



Students' Ethnographic Practices Reflect Critical Conscious Research in a Multicultural College Class

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ABSTRACT

Teaching the *Issues in Multicultural Education* course at a New York State college with a diverse population highlights the necessity to address current complex societal topics. The course's methodological framework is ingrained in the democratic ideas of tolerance, justice, and agency. This article describes an interdisciplinary college course, which allows students to practice ethnographic methods in order to re-conceptualize and confront stereotypes and social constructions. Through a formal mini ethnographic project, students documented their observations and interactions of a religious institution within a community. The oral and written presentations from this field-based research displayed that students became critically conscious of others' communal practices when they investigated the sites from a first-hand account.

KEYWORDS: Education, Curriculum and Instruction, Leadership

National media and news feeds were filled with post crisis events within communities most especially between 2014-2105. Violence and death counts rose among law enforcement and community members within the States, and “global terror” is on the rise. During these discouraging times, an important and challenging course to teach is *Issues in Multicultural Education* where the mission of the course focuses on practices of tolerance, empathy, and social justice.

As I started the Spring 2015 semester at a diverse state college in New York, I especially thought about the necessity and importance of teaching the course, *Issues in*

Multicultural Education. On the local level, during the Fall 2014, the semester concluded with non-violent marches and gatherings for Eric Garner, and the killings of the two NYPD officers, Wenjian Lu and Rafael Ramos, in New York. Students mimicked the gatherings within the college's halls. Abroad, during the winter break of 2015, the funerals of the members of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine aired. Along with the coverage was the showing of a 100 Million Person March with leaders from across the world walking together in solidarity. In June of 2015, the Spring semester concluded with another horrific and violent event--the Charleston Massacre. Students are consistently reminded that safe spaces are limited. Tragedies dictated the pace of time within and between semesters.

The current public events throughout the year coincide with the interplay of the coursework. The content became real and visceral as the students were living through such violent occurrences. The course, *Issues in Multicultural Education*, is rooted in critical conscious research (Willis et al., 2008). From this stance, "criticality is reflected in critical theorizing and research of language and literacy" (p.82). The structure of the course allows for readings and writing assignments that ask students to reinvestigate their learned perceptions. Through informal journal responses, students record their current beliefs and connect their viewpoints with theories studied in the class. Students are asked to confront stereotypes and consider how environment impacts their identities. The final project during the semester is a mini ethnographic project where the students are instructed to use ethnographic methods and record their observations of a religious or non-secular establishment within their communities. The assignment allows for students to travel into the field and gain access to a site. Through "thick descriptions", their experiences are documented (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). "Thick description goes beyond the mere and bare reporting of an act but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations, and circumstances of action: showing culture in this form" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 39). The presentation of these student projects are powerful artifacts for the course. During the semester students are immersed with studies and language reflected in federal legislation, state law, curriculum requirements, textbooks, and classroom discourse. In this way, they are informed about linguistic structures as it relates to diversification, and view how the mini ethnographic project allows them to practice critically conscious research (Willis et al., 2008).

This article will discuss the interdisciplinary design of the *Issues in Multicultural* course and the final writing projects produced by the students from a diverse college in New York. The article will show examples of student's ethnographic writings when discussing a religious site that they visited within their community. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how presenting student findings on delicate and complex issues, like religion, can strengthen student expression, create an environment for cross cultural expression, reconsider the functionality of the establishments within communities; and this project is an example of how students can understand tolerance, empathy, and social justice.

Setting and Students

The *Issues in Multicultural Education* course was a course offered at a state college within a suburban setting in New York. The school population is varied with about 4,500 undergraduate students. The course can fulfill a general education requirement and can be a pre-requisite course in order to enter the School of Education. Typically, this course is taken prior to students declaring or being accepted into the School of Education.

Enrolled in the course were 32 students with a range of cultural backgrounds. The class consisted of 26 females and 6 males. Many of the students within the course would like to be accepted into an Education program. At the time the students are taking *Issues in Multicultural Education*, students are registering for the writing sample test prior to acceptance into the School of Education. Many of the students at this college are transfers from local community colleges or at a sophomore status. Students in the course are the traditional students who either commute to school or live on campus. A small percentage is the non-traditional student and holds other familial responsibilities. All students have either part-time or full-time jobs as they are attending college. The framework of the college fosters interdisciplinary praxis, social justice, and professionalism.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this course is influenced by my research in Literacy Studies as well as working within Interdisciplinary College Writing cohorts. My vision of the course was enhanced after three years of teaching at the college. This experience enabled me to become more acclimated with the student population. Within Literacy Studies, “Critical Pedagogy addresses social inequity and injustices with the intent to develop crucial consciousness by advocating for social change and a more democratic society (Willis et al., p. 99). In drawing upon my background in literacy, literature, and writing studies, this interdisciplinary approach nurtured the necessity for qualitative inquiry as it relates to varied social groups. Three ideas that are critical to the design of this course are: implementing interdisciplinary multicultural dimensions, practicing critical consciousness through critical pedagogy, and utilizing ethnography as a tool for writing and social change.

