

Reflections from the Classroom: An Autoethnographical Case Study

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BACKGROUND

In Fall 2010, three college professors, Priya, Theresa and Tracy got together as a group to coordinate and facilitate the Healthcare Learning Community (HLC) at Johnston Community College (JCC) located in a rural town in the southwestern United States. The town had a population of 1,58,415, its per capita income was \$21,359 and income level was \$8,350. JCC, itself was a completely black institution with 90% of the students and staff belonging to African American origin. The college valued its mission and vision objective of providing education to minority students. To increase student retention and learning, the college encouraged its faculty to design learning communities across campuses. The Healthcare Learning Community was one such initiative. Learning communities came to the fore in the late eighties and early nineties (Browne, and Minnick, 2005). Learning communities in their most basic form, begin with block scheduling that enable students to take courses together. In some cases, learning communities link students by tying two or three courses together (Tinto, 2000). Learning communities involve a cohort-based, interdisciplinary, collaborative educational approach. They have become accepted as an effective pedagogical technique in higher education. HLC combined three courses with a common cohort of students to experiment with innovative and creative teaching pedagogies that hone the critical thinking skills of all its student participants. HLC was

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interested in creating a close community environment for all its healthcare participants through various outside classroom activities like fieldtrips, guest speakers and research projects.

Priya, Theresa and Tracy talked, discussed, debated and planned over a series of meetings their expectations and the overall goals for the HLC. During these sessions, all three found themselves talking about their experiences in the classroom and decided to critically reflect on what had worked for them. They wondered whether their personality and background had any influence on their teaching methodologies and styles. They mutually decided to pen these introspections in the form of personal, confessional autobiographies.

THE PROCESS OF SELF DISCOVERY

This process of critical self-reflection resulted in the creation of three mini life histories.

Priya's Story

Priya was born into an urban higher middle class Hindu (a religion in India) household in India. She was the eldest with a younger sister and brother. Her childhood was happy and fun-filled with proper doses of modernity and traditional orthodoxy. She did her schooling in an Anglo Indian Christian funded school, and learned Christian values and beliefs. All her teachers were Christian. This diversity in religion did not cause confusion, but taught her to appreciate and respect different perspectives. She believed in Santa Claus and celebrated all Christian festivals alongside traditional Hindu and Muslim festivals of Diwali and Id. School was succeeded by college. As an academic achiever, she opted for a prestigious North Campus College in Delhi, far from her home. This meant a huge investment in travel with nearly four hours of daily travel. College helped her spread her wings and blossom. In the meantime, things were changing at the home front, too. Her mother stepped into the shoes of a student again, and obtained her teaching certification. Priya's decision, struggle, and journey into the professional world made

her realize the importance of developing a self-identity. She was approaching the end of college life and had to make a decision regarding her future professional life.

She sat for numerous MBA admissions entrance exams. She got through the written papers and sat in for discussions and interviews. However, her introvert and shy nature proved a detriment as she did not get through the interviews. Consequently, the experience made her determined to join an MBA program. In the meantime, her father relocated to Africa with a government position, at the same time, Priya made it into an MBA program in the UK. As a result of her father's new lucrative position, she was able to attend school in the UK. Studying in the UK was an eye-opener – she was exposed to many different cultures, values, beliefs, and religions. It taught her tolerance, how to put aside personal biases and rivalries to work together as a team to achieve results, how to step aside and bury personal ambitions and desires for fulfilling the team goal. She enrolled for a doctorate, despite a shaky start with lots of wrong turns, she managed to complete the program.

Priya came back to India and worked briefly, dealing with Indian students who were near her own age group. Teaching for her simply meant preparing a script i.e., presentations, overhead transparencies, examples and class activities. She relied heavily on lecturing, demonstrating, assigning, checking and transmitting content. She usually planned out her entire semester schedule, class sessions, and course materials before entering the classroom. A sudden personal experience saw her relocating to the USA. When she joined her first job in the USA at JCC, she was not bothered by the fact that it was predominantly a black institution and 90% of the students and staff were of African American origin. She had never been exposed to a racial group of students completely different from herself and never thought culture or origin of students made any difference.

