

Multicultural Learning Communities: Vehicles for Developing Self-Authorship in First-Generation College Students

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Abstract. This longitudinal study of first-generation (FG), low-income students considers the impact of their participation in a Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) designed to challenge the isolation and marginalization such students experience at a large Midwestern research university. The study explores the extent to which learning community design, coupled with multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy, creates avenues for self-authorship for historically marginalized students in a TRIO program. Twenty-four FG students were interviewed 3 to 4 years after participation in the MLC, and results were analyzed through the framework of self-authorship. Findings focus on the dimensions of interpersonal and cognitive development, demonstrating that curricular spaces can facilitate the interplay of these two dimensions to build social and academic integration for FG students.

Students who are first in their family to attend college are far from homogenous; rather, they are more likely than their traditional counterparts to be students of color, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, and over the age of 24 (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In addition, they tend to enter college with less academic preparation and have limited access to information about college or assistance to prepare for the experience, either firsthand or from relatives (Thayer, 2000). The story behind these demographics

suggest that first-generation (FG) students often exist in a borderland between their home and school worlds. While their families may overtly celebrate their admission to college, families of FG students know little about college life and may not fully trust it (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Jehangir, 2008, 2009, 2010; Leste Law, 1995; London, 1989, 1996; Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004; Rendón, 1992, 1994). FG students enter uncharted territory with little guidance and must learn to navigate academia alongside their traditional peers. To do so, FG students must unpack the implicit and explicit expectations of academia and find a sense of place in an environment that often does little to invite them in. Transition to college is tumultuous for many students, but for first-generation students, it is akin to arriving in a strange new land where they have to learn the language, customs and mores without the codebook to explain what they are (Borrego, 2001; Rendón, 1996; Rodriguez, 1982). In addition, FG students walk a fine line between discovering how to traverse new landscapes, while assuring their families that they have not shed too much of their home identity (London, 1989; Howard, 2001). The push and pull between worlds often results in conflicting expectations between home, school, and work lives that may serve to reinforce doubts about their academic and motivational abilities to make it through college (Hsiao, 1992; Striplin, 1999; Thayer; Wirt et al., 2004).

Despite the fact that FG students come to college with the specific intent to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing (Ayala & Striplin, 2002), the incongruence of their various life roles often results in low retention rates, particularly for those FG students who are also low-income or students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000). This study examines the impact of a Multicultural Learning Community (MLC), offered between fall 2001 and fall 2004, on the social and academic integration of FG college students who participated in this program during their first-year of college. The MLC was designed to challenge the isolation that FG students experience, both socially and academically, particularly at large predominantly White research institutions. The intentional design of the MLC sought to create a safe place to challenge and support FG students and bring their lived experiences into the curricular space.

Presented in this article is the second phase of a multi-part study. The first part of the study analyzed MLC students' weekly journals to see how first-generation students perceived their learning experience during their first semester of college (Jehangir, 2008, 2009). The second part, described in this article, includes 24 follow-up interviews with these students, 3 to 4 years

later, revealing that participation in the MLC had some influence upon the self-authorship process of the FG participants. While the term self-authorship will be addressed in detail in this article, it is most often attributed to the work of Baxter Magolda (2008) who describes it as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations” (p.269). The findings in this paper focus on the extent to which the MLC impacted students’ process of self-authorship, with particular attention paid to the interpersonal and cognitive dimensions. The findings with regard to intrapersonal development are addressed in a Jehangir, 2012.

Given that many FG students live off-campus, work part- or full-time during college, and have additional family responsibilities (Chen, 2005; Hsiao, 1992; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), it is not surprising that they tend to feel less socially and academically connected on campus. This lack of social integration means that they are less likely to develop friendships or engage in campus organizations. In the classroom, a lack of academic integration may result in discomfort with responding to questions and using resources, such as office hours or advising. Furthermore, their lived experiences and cultural capital are unlikely to be reflected in the curriculum. The lack of both social and academic integration reinforces the ways in which FG students continue to feel like strangers on campus (Jehangir, 2008, 2009, 2010; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin). Linking together the structure of a learning community with the concepts of a multicultural curriculum is one means of cultivating a space and place for FG students.

Learning Communities

Learning communities have been shown to create environments that allow more time on task; heighten the quality of the learning experience (as measured by interactions with faculty and peer networks); and foster active and collaborative learning, often modeled by faculty members who build connections between the social and academic realms of the students’ lives (Astin, 1993; Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Goodsell-Love, 1999; Jehangir, 2001; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Levine, Smith, Tinto, & Gardner, 1999; Smith, 1991).

