

Understanding the Ethnic Self: Learning and Teaching in a Multicultural World

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A proliferation of theoretical and narrative literature related to ethnic identity development led the authors to examine the underlying assumptions and beliefs of a diversity of learners. In this article, we highlight a framework for understanding the ethnic self through five dimensional continua of cultural constructs, assumptions, and beliefs and tie them to various learning and teaching contexts. Appropriate educator action, (including student affairs initiatives, is recommended) to create effective multicultural learning environments responsive to diverse learning perspectives.

When someone, with the power, say, of a teacher, describes the world and you are not in it...

There is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in a mirror and saw nothing.

- Bell Hooks -

The literature on ethnic identity in recent years has been nothing shy of an explosion. From theoretical perspectives (e.g., Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 2000; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Cross, 1991; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Fanon, 1967; Gracia, 2000; Helms, 1993; Phinney, 1990; Tatum, 1997; Wijeyesinghe & Bailey, 2001) to personal narratives (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Bridwell-Bowles, 1998; Brown, 1994; Dublin, 1996; Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Lesage, Ferber, Storrs, & Wong, 2002; Rhoads, 1997; Rochlin, 1997; Rodriguez, 1982; Schoem, 1995; Stalvey, 1989), the literature on ethnic development is focused on theoretically unexplored identities and previously untold life stories. Educational environments are socially, culturally, and operationally constructed primarily around specific ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, ideological and personal norms, values, assumptions and beliefs (Borrego & Guido-DiBrito, 2002; Ibarra, 2001; Hooks, 1994; Freire, 1974). To develop effective learning and teaching techniques for higher education's already diverse populations of learners, we must understand manifested aspects of ethnic identity as well as other types of identity. As educators, we are then better equipped to design and facilitate learning techniques and environments that, in practice, work for every student. The purpose of this paper is to describe a framework for understanding students' ethnic identity related to a continua of five cultural norms. Suggestions for educators, in and out of the classroom, on how to create meaningful learning opportunities for students with various cultural norms are woven throughout the manuscript.

The Ethnic Self as Cultural Lens: A Framework for Learning

As we systematically reviewed existing models of ethnic and racial identity, searched personal narrative literature, and reflected on our own experiences and those of our students, we became aware that specific dynamics make up and trigger the consciousness of ethnic identity in individuals. From this review (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), and from a study of knowledge and educational environments among international and domestic graduate students of color (Chávez, 1995), we developed a framework for understanding ethnic identity applicable in both classroom and out-of-class learning. The framework outlined in Figure 1 includes five continua for which we found differential patterns. We map an ethnic identity framework composed of at least the following constructs: a sense of self in relation to others, sensing/interpreting/knowing, ethnic community responsibility, cultural imprinting, and ethnic/racial contrast.

See Figure 1.

We believe that much of the explanation for particular cultural groups' ability to negotiate traditional learning environments, and more importantly, educators' ability to promote learning for every student, is connected to an understanding of the concepts in Figure 1. Individuals and cultural groups manifest varying groupings of characteristics across these continua. In our experience, most formal and informal learning processes have at their foundation the assumptions and values represented on the extreme left of each construct in the continua. This end of the continua represents those ways of being steeped and grounded in Western European educational philosophy and practice. For individual learners and educators raised in cultures with these underlying constructs, this translates to an overall learning and teaching experience of normalcy, comfort, and conformity. For those raised in cultures with constructs in concert with the right side of the continua, traditional educational environments are likely to be confusing, uncomfortable, and often debilitating to deep learning. Various cultures exhibit different combinations of these continua, and the more characteristics a particular cultural group has on the right side of the continua, the more likely they will struggle to learn and be successful in traditional learning environments. It is not surprising that African American students learn more effectively in predominately Black Colleges (Fleming, 1981;

Roebuck & Murty, 1993), women learn more effectively in all women's colleges (Horowitz, 1984), and Native Americans learn more effectively in Tribal Colleges (Boyer, 1989). In the pages that follow, each construct and its meaning within an individual's ethnic identity, as well as some implications for educators working with students, are explored.

Sense of Self in Relation to Others

The Sense-of-Self continuum is perhaps the most challenging and elusive aspect of ethnic identity to comprehend. Philosophical belief systems, found to varying degrees across cultural groups, influence the sense that an individual has of being separate from or connected to others. In some philosophies, such as those found in Native American, Latin, East Indian, and Buddhist cultures, the self is often conceptualized as connected to other living beings or only temporarily separated from a collective "spirit" of being. In other cultures, such as those originating out of Northern Europe, the sense of self is more individuated, and persons are more likely to think of themselves as being separate and distinct entities.

