The Cultural Plunge:
Cultural Immersion as a Means of Promoting Self-Awareness and Cultural Sensitivity among Student Teachers

By Jesús Nieto

Introduction

"The depth of this class to me has been the cultural plunges. I learned so much in those plunges that no other course at (this university) could even remotely compete with. What I learned in the plunges about myself and accepting others is something that I will carry through life…after I forget the statistics and psychological tests in my other classes."

The number of K-12 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continues to increase exponentially (Major & Brock, 2003). Much attention has been focused on the ever-increasing disparity between the diverse student population and the predominantly white teaching force (Steeley, 2003).

Jesús Nieto is an associate professor in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University, San Diego, California.

Most students entering the field of teaching continue to be white, monolingual, middle-class women (Glazier, 2003). Female European-American teachers will thus continue to comprise the great majority of educators for some time to come, but will be teaching students increasingly different from themselves in terms of ethnicity and social class. Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the nation's population,

but just over 10% have a college education, compared to over 25% for all Americans (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). It has been noted that students from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum face the greatest educational challenges (Prince, 2002), have much less access to quality education (Lin, 2001), and perform more poorly in school (Davis, 1989; Ornstein & Levine, 1989).

Linguistic diversity is receiving an increasing amount of attention from educators, and it has been noted that students who speak a language other than English and have limited proficiency in English are the fastest-growing population in U.S. public schools. From 1991 to 1999, the number of language-minority school-aged children in the U.S. increased from 8 million to 15 million and the number of K-12 students who are classified as being limited-English-proficient (LEP) rose from 5.3 million to 10 million students (Smith-Davis, 2004).

Disability continues to be equated with inferiority and to lead to exclusion (Fitch, 2002). Disability issues are becoming increasingly important to "regular" teachers, as children with disabilities are being increasingly mainstreamed. According to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Education, more than 95% of students with disabilities are now served in regular schools, with 52% spending most of the school day in general education classrooms (Klotz, 2004).

Although many have voiced concern about the need for teacher education to sensitize future teachers to cultural and social concerns, few have offered concrete strategies for doing so. There has been a lack of effective teacher preparation for working with diverse, high-need students (Shinew & Sodorff, 2003); and although most teacher education programs report that they have thoroughly incorporated multicultural content and perspectives in their curriculum, this is not borne out by external examinations (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

Experiential Learning in Teacher Education

Several authors have urged the utilization of experiential learning in teacher education, often as a means of increasing cultural sensitivity. Baker (1989) believes that experiential learning is beneficial because students learn best when thinking, feeling and doing are all combined. Bergen (1989) has stated that no student teacher should be considered fully qualified for teaching until she or he has spent the equivalent of one semester involved in a "foreign" culture, and posits that Americans are very ethnocentric and thus in great need of becoming more culturally aware. Wilson (1982) believes that "Cross-cultural experiential learning should be a component of every teacher education program" (p. 184), and she outlines cultural immersion activities which are used to train members of the Peace Corps and other organizations.

Mio (1989) describes a program at a Southern California university where graduate students were matched with immigrant and refugee students in a cultural exchange. Socializing on campus, exploring ethnic restaurants in the area together,

and visiting one another's homes were among the program's activities, after which participants wrote a paper about their experience. Such approaches are congruent with calls to reach unmotivated students by using educational strategies which are interesting, meaningful and at a level of difficulty that is challenging but attainable and which elicit expression of students' opinions, experiences and feelings (Berlin, 2004). These innovations in teacher training are made all the more important because many teachers have had little if any contact with students from different racial or cultural backgrounds (Milner, 2003).

The Cultural Plunge

For some years several professors at San Diego State University have been using a cultural immersion activity called a *cultural plunge.* They have used this activity in a sociology program (Gillette, 1990), in counselor education (Cook, 1990; Malcolm, 1990) and most recently, as described here, in teacher education. The author has been using the cultural plunge in teacher education since 1989, at which time he incorporated it in classes in that department, and several other teacher education faculty now use it as well. While faculty who utilize the cultural plunge tend to do so in a similar manner, there are some differences among the approaches. This article describes the way in which he approaches this activity.