According to Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1993) and Tinto (2000), studies of learning communities at large, four-year campuses demonstrate that this curricular format allows students to “build a network of peers” (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo p. 18) that serve as a bridge between “academic and social systems by providing study partners, sources for class notes” and so

forth (p.18). These studies also suggest that students take ownership of their learning when they see “instructors grapple with and analyze their own course content” (Tinto et al., p. 19). In addition, a multidisciplinary approach allows students to have a diverse educational experience. This increased comfort level also fosters the sense of security students need to express and “connect their personal experiences to class content and to recognize the diversity of views and experiences that marked differing members of the classroom” (Tinto et al., p. 20).

Similar data were found in a qualitative study of FG students in learning communities, which facilitated building supportive peer groups (Tinto, 1997). The study extended the notion of peer support as a means of managing the “many struggles [FG students] faced getting to and participating in class” (p. 610). A second category of responses, titled, “shared learning– bridging the academic–social divide” (Tinto, 1997, p. 610), demonstrated how the learning community helped students bring their two worlds together. Learning thus extended beyond the classroom and became part of study groups and informal gatherings. These connections seemed to enrich the learning experience, as illustrated in one student comment: “Not only do we learn more, we learn better” (p. 611). Finally, the third category of qualitative responses showed that participation in learning communities aided students in “gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge” (p. 611). In addition, students seemed to value and appreciate the contrasting, yet complementary perspectives of different faculty members, which contributed to their ability to recognize multiple ways of knowing and learning.

Smoke and Haas (1995) examined the effect of clustered courses on the experience of a cohort of English Language Learner (ELL), English-as-a-Second–Language (ESL), and nontraditional students (NS). The course linkages allowed students to express their own histories in writing assignments and discuss common experiences concerning prejudice and discrimination. In addition, native NS speakers helped the ESL students with language issues. As is the case with most learning community models, students were thus encouraged to “become responsible learners, to work with the complexity of real-world problems, and to develop a personal voice or point of view” (Smith, 1991, p. 46).

Self-authorship

Self-authorship is a process that invites reflection on one’s own identity, relationship with others, and views of the world. Building on the work of

Baxter Magolda, Pizzolato (2003) defines self-authorship as

a relatively enduring way of understanding and orientating oneself to provocative situations in a way that (a) recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge and (b) balances this understanding with the development of one's own internally defined goals and sense of self. (p.798)

While the central framework of self-authorship was developed by Baxter Magolda (2001), in this study, we also draw on the work of Pizzolato (2003) and Torres and Hernandez (2007). Using the same four stages of self-authorship, these scholars build on Baxter Magolda's model with attention to the experience of historically marginalized students. Pizzolato's definition of self-authorship is particularly relevant in the context of our study, because her definition speaks to ways in which curriculum and pedagogy can create provocative situations that serve as catalysts to deeper self-awareness. The main focus of the self-authoring process centers around three dimensions of development: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. One way to think about how these dimensions are operationalized is to consider the big questions students grapple with in context of each dimension respectively: "How do I know?" "Who am I?" "What relationships do I want?" (Torres & Hernandez, p. 558). Further developing each of these dimensions, Baxter Magolda (2001) articulated in her self-authorship research four phases across each dimension: (a) External Formulas, (b) The Crossroads, (c) Becoming the Author of One's Own Life, and (d) Internal Foundations. With regard to the four phases of self-authorship: *External Formulas* attributes a dependence on external authorities for 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 needs and perspectives" (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 559). *Becoming an Author of One's Life* pertains to the process of cultivating one's values and identity, interpreting knowledge as contextual and engaging in diverse interdependent relationships to developing an "internally generated sense of self" (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p.12). *Internal formulas* refers to the ability to successfully negotiate external influences, make life choices and develop relationships that consistently reflect one's values and principles.

In her research, Baxter Magolda (2001) found that the process of self-authorship was "catalyzed by one of two kinds of experiences: (a) participants had to make a decision for which there was no formula for success, or (b) they

realized they were sufficiently unhappy in their present situations to start making changes” (as cited in Pizzolato, 2003, p. 798). From the research on self-authorship we argue that not only does the process of self-authorship require experiences that challenge one’s internal frame, but also spaces in which students can grapple, discuss, and debate these new ideas and realities. Therefore, the MLC sought to offer a curriculum in which students were challenged to critically analyze their own internal frames and ways of knowing. The MLC also sought to provide a safe, comfortable space in which students felt at ease sharing their opinions, grappling with new ideas, and ultimately figuring out how to reflect on and develop potentially new conceptions of oneself.

