

CONSTRUCTING INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM THROUGH COLLABORATION: AMERICAN AND ASIAN INDIAN COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS DISCUSS CURRICULUM FOR A SOCIAL ISSUES COURSE

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Abstract:-

Collaboration between college instructors who teach the same similar courses at a public university resulted in higher student engagement. This qualitative study provided a beneficial platform for both instructors and their students with regard to student engagement, multimodal curricular materials, and topics for reflective essays. The study focused on the collaborators memo notes, student samples (reflective essays and digital presentations) and technology integration.

Keywords:-*Collaboration, community of practice, global issues, multimodal materials, transaction, & sociocultural learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Two professors wanted to refine a class curriculum so that it reflected the idea and prior knowledge that they brought into the classrooms. They wanted to design an engaging curriculum that could generate a great deal of dialogue between students. The lead faculty invited us together to distribute the material for the course. At this time, we decided to devote weekly time to collaborate so that we could teach courses that were similar and that were a part of our own backgrounds, influences, and passions.

The two of us were devoted to creating a course that was consistent with our theoretical beliefs. We both are invested in sociocultural learning, funds of knowledge, social justice tenets, transaction theory, and community of practice. We also believed in Gardner's multiple intelligences because we learn using different modalities ourselves. Hence, we supplemented our instructional material with a variety of modes such as short videos, websites, articles, movies, web 2.0 tools, posters, dialogue, and debate so the courses were interactive and appealing.

The class was structured in a way that allowed the two instructors to interact more freely with students and allow the many ideas to be generated by students. It was made of small group discussion of the weekly chapters and large group presentation along with multimodal material. Class discussion always followed to allow students a space to discuss and ask questions both to the professors and the peers.

The materials and instruction were contextualized to student needs with exploring global issues that their students may encounter when they begin teaching. For non-education majors, the curriculum was designed to create an awareness of diverse population and issues around the globe. The following figure exemplifies a few concepts and the multimodal materials we used to teach the concepts to students (see figure 1 below).

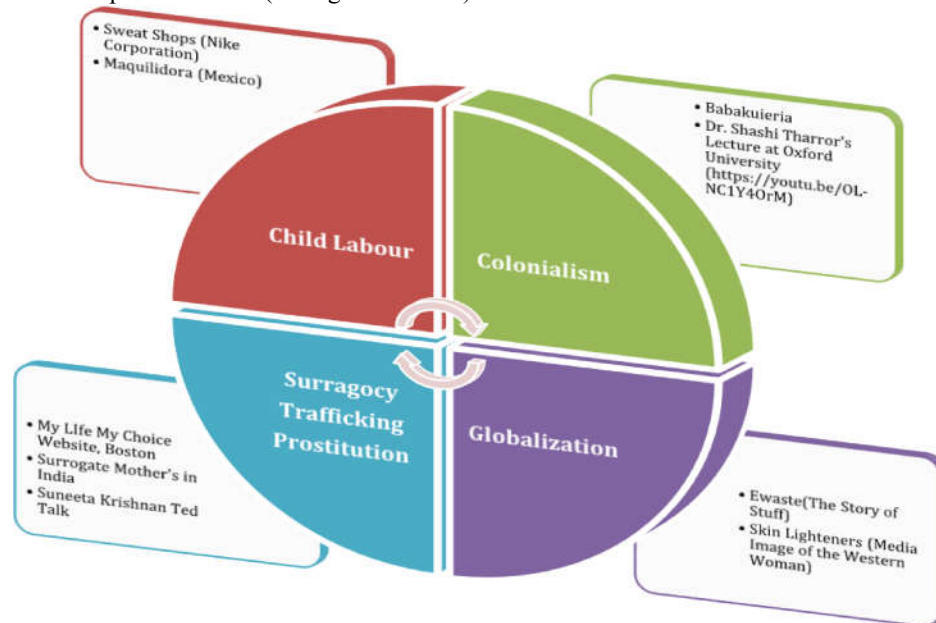


Figure 1: Concepts and Multimodal Approach

Theoretical Framework

We developed our theoretical framework based on the description of sociocultural theories and communities of practice in Crafton and Kaiser (2011) and Rosenblatt's transaction theory. These authors encourage teachers to share, collaborate, and reflect in ways that demonstrate the collaborating teachers' understanding of their pedagogical processes and curricular materials.