However, she soon realized her mistake in the coming few months. Her management class in spring 2005 consisted of young women ranging in ages from 18-35 years. The average class size

was 35 students. The students consisted of working mothers, non-traditional students, residential and commuting students. The class began on a sour note, everything came under massive critical attack, right from the students to the department chair. Everything was wrong, beginning with the course content and the teaching style of the instructor. Her students' evaluations came back with negative comments about the course and the instructor with demands for massive improvements on all accounts [see exhibit 1 for student evaluation scores and students' comments]. The students found the entire course very difficult. Motivation levels were low. Students were disinterested and did not even read for the class. The following classroom incidents provide detailed insights about the problems faced with the students:

- (a) Teaching single and double loop learning: Priya used the lecture format to explain this topic supported by overhead transparencies. The overhead transparencies had relevant information pertaining to definitions, meanings and concepts of single and double loop learning. Single Loop Learning emphasizes error detection and correction. The focus of the learning process is to gain information to maintain and stabilize existing systems. Single Loop Learning is concerned with providing immediate solutions to existing problems and conflicts. In contrast, Double Loop learning involves in-depth questioning of existing systems and processes to ascertain why errors or problems occur in the first place. Double Loop learning questions the effectiveness of current structures, policies, strategies and overall organizational functioning (Marquardt, 2002). She explained each type of learning using examples, pausing at regular breaks and asking students questions. The students would look up from their notes and read aloud the answer.

 - (b) Teaching Senge's five disciplines: Priya first introduced Senge (1990) and his book to the class, talked in brief about its relevance, and then lectured on each discipline for five sessions. Afterwards, the students engaged in class exercises like left-hand column which develops a vision statement for a company and factors responsible for designing a learning organization mentioned in Senge's (1990) Fifth Discipline Fieldbook. The
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students seemed bored during the sessions, disinterested and restless. On being questioned if they had problems, the students responded:

"I understand but what about the test?..." (Student 1)

"All this is too heavy..." (Student 2)

"You should slow down..." (Student 3)

"Why are we learning all this...?" (Student 4)

Priya was at a loss, and did not know what to do. Comments such as, *"she is an outsider who does not understand us,"* forced her to search deep within herself about herself! She wanted to be a good teacher, reach out to her students, and make them understand the concepts as well as the entire course. She wanted to establish a rapport with her students—build bridges with them and emerge not as an outsider, but as one of them. Teaching is building on past perceptions, assumptions and mental concepts.

She made a conscious decision to understand them as individuals with their own unique backgrounds, culture, and perceptions. She made an effort to incorporate examples which they might be interested in and could identify with. She began to respect their outlook and opinion, and appreciate their input in the classroom. She did research on types of teaching methods and learning styles. Her research informed her that African American students are field dependent, are dependent on teachers for more direct instruction. These students needed to be taught using examples which reflected their own lives, problems, and situations. It is essential for teachers "to allow [student] to speak in their own voice in order to develop their voice, rather than adopt the voice of the teacher" (Melear and Richardson, 1994: 17). African American students prefer to work in collaboration and community for them is very important. Priya found it crucial to emphasize teamwork and cooperative learning within her classroom.

Consequently, things began to improve. Priya's classrooms became participative, fostering an environment of mental stimulation. Her teaching style now encompassed techniques such as:

- Using student relevant examples
- Lots of class exercises and participating activities
- Using visual aids like videos, role plays, team work and class discussions
- Becoming more open and curious about students, their lives and activities

The next few semesters found her teaching the same topics single and double loop learning with Senge's five disciplines differently:

(a) Single and double loop learning: Priya first briefly introduced the subjective terms and concepts of single loop and double loop to the students in simple language using relevant day-to-day experiences. She then divided the entire class into teams and then asked each team to think of examples from their personal experience which would aptly illustrate single and double loop learning models. Each team then selected a spokesperson who explained the examples with the support of integrative subjective theory leading to an interactive classroom discussion.