Design and Rationale: The Multicultural Voices Learning Community

The MLC included three courses: (a) a social science course, (b) a humanities art lab, and (c) a first-year composition course. Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical basis for the educational contexts of historically marginalized students. Moreover, it looks at educational settings and curriculum not as value-neutral, but rather as “symbolic property—cultural capital—which schools preserve and distribute” (Apple, 1990, p. ix). As such critical pedagogy provided the theoretical framework for the design and curricular choices of the MLC.

The courses were also linked by concurrent registration and the curricular themes of identity, community, and agency. Each instructor enacted these three themes in their curriculum in different and complementary ways. For the social science course, students worked within a seminar format and in small groups to examine class, race, and gender, among other inequities in America. In the composition course, students worked with one another to discuss and reflect upon the process of academic writing and to consider how their writing locates them in relation with others. In the humanities art lab, students collaborated, negotiated, and grappled with creating final capstone projects—either a performance or a mural—that expressed the themes of identity, community, and agency.

This intentional linkage of interdisciplinary courses drew on theoretical writing, narrative prose, film, and a variety of art and collaborative activities to stimulate students to examine multicultural perspectives and connect them to their lived experiences. Community-building activities were also imbedded into the curriculum, and all three instructors joined in one classroom space when they conducted such activities. Students and faculty also attended one off-campus event together, such as an art exhibit opening or a play.

Method

This research is part of a larger qualitative longitudinal study that looked broadly at the impact of the MLC on the college experience of FG students in a predominantly White institution (PWI). For this paper, we narrowed our focus and sought to gain a greater understanding of the extent to which the MLC first-year experience impacted FG students' process of self-authorship, with particular attention given to the interpersonal and cognitive dimensions. The choice of methods, viewed through a constructivist lens, offered students opportunities to reflect upon their experiences retrospectively in semi-structured informal interviews.

Data Collection

Interviewing is a method by which researchers can better understand individuals' stories and perspectives. Participants are encouraged to elaborate, explain, and share their views on a particular topic (Hatch, 2002). In this study, data were collected through a semi-structured interview process. The interviews were conducted by three graduate research assistants and involved students from three different MLC cohorts. Three to four years after their enrollment in the MLC, students were invited to participate in interviews regarding their experience in the learning community and beyond. During the interviews, students were asked to reflect upon four main areas: (a) their MLC experience, (b) University experience outside the MLC, (c) involvement in extracurricular activities, and (d) future goals. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was taped using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.

Participants

Participants were juniors, seniors, and recent graduates at the time of the interviews. Over a period of a year and a half, 24 students volunteered for the interviews. The participants varied in their ethnicity, race, and gender; in total, the sample comprised 40% men and 60% women. Racially the majority of the sample was non-White, with most students identifying as Black (14), followed by White (5), East African descent (4), Asian (3), Bi-racial (2), and Hispanic (1). All but one of the individuals whom we interviewed were still enrolled at the university or had recently graduated. Only one participant had dropped out of the university. This is clearly a limitation of the study because it does not include data from students who left the university despite participation in the MLC program.

Analysis

Data analyses were carried out in three stages. In the first stage, our research team engaged in a process of meaning-making by individually analyzing and deriving themes for each interview. Involved in this initial analysis were three individuals, including the principal investigator, a graduate student, and an undergraduate research fellow who was a first-generation student at another institution. Our discussion around the themes emerging from the interviews started with one participant's text, creating categories from the individual case, then cross-checking the developed categories with the other participants' texts (Flick, 1998). The team engaged in this process until they agreed that there were no other emerging categories. In this stage of the analysis, 10 thematic categories emerged. Out of these 10, four thematic categories emerged as relevant to the self-authoring theoretical lens: disequilibrium, academic identity, claiming self, and critiques.

