



Lessons To Be Learned: Promoting Multicultural Discourse Through a College Minority Student Discussion Panel

By Mark S. Brown & Susan Woods

Introduction

On April 13, 2004, the College of Education and Professional Studies held its 2nd annual college minority student discussion panel at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. The main purpose of this panel discussion was for undergraduate students from culturally diverse backgrounds to discuss the personal experiences they have had as a student on campus. This minority panel discussion was promoted and supported by the Minority Recruitment Retention Committee.

The Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee is comprised of college professors from various departments (i.e., Special Education, Health Studies, and Educational Foundations) that are housed in the College of Education and Professional Studies (CEPS). The Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee had chosen the minority panel discussion as a vehicle that would continue the effort to diversify the

academic environment at Eastern Illinois University through the implementation of minority student focus groups and cultural awareness activities for students and faculty in CEPS (Gong, 2002).

Currently at Eastern Illinois University, the percentage of minority students is small, but stable. Minorities account for 9.5% of the student population; 6.5% of the population is African-American, 2.2% Latino-American, 1.3% Asian/Asian-American, and .20% Native American/Pacific Island. There may be geographic reasons for the small number of minority students who come to Eastern Illinois University. It is believed that some students from culturally diverse backgrounds may not consider attending a rural university and seek a college that has more "city" conveniences. The retention rate for minority students who come to Eastern Illinois University is currently 40% over a four-year period.

Panel Membership

Five undergraduate students were chosen by faculty members from the Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee to represent a diverse body of college students. The discussion panel was kept relatively small in order to allow each panelist to have enough time to discuss her view-

points on various multicultural topics that were posed to them as well as allow for audience feedback after each panel member had given her viewpoints.

It should be stated that a twenty-one year old undergraduate African-American male was also scheduled to join this unique panel. He had to withdraw his participation due to a scheduling conflict with student teaching. The members of this unique college panel were as follows.

- ◆ *Michelle Lucky* — A twenty-three-year-old African-American female undergraduate student majoring in health studies.
- ◆ *Ifraj Watts* — A twenty-two-year-old African-American female undergraduate student majoring in sociology and minoring in health studies.
- ◆ *Marissa Justiniano* — A twenty-year-old Latino-American female undergraduate students majoring in special education.
- ◆ *Jenny Sohn* — A twenty-year-old Asian-American female undergraduate student majoring in special education.
- ◆ *Camille Jordan* — A twenty-year-old African-American female under-

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graduate student majoring in special education.

Mark Brown, an Assistant Professor in the department of Special Education served as the moderator for this minority panel discussion. He first introduced the panel members to the audience, which was made up of students, faculty, and the Dean from the College of Education and Professional Studies.

Given that the panel discussion was only one hour in length, each student had to measure her words wisely. Each participant had approximately 7-10 minutes to speak. Time was also allocated at the end of the minority panel discussion for audience questioning.

Key Questions

Mark Brown posited the following three questions for the Eastern Illinois University students to reflect upon and then critically answer:

1. How did you prepare yourself for the academic challenges as well as the social adjustments that were needed in order to experience success at the college level?
2. What unique experiences did you have in your college classroom settings?
3. What assumptions might be made concerning minority students at a predominately white college campus setting?

Exploring the Panel's Experiences

Understanding "assimilation" and "acculturation" is helpful in exploring the panel's discursive experiences. While assimilation is the loss of ethnic culture through absorption into the mainstream culture, acculturation suggests biculturalism, or the capacity to function in both the ethnic or mainstream culture (Soriano, 1995). Banks (1999) defined acculturation as "the process that occurs when characteristics of a group are changed because of interaction with another cultural or ethnic group" (p. 61). In the acculturation process, interacting groups exchange cultural characteristics, and both are transformed in the process. This panel's discussion illustrated the bicultural challenge the students on this panel face in attending a predominantly White, rural university.

Preparing for the Academic Challenges and Social Adjustments to College Life

For the majority of these students from culturally diverse backgrounds, the need to make adjustments to new academic demands occurred very quickly. Half of the students on this panel came from a junior college program and realized that they would have to make an adjustment to the realities of college life. Ifraj stated:

No one is going call you and say that you didn't hand in a homework assignment. If you forgot to hand it in for whatever reason or it's late, you'll get a failing grade.

