

Literacy, Culture, Content: The Semiotic Triad Breaks Cultural Bounds for Diversity and Equity

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Abstract

The author as the teacher educator and her students as teacher candidates conceptualized semiotics into the course, "Exploring Social and Cultural Perspectives on Diversity". This is one of the six major courses in Core Curriculum, and serves as a prerequisite for admission to the Teacher Education Program. The purposes are to breakthrough the myths about immigration, free candidates from cultural bounds, and prepare candidates as cultural mediators who are able to willingly interact with their students and parents from diversity. The candidates explored the definition of diversity and the impact of diversity on literacy, differentiated their instruction, and integrated culture and content into English language proficiency (ELP). In this study, the semiotic triad comprised three signs: literacy, culture and content that were deliberately interwoven as a semiotic web for the development of social skills, and achieve academic success of their students from diversity toward literacy equity and cultural proficiency.

Keywords: diversity, semiotic triad, cultural bounds, cultural mediator, literacy equity

1. Introduction

The US Immigration Reform Bill (2013) proposed to issue the W-Visa for nonimmigrant laborers to solve the problem of labor shortages in the US, and the new bill will issue up to 185,000 new working visas in the next four years of the bill's enactment from 2014.

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More people from diversity will immigrate into this country bearing W-Visas, and their children whose native language is not English will populate this country and legally enroll in the public schools.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Most teachers in this country are monocultural (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012) or hold the misconception about immigration (Teaching Tolerance, 2011) and are not ready to deliver appropriate instruction to meet the special needs of their students from diverse backgrounds. The other problem is that culture and diversity are rarely addressed in teacher education programs (Beatty & Pratt, 2011; Robles de Melendez & Beck, 2013; Spradlin, 2012).

1.2 Objectives

The author and the teacher candidates conceptualized semiotics into the course, "Exploring Sociocultural Perspectives on Diversity". The purposes are to free teacher candidates from cultural bounds (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012) by breaking through myths about immigration (Teaching Tolerance, 2011), and prepare candidates as cultural mediators who are able to integrate culture, contents (i.e. Art, English language, Health & Physical Education, Mathematics, Music, Science, Social Studies) into culturally responsive differentiated instruction (Huber, 2010; Tomlinson, 2000) to enhance the English Language Proficiency (ELP) of their students from diversity toward social and academic success. At the same time, the candidates as well as their students from diversity and mainstream culture will be benefited to engage the world.

2. Literacy, Culture, Content - The Semiotic Triad

The creation of meaning is a biologically determined need of the living organism, and all living things communicate by exchanging signs (Eisner, 1978). Any item, whether natural or artificial, that is to have meaning can be employed as a sign (Langer, 1978). The world in which we are living is perfused with signs (Eco, 1990) and call for interpretation (Gallagher, 1992). Semiotics is the study of signs and the action of signs such as Languages, arts, music, dance, drama, cultures, etc. that humans created to mediate the world (Cunningham, 1992; Deely, 1994; Sebeok, 1978; 2001).

In this study, the semiotic triad (Siegel & Carey, 1989) comprises three signs or sign systems: language, culture and content (i.e. English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies). These three signs or sign systems are deliberately interwoven as a semiotic web (Sebeok, 1978) for the social and academic success of their student populations.

2.1 Literacy Equity

2.1.1 Teaching essential linguistics

For the curriculum of literacy in this course, the author and the candidates overviewed “essential linguistics” (Freeman & Freeman, 2004) so that candidates, most are native speakers of English, may be familiar with the instruction of the basic linguistic concepts in teaching reading/writing, ESL, spelling, phonics, and grammar to English language learners.