The sense-of-self related to ethnic identity is likely to influence how students interpret knowledge and in what contexts they learn best. A highly connected student is likely to filter knowledge through their cultural or familial community to ascertain its validity (Deloria, 1999; Van Hamme, 1996). For example, an African American doctoral student expressed her frustration with the lack of a cultural lens in her educational experience in this manner:

I learned, but I just didn't buy it. It didn't fit with my cultural reality and I kept wondering, 'Is there something here for me?' Have I taken precious time away from the most important things in life for this? (Chávez, 1995, p. 15)

A Mexican American doctoral student echoes a similar understanding, "Relational knowing is the most foundational aspect of my knowing. If I do not examine everything through the lens of my community, my people, my self, how am I truly to understand or determine its relevance?" (Chávez, 1995, p. 15). For optimal learning, collective learners may need a balance of individual and communal learning activities as well as strong relationships with both academic and student affairs educators and peers. Time

spent building relationships through communities engaged in mastering and interpreting subject matter may be essential in the learning process whether in or out of the classroom. In addition, educators need to diversify curricula and assist students in processing the practical relevance and application of knowledge for their community of origin. Distance learning, individual programs of study, and Internet sites may not meet the needs of students with a collective sense of self unless used as supplements to more relational processes, such as having a culturally sensitive group facilitator on site during distance education courses. In addition, life-skill learning arenas, including counseling services, need to be developed that assist students with a connected sense of self to process and develop skills through relational means.

Sensing/Interpreting/Knowing

The Sensing/Interpreting/Knowing of ethnic identity outlines a continuum of modes for validating and absorbing information. A student who uses the mind as the primary tool for gathering and interpreting knowledge is likely to do well in traditional learning environments. This type of learning is often validated and rewarded through test taking and step-by-step, additive learning processes. Students from cultures that value and teach the use of mind, body, *and* spirit as interactive tools for gathering and interpreting knowledge are likely to feel cut off and confused in these same learning environments. Gardner's (1993) work outlining seven intelligences (verbal, logical, musical, visual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and physical) reinforces the need for understanding the many ways people make sense of the world around them. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) validates both people who use the five senses as well as their primary tools for knowing, yet learning environments typically ask for more "concrete" proof. This can be problematic for many learners. For example, an East Indian law student in a study on knowledge shared that she felt "unable to express my intuitive knowing in scholarly environments because my sense of knowing isn't considered proof, and 'their way of proof' is required" (Chávez, 1995, p. 6). For the learner who listens closely to intuition, bodily signals, dreams or spiritual guidance, this singular mode of learning is likely to be unfamiliar and constraining. Students raised using more than the mind as guide are likely to need time for reflection, activities that broaden the exploration of knowledge such as the use of metaphor,

drawing, or music to make sense of their ideas, understand theory, or solve problems. In addition, alternative sources of knowledge such as intuition and dreams must be considered as valid if we are to work with many of the world's cultures (Deloria, 1999). Often, minority and international students are raised using more than the logical abilities of their mind as a guide for knowing. Educators need to create learning environments that encourage, use, and develop more than what we have traditionally defined as the mind in western societies.

Educational techniques using a wider sense of knowing can aid all learners by challenging and supporting different kinds of learning styles (Claxton & Murrell, 1987). For example, when educators create only test-taking contexts that are timed on a computer, and in a constrained environment, those students who have been taught to rely on reflection, movement, discussion, dreams, drawing, and other tools to solve problems are effectively debilitated. As result, learning is not adequately evaluated. A Hopi medical student expressed frustration at having to "translate the White man's education into symbols that made sense" (Chávez, 1995, p. 10). This learner's note-taking is primarily in the form of symbols and drawings rather than words. Using only the mind or limited parts of it also does little to broaden problem-solving skills of learners comfortable within this constraint and severely limits those who are accustomed to utilizing a wider collection of knowing tools. Educators will be more likely to appropriately evaluate student learning through the use of a variety of evaluation methods throughout a particular learning situation. By utilizing techniques from both ends of this continuum, students are challenged to learn from methods of evaluation that are comfortable and natural and from methods that are new to them and promote new skills.

Ethnic Community Responsibility

Ethnic Community Responsibility is a construct outlining the extent to which specific individuals feel personal responsibility for their own cultural community. Many cultural groups who have experienced long-term oppression have banded together for protection, support, and the retention of cultural traditions and values. These expectations are transmitted overtly through verbal direction and indirectly through oral histories, stories, and role modeling, and/or may be a result of seeing the plight of

persons in their cultural group and feeling a responsibility to make things better. There are strong indicators that individuals from legally defined minority groups often come to learning environments because of and with a strong responsibility for gaining education for the express purpose of creating a better world for the people of their origins. Their experience is a catalyst for a sense of responsibility for others within one's group as well as for human rights in general.

