

Critical Reflection Paper 1: Where and How I Enter

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CSP 6035

Submission Date: 24 January, 2012

Upon enrolling in this course, I was instantly struck with several preconceptions. I had an instant assumption that the course would be intensive in reading and writing, that the material would require a significant amount of introspection and reflection, and that it was being taught by a competent and passionate professor. With those three factors, I realized that if the proper effort and time were dedicated to the course, it would be a cornerstone for my professional career. My greatest concern, however, was that I viewed myself as a relatively monoculturalistic individual, having come from and grown up in a homogenous environment. Due to the conceptualization I had of my multicultural competence, I was quite nervous about the growth and challenge this course could and would provide.

Yet, once I began the course reading and participating in course discussions, I began to realize that, though I may be in predominantly dominant identity groups, Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) reminded me that “all of our social identities. . . influence who we are and how we view the world” (p. xiv). Reason (2007) also struck a chord, noting that the incorporation of my multiple identities may create situations where I, as a White person, may begin to realize where I may be an outsider due to the marginalized groups that I belong to (p. 128). In fact, as I began to explore the various groups to which I belong, using the “Dominant and subordinated group patters” handout from the Social Justice Training Institute, I was surprised to find that I belonged to a larger number of subordinated groups than expected. Even more surprising was

that the subordinated groups to which I belonged included both visible and invisible subordinations.

As I considered my subordinated groups, especially in the terms of how I embraced or denied them, I began to realize that I have a history instead of accentuating my dominant groups. As a White, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual male, it has been easy to be complacent in my own multicultural development, especially considering that those around me were not noticeably developing their own competencies. Reason (2007), however, notes that the incorporation of different perspectives, “especially perspectives from one’s own non-dominant subjectivities, precludes the use of denial or rationalization as defense mechanisms” (p. 133). Thus, I would say that the more I explore my own, as well as others’ subordinated groups, the less likely I would become to employ denial and rationalization. Furthermore, as Obear (2007) noted, the more that I explore my privileged groups, the more likely I would be to anticipate triggering comments by members of dominant groups, and thus employ my “personal feelings and experiences to connect with participants” (p. 5).

It seemed daunting to consider that not only would I need to examine and reflect on my current competency levels of multiculturalism, but that I would need to continue exploring both my subordinated groups to further grow, while at the same time exploring my privileged groups to continue strengthening myself as a professional. However, Watt (2007) provided relief by stating that, “Being competent in this area means that [a professional] understands that one will never reach an ultimate level of knowledge and awareness about self and various cultural groups” (p. 115). When considering that developing multicultural competence is truly a lifelong endeavor, and that there is no end game, it’s quite relieving.

Several of the authors have echoed that sentiment already this semester, that developing multicultural competence truly is a lifelong process, but have also noted that multicultural competence must be an institutional and field-wide endeavor throughout all professionals' lives. Talbot (1996) indicated that student affairs professionals "will need to assume a leadership role in helping institutions bridge the gap between old skills and paradigms and the new tools necessary to effectively meet the needs of changing student populations". Pope et. al (2004) echo the sentiment, noting that "it is no longer defensible for student affairs professionals to rely solely on 'multicultural experts'" (p. 6). Furthermore, Kupo (2011) argued that "societal attitudes and systems of power, privilege, and oppression have created a need for multicultural student services on college campuses as a remedy for communities that have been barred from receiving formal primary, secondary, and higher education" (p. 14). It is quite evident, therefore, that in addition to lifelong learning about my interests and positions, that lifelong learning for my field will include multicultural competency training and development to advocate for myself, as well as other populations.

Again, this is a concept that Pope et. al (2004) support, as they noted that a "multiculturally sensitive professional seeks out additional training. . . and begins supplemental reading" (p. 20). The model described by Pope et. al seems to be supportive of scholar-practitioners in the field of student affairs, a model that I wholeheartedly embrace and seek to employ. Ultimately, as Pope et. al (2004) prescribe that student affairs professionals evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses in the realm of multicultural competence, as few professionals have "received adequate training to be prepared to address the myriad multicultural concerns in higher education today" (p. 20). It is through the process of reflection and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses (introspection) and seeking out opportunities for training and

development (action) that student affairs professionals, to my knowledge, continue growth in their multicultural competence.

Another significant aspect in continued growth of multicultural competence is developing the comfort and competency to navigate difficult confrontational conversations. As Pope et. al (2004) note, “A student affairs professional is uncomfortable when students and other professionals make stereotypical remarks or inappropriate jokes, yet [they] are not comfortable confronting their behavior” (p. 25). There have been several instances since beginning the CSP program in which I have heard this, or similar quotations. Growing up in the “Minnesota nice” culture, confrontation is not a natural part of my repertoire. However, throughout time I have gained experience and confidence in confronting situations, regardless of context or setting. This confidence and capability has come, as Pope et. al (2004) recommended, by practicing the skills of confrontation in supportive settings (p. 25).