In the second stage of our analysis, Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authoring framework and Torres and Hernandez' (2007) Matrix of Holistic Development were used to analyze the four relevant thematic categories to the self-authoring process. Focusing on the cognitive and interpersonal aspects of one's self-authorship, our analysis broadly used Torres and Hernandez' (2007) terms in order to name FG students' holistic development more clearly. Like Baxter Magolda, Torres and Hernandez' matrix divides the process of self-authoring into four main stages: (a) External Foundations, (b) The Crossroads, (c) Becoming Author of One's Life, and (d) Internal Foundations, with each stage including markers that operationalize each phase. We found while some of the criteria that operationalized each stage were applicable to FG students, there were several new criteria that emerged within each stage of Torres and Hernandez' matrix. These new criteria that operationalized how students developed within each dimension for each stage were specifically relevant to the MLC as a curricular intervention for FG students' development. In the stage of Crossroads, within the cognitive domain three new themes emerged. One of the emerging themes, for instance, was how students expand their views to recognize multiple ways of knowing and the lived experiences of others as valid sources of knowledge. Whereas in the stage of Becoming Author of One's Life within the interpersonal domain, two new themes emerged. One example from this stage and domain was that students build relationships and points of intersection between lived experience and academic life.

In the third stage of analysis, our research team used our revised Torres and Hernandez (2007) matrix to analyze and codify the interview data. For this

article, we will focus our attention on interpersonal and cognitive development, highlighting the findings on student development in the context of each of the four aforementioned matrix stages. Data and analysis of the intrapersonal dimension of development is available in a forthcoming publication (Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2012).

Trustworthiness

The method of analysis our team used ensured internal and external validity. As with any qualitative research, the process of auditing and cross-checking is highly recommended. In this research, “each step in organizing the data involve[d] a consensus process between the raters” (Yeh & Inman, 2007, p. 393). The three research team members initially carried out each of the analysis steps independently, and then came together to discuss, debate, and reach a consensus. We had 80% agreement across the coding of all 24 transcripts, ensuring both independence of voice and validity in interpretation among all three raters.

Findings

The analysis of data revealed in what ways participation in the MLC impacted the college trajectory of first-generation students. More specifically, the analysis of the data demonstrated how social and academic integration in the MLC learning environment shaped students’ knowledge construction and meaning-making with regard to self-authorship over time.

Interpersonal Development

The interpersonal dimension included the question, “What relationship do I want to have with others?” Students raised a range of issues concerning the value, challenge, and impact of relationships they developed in the MLC and how their interpersonal engagement affected their views of others beyond the first year of college. These experiences were shaped by their previous experiences in relationships, friendships, and interactions with various racial and ethnic groups. The curriculum in the learning community explored race, class, and gender issues from narrative, historic, and sociological perspectives. Pedagogically, instructors in the learning community drew on relational activities and classroom projects that brought students’ lived experiences into direct contact with academic content. This resulted in experiences that were

often emotionally charged and pushed students to think about themselves, their biases, their commonalities, and their interactions with those who were similar with and different from them.

Reflecting back upon their early semester experiences in the MLC, some students remembered being particularly challenged by feelings of dissonance that resulted from engaging with new ideas, people, and perspectives. For those rooted in External Foundations, Lauren, an African American student, described how both her peers and the material created significant disequilibrium, which at first reinforced her own beliefs and devalued anything outside of her comfort zone. She reflected on this early challenge:

The one thing that did rise up for me as an issue was religious beliefs and personal morals ... Because in the classroom we were addressing issues that ... a lot of times behind the actual issue is a religious belief, or whether it is race or culture ... So, in the classroom, I think it kind of made me feel like, “Oh, well I’m a little afraid to be more open minded, because it might go against some of the things I’ve been taught or whatever.” So, being challenged with that personal faith, and being challenged to embrace other ways of seeing the world.

While many students expressed this type of dissonance, the camaraderie they experienced and the trust established in the community brought them to a place of Crossroads. Many students such as Anna, a Latina student, found security in navigating this disequilibrium with other students who “came from places” that she came from. Despite the heterogeneity of the classroom with regard to race, gender, and immigrant status, the experience of being first in their families to attend college, as well as the growing connections they saw across race and ethnicity, impacted the support they garnered from one another. Anna articulated how this social integration created an awareness about self and others that challenged previously held stereotypes and external influences:

Just because there are other people that ... have probably been through the same thing that I have been through, the same issues that I am having. Maybe I even still have issues with claiming myself, like this is me and this is who I am, you know, I think that going through the MLC group helped me do that like just discover who I am as an individual and what I want to do. I just feel like, I gained that from being around so many other people that had goals and came from places like I came from, and look at them now.

