

CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND CURRICULUM

BY KRYSZYNA NOWAK-FABRYKOWSKI
& ANDREW PRICE

IN CONSIDERING A DEFINITION of "culture," different approaches can be taken. In Spradly's (1979) definition, a culture is considered a system of meaningful symbols. Culture is a shared perspective of the individuals, who are socialized by integration of different symbols and interaction inside the society (Charon, 1989). Boekstijn (1988) stresses the complexity of issues of cultural identity and the dilemma between socio-cultural adaptation and the presentation of identity. Culture stimulates the behavior and influences learning by exposing people to different values, norms, and demands. As Ortner (1979) emphasizes, each culture has certain key elements of special significance. But cultures are by no means mutually exclusive: they overlap, contain, and are contained by other cultures (Halliday 1994).

Mount Union College is a small liberal arts college situated in Alliance, Ohio. Most of the students attending this college come from the immediate vicinity. The enroll-

ment data provided by the *Campus Cultural Audit* (1999) for 1997-98 indicated that out of a total headcount enrollment of 1,920, just 2 percent were international students, 1.5 percent were African American students, and 1.5 percent identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic. The total minority student population of 127 students represented only 6.6 percent of the total College enrollment in 1997-98.

In order to provide more information on diversity that would help the students to work in diverse settings, in 1995 the College, with funding from Ameritech, began a curriculum transformation pilot project. The purpose of the project was to assist faculty members who were interested in restructuring their courses in order to reflect a multicultural approach to course content and pedagogy. The project was an outgrowth of an institutional initiative, adopted by the faculty in 1993, to "foster greater awareness and commitment to diversity among faculty, students, and staff in both curricular and co-curricular" areas.

The pilot project was launched for the 1995-96 academic year through a workshop led by Lee Knefelkamp that was attended by 35 faculty and staff members. Of that initial group, 12 committed themselves to working in a year-long workshop, led by Jamie Capuzza of the Department of Communication. The work begun by the

Ameritech grant was continued the following year, this time through a three-year grant from the George Gund Foundation. The 1996-67 annual workshop was led by Wendy Kolmar, with 26 faculty members attending; that year, 9 faculty members signed on for the annual workshop. The following year, it was led by Elizabeth Minnich, with 22 faculty members in attendance. Nine faculty members then signed on for the year-long workshop. The 1998-99 workshop was led jointly by Terry Kershaw, Austin Brooks, and Andrew Price; thirteen faculty members worked on revising their courses that year. To this date, as a result of the combined funding by Ameritech and Gund, 43 faculty have participated in this project, nearly 40 percent of the total Mount Union College faculty.

Central to the work of the year-long workshop is the goal of making multicultural issues central to our courses, not merely superficial "add-ons." To that end, participating faculty members chose a single course with the goal of offering a newly "transformed" version of it in the near future, usually the following academic year.

At the beginning of the workshop, faculty submitted a written "base statement" describing the course they had chosen, focusing on course content, assessment practices, required texts, and pedagogy. The "base statement" provided both the faculty member and the group with a kind of "before" snapshot of the course, which usually

Krystyna Nowak-Fabrykowski is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and Andrew Price is an associate professor in the Department of English and director of the American Studies Program, both at Mount Union College, Alliance, Ohio.

reflected a fairly conventional approach to the course content and pedagogy.

Members of the workshop met over the course of a year, during which time they read literature on multicultural course transformation, shared their struggles, and listened to presentations from other faculty members who had participated in the project in previous years. By the time the workshop was over, participants usually had a pretty good sense of the work that lay ahead in order to make their course conform to the goals of the workshop.

After the workshop, members then went out and offered their revised courses, implementing issues of culture and diversity. When they were done, they submitted a transformed syllabus, along with a reflective statement in which they shared successes as well as disappointments (many were often invited to present their narratives to next year's group or to the faculty at large). Faculty members who completed the entire project received a modest stipend.