(b) Senge's Five Disciplines: This topic was taught using a collaborative team based activity session. Students were divided into teams and asked to provide personal examples of mental models, personal mastery, shared vision, team working and system thinking from their lives. This was followed with a participatory, active discussion. All students were then asked to expand the elements discussed in the class as a take away written home assignment which added towards their overall course grade.

Priya believed these initial teaching years at JCC had been a very positive learning experience for her. She found herself being able to judge, analyze and be more empathetic about the demanding lifestyles of her students. She was able to "look into" and scrutinize her mental models and perspectives to understand, help, and appreciate her students. She finally got rid of

the label of “outsider” becoming more approachable and open to the student body. She could with confidence and sincerity state that she had made mistakes, learned from them and improved.

Theresa’s Story – “Facilitating Education”

In 1988, AHS 4401 Healthcare Administration Practicum was a capstone course in the Allied Health Program which was housed in the School of Nursing. Theresa’s class was comprised of approximately 30 students, undergraduate students—mostly African Americans. A few of the students were transfer students who hoped to complete the requirements to obtain advanced certification in medical laboratory technology (natural sciences concentration). From Theresa’s perspective, her class of approximately 30 students was going extremely well. They liked each other and were having a GREAT time. She felt as if they were a big happy family. Being African-American, she felt a close connection with all her students.

Most of her student evaluations were positive. Complaints were rare. But over time, she began to realize that she needed to facilitate education more. Generally, Theresa read the course material word for word in a lecture format which allowed students to take notes. She was often asked by students to repeat important points to assure that nothing was missed. There was never any course material on the quizzes or exams that did not come directly out of her mouth. She was the oracle of knowledge, revered and ecstatic. Theresa thought that she knew the achievement capabilities and learning styles of the students—all in the highly achievable range. Everything was perfect, rosy and cherry, but something was missing... Theresa’s students relied primarily on an auditory learning style and intelligence modality. Rarely, were other aspects of student learning and intelligence modalities tapped. Students simply listened, recorded and memorized information. There was little integration of concepts or practical application of class work.

Theresa began to feel a sense of discontentment about the educational progress and course delivery style that she was using at the time. She gradually came to realize that more was needed in the classroom and the practicum setting. She wanted to be a facilitator for learning – learning which would equip her students with the knowledge and skills to function in the contemporary global business world. She had to change her teaching style to adapt herself to the cultural implications of teaching a diverse student population relative to learning styles and backgrounds. Theresa’s approach to teaching warranted a change in order to support students and promote academic excellence – her teaching had to change!

It was time for Theresa to study herself, to know herself, and fully evolve into the culturally responsive teacher that she wanted to be... The methodology that Theresa began to apply was highlighted by Grant’s (2009) description of Gardener’s (1993) multiple intelligences. Such intelligences and learning styles enabled Theresa to identify student talents and intellect that were not originally acknowledged and incorporated:

- Linguistic (word) intelligence
- Logical - mathematical (number) intelligence
- Spatial (picture) intelligence
- Bodily - kinesthetic (body) intelligence
- Musical (music) intelligence
- Interpersonal (people) intelligence
- Intrapersonal (self) intelligence, and
- Naturalistic (nature) intelligence.

Theresa began to implement and include students in a variety of learning activities. The combination of activities allowed for the inclusion of various learning modalities and learning styles. Teaching and learning author, Joseph Seidlin, states that for teachers, students are the end product—all else is means. Hence, there is but one interpretation of high standards of teaching: standards are highest where the maximum number of students- slow learners and fast learners alike-develop their maximal capacity (Wayant, 2003). Accordingly, learning was facilitated and extended beyond rote memorization and testing. The learning process was supported by culturally relevant teaching and learning activities for students. Learning activities were expanded to include people (preceptors, guest speakers), music and pictures (PowerPoint presentations, videos, movies), intrapersonal (project development) and naturalistic (onsite learning).