Crafton and Kaiser drawing on Wenger (1998) state:

[Teachers] come to make contributions to the development of the community, they come to establish themselves as equal participants, bringing their unique inquiries, values, opinions, and ways of knowing. There is reciprocity, then, as learners with varying experience construct a learning trajectory together. Through ongoing participation in something that matters (a 'joint enterprise'), a practice evolves. Members of a group use cultural tools (e.g. talking, reading, writing, technology) in ways unique to their evolution, develop routines, produce artifacts and interact (p. 106).

When two instructors work together to rethink and revise curricular materials including multimodal presentations, there is a synergistic outcome that may be beneficial to students and the participating instructors. According to Wenger (1998) "...we are to address the kind of dynamic, organic knowing that makes a difference in practice, 'it requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge'" (as cited in Crafton & Kaiser, 2011, p. 107). These authors also emphasize the collaborative aspects of being a professional that is concerned with successful student outcomes.

This study also draws on Rosenblatt's (1986) transaction theory that helps us with an understanding of how societal and cultural influences help participants form new knowledge with regard to self-development. The theory provides information about cross cultural comparisons and the importance of exchange and its impact on cognitive enhancement.

Literature Review

We explored several articles on the topic of collaborative teaching and Timperley's (2008) report helped us situate our topic comprehensively. We drew on several articles in the report to support our claims in this study. The report on valued student outcome emphasizes on the importance of collaboration in college teachers:

Collegial communities have been promoted as a means of improving teaching, but research typically reveals only a weak relationship between participation in such communities and improved student outcomes. Yet findings from many studies suggest that participation in a professional community with one's colleagues is an integral part of professional learning that impacts positively on students. The resolution of this apparent contradiction appears to be that if teachers are to change, they need to participate in a professional learning community that is focused on becoming responsive to students, because such a community gives teachers opportunities to process new information while helping them keep their eyes on the goal (p. 6). Such factors include teachers' knowledge and their beliefs about what is important to teach, how students learn, and how to manage student behavior and meet external demands.

Professional learning is strongly shaped by the context in which the teacher practices. This is usually the classroom, which, in turn, is strongly influenced by the wider school culture and the community and society in which the school is situated. Teachers' daily experiences in their practice shape their understandings, and their understandings shape their experiences.

The report on *worthwhile content* outlines the following criteria for student success: Context specific approaches allow teachers to turn theory into practice. It is local and fits desired student outcomes. Integration of knowledge and skills provides researchers with information on teachers' approaches to the concepts that will be taught to students. Integration of knowledge and skills provides researchers with information on teachers' approaches to the concepts that will be taught to students.

When designing professional learning opportunities, it is important to consider teachers' prior knowledge of curriculum and assessment. The integration of essential teacher knowledge and skills promotes deep teacher learning and effective changes in practice and how they view existing practice. This takes teacher diversity into account just as we expect teachers to take student diversity into account.

Such opportunities should involve a variety of activities that are designed to promote acquisition of the target knowledge and skills (Timperley, 2008, p.15). Having goals for the community are important. We sought to improve our practice through questioning one another and pushing for better understanding of topics and pedagogy that has been supported by a number of studies. Little (2002) sought continued improvement of instructional practice in their groups and communities such as ours developed goals of improving our instruction through interaction with one another's findings from their classrooms. Lastly, we wanted to improve our classes and not take up past course work and continue on with it. The course needed to be ours. It needed as Wardrip (2010) found, very deliberate effort into knowing about the systems we used and how we thought about our practice if we were to improve as we desired.