The newly transformed courses now offered in the Mount Union College curriculum reflect a broad range of subject matter. Each course, though, is distinguished by the attention it pays to issues of race, ethnicity, and gender. Courses revised in the English Department include "Critical Theory and Practice," "The English Renaissance," and "Voices of Canadian Americans." In the Communications Department, a course in "The Rhetoric of Woman's Suffrage" has been added to the Department's offerings. In Political Science, a new course in "Women and Politics" was successfully offered. The Sport Management Department has offered two transformed courses, "History and Philosophy of Sport" and "Program Management." The Department of Economics has offered a course in "Economics of Gender." These are just handful of the courses that have been restructured as a result of the College's efforts to respond to the challenges of multicultural education.

Such courses are successfully transformed because the multicultural course content is truly integrated throughout the courses. Those participating in the workshop agree that "simple exposure [to difference] is absolutely meaningless without a reconsideration and restructuring of the ways in which knowledge is organized, disseminated, and used to support unequal power relations" (Gordon & Lubiano, 249-250).

For Mount Union College faculty members, the rewards of participating in the project are twofold. First, there is the satisfaction of opening student eyes to texts, perspectives, and experiences that have

traditionally fallen outside the purview of the college curricula. Before enrolling in transformed courses, most students are only dimly aware of the extent to which college curricula reflect the viewpoint of the white middle class. Simply put, they are not aware of the ways in which course content reflects social structures of power and privilege. (For many faculty participants as well, there was often shock expressed in recognition of how thoroughly their chosen academic discipline reflects racial, gender, and class bias).

Transformed courses allow for students to see how normative whiteness has silenced other voices, how knowledge is truly socially constructed. Second, there is the satisfaction of providing our students of color course content that more closely fits their own experiences. Students do indeed become richer and happier when classroom readings and practices are responsive to their experiences and backgrounds. Both white students and students of color emerge from such courses as agents of social change who are keenly aware of the myriad intersections between culture, politics, and the making of knowledge.

IN THE DEPARTMENT of Education, one of the authors transformed a course entitled "Introduction to Early Childhood Education." The multicultural content started from the description of the course. A description was added: "This course also teaches how to implement knowledge of cultural and linguistic diversity and endorses the recognition that children are best understood in the contexts of family and culture." In the course objective, the focus is now on "Developing the abilities of positive interactions with children coming from different cultural backgrounds" and "respecting and loving children of diverse heritage." In the requirements for the student presentations, the topics have been expanded to include multicultural content such as the children's home culture, cultural contrasts in communication styles, communication styles in high- and low context cultures, a bilingual programs in kindergarten, and an anti-bias curriculum.

In the course handout, new elements were introduced in the assigned reflection questions: Do you think your ideas, feelings, and views relate to your culture? Do you regard your views, feelings, and meanings as a cultural issue? How important is it for a young child to learn to properly greet an older person and learn other similar ways of showing respect? Do you think your answer relates to your culture? Have you had personal experience with bilingual education?

The new assignment in observation (field experience) involves evaluating the classroom as a multicultural environment. After teaching this course for a year, it became evident that the changes that have been made influenced classroom discussions and the students' perception. One of the students commented in her final paper:

My ideal school would have cultural diversity. This includes diversity in the teachers and staff. The cultural diversity would help the students learn how to work with others and help develop individuality. [...] Students that have been sheltered from cultural diversity have a harder time dealing with these problems once they encounter them. Cultural diversity also helps students establish identity and individuality. By learning about other cultures, they begin to learn about themselves and how they are different than other students. Students need to learn these things and become comfortable with themselves so that they can use it to their advantage out in the real world. The teachers and staff should contain cultural diversity so that the students can watch them and learn from them. The students will be able to see differences by watching them, and learn from them by listening to first hand experiences the teachers may have had.

REFERENCES

- Boekstijn, C. (1988). Intercultural migration and the development of personal identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Vol.12, 83-105.
- Charon, J. (1989). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Third Edition.
- Gordon, T. (1992). The statement of the Black Faculty caucus. In Paul Berman (ed.), *Debating P.C.: The controversy over political correctness on college campuses*. New York: Dell-Laurel, pp.249-50.
- Holliday, A. (1994). Student Culture and English Language Education: An International Perspective. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. Vol. 7 no. 2.
- Heiman, S., LaCour, D. Risscher, J. (May, 1999). *Campus Cultural Audit Final Report*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Ortner, S. (1979) Key Symbols. In Lensa, W. & Voght, E., *Reading in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Spradley, J.P. (1979). *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.