A sense of responsibility has direct implications for students' learning environments that often seem normed around the concepts of individuality, competitiveness, and abstraction rather than implications and applications of knowledge (Deloria, 1999). Educators must understand that students with tendencies on the right side of these continua are likely to live by concepts of success based in a priority of family and culture above work or even education. Many of these students are likely to be interested in education as the development of wisdom rather than knowledge; wisdom acquired specifically for the benefit of their cultural community. A Navajo student questions, "How do I live up to my responsibilities when I come to a university that imparts not wisdom or humanity but only facts, and many of them limited or harmful to future generations?" (Chávez, 1995, p. 12). This sense of cultural responsibility reaches across to other oppressed groups. Activist Cherríe Moraga (1983) wrote,

I think: what is responsibility to my roots: both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds. I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently. But one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins. (p. 58)

The Responsibility Construct is likely to influence the amount of time and type of priority a student places on formal learning outside their culture. Educators need to understand the balance that students with a strong sense of cultural responsibility or collectivity must walk daily. Similar to many working class learners, these students are not likely to have the luxury of placing non-interpretive education as their first priority, as they must maintain responsibilities to the culture in which they live or are grounded. In addition, these learners may wish to place knowledge in the context of their culture and may value that which can be directly applied. Educators can assist students by ensuring the inclusiveness of curricula, working with their needs on a case by case basis, facilitating

consideration of the implications of knowledge gained to communities of origin, and developing highly flexible and diverse learning techniques and environments that respond to a wider variety of community and cultural expectations. Thomas (1992) urged us not to change the cultures of our people but rather to develop the operational cultures and practices of our organizations in multiculturally competent ways.

Cultural Imprinting

The Cultural Imprinting construct outlines the extent to which a particular individual is immersed in a specific and deeply lived cultural environment. To varying degrees, individuals are raised in environments where cultural imprinting of traditions, behaviors, social norms, values and expectations are overt, deeply held, and consistently transmitted. These imprinting environments can be limited to a family unit or can be as broad as an entire community and still have a strong ethnic/cultural identity development influence. On the other hand, some individuals are raised in environments where cultural imprinting is done in invisible ways by teaching core principles, norms, and behaviors with an absence of identified connection to the cultural origins of these principles. Either of these processes can occur within extremely homogeneous or extremely multicultural communities and regardless of ethnic/cultural origin. For example, there are strong openly Norwegian and German communities in the Midwest as well as communities in which whole groups proudly proclaim they are American and not ethnic. In both types of communities and families, cultural transmission takes place; however, differences exist. In the first type of community, cultural transmission is overt and consciously embraced. In the latter, much cultural transmission still occurs, yet it is often unconscious and framed as voluntary choices of behavior and values rather than cultural transmission. Individuals from these two polar types of cultural communities, as well as those in-between, will all enter and negotiate learning environments differently. When ethnic identity is unconscious, individuals are more likely to expect and even insist that their cultural norms and values are inherent in the educational environment. These individuals are often less able to negotiate multicultural environments than those who already have experience in dealing with culture overtly. For these students, creating an educational environment that disrupts these "invisible" norms will assist them to enhance learning, develop multicultural skills, and hone broader critical thinking

abilities. By utilizing a wide variety of Gardner's intelligences and the Myer's-Briggs personality norms in learning environments, educators are able to challenge culturally unconscious learners to develop a variety of ways of thinking, processing, and applying knowledge.

In contrast, those with conscious ethnic identity are more likely to be highly adept at negotiating multicultural environments, yet are also likely to struggle with a context that prioritizes only ways of doing and values inconsistent with their cultural norm. In addition, students culturally visible in some way (by accent, skin color, or last name) are likely to have their ethnic identity pointed out to them regularly, such as this Jewish student's high school experience, "I guess I understood what an oddity I was. My social studies teacher made me realize it. On the day classes began, he called my name from the attendance sheet... 'Goldman, eh? So you're Jewish?' 'I nodded'" (Goldman, 1991, p. 257). Educators must work to assist these students in feeling welcome and aware of the strength of the skills they bring naturally to learning as well as to challenge them to stretch into new areas and techniques. Educators benefit learners on all points of this continuum by assisting them in deconstructing the cultured nature of their identities, work environments, student clubs and organizations, academic majors, and group process, as well as the subject matter and its application.