Opportunities to process new learning with others enlist how instructors from different backgrounds can learn to integrate their knowledges. The two instructors came from very different background. While communities of practice can often lead to more firmly held ideas that do not seek to stretch current understandings, we felt our background differences would produce as an intervention on its own, a collegial community, and would not entrench existing practices and assumptions (Timperley, 2008). We felt that breaking up the "isolation" (Hadar & Brody, 2010) that can occur in developing courses and pedagogical stances was needed to both strengthen and challenge our held beliefs.

Community of Practice

Communities of Practice are the idea of situated learning that learning occurs as practitioners find ways to, "speak about the relations between newcomers and old timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 29). Communities of practice also seek to be places where authority is "decentered" and the emphasis is placed on resources that the community brings to bear.

Also, communities of practice serve very practical purposes. Members who have common goals come together on a regular basis to to increase their knowledge and skills. McDermott (1999) also strengthens the idea of communities of practice with three important types of knowledge the communities create: explicit information, tacit know-how, and thinking that is shared by its members. The everyday work occurs shifts as the knowledge goals shift over time (Margarisova & Stanislavsky 2011).

Socio-cultural Learning

Socio-cultural learning is nested in the constructivist paradigm, where people believe that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Orellana (2009) augments the socio-cultural precept by referring to culture as performative act, where people exhibit or demonstrate instead of just showing things they possess. Culture is also the community experiences people carry with them. Diverse children bring their funds of knowledge (Moll, et al, 1992), and it is important that educators provide

opportunities for these children to create meaning using the experiences that the children are familiar and comfortable using (Perez, 2004). The child needs appropriate and situated learning opportunities to scaffold to its ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

Further, researchers posit that understanding is “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.1); guided participation (Rogoff, 1991, p. 8); and, “is developed through continued, situated use” (Brown et al, 1991, p. 8) (as cited in Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 229). Hence socio-cultural learning enables children to acquire knowledge using the tools that the children are familiar with and are inclined to use without constraints.

Positionality

With 12 of teaching experience in high school, middle school, and college levels, masters in reading and literacy and currently a doctoral student in Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching (ILT), Kyle believes in the importance of collaboration. Kyle has experience as an enlisted United States Marine for 21 years living and interacting with communities around the world. He has taught English courses along the Mexican border. As a teacher consultant of San Antonio Writing Project and Sam Houston Writing Project (site networks of National Writing Project) conducted professional development courses for English teachers in the Southwest.

With 25 years of English teaching experience at the high school and college levels, two masters in linguistics and commonwealth literature and English from India and the United States respectively, and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning, Gowri is invested in professional development. She is also the co-director of SAWP and Haridwar Writing Projects. Gowri initiated collaboration between UTSA and Dev Sanskrithi Vishwa Vidyalaya (DSVV) by establishing the Haridwar Writing Project in India. Gowri publishes articles in peer reviewed journals with her dissertation chair and colleagues in the ILT and Bilingual and Bicultural Departments.

Methodology

Study Context

The two instructors met at Kyle’s school each week during his conference period to swap, share, negotiate, and decide materials to use each week for an hour for 16 weeks. The classroom housed several research books from Kyle’s PhD classes and the technology and materials available were similar to what would be available in the classes taught at the university.

The following figure illustrates weekly collaboration topics (see figure 1 below).