Simply put, a cultural plunge is individual exposure to persons or groups markedly different in culture (ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and/or physical exceptionality) from that of the "plunger." Most plunges last about one hour and there are a total of four required in my course. Important criteria for cultural plunges as described in my course syllabus are: (1) the majority of people there are from the focal group; (2) you are on the turf of the focal group (not in a school or restaurant); (3) this must be a type of experience you've never done before; (4) the plunge takes place after this course begins (credit cannot be given for past experiences); (5) you do not take notes; and (6) the plunge lasts at least one hour.

While the number and type of plunges I require have varied over the years, the most recently required are: (1) Attend a service at the largest African American church in the city; (2) Attend a religious ceremony in a language which you do not understand (Spanish and Vietnamese are recommended, as they constitute the two most widely spoken languages among English Learners); (3) Interact with homeless people; and (4) Interact with people with disabilities.

Cultural plunges have four major objectives which are stated in the course syllabus: (a) to have direct contact with people who are culturally different from oneself in a real-life setting which represents the target group's "turf"; (b) to gain insights into circumstances and characteristics of the focal community; (c) to experience what it is to be very different from most of the people one is around, and (d) to gain insight into one's values, biases, and affective responses.

Cultural Plunge Papers

Because people who engage in cultural immersion activities heighten their learning when they reflect upon their experience (Barrett, 1993), students write a 3-page reaction paper for each plunge. On page one, students list 10 popular stereotypes about the focal group and indicate what prior contact they've had with it. On page two, students describe their emotional response to the experience and any insights on why they reacted emotionally the way they did. Page three begins with discussion of whether the plunge experience reinforced or challenged the popular stereotypes of the focal group. The cultural plunge paper is concluded with exploration of "implications for my career." This last section is particularly significant because students often overlook the implications of the plunge experience for the classroom or other career setting. Upon further reflection, they often realize such things as the importance of greeting students warmly, learning to speak a few words of diverse languages as a sign of respect and interest in various cultures, and, most importantly, the crucial nature of not prejudging others.

Students' Reactions to the Cultural Plunge

Students' reactions to the plunges are described in detail in their cultural plunge reaction papers and tend to follow a progression of fear, excitement, and finally, appreciation. While most participants are generally afraid initially to go on cultural plunges, they almost invariably are glad they did after completion of the assignment, and tend to rate them as among the most important learning experiences they have ever had. The author surveyed 93 students enrolled in his spring and summer 2004 multicultural education classes. They were asked a variety of questions about their reaction to the course, including items about cultural plunges. They were asked to rate specific types of cultural plunges as well as the cultural plunge in general. Table 1 reports results from those surveys.

As all ratings reported on Table 1 range from 4.2 to 4.9, it is evident that cultural plunges had a "great" or "very great" impact on most respondents. These findings

Table 1
Impact of Cultural Plunges on Students

	Mean*	N
African American cultural plunge	4.4	93
Other Language cultural plunge	4.5	93
Homeless plunge	4.5	93
Disabled plunge	4.5	93
Gay/lesbian plunge	4.4	93
Cultural Plunge overall	4.6	93

*Ratings Code 1=None 2=Some 3= Moderate 4=Great 5=Very Great

are similar to those of prior surveys done by the author with hundreds of students from 1989 to 1993, wherein cultural plunges received ratings ranging from 4.5 to 4.9 on a 5-point scale. In addition, cultural plunge papers have also been rated highly (4.2 to 4.5) in numerous surveys over the years.

Excerpts From Student Reaction Papers

Going beyond quantitative data, perhaps the following excerpts from students' plunge papers can best illustrate the impact that such experiences have on participants. The excerpts are organized around stated plunge objectives:

To Learn about the Target Community

[Farrakhan discussed]...some of the 'lies' that the whites use to keep African Americans down, and aren't they clever at making the blame all fall upon these people. The media portrays mainly blacks as gang members and drug dealers and this perpetuates the 'lie' and grinds away at all African Americans' sense of respect and self-esteem.

Many of my friends view Hispanics as lazy people. Nothing could be further from the truth. I saw many people, men and women, young and old, working their hearts out. Their community...was...a place of pride. As for family, when Paco told us about his family, I could see the pride and respect in his eyes.

Students are often quite surprised, even shocked, to learn that communities they visit are very different than what they had anticipated. They become intensely aware of how little they know about people unlike themselves, and often feel very ashamed about their ignorance. They often report a new desire to learn more about different cultural groups. Given the fact that gay students are among the most vulnerable students in middle school and high school (Weller, 2004), experiences which help future teachers to develop an awareness about the gay community are of particular significance.