Many students prepared themselves during this transition by seeking out either family friends or an actual program that allowed for one-on-one mentoring experiences. Furr and Elling (2000) determined that African-American college students who participated in a mentoring program during their first year of college were more likely to be retained. This mentoring process also gave them greater confidence in seeking out social organizations that allowed them to experience personal growth and emotional development.

Ifraj stated that during her first year of college, she became involved in the TRIO program at Eastern Illinois University. TRIO is a national federal program that began in 1965. It was defined as a series of specialized programs (i.e., student support services) for students from disadvantaged background. Congress authorized these specialized programs through the Higher Education Act of 1965. TRIO assists students from low income families and first generation college student in navigating the complexities of college through individual tutoring, study skill enhancement, as well as leadership development training (Wilson, 2001).

Other students who were not in a mentoring program may choose to rely on past friendships that have pulled them through in difficult times. Marissa had a Latino-America friend at home whom she initially leaned on for emotional support when she came to Eastern Illinois University as a first year freshmen.

I felt like I had to cling to my friend back home, because she understood me. I would talk to her and she would listen to me without any judgment.

Making the transition from high school to a four-year institution was a challenge that often left her feeling overwhelmed. She felt overly "stressed" with homework and missed her family. Maria

began to rely on a family friend who was "like herself" and would understand what she was going through (Dorsey & Jackson, 1995; Lopez, 1995).

Upon her arrival, she called her high school friend often for support and continues to keep in contact with her to this day. Maria's struggles with transitioning to a new college are supported by Pidcock, Fischer, and Munsch (2001) who quantitatively examined behavioral differences between 201 Latino-American and Anglo-American first-year college students. This study determined that Latino-American females were at a higher risk for non-retention than their Latino-American male counter parts. This was because Latino-American females were more likely to leave college if they had too strong a "parental addiction" and they did not receive any form of mentoring at their new college. Parental addiction was defined as excessive parental demands that would not allow the female Latino student to psychologically break away from the demands of their parents (i.e., being asked to visit home in order to take care of a sick sibling).

For other college students who are culturally diverse, being "Americanized" may create further tensions with college students who come directly from their non-Westernized country to attend college. Jenny discussed the difficulty of being an Asian-American student and feeling more comfortable with other "American" students. She often found it difficult to "connect" with International Asian-American students. She believed that she was not accepted by her International Asian-American peers because she was perceived as too "Americanized" for them. They seemed to be more emotionally, socially, and politically tied to their native country.

While, Jenny was concerned about familial, social, and political events that were taking place in the United States. Lay and Safdar (2003) use the term "ingroup hassles" to explain problems that may directly relate to a culture-specific group. They infer that, "Difficulties may arise from a lack of fluency in their heritage language or from an inability to understand and to conduct themselves confidently within the context of their heritage group" (p. 4).

While Jenny felt proud of her Asian-American cultural roots, she also clearly defined herself as an American student who could freely interact with other American (non-minority) students. She felt that while her international Asian peers enjoyed their academic classes and social experiences as college students in Charleston, Illinois, they were still emotionally tied

to their native country and thus tended to gravitate towards social interactions that were mainly with other international students like themselves.

For some students, acculturation may appear to be less stressful if they never have to make an emotional shift to learning at predominately white college institution. Camille stated that she has always gone to schools where she was one of the few students from a culturally diverse background in her class. Camille's transfer to Eastern Illinois University was not emotionally difficult, because she was already used to that environment:

Coming to Eastern Illinois University as a student was not difficult for me (i.e., being a minority student). It's something that I am used to.

She felt "acculturated" and therefore comfortable in both worlds. Camille could easily adapt to classroom experiences or social situations that involved differing perspectives.

Students

from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds: Their Classroom Experiences

For many college students from culturally diverse backgrounds, the need to feel accepted and fit in with their white college peers may make it difficult to discuss relevant issues pertaining to race when they are brought up in the classroom. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds may feel that they have to carry their "minority status" on their shoulder when they in essence become a "spokesperson" for their ethnic group when class discussions on race take place (Cage, 1995).