9/1/15

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8	Group 9
Colonialism	Colonialism	Race	Eurocentrism	Colonialism	Colonialism	Colonialism	Eurocentrism	SocialChange
Neocolonialism	Globalization	Privilage	Racism	Imperialism	Eurocentrism	Imperialism	Inequality	Colonialism
Post-Colonialism	Imperialism	Identities	'Othering'	Post-Colonialism	Globalization	Patriarchy	Social Change	Inequality
Immigration	Immigration	Sexism	Social	Globalization	Neoliberalism	Race Privilege	Social	Race Privilege
Eurocentrism	Rights	Colorism	Movements	Dimensions	Social Change	Colorism	Movements	'Othering'
Social Change	Race Privilege		Consumerism	of including Economics	Social	'Othering'	Race Privileges	Sexism
Race Privilege	Colonialism		Colonialism	Inequality and	Movement	Sexism		Identities
Patriarchy	'Othering'			Structuralism	Feminism	Eurocentrism		Immigration
Social	Sexism			Eurocentrism		Social Change		Rights
Movements				Patriarchy		Social		
				Social Movements		Movement		
				Social Change				
				Global Poverty				
				Feminism				

Figure 1: Topics

Participants

Two instructors teaching three sections of Interdisciplinary Studies course on society and social issues that was offered campus wide at a major public university in the Southwest of the US decided to collaborate. The majority of students enrolled in the course were elementary education majors with a few students from engineering, psychology, criminal justice, cyber security and sociology. The classes were largely made of women.

Data Collection

The data for this study was, (a) the two collaborators’ weekly meeting notes (b) curriculum (c) student reflective essays and multimodal presentations (d) college assessment tool The researchers archived the notes from both pre meeting and debriefing on a wiki that was created for the purpose of collaboration. The instructors created individual pages on the wiki for weekly instructional materials. These included questions from the textbook chapters, YouTube videos, websites, and research articles. Each week we discussed the topics for reflective essays that the students would engage in. We ensured that the students had continuity with the topics for the reflective essays (e.g. discussed the text book chapters in small groups and large groups), used a variety of “cultural tools” (Crafton & Kaiser 2011), and brain stormed for prospective reflective essay ideas. Finally researchers revised goals and outcomes for a university assessment tool.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was supported by discourse analysis. Discourse analysis deals with socially constructed realities that are formed through collaborative process (Van Dijk, 1993). This co-construction of the curricular materials by instructors who were invested in the increased awareness of society and social issues was possible through regular meetings for 16 weeks. We used discourse analysis (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullan, Josselson, Anderson, McSpadden, 2011; Glynos, Holwarth, Norwal, Speed, 2009) to analyze the data set. According to Mertens (2010), ”

Discourse analysis focuses on understanding the meaning of participants language” (p.427).

Fairclough (2006) lists the three dimensions of discourse analysis. Mirhosseini, (2006) cites Fairclough and posits that, “Discourses are the representational aspect of texts. In Fairclough's own words, discourses ‘not only represent the world as it is ... they are also projective, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied into projects to change the world in particular directions’” (124). For the purpose of the current study, we will draw solely from discursive practices. Discursive practice involves production, interpretation, dissemination and consumption of texts. The following table lists the data sources, theories, and emergent themes (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Data Source and Theory

Data Source	Theory 1	Theory 2	Theory 3
Wiki		Transactional	
Reflective Essays	Sociocultural		
“Cultural Tools”			Community of Practice

Wiki - A wiki is a collaborative online tool that facilitates exchange of ideas, shared documents and multimodal artifacts. Each member has a customized page that allows them to upload and share idea, materials and sustain a dialogue with others. These activities in the wiki enabled sociocultural interaction, transactional processes and helped establish a community of practice. However, there was a heavy presence of transactional theory within use of the wiki. The following exemplar from the Wiki shows transaction the student had with the text that was discussed in class and supplemented with a YouTube video. *There is so much more evidence in this piece that supports Michael Parenti's view on media. However, I believe this article is not persuasive. It seems more of an informative piece, for I never once felt that I should be against media and dislike everyone that runs it. I understand that he is trying to get his point across, and now I am more informed on how media works due to his help. I will now be more cautious or aware of what is being reported since I am now exposed to more of mass media's background.*

Here, in this transaction the student realized the dissonance that occurs with prescribed reading materials and the additional media that was presented in class.