To Experience Being an Outsider

Arriving at the church, ... I immediately felt out of place and almost apologetic for being there. It was a strange feeling to be the minority in the group, something I have never experienced before to such a degree.

I realize much clearer now how it really must feel to be a minority. I've just taken my color for granted. It's not something I have to deal with everyday.

I can now understand more thoroughly what it is like to be in the minority, rather than the majority. The sense of isolation and loneliness is horrible, and it makes me sick to think some people live with that feeling everyday.

The underlying theme in these quotes is clearly fear. Most students who embark on cultural plunges are very anxious and occasionally even express concern for their

lives. When I telephoned a student who dropped my summer, 1993 class after the first day, she told me that a big reason was because she was afraid to do the required plunge in an African American community, and both she and her husband were afraid that she might be physically harmed. Another student verbally expressed similar fears on the first day of that same class, but she decided to stay in the class and in fact had a great time on that plunge, as do almost all students.

The sad fact is that many European American students in my classes have usually managed to avoid ever going into a setting where the predominant ethnicity is different from their own, and many students of color have socialized primarily with members of their own ethnic group. Due to the influence of parents, peers, and mass media images, many White students have a profound fear of people of color and particularly of African-Americans, as these quotes reflect. Students of color are not exempt from such fears either, and they often are very anxious about visiting a community of a different ethnic group. The reality is that we all learn the same lies, and students tend to have the same biases about people different from themselves.

As these quotes indicate, cultural plunges are often the first experiences that many European American students have had of not being in the majority. Intense discomfort and a desire to leave immediately are common responses. The value of this particular lesson is profound. Students often write in their plunge reaction papers that they are now keenly aware of the importance of reaching out to their students who are ethnic outsiders. This realization is usually deepened when someone from the community reaches out to them on their plunges, which is usually the case. They thus learn firsthand what a positive impact a friendly gesture can make to a student who is culturally different from most others in a new setting, and they determine to be especially welcoming to ethnically diverse children in their future classes.

To Become More Aware of One's Values and Biases

I sat quietly in my chair listening to the conversation of the [African American] ladies around me. I really don't know what I was expecting, but these women did the same things in their lives that I did and they talked about the same things I do. It's amazing how because someone else may look different than you do you think that they act differently, too.

Throughout the (funeral) service, I was angry because I didn't see anyone cry, not even relatives. Then I learned that Buddhists believe in reincarnation; their spirit comes back to life in a form of human or animal, depending on your karma. Well, this helped me understand. I had already judged them, thinking they were morbid and insensitive people. This is where the danger lies; one starts to judge and stereotype out of ignorance or lack of understanding, which in turn, can lead to prejudice.

It caused me to reexamine how I interact with people of different cultures and how I unconsciously favor or respond better to those that relate better to my values. I also realize that while I try not to be "colonial" in mentality, I do want to be acknowledged

and appreciated. Since visiting the conference and discovering this about myself, I have tried harder in communicating and listening and I have found I get far less defensive, I work far better with non-middle class students, I no longer expect acknowledgement, and I am far happier in my relations across cultural lines.

Students have many different types of insights about their values and biases as a result of cultural plunges. Whether discovering basic differences in world view, custom, or belief, or becoming more aware of similarities that exist across ethnic lines, students learn firsthand that their ideas about others are very often erroneous. They are able to discover some of their own fundamental assumptions, and are often very surprised that they were so unaware of their own values and biases.

Further Impact of Cultural Plunges: Effects on Motivation and Behavior

While the foregoing quotes from student cultural plunge reaction papers speak to three of the objectives of the plunge activity, there is another type of quote which warrants inclusion. This kind of quote speaks to the effects of cultural plunges on students' motivation and on their future behavior with people different from themselves:

That Saturday evening will stay with me for a long time. Both in my mind and in my heart. It's so easy to be oblivious and unaffected, when we don't think about things that don't concern ourselves. The thing is… that they do concern us, and I don't think I can forget that, or better yet, I don't want to forget!

I don't think I will ever be able to not think about what I saw on this day. No, as a matter of fact, I believe I will think about it often and I'm glad, because that means I will have to <u>do</u> something about it to be able to live with the images.

This cultural plunge really made me experience how the so called "minority" groups feel in our society. And hopefully this experience will stay with me forever so that I'm more sensitive when I'm teaching my students about the many different cultures in our society who all have an equal place here.