Educational settings had always been a haven of happiness, safety, and wonder for Theresa. There was never a time, except summers, since the age of five, that she was not enrolled or employed in an academic or educational setting with various degrees of diversity. Even during brief employment stints in governmental settings, she was enrolled in or maintained close ties with educational facilities. From a small child, the second of four girls, Theresa was described as a “good student.” Coming from a family of educators, she had learned the value of education at an early age. She was generally attentive-and always strived to excel. She also relished her home life, and the comfort of her nurturing family. Hers was close knit family who enjoyed their Christian faith, extracurricular activities, and their extended family and friends. They enjoyed life’s necessities with lots of love and encouragement. Theresa and her sisters eventually finished college and started their careers and families.

Theresa was fortunate to begin her doctoral studies at a university in close proximity to her hometown. While her doctoral studies were enlightening, she didn’t know that the degree would take so long to complete. Even so, one glorious day, she completed her doctoral

requirements. Her educational experience taught her perseverance, affording her wonderful work and social experiences in the health and social service fields.

Theresa believed that now she was a more involved facilitator of learning — understanding the importance of culture for the student, and for the educator. As she reflected on her teaching in the early years, she had transferred the loving atmosphere of her home, into the classroom. It felt warm and fuzzy. She wanted to be very fair with the students and eliminate discomfort whenever possible. She wanted the students to learn the course material, but she didn't want to overexert them or set goals beyond their reach. She believed that she had learned, honed her teaching style to include the culture and learning styles of her students. Her teaching style began to shift towards a more facilitative mode as a result of various teaching and learning workshops. Exhibit 02 compares the gradual change in her teaching methodologies as a result accepting the role of culture and learning styles of her students.

In 2011, Theresa no longer felt that she was the oracle of the educational process. She believed in the ability of the students to learn, excel, synthesize knowledge and express their creativity. She believed the students were obtaining skills that would allow them to function beyond the academic setting into the real world. She believed her personal experiences and the cultural experiences of students were relevant and contributed greatly to the educational process. When properly incorporated, culture could enhance the learning experiences of all students groups. The MGHC 4211–Healthcare Administration Practicum course was still an enjoyable experience for Theresa and the students who enrolled. They still had an exciting time, but not at the expense of the student. Learning had expanded with high expectations, teacher facilitation, a reshaped curriculum and student centered instruction.

Tracy's Story: "What's my Motivation?"

As a little girl, Tracy grew up in south Texas and educated in the public school system. Public school had several problematic issues which shaped her personal and public existence. Never

in her life did she think that a childhood steeped in poverty, illiteracy and crime would prepare her for the obstacles she would face as a teacher in the future classroom.

Tracy was the youngest in a family of strong and independent African American women. Her grandmother had five daughters, her mother being the oldest. Tracy's mother was the first one to graduate from high school in her family and Tracy was the first grandchild to graduate from college. Tracy's grandmother had always instilled in her that education was the only true way to succeed. She encouraged her to study hard and be independent. As a child, Tracy's mother and grandmother insisted she speak clearly, hold her head high and look people in the eye during conversations. Her mother would always say, "Can't is a luxury you cannot afford!" She did not understand how much those words would ring true today. Somehow, she always knew that she could achieve anything, but she had no idea of the complex issues she was to face with her students in the classroom.

Tracy's mother wanted her to be educated at a good school, but she could not afford to send her to one. Tracy graduated with honors from high school, and had to wait a few years before she could afford college. Tracy's mother made sure Tracy went to a very good college because being African American, she believed, was one strike against her and being a woman was the second.

Tracy quickly graduated from community college and boldly enrolled into a good university. She felt she had achieved something great, an accomplishment not achieved by anyone in her family thus far, registering for a university level class. There she sat in the classroom with all kinds of emotions going through her mind. She had always done well in school and had never faced any problems with tests or entrance exams. She had never felt out of place until then. Tracy looked around her classroom and felt like she did not belong. The students were younger than her, of different races and by the way they were dressed, definitely different social-

economic backgrounds. Tracy did not even encounter any professors that looked like her. She had to re-evaluate and determine if this was really where she belonged.