As in Torres and Hernandez's (2007) matrix, for many students this change in environment and new diversity became incorporated into their social circle and extended beyond the classroom. Students described how the diverse student body and their stories and perspectives began to affect how they valued hearing multiple perspectives. Students described how they began to contextualize their relationships with one another in ways that seemed to limit external influences and helped them move toward a place of Becoming an Author of One's Life. For some, this involved actively renegotiating relationships with others, particularly in the context of systems of oppression. Describing an experience with a South Asian classmate following 9/11, Ruben, an African American male student, addressed how he began to see connections between different groups of people of color. He stated:

I remember 9/11 happened and Rita came in and I don't think she knew exactly what happened, she just knew that Americans got attacked and I think they spit on her on the bus and we had gone into this Brown alert on campus. And you know me being a Black, it was just interesting because all of the sudden me and Rita found ourselves in a situation of similarity because we were afforded the chance to get to know one another and talk about it. Had we not been in that Learning Community it wouldn't have been an issue—instead you'd have a class with all of these kids there that has nothing to do with your personal life and academics, but just about getting the knowledge and regurgitating it back.

To Become an Author of One's Life with regard to interpersonal development, students often reflected back on the value, importance, and necessity of engaging with diverse peers, and also how this engagement invited them to think about their own identity. While they acknowledged the ways in which community and camaraderie impacted their newly realized multicultural perspectives, they also noted that this was not without struggle or dissonance. In fact, the push and pull they engaged in as a group to complete projects or discuss challenging issues was critical to renegotiating relationships and also empowering them to express their own points-of-view. Paul, an African immigrant student, reflected back on this frustration as students worked on a capstone mural project.

Frustration, I mean, it's human differences—frustration always has to be part of like of life, we are human, we have emotion and when you have 25 people in your room with all these emotions and passion in what they want

to do, there is always going to be a frustration, not everyone is going to agree with each other. And now the fact that we were working on a project, that all of us had to contribute, everybody wanted to be represented on this project ... Everybody wanted to be a part of it. It was a really good job, I don't regret the frustration, I don't regret the emotional tie, I don't regret the arguing. Because, you can tell that everybody wanted to be represented on that mural, whether it be their painting, their pictures, their words, their quotes, their time, their voice. People just had to be, people just had to listen to each other. But at first, it wasn't easy, even to the last day it wasn't easy. But when the mural was finally up there it was like, wow! We did it. So there was a lot of frustration, there was a lot of arguing, there was a lot of disagreement, but at the same it was the disagreeing that helped make what the mural is.

Jarod, a White first-generation student, reflected on how the opportunity to be pushed by peers he had grown to trust and respect shaped the development of his own voice. He found that cultivating his voice in the safety of the community extended into a greater confidence and willingness to engage in healthy disagreement later in his academic career. He stated:

Coming from me being such an introverted person, and not really confident about ... I guess my voice and how to express it. It definitely made it a lot easier just to be able to ... I don't know how to say it. I guess just be around people that I was comfortable talking with. I think as college went on further down the road that confidence I gained made it easier for me to say these things and write these things ... and you know even challenge professors about things ... because of that class. In other classes, the things that I did in the learning community made it a lot easier to say, "No, this is not right."

Among the students interviewed, very few students arrived at Internal Foundations with regard to interpersonal relationships. These students discussed the value of living in ways that continued to create opportunities for diverse relationships and to build intersections between their lived experiences and academic lives. Anna, a Latina student, spoke to this intersection:

I think that ... throughout my education I have always fit in with a diverse crowd and been in groups with the diverse people, multicultural... I want to keep that going in some way, I want to stay connected, I want to keep doing things to help people that come from different backgrounds and

that are disadvantaged. So I think that the MLC probably just kept me on track to doing that and being a person of color as well has done that. I just want to give back to the community.

Anna commented on how the learning community, as well as her experiences being a woman of color, shaped how she wished to extend support to diverse groups. This ability to illustrate a connection between her values, relationships, and future actions are reflective of an enactment of her internal belief system.

Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension asks the question, “How do I know?” A student’s capacity to reflect on how they make meaning and their capacity to actually engage in the knowledge construction process reflects their growth in this dimension.