Implementation of Multicultural Dimensions

From the onset of the semester, James Banks’ (2009) Five Dimensions of Multicultural Education are introduced, studied, applied, and reviewed. The foundation of the course relies on these key integral dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, school culture empowerment, and pedagogical equity. Students throughout the semester identify issues within the film *Walk-out* where these principles are absent, and they analyze how curriculum materials can reflect Banks’ (2009) tenets through cultural sensitivity. The film depicts a time in American history where students assembled nonviolently to speak out against the injustices that they saw within their schools. The portrayal includes all members of the community to participate

so that their collective voices could bring about change. The protests and marches resonated concretely with the student body especially since the marches for Eric Garner were occurring concurrently in New York.

The course focuses on presenting interdisciplinary curriculum that allows for rich analysis of micro-cultures. A central theme throughout the course was highlighting how language was used in sociocultural structures of schools and communities. Nieto (1999) acknowledges that micro-cultures exist within the macro-culture of the United States. She explained in *Light in their Eyes* the shifting dimensions of “culture.” Nieto (1999) quotes Mary Kalantzis (1989) in that “We are not simply bearers of cultures, languages, and histories, with a duty to reproduce them. We are the products of linguistic-cultural circumstances, actors with a capacity to resynthesize what we have been socialized into and to solve new and emerging problems of existence.” Nieto (1999) assesses culture to be multi-faceted and dynamic. The responsibility educators have in providing a rich and equitable learning environment is challenging within the constantly fluctuating parameters of education. Throughout the semester within reflective journals, students indicated the events that impacted their previous educational views. This form of honest expression was encouraged so that their perceptions can be recognized and growth could eventually follow.

Practicing Critical Pedagogy through a Critical Consciousness Lens

In looking at the world from a critical lens understanding, Banks (2009) and Nieto (1999) frame Freire’s central platform and picture of problem posing education. Paolo Freire (1970) and Maxine Greene (2009) offer powerful accounts on the idea of “critical consciousness” through practitioner research and invoking the imagination. In the course, Freire’s (1970) “banking concept of education” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is analyzed. During the semester, his theory parallels Banks’ (2009) ideals in addressing student and teacher relationships. In addition to the “banking concept”, Freire (1973) distinguishes between critical consciousness, naïve consciousness, and magical consciousness in that critical consciousness “represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their casual and circumstantial correlations” (p. 34). The class environment welcomed an open and safe space to share common stereotypes as it related to any of the controversial micro-cultures. Conversations also specified how social constructions perpetuate these stereotypes.

Practicing critical pedagogy assists with imagining schools and modes of teaching that confront “power domains” through varied opportunities for discourse (Willis et al., 2008). Maxine Greene (2009) asserts that we do not discuss the embedded natures and mindsets of our own cultures; therefore, when conducting and collecting “observations”, we are not free from our prejudices that have been imposed by our “cultures”. With this idea in mind, learning spaces in the course were created through small cooperative learning groups, through class debates, and through reflexive in-class and online writing prompts so that students can acknowledge their peers’ learned beliefs and come to understand their conceptions. Through critical consciousness, students willingly analyze the world carefully for him-or-herself by thinking outside of binaries.

Ethnography as a Tool for Writing and Social Change

Glesne (2011) defines ethnography as “literally meaning to describe people or a cultural group. Using culture as the theoretical framework for studying can be describing a group. In essence, ethnography’s origins are associated with anthropology, and to some extent, with sociology” (p. 17). Within these disciplines, the term “culture” has shared multiple meanings; this is also expressed by Nieto (1999). Practicing ethnography allows for data collection through interviews and observation. These practices will assist in the development of ‘thick description’ in writing. Ethnography can be seen as both ‘interpretivistic and qualitative’. The method can consider how the data is collected and how it relates and shapes perspective. The students are using qualitative methods, and interpreting their direct observations from what they hear and see in time and space. Through these interdisciplinary approaches the student’s role for the final writing assignment is to enter a religious or non-secular space from an empathetic understanding and write descriptively (Glesne, 2011).

The descriptors illustrated by Geertz (1973) and Glesne (2011) within ethnography help display linguistic patterns. Ethnography does not separate language and culture, and so the researcher is able to weave a rich pattern through words and symbols. Geertz (1973) would agree with Willis (2000) that, through ethnography, “we need to see social lives as containing many different kinds of meaningfulness, incarnate in different practices and forms, layered and overlapping, connecting up in complex ways” (p. 22). As an ethnographic study, it is under the conceptual framework that there are crossing of paradigms. Ethnography of speaking has a structure, function, language, organization, appropriateness, diversity, and community in place. Students within their own ethnographic projects focused on a location and painted the picture through narrative voice. They included a description of the physical structure, observed rituals, encounters, spoken language, and artifacts. Based upon the students’ individual projects, the class collectively coded the commonalities among the spaces they visited. The class’ categorical coding reflected a systematic structure based upon the language spoken and performance within these assembled places.