Persistence and dedication allowed her to graduate quickly with her Bachelor of Science in Education. Enrolling in graduate school was the next big step. Graduate school was an easy journey for her – principles of hard work and persistence again stood for her in good stead. She graduated with two Master of Science degrees within two years. The next natural move was to get her doctoral degree. There, she realized just how rare it was for African Americans to achieve this status. Sometimes, she was the only African American in her class for the entire year. All eyes would be on her whenever she asked a question or had a presentation. Sometimes she would be badgered with questions just for the sake of intimidation. This did not deter her; she made sure she studied more and researched more. She was always good at finding out the answer through research. She made sure to memorize everything she could in her field. Not just memorize, but understand and be able to rationalize concepts and theories. This way, if someone disagreed with her in class, she could debate the evidence and stand her ground with factual data. After a grueling round of discussion with her peers and professors, they would finally let her be. At these moments, Tracy would question if she was ready or if this was really worth the entire emotional trauma. But, she continued on in the name of her mother and grandmother, and graduated with her doctoral degree in health science.

Tracy had worked in the field of Healthcare most of her life. Since she was 16 years old, she was a Certified Nursing Assistant. Her mother, brother and sister were all Registered Nurses. She decided that she did not want to be a Registered Nurse, but she loved the thought of being a caregiver. So, she decided to become a Respiratory Therapist instead. Tracy had worked many years at the hospital becoming a member on the Neonatal Intensive Care Transport Team, moving into home medical equipment and then finally stabilizing in Community School Health. In this area, she was allowed to use her skill of a Respiratory Therapist by collaborating with nurses writing an asthma curriculum and teaching Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation to

faculty and staff members. Coming to JCC from the corporate world was hard for some of her students to swallow. Some students told Tracy that she was not a 'real' professor. "Real professors had taught at the university level for many years and had written books, while her experience just came from a hospital," they said to her with sarcasm. She had to re-evaluate her identity and consider if she was even 'qualified' in her student's opinion to teach at a university.

As a college professor, her classroom had always been diverse, to include differences in age, gender and race. Normally, classroom instruction revolved around a teacher lecturing in front of the students, while the students feverishly take meticulous notes, not really providing any engagement in their education. Tracy found this to be very difficult because there was usually minimal interaction between the student and the professor. If there was interaction, it was a student needing clarification about the given topic. By the time the student reached understanding, the class was over and the students left probably with even more questions than answers.

The problem she was having in the classroom was that these students came from such dire socioeconomic backgrounds, that they did not fully understand the concept of working with teams or customer service, let alone the definition of quality or excellence. They were living in communities that were basically in 'survival mode.' Just coming to class was a huge effort and somehow she was supposed to teach them about the importance of customer service.

So, how could she lecture on a topic they had no understanding of? This was just the beginning of her problems. Even though she was African American, her students had a hard time relating to her because she really did not have that 'college professor' look. She did have the same skin tone as they did, but standing only 5.0 ft. tall and resembling a student fresh out of high school didn't help her much. Tracy could recall her first day of teaching when she was sitting up front in the classroom patiently waiting for her students to come through the door. They filed in one

by one sitting down in their desk, started chatting away asking each other if they had seen the 'new' professor. Many of them stated they had not and had heard that 'she was new.' All the while they continued to talk some of the students would occasionally smile at her and continue talking. This is when she realized that they did not know she was the professor. "Good Morning!" Tracy had said, "Let's get started! I'm your Professor." The silence was deafening. The students stared at her for what seemed an eternity until one of them finally said, "How old are you?" What an icebreaker...

She wanted her students to be able to relate to her in the classroom. She wanted them to feel as though they could contribute their life experiences in a safe environment, without sympathy, but understanding. Tracy wanted her students to allow their own identity to be the driving force in their engagement with the learning environment. She wanted them to be motivated for *themselves* and within *themselves* so that they could value *themselves*. The solution came when she volunteered to discuss her background. In essence, the background of where she came from, what was the norm in her community and how she realized the difference between what *was* and *what was supposed* to be. Then, it finally dawned on her – she had to become completely aware of her beliefs, values, perspectives, and feelings to be able to reach out to her students.