Sociocultural - This theory propounded by Vygotsky (1978) claims that understanding occurs within social interactions with others.

My college educated brother must compete with the stereotype of being a gangster or thug. People do not look at him and see a bright young man with a promising future ahead of him, they see a young black man who is probably hoodlum.

The above narrative that discussed preconceived notions of African American men came from the student's experiences with prejudice that her family has encountered. She was able to make a connection between her life and the movie, *My Name is Kahn*.

People look at my lesbian aunt and automatically assume that she does not go to church or have a relationship with God.

The same narrative later records the perceptions and misconceptions of LGBTQ persons and their faith.

People look at my boyfriend, who is Muslim, and all they see is “terrorist”. They do not see him for the kind hearted, selfless, loving, and harmless person that he is. They see him walk in airport and they all stare, and give him dirty looks assuming that he is there to hurt them. These assumptions are all wrong and are only a couple of examples of discrimination that I and my loved ones face day to day.

Continuing with the student's commentary on societal discrimination practices, she realizes that people's myopic view of people of color, LGBTQ, and different faiths prevents people from embracing and accepting differences.

My aunt's wife was raped and beat by her ex-husband for being “a lesbian slut” and not a single light was shed on this crime. Nobody cared, justice was not served, and her attackers were not convicted. It is not right, and that is why I was so inspired by Khan in the movie.

Another example from the student's personal story is about her aunt. No one wanted to help and there was no justice for her aunt who was abused because of her sexual orientation. The attitudes that people have about the “others” leave many with no familial, societal, and legal support because they are different or because they are the “others.”

“Cultural Tools” - We incorporated multimodal texts including webpages, YouTube videos, and radio interviews to engage with students in a transactional dialogic collaboration. We wanted the material to be socially relevant and meaningful to the students lived experiences. According to Crafton and Kaiser (2011), “members of a group use cultural tools (e.g. talking,

reading, writing, technology) in ways unique to their evolution, develop routines, produce artifacts and interact” (p.106). The following figure is an example of a website of an organization (see figure 2 below).

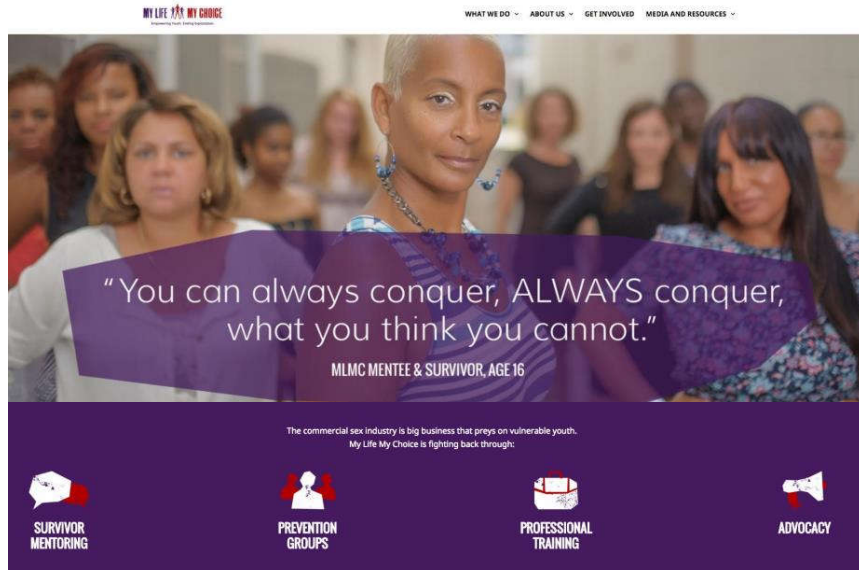


Figure 2: Website

The *My life My choice* website provided information and strategies that allowed students better access to how to deal with issues such as sex trafficking and “commodification” (Gerner, 2005) of women's bodies. The following figure is an example of a Ted Talk video (see figure 3 below).