In the first phase of External Formulas, students look to sources outside of themselves for answers. They maintain the understanding that knowledge is static and something provided by teachers, family, or other experts. Samuel, an African American male student, still seemed rooted in this phase. While he had a sophisticated understanding of the world around him, he seemed to measure his life success in the context of standards outside himself. Samuel reflected on this struggle when he noted:

A lot of my friends, they were there when I studied abroad and mainly all of them were business students. That sort of put me in a rather uncomfortable position. Because when I came back, I really need to be working in something more you know, where they are going in their lives, and what they want in their careers is the same ... as I want, I am going to need to get myself on equal footing. It was ... again, if there is one sort of running thread that goes through all of my life up to this point, it was that I was sort of falling behind on things, that people were getting ahead of me.

Like Samuel, many MLC students talked about how participation in the MLC created a social and academic confidence that encouraged them to participate in Study Abroad, domestic exchange programs, and internships. These experiences that challenge students to learn in new ways have been shown to create a space where students can enact and apply concepts learned in the classroom (Paige, 1993). In this case, the MLC provided a platform from which students chose additional opportunities to broaden their worldview. Yet, for Samuel, while he chose to study abroad—an experience that took him away from his

comfort zone and into new contexts for meaning-making—he did not reflect on the experience that way. Rather, he saw it as a deviance from a path that will put him on equal footing with others. He represents an interesting aspect of the self-authoring process, in that he talked about his experiences in the learning community as the “greatest sort of educational return.” He went on to reflect upon his learning community experience and critique aspects of his overall academic experience:

I think the learning community was genuinely the semester in which I learned the most, by far I got the most return from each class, there was more emphasis on teaching and connecting than there was on sort of reading and just learning it on your own. That was something that I thought was lacking throughout the rest of my career at the U which has made me regret at various times choosing such a large University where there is, you know you have these absurdly long reading lists, and it's like you know if I have this list, what the hell do I need you for, but yes I would say the greatest sort of educational return was during that MLC semester.

His comments suggest an ability to reflect on multiple perspectives and to recognize learning contexts that are best suited to him, both of which are more reflective of the Crossroads dimensions. Yet, despite this, his overarching life trajectory seems to be based on an external expectation of success, albeit a very sophisticated one.

Students who crossed more decidedly into the Crossroads dimension demonstrated how the learning community introduced them or extended their appreciation for multiple ways of knowing and how new interaction with diverse peers was a critical factor in engaging with new perspectives. Many students began applying these ways of knowing to their own meaning-making as students.

Paul, an African immigrant student, noted that his previous academic experiences had not prepared him for an experience that invited him into the knowledge-construction process:

It was just, my idea of schooling wasn't always like sitting down in a circle or people trying to get to know each other, it was never like that. It was always the teacher assigning reading and talking about it.

This new approach to learning was met with some resistance, and students commented on how they were not used to people “being in their business.”

Part of the adjustment was that for most students, this was the first time they had been asked to articulate what they thought, and why they had certain beliefs. Jon, a White student reflecting on his own learning, revealed how this idea of engaging in discourse about complex ideas and lived experience was conducive to his learning style. He recalled his MLC experience and critiqued learning spaces that stress regurgitation and memorization versus engaged knowledge construction.

No I still I still do not know ... who I am, what I am doing or what any of this means. But the [MLC], it gave me confidence in one [of] the most important parts of being a university student and that is the discussion period, because all of our group settings were discussion based and it would be lecture and at the same time discussion and it's very very important because creating your own special ideas is what everyone wants. They don't want me to just regurgitate what the professor said. And I see a lot of people never going to discussion and just memorizing.

Jon's realizations are on the cusp of the Becoming-an-Author stage in the cognitive dimension, and many students moved into this phase as they practiced engaging with their learning environments in ways that reinforced meaning-making. Paul's comments address how engaging with complex ideas, sharing the self, and communicating with peers have shaped his knowledge construction process:

Whereas we actually used class time and talked about ourselves and there was this sense of, you know what people are actually listening to what I am trying to say, a lot of people are curious about where I am coming from...It is not that common to see people curious where you are from and what are your experiences and those are things that you take for granted because your experiences are the things that shape your perspectives and construct your ideas and perception of ...the world and those around you.

For Paul, these experiences impacted the development of his own knowledge framework, and he sought out learning environments and work that would allow him to continue to make meaning of his learning process. He double majored in sociology and youth studies and commented on the similarity of his learning experiences in the MLC to the discussion, dialogue, and constructive dissonance he found in his youth studies coursework as a senior.