Course Layout and Materials

Given the theoretical framework, it was important to consider how the literature and curriculum materials reflected Banks’ 5 Dimensions and critically conscious research (Willis et al., 2008). Within the course, the class explores the concept of identity through gender, class, culture, and race. Students begin to categorize these descriptors within macro-cultures and micro-cultures. Within this unit, students read articles by Ashley Montagu, “Origins of the Concept of Race”; Deborah Tannen, “Sex, Lies, and Conversation”; Wendy Goodman, “Living and Teaching in an Unjust World”, and excerpts by Anthony Cody from *The Educator and the Oligarch: a teacher challenges the Gates Foundation*. These excerpts are scholarly pieces that discuss myths and misconceptions on race, gender, class, and school culture. Each text challenges the dominant discourse in education and is an example of interdisciplinary qualitative research methods. These texts were chosen with the intention to heighten students’

literacy practices because the students were creating text to world connections especially as they reflected upon their own roots and personal stories.

The semester begins with students examining and performing close readings from multiple versions of the fairytale, *Cinderella*. Students deconstruct the elements of the fairytale based upon the different cultural ethnic backgrounds presented in the stories. The students pinpoint the commonalities within the accounts and learn about other geographic locations and cultures. This assists with questioning the portrayal of the media driven, Disney, version of Cinderella (See the reference list under Children's Literature). This exercise introduces to the students how longstanding conceptions on culture can be formed.

Next, the students come to an understanding of the background of the course through the film, *Walk-Out*. The depiction of the film directed by Edward Jones Olmos provides a public history of the 1960s Chicano non-violent protests in East LA schools. The film enables students in the *Issues in Multicultural Education* course to apply Banks' Dimensions of Multicultural Education and analyze the shifts of the Bilingual Education Act through a continuum. Other histories that the students explore are those of the Native Americans and Taino Natives in the Dominican Republic. Many of the students have familial roots from the Island of Hispaniola. Students are exposed to these histories through interdisciplinary materials so that they view how these histories impacted American history. Most students are unaware or have not read first-hand accounts from natives in these cultures.

The course continues to be organized thematically. In another unit students also learn about how student identities are shaped on a K-12 level and the design of public school classrooms as it relates to growing demographics in the United States. Topics that are introduced are types of learning styles, Common Core Curriculum, and language acquisition. Participants in the course are asked to question the labels placed upon students who are deemed underprepared or learning disabled (Flurkey, 1997). The class is exposed to first-hand accounts from teachers in the field as to how the students are reacting to high stakes testing. In addition to the enforced curriculum standards, current federal acts that impact school communities are assessed on a social level. Examples of such acts discussed are the Dignity for All Students Act 2012, Shepherd-Berd Act 2009, and Dream Act Revisions. These Acts were implemented because of the violence and bullying exemplified within schools. The reading material in this unit demonstrate language of power as well as a reform against intolerance.

Students are then assigned a book club group where they are applying concepts from the first part of the semester and place in action their own critical conscious research. Assigned texts depend on the number of students in the course. The following books have been assigned: *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *Roll of Thunder Hear my Cry* by Mildred Taylor, *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Garden, *Orange is not the only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, the *Part Time Diary of Native American* by Sherman Alexie, and *Keeping Corner* by Kashmira Sheth. Students are asked to identify a micro-cultural group within the text. They are to identify an objective

for the lesson that is also aligned with Common Core State Standards. As the students meet with their book club groups, they are analyzing and interpreting the ideas within cooperative learning groups. Students present to the class their findings through guided questioning. These young adult pieces of literature can shape adolescents and be teaching tools for critical consciousness. More specifically, YA Literature targets core issues of identity that impact middle school and high school students (Morrell, 2004). Some of the micro-cultures described were sexuality in relation to religion, race and identity in relation to schooling, and gender and culture in relation to societal codes. The literature circles work effectively because students are learning not only about their assigned text but local and global concerns through the other groups' assigned stories.

In choosing these texts for this course, I am mindful to implement critical literacy approaches within the coursework so that students analyze "issues of power" directly as it relates to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, language, and religion (Beck, 2005, p. 393). Educators are reminded to incorporate multicultural literature where students have the opportunity to interrogate their own perspectives along with the author's message (Ching, 2005).

In the final writing project through a lens of critical consciousness, students intimately understand that ethnography is a tool for cultural inquiry (Glesne, 2011; Greene, 2009). This project permits the student to apply the theories studied during the semester and enact the coursework into their ethnographic research and writing tasks. The purpose of this study is to understand how students implement critical conscious research within their ethnographic writing and oral presentations. It also evaluates writing patterns that unfold within the ethnographic projects.