Now Tracy felt she was more adept at being the teacher she had always yearned to be. She adopted a model of culturally responsive teaching that included theories of intrinsic motivation. She gained a connection like never before with the students, and they had begun to open up in the classroom discussions. These participatory discussions yielded some interesting discoveries – her students and she had similar issues and tensions! Allowing the students to have an opinion, rationalize and be able to critically reflect had indeed opened up a whole new way of teaching in the classroom. Further, her classroom was not speaking in only one voice, but rather speaking in the voices of her students from all backgrounds and all nations. Tracy's

students now had a voice – they could speak aloud, argue, reflect, and discuss. They no longer felt separated from their instructor and were emerging as active fulfilled learners.

Case Review Questions

Q1. How did the teachers' life experiences described in their life histories influence their teaching philosophies and practices?

Q2. Describe the teaching methodology adopted by the three professors in their classrooms?

Q3. What pedagogical techniques were used by the three professors in the classrooms? How are these methods different from the ones used earlier?

Q4. What pedagogical techniques do you use presently in your classroom? How could you adopt culturally responsive practices in your classrooms? Do you think culturally responsive teaching strategies would work for you in your classrooms with your students?

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Exhibit 1 - Priya's Teaching Evaluations

Combined Average Means of Organizational Learning Course

	Instructor (5 points)	Course (5 points)	Environment (5 points)	Overall (5 points)
Organizational Learning	2.87	2.62	3.00	2.82

Students' Comments

1. Instructor should stop giving so much material to study at one time.
2. Instructor should continue giving daily activities that correlate with the material being covered.
3. The instructor should stop giving long assignments and expect them to be done by the end of the class.
4. Start doing, use another textbook. Continue doing, using overhead projector. Start doing: Use more hand-on things to help us understand more. Making things more relevant to us so we can learn more.
5. This instructor should develop better lines of communication with her students and demonstrate a better degree of understanding for the peek lines of communication facilitated.
6. She is very knowledgeable about the subject matter but is unable to establish a communication line with her students.
7. The instructor should to be professional but make a conscious decision to include the students in the class discussions.
8. If the instructor can reframe from taking constructive criticism as subjective she will develop a better structure of her classroom management and establish rapport with her students positively.
9. I know that Dr. Priya is a great instructor and has truly given me essential tools that will assist me in the workplace. Not only has she given me information in the class that has helped me but she has also guided me outside of the classroom as well.
10. Overall, she is a great professor and I found nothing needed, no improvement on her end. Students need to take accountability of their mistakes and stop blaming her for their failures.

Exhibit 2 – Evolution of Theresa’s Teaching Methodologies

Course Goal(s)	Before – 1988	After - 2011
Learn healthcare management knowledge to apply...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Read all course material to the students –Word for word for note taking – although reading was assigned -Quizzes only based on verbal knowledge transmitted by instructor -Critical thinking limited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Face to face or Online instruction -Structured weekly sessions with reading assignments -Virtual support material available(PowerPoints, Videos and Literary) -Quizzes beyond rote level
Develop professionally through tasks and interaction in the workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Instructor visits to each site weekly -Local placements only -Singular course focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Healthcare Learning Community – three courses linked -Mid-term / final progress Checks -Student / preceptor planned projects - Guest speakers - Group presentations
Understand managerial processes...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teacher as oracle concept -Theoretical link – but not directly related to practical application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Application Exercises -Individual and Group Projects on Managerial Issue (to address critical need)
All course goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher determined all aspects of course with little student input or feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Student demographics and background reviewed -Student personal and career goals determined / incorporated -Formative and process course evaluation implemented -Ongoing comments and feedback -Evaluation of guest speakers – recommendations for speakers and course events.