Interestingly enough, that was not the sentiment shared by Marissa. Marissa elaborated that she took a class focusing on collaborating with families from diverse cultures. She was the only minority student in her class. Yet, she wished that the Professor had asked for her input when the issue of addressing effective classroom and/or community strategies for working with Latino-American families was brought up.

I was surprised when my professor did not ask me about issues (i.e., cultural) pertaining to Latino families. I felt like I had a lot to offer in terms of my life experiences.

Being a minority student in a class of predominantly White college did not stop her from wanting to express her own viewpoints on family from a more personalized perspective. Unfortunately, this validation of her cultural knowledge did not take place.

Understanding the Non-Verbal Behaviors of a Minority College Student

Within the culture of a college classroom, it is also important for professors to understand that what is not "verbalized" in the classroom can be just as important as what is being stated. Ifraj discussed how professors are not often aware of cultural behaviors that often "silently" occur in the college classroom. As an African-American female, she was taken aside by a professor in one of her classes and asked why she didn't always seem interested in the classroom discussions that were taking place.

Ifrac further explained that professors may not realize that African-American college students may not always give direct eye-contact when interacting with their peers or their teacher. This fact is supported by current research. Harry (1992) suggested that African-Americans have been socialized to use less direct eye contact when initially speaking. They may also use more peripheral vision when initially listening to another individual. Camille Jordan, an African-American undergraduate student reiterated this same point, but from a familial perspective. She said, that "direct eye contact is a sign of disrespect within the African-American family. Children in minority cultures are socialized not to demonstrate direct eye-contact when talking to an adult or a person of authority, but are instead taught to look down and away from that person."

In the context of a college classroom setting, a non-minority peer/professor who is unaware of this cultural trait (i.e., which has been handed down from generation to generation) may assume that the student from a culturally diverse background is either not paying attention or is just not interested in what they have to say. This non-verbal miscommunication may intentionally obstruct the collaborative learning process that is supposed to naturally occur within the college classroom setting.

Marissa, a Latino-American undergraduate student agreed with both Ifraj and Camille about the issue of "not always using direct eye-contact in the classroom" when conversing with peers or the professor. She stated that she too was judged by some of her professors as initially not being truly engaged in the class discussion as her White college peers.

I've been asked by a few professors... Are you paying attention to me? I proved to them that I am paying attention. Once they get used to me, they have accepted me for who I am.

Marissa went on to state that she has had to prove to some of her professors that she was a focused and capable college student. She felt that she proved this point by performing well on class assignments, tests, and group work in those particular undergraduate classes.

Assumptions Concerning Dialect in Relation to Minority College Students

One's cultural dialect that is spoken in the college classroom can lead peers and professors to make generalizations concerning one's general intelligence and academic capability. A dialect such as "Ebonics" when spoken in the college classroom may be less valued, because it is unfortunately often negatively viewed by mainstream society in an academic setting such as a college classroom. Therefore, it is likely that an African-American student may not be reinforced for speaking "Ebonics" in the college classroom (Flowers, 2000; Hutchinson, 1997; Lippi-Green, 1997). This may be true if what is being stated is not easily understood by other college classmates and/or the professor. It is more likely that they may be complimented for speaking in a non-Ebonic discourse that appears easier to comprehend and is viewed as more intellectual in nature.

Ifrac Watts stated that she never really thought about how she spoke and how it might be perceived by her professors. This African-American undergraduate student usually found acceptance in the classroom with college classmates and her professors in terms of how she relayed her ideas. One time however, Ifraj felt that she experienced a "back-handed" compliment by a professor who always made the comment, "Oh, You speak so well." She often wondered if her professor was saying that she spoke so well because she was an accomplished student in the department of health studies, or was it because she spoke "so well" for a student who was also African-American?