Research Design and Methodology

Students within the course were given the opportunity to practice critical conscious research methods through a final mini ethnographic research project (Willis et al., 2008). This allowed me to evaluate how students implemented course theory into their field based assignment. "Critical qualitative research acknowledges the political intentions to transform social inequalities" (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, p. 51). By collecting student work, taking ethnographic notes on their oral presentations, and categorizing the patterns, it allowed me to identify how critical consciousness research was used within ethnographic writing. Through my interdisciplinary background in literacy studies, Shirley Brice Heath (1982), Brian Street (1993), and James Gee (1989) are identified as the major players during the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement. Each of these scholars impacted NLS and offered analyses in understanding qualitative research through literacy studies. Within literacy studies, ethnographic tools and critical discourse analysis were central methods for inquiry.

This study specifically focuses on 5 students' work out of the 32 students in the course. The reason the five students' ethnographic writings and oral presentations were illustrated in the study was because each communicated that the visit enabled them to confront previous conceptions associated with the religion. They expressed that they held

a predetermined notion about religion prior to experiencing it. After documenting their observations, they left with another impression and vantage point.

At the end of the semester, the class discussed the topic of religion through the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. One idea discussed was how Puritans who were escaping religious persecution founded the United States. “Religion is separated from broader notions of spirituality and understood to be formalized” (Willis et al, 2008, p. 70). Throughout time, many were persecuted for religious beliefs, and religious sites were attacked violently in American history and during the present time. The themes that surfaced within student conversations and the ethnographic data were about “knowledge, values, society, culture, and history.” It continued to raise consciousness (Quantz, 1992).

Qualitative and Ethnographic Research Methods

This was a qualitative study. It analyzed how students put the theory taught in the course into their own practice of critical consciousness. The analysis of student work was based upon their ethnographic writing and their visual presentations. Through narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis special attention was spent listening to student dialogue. The development of the ethnographic methods and oral narratives depicted how the student’s words navigated through social constructions as it related to religious establishments. Students recorded their observations at a religious site and orally shared their findings.

This study reflected critically conscious research. As an ethnographic study, it is a multi-method qualitative approach which involved close exploration of many sources (Brewer, 2001). The projects the students produced included summaries of observed activities. It was structured based upon the course assignment. The function of the assignment was to allow students to practice critical conscious research in a space that presented diverse societal perceptions. The five students in this study had not visited their chosen sites prior to the assignment. John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (1991) explain through ethnography of communication it could assist in the ways of looking at the world. The research was supported by the ethnographic work of Geertz (1973), Hymes (1991), and Taylor (2012). Gunther Kress’ (2003) framework on social semiotics and digital literacies was a model for analysis, as well as including key players in discourse and narrative analysis and literacy studies.

Literacy Approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis and Narrative Analysis

In literacy studies, “stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it” (Noddings, 1991, p. 13). In literacy and through literary genres, telling stories presents itself in a narrative. I go back to how Geertz (1973) explained that narrative studies innately become interdisciplinary. It begins to take a shape through the acts of “reading, analyzing, transcribing, telling, and attending” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). The student’s narratives were shown through the format of oral presentations, ethnographic writing and digital displays.

Critical discourse analysis revolved around several ways to study “language, discourse, writing, talk, conversation, or communicative events” (Fairclough, 2003). Utilizing CDA as a tool of analysis to collect data presented by the students enabled me to find patterns in their oral narratives, ethnographic writing, and PowerPoint presentation. Through discourse analysis micro cultures and micro languages were analyzed through conversations (Banks & Banks, 2010). Repeated ideas emerged among the five student participants in the study. These ideas were expressed orally and within their writing.

Utilizing the five students’ projects as samples for analysis does not place the students into categories. It personalized their lived experiences and shared greater insight. Speaking teaches us what our natural “literature is” (Deveare Smith, 1994, p. xxxi). I allowed for the students to share their accounts of the religious site. They were influenced by their own upbringing on the ideas of religion, and what religion or avenues of spirituality they exercise currently. Also, their current literacy practices and living environments influenced their learned perceptions. Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic approach to utterance does not eliminate the ordinary represented values of words. Instead it added consideration of the speaker’s position within the storytelling event--such that the represented content communicated and the interactional position established cannot be separated from each other (p. 24). I thought it important to notice that narrative and discourse analysis were tightly interconnected. This study illustrated a ripple of ideas from a common bed of knowledge. In this study, through discourse, the narrative forms a structured pattern by including the speaker’s identity and tradition. These bridges delineate depth in text-to-text analysis and intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981).