Ethnic/Racial Contrast

The Ethnic/Racial Contrast construct outlines the most evident trigger or catalyst for a student's conscious sense of having an ethnic or racial identity. Living, learning, and working in environments that are normed on a culture or cultures different from one's own is likely to cause individuals to become aware and even hyper-aware of their own cultural identity. Ways of doing things, values, beliefs, and assumptions become painfully obvious when we are in contexts where we are the outsider or "foreigner." For individuals experiencing ethnic or racial privilege, or insider status, there is very little to trigger consciousness of an ethnic self (McIntosh, 1989). Norms and values remain unquestioned and even taken for granted in most contexts. For those who experience racial or ethnic oppression or outsider status, consciousness of an ethnic identity is almost unavoidable as an attempt is made to negotiate norms not their own. In some

cases, the pressure to assimilate to values of a mainstream culture affects behavior within the personal culture itself as in this bi-racial family:

There was definitely a hierarchy of beauty, which was the main currency in our daughters-only family. It was not until years later, from the vantage point of this country and this education that I realized this hierarchy of beauty was dictated by our coloring. We were a progression of whitening, as if my mother were slowly bleaching the color out of her children. (Alvarez, 1998, p. 139)

Vontress (1996) wrote about the histories and emotions that individuals from outsider and oppressed cultures bring with them into formal relationships with educators and counselors. He suggested that persons interpret and experience every situation from a vantage point of privilege or oppression. Educators working with students must consider the real concerns and challenges students of color bring to any learning environment. Survival for many in this country means initially not placing trust in people from other racial and ethnic groups, crafting a strong radar for determining the sincerity of others, and experiencing a lack of cultural self-identification represented in most histories, ways of doing things, and values.

Triggers such as privilege or oppression, cultural messages, media portrayal, and educational inclusion affect the likelihood of ethnic consciousness. Many Caucasian European individuals in the United States do not have these triggers as catalysts for a consciousness of their ethnic identity (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 1996). It is important to understand that even without consciousness, these individuals often possess a strong ethnic identity built from familial, educational, and societal transmission of values, assumptions, behaviors, and priorities. Many minority individuals do have a conscious sense of ethnic identity because of the many triggers outlined previously and because of overt cultural messages within their communities. Educators can create effective learning environments by working with students who are cultural insiders and outsiders to create the most effective multicultural learning environments. Healthy learning climates are enriched by sustaining relationships long enough to build trusting rapport, by suspending judgment about students and constantly asking them about their needs, and by learning as much as possible about the histories of various

cultural group experiences. By developing ways to draw from the multitudinous wisdom our students bring into a learning environment, educators benefit all students.

Challenges for Learning and Teaching in a Multicultural World

It is difficult to understand the culturally constructed nature of educational environments and to develop an awareness of the effect of our own culturally defined sense of learning. Difficulties arise for many domestic and international students of color when they attempt to negotiate learning environments constructed by a different ethnic base of values, behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions. The unquestioned norms of individuality, competition, linear thinking, and compartmentalization of subject matter serve as foundations for the construction of United States learning environments. For a Native American, Laotian or Samoan learner, who is likely to have been socialized in a worldview based on collective rather than individual identity, where competition is appropriate only on the sporting or game field, where thinking is circular and life is conceptualized as interconnected rather than compartmentalized, most mainstream American learning environments are confusing and almost non-negotiable. If oppressive elements and isolation are added by peers and educators, learning is unlikely at best as the student becomes increasingly embattled within the learning environment. For students raised with these constructs as the norm, such as those from most Caucasian European American ethnic groups for which these learning environments were created, learning is often proven effective and comfortable. Although this may seem on the surface to be a good thing, this comfortable cultural environment is not likely to be enough of a catalyst to assist students with a monocultural lens in developing the critical thinking, multicultural skills, awareness, and knowledge necessary to negotiate the immense diversity in United States and global societies. In this learning environment, multiple perspectives are less likely to be explored making complexity and critical thinking more difficult to grasp and practice.

As educators, we have the wonderful challenge of creating multicultural learning environments that both empower and challenge each of our students to grow from wherever they begin their journeys toward a more culturally enlightened and adaptable educational perspective. However, we must also challenge ourselves. Educators must consider their own ethnic/cultural identity when constructing learning processes. As

educators, we bring our own strongly imprinted sets of norms, values, behaviors, and assumptions into learning environments as well. Ongoing reflection and self-analysis of the daily influence of these cultural aspects is essential for higher education and student affairs educators to be effective in creating multiculturally competent learning environments. We recommend that educators utilize this set of continua as well as other tools to first consider their own cultured influence in the learning environment and then apply these tools to reengineer learning environments on an ongoing basis. By considering the impact of our own identities on our professional practice, we are better able to develop as multicultural educators, and thus, better able to effectively facilitate the development of all our students.

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Figure 1.
A Culturally Responsive Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Multicultural World

Cultural Constructs
 Individual -----Sense of Self in Relation to Others-----Collective, Connected
 Mind as Guide-----Sensing/Interpreting/Knowing-----Mind, Body, Spirit as Guide
 For Self as Individual-----Ethnic Community Responsibility-----For Cultural
 Community

Unconscious-----Cultural Imprinting-----Conscious
Cultural Insider-----Ethnic/Racial Contrast-----Cultural Outsider