their culture and multiple selves into their day-to-day behavior and choices. They were secure in presenting themselves as complex individuals with multiple facets to their identity. As Lauren described, these students were able to imagine and step into new possible selves and in doing so they reaffirmed a commitment to a dynamic, evolving sense of self.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article was to explore the extent to which participation in a MLC in the first year of college impacted the development of intrapersonal self-authorship for first-generation college students. As earlier, data collected in this study included student narratives during their first year of college and interviews with 24 learning community participants again 3 to 4 years later. It is also important to reiterate that we cannot assume that their journey toward self-authorship is solely a result of participation in this experience. Rather, we discuss how students’ reflection on specific experiences and critical moments was precipitated by their participation in the learning community and impacted intrapersonal self-authorship development. The data also informed additional developmental tasks that facilitated students’ progression through Baxter Magolda’s (2001) and Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) holistic developmental model in the context of curricular interventions for first-generation student development and the discussion section focuses on these specific findings. These findings are reflective of the varied roles and identities of first-generation college students and also of the MLC pedagogy that sought to locate their lived experience in the center of the curriculum so that it could be “intimately related to identity formation” (McLaren, 1989, p. 226). As suggested by the work of Abes and Jones (2004) and Jones (2009), the dimensions of self-authorship cannot explain all facets of identity development, but it is useful to consider how the frames of self-authorship intersect with “other dimensions of identity, such as social class, race and ethnicity” (Jones, 2009, p. 288).

Within the intrapersonal dimension, first-generation students in the crossroads phase demonstrated a growing awareness of their strengths and weakness as learners and individuals and the recognition of voice as a powerful tool for self and others. Baxter Magolda (2008) indicated that self-authorship is an ongoing process and “more complex and nuanced than a simple linear trajectory” (p. 281). This complexity was evidenced in how students engaged in meaning making and acknowledged that ability to grapple with disequilibrium was shaped by the extent to which salient aspects of identity, especially race, social class, and ethnicity, affected socialization, life challenges, and encounters on campus. Many students noted that at the time of participation in the learning community their way of coping with the dissonance was to be angry, frustrated or confused—but over time, they were able to give meaning to these emotions, which facilitated movement from the crossroads phase toward becoming an author of one’s life. In the crossroads phase, they may not have been ready to act on their
new-found self-awareness of their multiple identities, but they were actively engaging in questioning self-identity. The MLC provided them with a space and curriculum in which to practice giving words and voice to this dissonance.

In the becoming an author of one’s life phase, first-generation students engaged in making meaning about their identity based on deconstructing personal experiences in the context of knowledge and regularly practiced self-reflection to inform choices. Many students commented on how classroom discussion, readings, and activities pushed them to consider their own narrative in the context of academic knowledge. Also, reflection was a critical component of the curriculum, so students became familiar with the process of reflecting on their learning and their understanding of self.

Finally, those few who demonstrated arrival into the internal foundation phase of intrapersonal development sought out opportunities for multicultural engagement, and their life choices and actions reflected congruence among their multiple identities. Students in this phase articulated how they found relationships between the curriculum and their lived experience and how this connection served as a springboard for deeper examination of self. For these students, the process of self-examination pushed them outside their comfort zones, and their disequilibrium in turn empowered them to take actions creating a greater congruence between their choices and their beliefs. In many cases, these choices were not easy and students described a shedding of some aspects of their previous selves. It is important to differentiate this process from acculturation, where students may give up parts of themselves to fit in; rather, in this case, students were more likely to find ways in which their public selves were more in step with their private selves.

As the results section illustrated, first-generation students in the MLC reflected on ways in which the curriculum created provocative moments (Pizzolato, 2003) that challenged their external formulae and also intentionally supported students and validated them as knowers in their process of self-authoring. In the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship, students reflected on how disequilibrium gave rise to a questioning of self, relationship with others, and how one made meaning of academic work. How each student progressed from external foundations to crossroads and so on was shaped by their previous experience and their developmental maturity to negotiate the dissonance that the curriculum stirred up. Experiencing disequilibrium was a starting point for the students to further their development. It was this experience of encountering something new that the students had to understand and incorporate into their own knowledge system that helped them to move from one phase to another in their development of self-authorship.

Another aspect of the results was the way in which students discussed how the learning community curriculum and pedagogy intentionally encouraged them to practice self-reflection. Given that the curriculum invited students’ lived experience into the classroom, they engaged in reflection about why or how they came to have certain beliefs. The learning experience was not something outside their lives, but rather intersected with their lives regularly. The result was at times messy and ambiguous, but most students sought to make meaning of this confusion, even when it meant questioning their beliefs, identity, or interaction with others. This conscious and early attention to one’s strengths and weaknesses, to active reflection, and to meaning making about one’s multiple identities allowed first-generation students
Learning Communities and Self-Authorship

to not only better understand their isolation, but to actively combat it. Rather than running from or being shut down by disequilibrium, students began to practice how to contextualize these experiences with regard to their complex identities, classroom knowledge, and their own cultural capital. As the interviews revealed, the act of “processing experiences” (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 808) was something that most students practiced well beyond their learning community experience.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations—one being the lack of diversity of the sample with regard to retention and departure from the university. Although we made every attempt to contact students who had left the university, because of many factors, we only interviewed one individual who had left the university. Therefore, further research including students who have left the institution would provide a richer and deeper understanding of limits and strengths of curricular efforts to engage students in the self-authoring process.