Data Collection

This study reflected analysis based upon focused presentations and ethnographic writing by five students within the *Issues in Multicultural Education* course at a state college in New York. The five students collected the data during the Fall 2014 semester. They had the second part of the semester to select a site and conduct research. They shared their ethnographic findings in the classroom. Each wrote a mini ethnographic study following the assignment guidelines and displayed an oral and visual presentation of their research. Each of the five students presented a unique narrative. None of the five students chose a site with a Protestant background. Their shifted viewpoints in time and space became central to the research. Through the retelling of their site visits, oral expression was documented. Patterns were analyzed and mapped. Grounded theory was necessary to include in this studies’ framework. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that through Grounded theory research, “Data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously and each informs and streamlines the other” (p. 1). When reflecting upon the way discourse analysis was used in the classroom space, it added layers to critical conscious research. The first-hand accounts mirrored theoretical frameworks that were studied during the first part of the course. “Grounded theory methodology contains points on where to find the data, how to sharpen one’s observational sensibilities, and how to transition jotted notes during the presentation to the final manuscript” (Bryant &

Charmaz, 2010, p.496). It was not until after the presentations that the layered patterns emerged from the conversations and ethnographic writing samples.

Data Analysis

I first learned about my students' identities through prompted journal writings during the first part of the semester. They attempted to intertwine course theory with their prior experiences. During finals' week in the Fall 2014 semester, students were required to present their assigned ethnographic presentations. The entire class of 32 students chose to reflect images in PowerPoint or Prezi presentations. Along with sharing narrative accounts with the visual presentations, the 32 students submitted ethnographic writings. During the presentations, I took notes on their oral discourse. I asked students to email me their visual assignments. When analyzing the ethnographic writing, I coded the type of site the student visited. I evaluated the writing for correctness. Meeting the objective of each of the assigned prompts was assessed. Through this coding process,

the essential relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code. Coding gives the researcher a condensed, abstract view with scope and dimension that encompasses otherwise seemingly disparate phenomena. Incidents articulated in the data are analyzed and coded, using the constant comparative method, to generate initially substantive, and later theoretical, categories. (Holton, 2010, p. 266)

I noted the shared forms among the 32 students. More than 20 students chose an institution that upheld Christianity or Protestantism, which aligned with some part of their identity. A few students chose to visit Sikh Temples. They practice or had practiced Hinduism and visited a Temple that they have never attended. The five students in the study demonstrated most the practice of the theoretical framework of the course, engaged their peers with their presentations, and showed improvements in reflective writing.

Discussion of Student Work and Findings

It can be understood that critical consciousness research allowed for emerging viewpoints and confronting "social norms" (Hefferman and Lewison, 2005, p. 108.). Within this study, students had the opportunity to interact and view a religious site of their choosing and consider how the first part of the semester's coursework influenced their choices, observations, and writings.

The last unit during the semester allowed students to put into practice ethnographic methods. They read ethnographic writing samples from multiple scholars throughout the semester. Based upon students' experiences and as it related to the content, they entered nine in-class journal submissions and seven online discussion board reactions. For their final assignment, they were asked to visit a religious site within any local community. The site should be one that was new and unfamiliar. Students were asked to gain access to a religious site or non-secular institution that they were not familiar. They were required to write ethnographic notes on the site and include a

description of the site's exterior and interior by painting the picture with their words. Included in the narrative submission should be a detailed discussion of the visit. Questions they could respond to were: Did you go by yourself or did you bring a friend? Did you encounter anyone? An inner-monologue and reflection on the day should include this subjective voice. A self-reflective evaluation of their learning process was exemplified. They responded to such questions: What was their initial perception prior to the experience? Did the visit impact their learned views? Religious sites also contain many artifacts with deep-rooted meanings. Students honed in on one artifact and explained its physicality and signification. These establishments have particular linguistic features. Students were prompted to discuss the language practiced in the space. Prior to entering the religious site, students had a preformed conception about the religious or spiritual beliefs. They referred to a chosen text in any genre that aided or assisted in the discussion about the religious concepts. Lastly, an oral and visual presentation was given. All students chose to use PowerPoint or Prezi. Photographs were taken from the site. (See Appendix for complete assignment.)

Within each of the five selected ethnographic projects, this study analyzed how students practiced critical conscious research, responded and met the requirements, and expressed their observations through writing and oral discussion.

Student One

Student One explored the *Queen of Most Holy Rosary Church*. In her mini ethnographic paper, she wrote "As a Muslim I did not know how there was a difference between Catholicism and Christianity. Fortunately, my friend, took me to her church where I got to experience a Sunday mass with Catholics." The focus in her paper demonstrated a comparison between prayer rituals that she participated in the church with her friend to her prayer rituals as a Muslim. When responding to the text-to-text part of the project, she chose to analyze the characters in the novel *Lord of the Rings* and compared moral ideals.

The student wrote, "A novel that I have read and relate to Catholicism would be the Lord of the Rings series by J.R.R. Tolkein. This fiction novel has many characters that show a reflection of Jesus and Satan. The novel shows a world where there are good people and bad people. Of course, the good people face trouble due to Sauron (the devil) in the novel. The three characters in the book that seem to play an important role in saving the good people are Gandalf, Aragorn and Frodo. The only way Sauron could be destroyed is if his ring is destroyed which gives him power. The ring falls under the hands of many and good people turn bad because they become greedy due to the fact that they wish to keep the ring to themselves."