Of the students interviewed, four demonstrated movement into the Internal Foundations phase of the cognitive dimension. They expressed how the introduction to complex ideas and situations in their first year of college pushed them to examine new ideas, but most critically how introduction to active reflection about their learning process played a critical role in the development of a personal knowledge framework that helped them navigate new information and ideas. Diane, an Asian American student, captured this:

The reflection part of this whole program ... like how we were, not forced, but that was one of our assignments to reflect on readings or things discussed in class. I find myself doing that even though I don't have the need to do it for any kind of class. I still find myself journaling, blogging ... things like that in my life. I think that when I do that, I capture confusion, and things that don't really make sense to me, and then when it does and I read back to it, it's like, "I learned that lesson or this lesson about myself." So it's encouraged me to reflect and, just learn from experiences and really take time to jot down the thought process that I go through. Which is really important to me, because that's what helps me define who I am.

Her narrative illustrates the way in which she uses reflective activities as a recursive process—one that pushes her to navigate new learning and experience—and to use this to refine or reaffirm her personal knowledge system or beliefs.

Discussion

The overarching goal of the multicultural learning community at the individual level—the student—was to create a space in which an individual's self-definition is (a) not only affirmed, but also simultaneously challenged; (b) where a student's internal compass shifts in relation to oneself and others; and (c) where one's self-authoring process can be supported.

Intersections of Cognitive and Interpersonal Development

The findings from this research noted the interconnectedness of students' self-authoring processes across the three dimensions. Essentially, one's cognitive dimension of self-authoring is related to or has an effect upon one's development in the interpersonal dimension. Similar findings were elaborated upon in Torres and Baxter Magolda's (2004) study with Latino/a college students,

whereby they found that for Latino/a college students, “ethnic identity was intricately woven with cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of development” (p. 343). More specifically, even if students had a particular propensity for developing their voice within the cognitive or interpersonal dimension, their growth and meaning-making in one dimension impacted their ability to move through other self-authorship dimensions. For example, Ruben, by engaging with his classmate Rita, began to explore issues of race and the treatment of individuals from his own perspective. By interacting with classmates (interpersonal) who had stories similar to his own, Ruben explored his own constructions and meaning (cognitive) around that particular issue.

Cognitive development. In the construction of the course, instructors paid particular attention to involving students fully in the intersections of individual reflection, critical pedagogy, and a multicultural curriculum by constructing knowledge based upon students’ own lived experiences, not disjointed from their own realities or experiences. As Paul explained, “Your experiences are the things that shape your perspectives and construct your ideas and perception of...the world and those around you.” Inviting and validating multiple perspectives create an environment where the exploration of one’s own identity and worldviews can be fostered. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) explain,

Creating educational environments where students are allowed to both explore and express their identity is critical in helping students construct an internal sense of identity and their own belief systems. It is through these new perspectives that students can reconstruct their worldview to be more complex, integrated, and inclusive. (p. 343)

Interpersonal development. In a similar vein, these findings note how some students’ identity developed through interacting with others in a comfortable, supportive environment. For instance, Jarod explained that in the MLC courses, the peer support, and engagement gave him confidence in his own voice; people listened to and respected him as an individual with an opinion. As his confidence grew over his four years at the University, he felt like he could also challenge and question the opinions of faculty and peers. Others, such as Paul, explained how experiencing disequilibrium within the MLC course offered a platform from which personal identity constructions and worldviews were challenged.

Conclusion

Structured challenging, supportive learning environments such as the MLC can offer a variety of avenues for students to engage in the cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship. Learning environments such as the MLC can facilitate the development of self-authorship and can serve as one catalyst in the process toward understanding oneself as a person and learner. Clearly, no single class, learning community, or collegiate experience can serve as a panacea for the isolation and marginalization that many FG students experience on campus. Nor, can one's experience claim to be the sole impetus for the development of self-authorship. Yet, given that students spend the largest amount of consistent time in the classroom, attention to ways in which curriculum, pedagogy, and course design can facilitate belonging (Jehangir, 2009) and self-authorship, particularly for historically marginalized students, is worthy of our attention. Self-authorship is a process that is not linear, but bringing it into the awareness of FG students, especially during the critical first year of college may reinforce the ways in which their lived experience, cultural capital, and identity can intersect and inform their learning and knowing in higher education. It can also remind those who teach of the many ways in which students' understanding of themselves can shape, inform, and deepen the learning process for all involved.

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