Second, despite evidence that many students reached a level of authoring one’s life and few even entered a phase of internal foundations, it is unclear how long their current stages would be sustained as they moved further and further away from a more supportive context. As Baxter Magolda (2001) found, even those participants who do develop strong contextual knowing skills felt dissatisfied after college because their interactions and knowledge construction were not built on a strong internal foundation and did not take into consideration their values and needs (see Pizzolato, 2003, p. 797). Such a critique suggests the need for further research on the length of time students may need within an academic curriculum intentionally supporting individuals’ process of self-authoring.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Isolation for first-generation students deeply limits their engagement, involvement, and persistence in higher education, but this effect is heightened when they find themselves marginalized in their curricula as well. When curriculum describes the world in ways that exclude, limit, or undermine the perspectives of many students, the disconnection between one’s school and lived experience grows. Being silenced and rendered invisible by the mainstream curricula in this way can further marginalize first-generation students. Giroux (1988) suggested instead that teachers capitalize on the ways in which “students from different class, gender and ethnic locations, mediate and express their sense of place, time and history” (p. 114). Rather than viewing first-generation students from a deficit model, drawing on their cultural capital and lived experience in curricular interventions can be powerful tools to engage them in the process of self-authorship.

The first-generation students in this study demonstrated that their diversity brings a richness to the classroom that deepens and contextualizes the discussion of critical issues, like race, class, and gender roles. Their histories and experiences have the capacity to inform and enrich the learning experience, but for this to happen the classroom space must intentionally see them as knowers and invite their lived experience into the curriculum. Unlike their traditional counterparts, first-generation students do not arrive on campus with a code book for survival. They may feel family pressure to commit early to certain majors or to acculturate to other external forces (e.g., peers, faculty, staff) who communicate explicitly and implicitly the “ideal” image of a college student. For first-generation students,
this push and pull between the expectations of family and school can result in a divided life—where their public and private selves are always at odds with each other or, worse, they are tied to external formulas that limit their progress and self-authorship. Given, the chasms that may exist between their home and school worlds, bringing first-generation students into awareness of this journey of self-discovery early capitalizes on their strengths and allows them to engage in a reflection on their learning preferences, areas for growth, and possible obstacles.

College classrooms are the spaces in which students spend a bulk of their time in a given semester—the continuity of time, space, and people creates opportunities for engaging in self-authorship. It is in these spaces that disequilibrium can be facilitated as both a means of knowledge construction and understanding self. How intentionally we as teachers create opportunities for conflict to serve as a catalyst (Jehangir, 2009) to constructive disequilibrium plays a role in how our students think about dissonance in their learning and in their understanding of themselves as learners. For first-generation students, although many had already experienced critical moments that brought into question their identity or beliefs, the MLC provided a consistent safe place to unpack these moments and to name and make sense of dissonance in the context of academic and lived knowledge. Finally, although many learning experiences might prompt disequilibrium, it is how we engage students to reflect on what this dissonance means to them as learners and human beings that facilitates self-authorship. To be intentionally mindful of how we learn, and how who we are impacts our learning and our relationships with others, is the element of the self-authoring process that can be embedded in curriculum and pedagogy. This intentionality may also help students who have been historically marginalized to reimagine their place and contributions to learning and also their ownership of it.

The foundation of this connection between students’ life worlds and their academic homes may have different points of initiation depending on the nature of the college setting and student population. The critical issue is that institutions need to assess their students’ needs and engage in organizational curricular reform that promotes connected knowing and learning among the students, faculty, and disciplines (Tinto, 1998). It is, thus, not only what is taught, but how it is taught, that influences the student experience. An educational program that incorporates peers, faculty, and an instructional style that actually changes or deepens the student experience is essential and can play a critical role in opening the door to early reflection on personhood and development of self-authorship.

The process of self-authorship is neither linear nor time bound and, as higher education considers it role in preparing global citizens to engage in an increasingly complex world, an examination of one’s own place in the world cannot begin soon enough. As college campuses grapple with how to engage students, particularly the new majority of first-generation students, for life during and after college, we would do well to examine the role that curriculum and pedagogy can have on self-authorship. James (2005) argued that we must “offer students ways to construct bridges between their personal and cultural knowledge and that of the academic world” (p. 249). This concept of bridge building is relevant not only to our students who need to see connections between their lived experience and their academic life, but also to those of us who teach. We need to consider the relationship between student development and student learning and how our classroom spaces can intentionally build bridges between these two elements and facilitate development of self-authorship.
REFERENCES


284