Student One chose a site that was unfamiliar to her. She attended the site with a peer. She focused her conversation and written analysis on comparing and contrasting two types of religions and the rituals of prayer practice. Her intertextual analysis was distinctive. She compared the overall idea of religion and morals to signifiers within the fiction text *Lord of the Rings*. A typical text chosen among the class was either the

primary text for worship (Bible, Torah, Quran) or a simplified reader to assist with the interpretation of the religion. In the overall study, two students chose children's picture books that illustrated a religious practice or holiday.

Within education, students learn about axiology as a philosophical school. Ethics is taught from a philosophical and educational frame. The student who chose *Lord of the Rings* described the traits and roles of the characters and related it to ethics. The writing reflected how the student was critically conscious in viewing other rituals within religion and related the concept of good and evil within a fiction text. Through a higher order of thinking, she found a commonality between the cultures (Bloom, 2001; Nieto, 1999). This portrayed a rich performance of intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981). She was the only student out of the 20 who visited a Catholic Church who did not have a prior foundation in Christianity. In this way, she was building on the dimension of knowledge construction (Banks, 2010).

Student Two

Student Two shared his experience in visiting the 2nd Largest Black Hebrew Israelite Organization in a diverse urban area. Within the first part of his Powerpoint presentation, he included the following explanation about the group. "It is a Christian Group that accepts the Old & New Testaments of the bible and believes that the specific people of African & West Indian descent are the lost 12 tribes of Israel."

He proceeded to include the days and times that religious classes were held, service days, and additional classes that the church offered in scripture, history, geography, and martial arts. Direct description included the physicality of the site. "The church building consists of four floors but from the front you can't tell whether there is a basement or not. A plain white sign identifies the church with the church's name on the top, with a picture of the planet Earth and the six-pointed Star of David next to it."

He recorded the telephone number and the website. He continued with the description. "Under the white sign is a glass front in all red with black borders separated into four windows. The middle two are the doors to the building. The doors to the church have the Star of David on both of them welcoming people to the Israelite holy headquarters. On the other two outer windows are the list of the 12 tribes of Israel (Judah, Benjamin, Levi, Simeon, Zebulon, Ephraim, Manasseh, Gad, Reuben, Asher, Naphtali, and Issachar), of which they believe that these tribes are specific people of African and West Indian descent. These lost 12 tribes of Israel are what the Israelites believe to be the true racial and Biblical Jews."

This is the first time in my five semesters of teaching the course that a student chose this type of site. He stated that he walked throughout the neighborhood in which he lived and never knew the function of the storefront. This offered an invaluable opportunity for exploration. He was curious and gained entrance. For many students in this course, they did not know about this religion or the functionality of this establishment within this community. The student's writing in this section was

informative after he gained access (Glesne, 2011). His writing focused on a concrete description of the site (for example, the hours of operation). His oral discussion was extensive. Along with the PowerPoint, he also showed a short clip of the members on television sharing the beliefs practiced. From a critical conscious standpoint, he blended the hybrid ideas of race, culture, and religion that were taught earlier in the course (Nieto, 1999; Satrapi, 2008).

Student Three

This student visited a Sikh temple. She explained that the space used to be where a bank was operating, and then the Sikh followers bought the space. The location was not what the student expected to find. From an ethnographic standpoint, Glesne (2011) would support that she became a participant observer and began to record her findings. Students were surprised to learn of the background of the existence.

She included visuals from outside of the Sikh Temple and artifacts found inside the temple. The visuals were colorful and traced the origins in India. Her reflection after the visit was “We don’t live in a world with one religion, one nation, or one culture. So, in order to live in the diverse world, we need to know about other people’s religions, cultures, and traditions along with our own.” It reinforced Nieto’s (1999) theory on culture. However, she practiced Hinduism, but was visiting another location. She found that since American culture is entrenched with the founding ideals of Protestantism, it was necessary to inform others of more global beliefs. In this way she was empowered to share aspects about the religion and acted as the teacher, and portrayed pedagogy equity (Freire, 1973; Banks, 2003).

Three students within the course chose Sikh temples. This particular student experienced much challenge in giving oral presentations throughout the semester. However, her final presentation was one of her strongest expressions. She was a gifted writer in her native language, and for this assignment, she excelled in weaving the visual artifacts and her own inner monologue. Her oral presentation was more engaging and performed. She did not read from the paper, but interacted with the class.

Student Four

Student Four began her presentation with a quote from Gandhi. Within her piece, she chose to begin with the nonviolent activist’s quote and connect to the peaceful community in which she learned. She offered a narrative anecdote of her perception of Jehovah Witnesses. While she had learned practices, she was open and respected another community’s right to assemble and engage. She was applying the Dimensions of Banks’ Multicultural Education through knowledge construction and prejudice reduction.