In all, I thought this experience was definitely worth it. I felt what it was like to be in the "minority." If this is what people of different races feel like when they are in the presence of a majority of whites, then something ought to be done to change attitudes. If this is a realistic goal, I don't know. All I know is what I have in my hands to control and I am definitely going to try.

These reactions indicate the lasting impression which cultural plunges leave on many students, and the degree of resolve which students feel to act on their newfound sensitivity. Unforgettable images, exposure to previously unknown crucial issues, and the experience of having been an outsider for the first time provide intense motivation to behave in new ways. The most commonly expressed new goals are to reach out to all students, attempt to promote increased communication and understanding between different ethnic groups, and become involved in social change efforts. All of these behaviors can significantly improve teachers' effectiveness with culturally diverse students and those students' communities.

Discussion

Cultural plunges engender a level of learning that is not possible with standard teaching methods such as lecture, texts, or discussion. Although plunge papers varied in terms of student reactions and emotional intensity, the overwhelming majority reported positive learning resulted from the experiences. This was true for students of varying ethnicity, color, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, physical attributes, religion and political views. Student enthusiasm for cultural plunges was very high, and a number of students recommended that more cultural plunges be required in the author's classes. One student stated in a reaction paper that "cultural plunges...should be a requirement for all future teachers," and this sentiment was quite widespread.

Perhaps the most compelling validation of cultural plunges comes from the words of students themselves. The author's students write a course reaction paper in lieu of a final examination in which they have total freedom to state their reactions to any aspects of the class which they care to comment upon. They are encouraged to be as frank as possible and to offer criticism and suggestions for improvement. Almost all students write about their cultural plunges and what they got out of them. The following excerpts are taken from course reaction papers:

The cultural plunges are the best type of homework that one can do in order to truly learn about other cultures, customs and creeds. The benefit one obtains after such an experience is very great; more than if one had simply read an article or a book. All these plunges create that direct highway to the human heart.

The plunges that we were sent on helped me face my fears, biases, and most of all the truth. It is amazing what first hand experience can do to a person. . . The plunges that I experienced have changed the way I think and look at things forever.

The plunges give you that crucial first-hand experience that reading a textbook will never give you. I began to think about what kind of implications these plunges have for my career, and I became excited about how I would address these issues in my own classroom.

The learning which takes place from cultural plunges can be greatly enhanced via lectures, texts and videos. The author uses a number of powerful videos which address homelessness, discrimination against African Americans, violence against women, war, CIA experiments with drugs and diseases on Americans (including soldiers) without their knowledge or consent, and conditions in Third World sweatshops. These shocking depictions of the realities of diverse populations help to open minds and hearts and to create more empathy and compassion in future teachers. Many students have stated that the combination of lecture, video and cultural plunge has had a profound effect of their views towards homeless people and other populations.

Limitations

In the face of these results it is important to remember that there are limits to any teaching method, and the cultural plunge is no exception. One ought not over-generalize from what one experiences on a single outing in any community, and cultural plunges certainly do not make cultural experts of anyone. Some students do not get as much out of these experiences as others, and are not very impressed with them. A few students view their plunges as negative experiences which they wish they had not been through. They might not have felt welcome, might disagree with a sermon in a church service or might strongly dislike church services in general. Such reactions are quite infrequent, however, and limited to a very small number of students (probably less than 5%). I make every effort to accommodate student concerns and requests for alternative plunges. For example, some students who are atheists have attended African America cultural events rather than go to the Baptist church service. In these types of situations, I brainstorm with the students for options which will be meaningful as well as acceptable, and leave the final decision in the hands of the student.

Conclusion

Plunges represent a type of education that is experiential, meaningful, inter-esting, challenging, confidence- building, growth-inducing and rewarding for most students. They represent a significant means towards students' greater understand-ing and acceptance of others, as well as of enhancing self-awareness; they thus have great potential as a viable educational approach in a full range of academic, business and government training programs. The fact that most plunges are one or two hours long makes their use very practical, and numerous students have said that they have gotten more out of plunges than out of service work requiring much more of a time commitment. Given the myriad challenges that confront teacher education in terms of preparing future teachers for the increasingly diverse students they will serve, the cultural plunge provides one means of helping to sensitize student teachers to social and cultural realities, to their own values and biases, and to the students of today's and tomorrow's classrooms.

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