

Enhancing PSY 245 - Culture and Psychology, Through Service and Reflection

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Introduction

PSY 245 – Culture and Psychology is a 3-credit hour course that I taught in the Spring of 2020. The course had not been offered at Xavier for a number of years, and I had the opportunity to develop the course with the support and guidance of Deb Kuchey, my Ignation faculty mentor, and Sean Rhiney at the Eigel Center for Community-Engaged Learning.

Teaching to the mission was a priority in developing this course and the course received the following designations/attributes: *Diversity Flag* and *Service Learning*

The Course

From the syllabus, Spring 2020:

This undergraduate course examines the important (and wonderful) influence of culture on our lives. Together, we will study how cultural factors impact the way we think, how we experience and exhibit emotions, how we parent our children, our worldview, and how we experience and treat mental illness. We will explore these and many other questions as we begin to grasp the awesome* impact of culture on our lives and the world around us.

**Merriam-Webster definition: Awesome- causing a feeling of respect, fear, and wonder"*

Background

As I was developing this course, I reached out to the Eigel Center on campus and met with Sean Rhiney to discuss how to infuse service/community-engaged learning. We brainstormed ideas and met with Jill Smith (Xavier alum) who is the Resource Coordinator at the Academy of World Languages (AWL). AWL is

a Cincinnati Public School located less than 2 miles from Xavier that attracts a diverse group of students including over 60% from immigrant and refugee families that represent 35 different countries. Together we spent considerable time discussing, reflecting, and creating a community-engaged experience that would be beneficial to students at both Xavier and AWL.

Enhancing the Course through Service and Reflection

At the start of the semester, students in PSY 245 read Bishop's (1990) seminal essay on the importance of representation in children's literature -

“... Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books... When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix–xi)

Xavier students read and learned more about the lack of representation in children's literature and detriments of this (e.g., #empowerthereader – Johnson et al., 2018). Sam Bloom, a librarian from Cincinnati Public Library visited the class and led a discussion on the importance of representation in children's literature and shared books that captured a range of experiences and characters, for example, children from diverse backgrounds in the U.S., children living in multi-generational homes, children in lower income households, children with immigrant parents, etc. Annie Schneider of the Cincinnati Literacy Network also visited the class and spoke about issues pertaining to literacy in Cincinnati.

As a class, we selected books and developed activities to engage children at AWL. Students were thoughtful in the books that were selected, choosing books by authors whose experiences were authentic to the experiences of the characters they wrote about. The books selected depicted a broad range of diverse children and experiences, including *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* by Hena Khan and Mehrdokht Amini; *Radiant Child* by Javaka Steptoe; *Crown: Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes and Gordon James; *Knock, Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* by Daniel Beaty; *Drum Dream Girl* by Margarita Engle and Rafael Lopez; and *A Different Pond* by Bau Phi & Thi Bui. Xavier students then visited the Kindergarten and one 1st grade class once each week to read these books and engage with the students.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the visits to AWL were halted halfway. The Xavier students wanted to continue their engagement with AWL and recorded themselves reading books, and these recordings were posted on the AWL students' remote learning portal. The Blue Manatee Project donated 6 of the books that the Xavier class selected and Xavier students delivered these books to close to 100 children across Cincinnati following the transition to remote learning.

Student assignments to encourage reflection included a weekly reflection following their visit to AWL. Students were instructed to reflect on their experience, and how the visit connected to the course material and their broader learning. Students also wrote a self-reflection paper on their cultural identity and reflecting on how their identity impacts their worldview and interactions with others. At the end of the semester, students wrote a summative reflection of their learning in the class and their experiences at AWL.

Student Feedback

Overall, student feedback of the course was largely positive, and students articulated the many ways in which the service and reflection emphasis of the course was beneficial to their education and development as a man/woman for others.

Representative student feedback

- I really enjoyed the service part of the class as that helped to actually take part in being the change we want to see in the world
- We are given the opportunity to reflect on our own biases and challenge ourselves to be people for and with others. I was able to challenge my own beliefs, and reduce my own ethnocentric viewpoints
- I would recommend this service-learning experience to everyone. Not only is it a great opportunity to engage with students from a variety of cultures, but it is a great way to see concepts from class come to life
- I learned so much about other cultures and issues that are so prevalent in our society and I think that this course genuinely helped me to become a more understanding and genuine person
- I am a white male, I have no shortage of heroes or role models in the media, whether it be books, television or movies. I know how nice it feels not to see queer representation as an adult, but I had no idea how much it could mean to kids. When we read the *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns*, the girl in our class who wore a hijab lit up. I think seeing herself in the book meant a lot to her. It helped me understand more about the privileges I've had and see a need that is not being met
- One topic that I had never really considered before is the importance of cultural representation in books. I really valued having the opportunity to consider the impact that this can have on kids as they develop. I feel like we have created a world where we focus on differences and only fully accept a certain demographic of people. This demographic can be seen in what kids typically read in class and at home: white characters who are able-bodied, of middle-class status, with happy home lives
- This course taught me a lot about myself, my values, my culture, in addition to that of people all around the world. I am most thankful that this course gave me a sense of greater appreciation and respect for other cultures and countries
- I got to recognize and become intentionally aware of the privilege and opportunities I have taken for granted
- It was beneficial being able to apply the knowledge that we learned in class and use this knowledge to connect with the kids. I also enjoyed everything that we were able to learn from the children. It was great whenever the children were able to talk about the books and connect it to their own experience. I hope that we were able to leave an impact with the kids, because they definitely left an impact on me.
- As I look back on my experience, I am so thankful that I decided to be a part of this project. It has opened my heart and inspired me to be more involved in a community, where I know I could give more of myself... This project has shown that diversity can be beautiful and rewarding when we create an environment where all languages, cultures, and ethnicities can be a part of it

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References

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