She began: “Mahatma Gandhi: ‘God has no religion’ some may say that they agree to such saying while others may believe that there is only one kind of religion that God accepts. When we think about Jehovah Witnesses, the first thing that pops up in our heads is people knocking on our door early on Saturday morning asking if you have a

minute to listen to God's word, but in reality that's not all that they do. I used to be a person that blocked my thoughts with anything that had to do with Jehovah Witnesses. It was not because I disliked them but because I had my own church that I attended."

Again, students were fascinated by this student's experience and willingness to visit an establishment that was often ostracized or viewed stereotypically by the general public. This was a great risk the student took. She had Catholic roots and identified herself as an English Language Learner. She articulated that a public conception of Jehovah Witnesses was to be "intrusive". The class thought it courageous that she was able to find a way to participate with the community. They were able to notice how she internalized the process of knowledge construction. It also highlighted Greene's (2009) and Freire's (1973) practice of becoming critically conscious with observation. While her oral presentation was detailed, the academic tone and structure of the writing was not as strong. However, the final writing sample did confirm a progression in her writing from the onset of the semester.

Student Five

Student Five began with expressing the reason she chose her location. "I chose this religious institution because I have always been curious to see what the interior of this religious site looks like. ---- Muslim Center is not only a school but a place of worship, also known as a "mosque."'" In her writing she was detailed in referring to the meaning of language as it related to the religion.

"According to (that religious studies website), the word Qur'an means, 'recited' or 'that which is read.' The Quran is a holy book in Islam. It is used for payers. It is believed to be God's final revelation to humanity. It is said that God has revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. Even though the Quran was translated into many different languages, Muslims consider a Quran written in Arabic to be the Word of God. Qurans written in Arabic are treated as a sacred object by Muslims. Many believe that in order to touch a Quran written in Arabic, one must be pure in order to do so. Also, many Muslims believe that in order to appreciate the true meaning of the Quran, it must be read in Arabic. The Quran is made up of 114 chapters of unequal lengths called Surahs."

Students listened attentively to her presentation. This student's writing focused on the "definitions" and meanings of the religious text and the historical stories. This student practiced the dimensions of prejudice reduction and content integration. Especially within a post 9/11 environment, and with the current state of affairs, students found other meanings and unpacked an aspect of the religion that they have never been exposed to in any K-12 public school classroom. After the presentation, every student conveyed that on the public high school level Islam was not studied in a critically conscious way. Other religions like Christianity and Judaism entered the curriculum more regularly. On a 7-12 public school level, traditionally the Islamic foundations are taught. However, it is not explored in greater detail or through a critical literacy approach. The dialogue in the class became dynamic and allowed each of the students in the class to be

critically reflective of the types of pedagogy that they were exposed to as an adolescent (Banks, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978, Freire, 1970).

Collective Findings

Through practicing critical conscious methods throughout the semester, students were required to enact ethnographic methods. The final assignment prompted students to choose a location. Throughout the class, each expressed the reason they chose the site for the final project. Three consistent reasons surfaced. First, the site was close in location, which made it convenient and accessible. They had a contact or knew someone who practiced at the site. Lastly, they chose the site because they wanted to learn more about it. Four of the five participants visited a site that they did not have a prior connection with even though they had prior knowledge through other sources of information. The four experienced the site first hand. Like an ethnographer, they had to gain access into the space. They respected the space. They confronted their own beliefs and shared their findings.

From a writing standpoint, since all the students followed guided prompts, the organization of the written sections was structured. Based upon the 32 students, the formality of writing could be more consistent. Students shifted between colloquialisms and academic language. Syntactically, students could be more mindful of mechanics. It was unclear whether students did not place time and emphasis on this part of the writing process or if they did not have comprehension. Almost two thirds of the class illustrated a consistent clarity in their writing. Among the five students in the study, three of the students exemplified greater strength within oral expression than with the formal writing task. However, there was a progression in their writing from the beginning of the semester. Two of the students began the semester with a strong base in academic descriptive writing. However, all five demonstrated a shift within their thought process and this was conveyed through their writing and oral expression. They were combining and confronting a variety of ideas by placing these concepts into multiple modes. Through their gestures and intonation in their verbal expression, they personalized and embodied the experience during the presentation and gained confidence on presenting a topic that was not often discussed.

Several of the artifacts chosen were revealed through the visual images in the PowerPoint or Prezi presentation. Artifacts included objects hanging at the center and forefront of the site. The artifact was often a focus during prayer time. The text that the community worshipped was a consistent choice discussed. Pamphlets and programs during service were cited within projects. All images included a symbol or text to show the linguistic features of the site. Some sites reflected the traditional alphabet. Many sites held unrecognizable symbols. Of the five participants, three of five were able to understand the printed features at the site.