The need to develop competencies in confrontation was echoed throughout the readings in the course thus far, as Pieterse and Collins noted that “A critical element of multicultural competence is the ability to participate in and foster dialogues that non-defensively acknowledge patterns of social hierarchy and dominance” (p. 145). As noted earlier, due to the fact that student affairs professionals will act as the bridge between old and new skills and tools in an institutional setting, it is again essential that student affairs professionals be competent and able in fostering difficult dialogues without causing participants to become defensive and shut down. It is imperative to avoid creating a type of discomfort that leads to “one feeling that he/or she is being attacked the [a] need or requirement to defend oneself or one’s views” (Watt, 2007, p. 116). One way that I would expect for student affairs professionals to find ways to avoid these

uncomfortable situations is, again, to explore their own identities and groups, as well as examining their “triggers”.

Obear (2007) describes triggering events as moments where individuals “experience an intense, often unexpected, emotional reaction to an external or internal stimulus and are often surprised by how the intensity of their emotions is disproportionate to the original stimulus” (p. 1). Participating in a triggering exercise so early in the semester was, to me, incredibly beneficial. This past week, as I reflected on the exercise, I realized that it was beneficial as a professional to identify what triggers exist in my life to avoid the negative effects of those triggers, especially during professional or facilitative functions. As I began to reflect on the triggers that I am currently cognizant of, I realized that I experienced several triggering events last semester, and managed them in several different fashions. For the majority of the triggering events I experienced, I realized that I was being triggered, took a few deep breaths (a common anecdote of mine), and moved on.

There were several events, however, where I realized that I was being triggered, but could not overcome either the trigger or exit the event (especially considering events that happened during my internship hours). However, in the moment and upon reflection, I was able to identify several of the emotional, physical, and cognitive processes and reactions that I had been experiencing during the events, just as Obear (2007) had recommended student affairs professionals do (p. 4). Although I am nowhere near being competent or capable of controlling the triggering events I experience, but I will, hopefully, over time begin to identify those events much sooner and, as Obear (2007) suggests, “shift [my] intention to align with learning goals” of whatever I may be doing (p. 5).

Another significant concept covered in class thus far is in developing the ability to communicate across cultures. Earlier I noted how I had been nervous about this course due to the conception that I have minimal experience working with diverse groups. However, as I began to delve further into Pope et. al's (2004) literature, I began to realize that I do, in fact, have significant experience in communicating and working with varied cultures: I've traveled, studied, and worked abroad. One of the greatest lessons I learned from studying abroad for a semester in downtown Tokyo was the value of language and culture, and the ability to communicate and connect with both. Due to the language barrier, I was forced to learn how to "communicate across cultures and understand how culture influences the content as well as the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication [as being] central [to dialogue and development]" (p. 15). By reflecting on my experiences abroad as encountering various forms of diversity and cultures, I began to realize that I have encountered and created environments that, though non-traditional, are still environments where multicultural competency is cultivated.

A more recent example of encountering a new environment of multiculturalism is in my move to Ohio for graduate school. I had an opportunity to remain in my home state of Minnesota and attend a student affairs graduate program there, but in discussing my options with my family and mentors, ultimately made the decision to venture to Ohio to encounter a wider variety of individuals than otherwise in Minnesota. Already in my eight months in Ohio, my desire to meet varied and diverse populations, philosophies, and personalities has been justified. Pope et. al (2004) support the search and exploration of new and unfamiliar cultures, stating that, "we must all increase our contact with people who are culturally different from ourselves" (p. 22).

Although I have already begun experiencing new identity groups, privilege statuses, and forms of diversity and multiculturalism, I realize that I still have a long way to go before I can be considered even an amateur in multicultural competency. I recognize that I still react in denial from time to time, “arguing against an anxiety provoking stimuli by stating that it does not exist” (Watt, 2007, p. 120). I also recognize that I am guilty of intellectualization and principium, using logic, reason, and principles to explain events and environments with which I interact (Watt, 2007, p. 121). I even recognize that, though addressing a privileged identity, responding with benevolence is still not a genuine act of charity (Watt, 2007, p. 122).

However, as Watt (2007) notes, “the exploration of privileged identity is an on-going socialization process[,] there is no ultimate level of consciousness that can be reached regarding one’s privileged identity[, and] engaging in difficult dialogue is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression“ (p. 119). Developing multicultural competence truly is a life-long process, but I believe that going about developing competencies in a positive, open, and professional manner will bring about greater development and growth. The significance of this course, to me, is in learning how to communicate with diverse populations, fostering difficult, but necessary dialogue, and identifying, understanding, and exploring my privileged and subordinated groups, all of which are necessary skills and tools to contribute as a multiculturally competent professional in the twenty-first century field of higher education.

References

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