Figure 3: Ted Talk on a Global Issue

Another “cultural tool” was TED talks that incorporated international concerns that gave students a broader understanding of issues such as sex trafficking outside of the United States. The following section lists a student presentation of “cultural tools”. The students read articles, discussed concepts in small and large groups, watched videos and wrote reflective essays on concepts, issues and topics throughout the semester. One assignment required that students use technology to create a multimodal text for presentation in class.

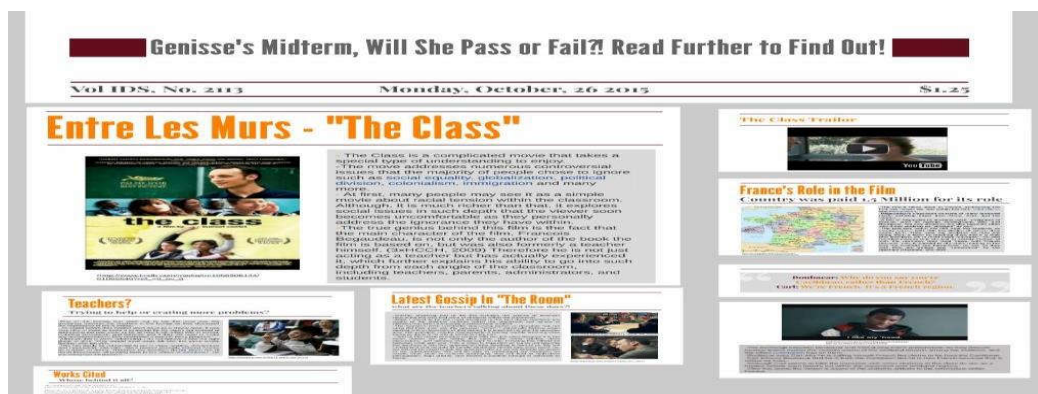


Figure 4: Prezi

This Prezi was a response to the movie, *The Class* which contained videos, news articles, journal articles, and webpages that all incorporated her understanding of the topics that were seen throughout the film. Through her synthesis using articles, news clips, documentaries, reviews, and videos she showed a better understanding of colonialism and its current ramifications in France and other communities.

Findings

Trust and challenge were the two notable findings in this study. This was the first time that Kyle had taught a college course. He needed help with seeing the direction the course was meant to take and how teaching college students would go. Gowri needed help with Western issues and the blending of global concerns with what was occurring more locally. Kyle also needed help with developing a deeper understanding of gender issues and Gowri with American issues. There was a good mix where both felt that they could bring up shortcomings in a way that would deepen understanding and help the course. There was a desire to have a great course to teach, deepen the connections of SAWP, share meals, and the lives of one another's families.

There was a sense of fun and greater understanding of how theories that both of us wanted would become part of our pedagogy and improvement of our personal skills and within outcomes for the students. Every Week there was a time when the two instructors learned something new and deepened their knowledge of their profession and one another.

Conclusion and Implications

The collaborative efforts of the two professors teaching the Global Issues course enabled them to discover a common ground about issues that each one of these teachers had prior knowledge about and were willing to share resources to help their students to experience an engaged conversation. Along with the students, the professors were also able to dialogue about sensitive issues and discuss the different ways in which they would share their mutual discoveries. The time to talk through the topics, questions, and topics for students to reflect upon in class orally and in writing gave both the professors an opportunity to enable students to learn critical thinking and writing skills that is needed for success across the curriculum.

The implications of this study are (a) teacher collaboration may produce enhanced learning platforms for students (b) teachers are able to share theoretical underpinnings and later adapt them in their own research writing (c) students benefit from professors from diverse backgrounds who may bring their expertise into the classrooms and (d) collaboration may function as professional development in an informal setting.

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