After the students presented on their visits, the class concluded with three unified conclusions about the project. Through written informal reflections and oral presentations, they stated that each establishment had a code of conduct in which people

followed in the space where they assembled. There were a set of practices and beliefs that were performed. Thirdly, the interior and exterior of the buildings consisted of a particular infrastructure and repeated pattern from town to town (Willis, 2000). This diverse project allowed students to venture to such venues within the areas of Harlem, Brooklyn, Long Island, and Manhattan. One student during spring break went to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Other spaces visited were:

Queen of Most Holy Rosary Church

Kingdom Hall

St. Paraslavi Greek Orthodox Shrine

Plainview Jewish Center

United Methodist Church

First Presbyterian

Christ Episcopal Church

Grace Baptist Church

St. Patrick's Cathedral

Systems of Faith included: Protestantism, Church of God in Christ Baptist, African Methodist, Episcopal, & Pentecostal

Over the past year, discussions within this course circled around relevant topics in New York relating to race and authority and crime and culture. The stories explored and learned in this course were of importance especially because of the violence committed and documented around the nation and globe. A student responded at the end of the semester that "I have friends in all communities (meaning-- law enforcement officials and communities with high levels of police surveillance), and it doesn't matter. In the end, we are killing each other." This was a powerful statement. The significance of this project was to allow students to be open to experience 'the unfamiliar' in order to alleviate tension, hate, fear, rage, and concern about another community. This project considers one to give over to the idea of tolerance through a lens of conscious and to discern and interrogate second hand information. These mindful acts were key because it could have the potential to bring about peaceful practices.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper assessed how students incorporated critical conscious research into their lived experience at a religious institution and how theoretical frameworks from the course were included in their final written and oral presentations. Students within these course re-envisioned narrative stories through their own encounters and by being critically conscious (Greene, 2009). In each of the student's papers they met the objective by responding to each of the parts. They provided evidence through direct and indirect descriptions. They analyzed and made observations about religious sites through written and oral presentations. They were agents within the teaching process (Freire, 1978). They respected and listened to other transactional accounts. They acted like ethnographers in venturing to communities that were unfamiliar. They taught and shared new knowledge through first hand experiences about religion, language, culture. Their presentations became multimodal not only through technology but included

artifacts that held layered meanings (multimodal). This project was an opportunity for students to be at the forefront of teaching, and they had an opportunity to voice their findings.

The development of this course reflected critically conscious practices. An analysis and understanding of varied pedagogical methods, instructional materials, related curricula, and problems of multicultural education empower future teachers with knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to effectively work in diverse classrooms. Strong teaching methods create a classroom environment which builds a “community of learners.” Even if the students in this course do not continue within the field of education, they can still practice tolerance and empathy.

Reflecting upon the conception of this course, teaching tolerance, empathy and promoting social justice are paramount. Students do feel unsafe. They feel unsafe because of the public acts of violence that can appear at any venue-- malls, movie theatres, and even religious sites. Through education and learning about different environments, it allows for students to rethink their viewpoints and confront fears. Elio Frattaroli (2002) wrote,

The real importance of being conscious is that it allows us to become better people. It opens us to love and a genuine sense of community with our fellow human beings. It inspires us to live in accord with our higher values, and to recognize and change the patterns of suffering we inflict (on ourselves as well as others) through the unreflective enactment of our repetition compulsions. (p. 433)

We are ultimately trying to have students become better people and contribute to society positively, and this course and project provided students a chance to be “leaders for a just world through interdisciplinary teaching and learning.” The multicultural literature and sources studied throughout the semester incorporated “interactive processes” that were reliant upon critical discourse and ethnographic methods (Rogers, 2002).

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Appendix

Mini-Ethnographic Project

Visit a religious site within any chosen community. The site should be one that is new and unfamiliar. Students are asked to gain access. The description of the assignment is below:

- Choose a religious site or non-secular institution that you are not familiar with and visit the site. Write ethnographic notes on the site. What does the external site look like? What does the interior look like? (Paint the picture with your words).
- Discuss the visit. Did you go by yourself or did you bring a friend? Did you encounter anyone? What was the visit like for you? Include your inner-monologue and reflections on the day. What was something you learned? Did your initial perceptions change? Explain.
- Choose one artifact from the site. Describe the physicality along with the meaning behind the artifact.
- Evaluate Language: What language is spoken in this space? Are the printed texts written in multiple languages? Why do you think the site chose to include language in this way?
- Choose one book—print based (it can be in any genre or format that you would like—fiction, non-fiction, journal article) that discusses the religion that is practiced at this site. Explain one new idea that you took away from the written piece. Did the text complement what you had seen on your actual visit? Be sure to cite the text on a reference page.
- An oral presentation will be given about your visit. Pictures should be taken of and at the site (as it fits within the guidelines of the institution).

About the Author

Josefa Pace possesses a Ph.D. in Literacy Studies. Through ethnographic research and discourse and narrative analysis, Josefa examines writing and digital rhetoric on culture, identity, and gender.