Minority College Student's Perception of Group Work

The ability of a college student to work effectively with peers on a group activity can be influenced by different variables. College students often pick other peers to work with that they currently know and feel comfortable with or have known from a previous classroom experience. The successful completion of a group activity or assignment often depends upon individu-

als being able to delegate sharing task responsibilities and being responsible for part of a group assignment.

Group work must allow for equity in participation from all members. For college students from culturally diverse backgrounds, the ability to effectively work in a designated group allows them to demonstrate their social competency and consistent work ethic over the course of the semester. This minority student panel also discussed the issue of working in groups and how their non-minority peers might initially perceive them. Jenny Sohn stated:

I may not be the first person to jump in initially and add an idea. I may hold back and then jump in.

Michelle Lucky discussed the importance of group work from a socialization process. She looked forward to working in groups, sharing ideas and realizing that it's "alright to disagree." Ifraj perceived differences in how college students from culturally diverse backgrounds worked together in a group. She stated:

I get a greater sense of collaboration when I am working with African-American students. In the past, when I have been in an all minority group, it felt more collaborative. We would bring our work to meetings and ask each other, "What do you think?" When I was the only minor-

ity in a predominantly white group, I felt like my responsibility was to complete my part of the group assignment and bring put things together on the day of the presentation. I didn't feel that this transition process went as smoothly due to the lack of initial collaboration.

Like the majority of college students, group work for Ifraj was not only an academic task but also a social event as well. She could state her opinions among a "safe" group of peers. This tightly knit group was open to discussion which led to greater collaboration among group members. Current research suggests that African-American, Latino-American, and Native-American Indian college students prefer cooperative learning experiences and group work (Sanchez, 2000). As the approach to group work may be different for students from diverse backgrounds, teachers should enhance this process by encouraging members to share their work style preferences when engaged in collaborative assignments.

Lessons To Be Learned from This Minority College Student Panel

The five undergraduate Eastern Illinois University college students spoke

openly and without hesitation concerning their feelings with regard to being a minority at a predominantly White college institution. Through their discussion, we as faculty and fellow students were given a greater insight into their personal experiences. Additional multicultural insights from these five members of this minority student panel are given in Table 1.

In closing, if college faculty and staff wish to be committed to allowing equal access to learning for all students, they need to be open to further examining their professional teaching practices when interacting with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The panel discussion that took place allowed faculty and non-minority college students to better understand the perspectives of those students whose "voices" were often not heard or appreciated in the college classroom setting. This open dialogue that took place has also served as a springboard for future panel discussions on multicultural issues.

Future minority college panel discussions at Eastern Illinois University will be expanded to include both college students and University faculty. It is hoped that over time, community participation will become a visible presence as well. We can all learn from one another's culture and grow in the process. These are the lessons

Table 1.

Discourse Themes Pertaining to Additional Dialogue at the College Minority Student Discussion Panel

Theme	Experience	College Student's Discourse	Lessons to be Learned
Early lack of cultural awareness demonstrated by an elementary school teacher.	Lack of cultural awareness in relation to communication that is non-verbal.	<i>When I was younger, my teacher referred me to a speech and hearing specialist because she thought I had a hearing problem.</i>	Teachers need to have a greater awareness of student behaviors that may be exhibited based upon the cultural make-up in their classroom.
Acculturation stress.	Parental concern that his daughter is losing her cultural identity.	<i>My father has noticed that I'm losing my Spanish. He leaves messages in Spanish on my answering machine when he calls.</i>	A parent's need to remind his daughter of her cultural roots can lead a child to a greater self-awareness of the positive as well as negative aspects of the acculturation process.
Non-college classroom experiences.	Unexpected rude treatment from young children during a practicum experience.	<i>During my practicum at an elementary school, students asked if I spoke a different language. Others just used derogatory terms towards me.</i>	Cultural bias can be learned at a young age. School teachers need to effectively address the issue of multiculturalism in their classroom.
Completing group work in the college classroom setting.	Some white college students may have the assumption that minority students won't contribute their fair share of work.	<i>Once the other (white) students get to know me and my work ethic, there's no problem.</i>	The college instructor should provide directions as well as request feedback on the process of working collaboratively in diverse groups.

that we have learned through this unique college panel discussion experience.

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