2.1.2 Pragmatics

Teaching natural conversation. Bardovi-Harlig (2011) investigated that most students from diversity have little opportunity to engage in appropriate linguistic behaviors outside classroom, which revealed that simply exposing those students from diversity to grammatically appropriate sentences is inadequate. Thus, the author incorporated activities for “Pragmatics: Teaching natural conversation” (Houck, & Tatsuki, 2011) in this course, in order that candidates will be able to engage their students of diversity into the following interactional activities in authentic language patterns such as expressing gratitude (Bardovi-Harlig, 2011), saying apologies (Lieske, 2011), paying compliments (Carduner, 2011), taking turns and talking naturally (Carroll, 2011), and performing pragmatic competency in telephone conversation (Wong, 2011). Through this kind of authentic discourse, the students from diversity will develop functional literacy (Dolly, 1998) for social success in and outside school settings.

2.1.3 WIDA Consortium (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment)

WIDA (www.wida.us) is an educational consortium which designs and implements proficiency standards and assessments for grade K-12 students who are English language learners (ELLs). WIDA also provides professional development to educators and conducts research on instructional practices.

The author introduced this consortium (2002; 2009) as a resource guide in matrix into the literacy part of this course and required candidates to use the consortium to design and assess their students' English Language Proficiency (ELP) in six levels (entering, beginning, developing, expanding, bridging, and reaching) for the four language domains - listening, speaking, reading and writing.

WIDA has five standards for English language proficiency: ELLs communication for social and instructional purposes, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies spanning the K-12 spectrum. Teacher candidates manipulated the CAN DO Descriptors in WIDA to pre-assess, design, and assess the integrating of English language proficiency across contents and differentiate their instruction in listening, speaking, reading and writing to match students' various proficiency levels.

Example 1. The candidate modeled the CAN DO Descriptor and invited students

to locate information on graphs based on oral statements or questions (*e.g.*, "Which bar shows that most children like ice cream?") (ELP Standard 3: The Language of

Mathematics, Formative Framework). If the student from diversity can interpret the data on the graph, the candidate will place him/her on Grade Level 1-2, Listening Level 3.

Example 2. If the student from diversity can "forecast weather and provide reasons from pictures, photographs or graphs" (ELP Standard 4: The Language of Science, Formative Framework), the candidate will place him/her on Grade Level 1-2, Speaking Level 4.

Currently, thirty-three U.S. states participate in consortium (www.wida.us) and TESOL International Association planned to adopt this WIDA Consortium for TESOL from 2014 (TESOL English Language Bulletin, 2013).

2.2. Cultural Proficiency

2.2.1 Integrating Culture as Semiotics

Semiotics of culture (Salupere, Torop, & Kull, 2013) defines culture as a type of human symbolic activity, and the creation of signs and a way of giving meaning to everything. Cushner, McClelland, & Safford (2012) assert that culture determines people's thought, ideas, patterns of interaction, and material adaptations to the world around them, and it should be infused into our daily life. The U.S. is a multicultural nation that includes people from African, Asian, Caribbean, European, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and other backgrounds. However, Beaty and Pratt (2011), and Richards, Brown, & Forde (2006) are deeply concerned that cultures in the school settings have been made superficial in only the celebrating of occasional cultural holidays, heroes, and festivals, with little integration into the overall curriculum within the Teacher Education Program. Lord David Wilson (2013), a retired British diplomat and Governor of Hong Kong, advocates that culture should be at the heart of efforts to tackle the challenges facing the international community, to raise understanding between people and nations; to encourage solutions to the major international challenges, and to help solve intractable social, political and economic problems. Boraie (2013), the TESOL President, declares the inclusion of cultures in the EFL/ESL curriculum.

2.2.2 Cultural Proficiency and Equity Literacy

Teacher educators like Alvermann, Gillis, & Phelps (2013) who integrated culture into the curriculum to make teacher candidates the culturally responsive educators, and Gorski (2014) who advocates equity literacy as well as cultural proficiency, reflect a shift in educator's commitment to implement the knowledge, skills professional dispositions, and create and sustain equitable and social justice learning environments for both diverse and mainstream students.

2.2.3 NCATE and CAEP Standards– Diversity

The accreditation standards from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2001) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) (2013) are endorsed to establish high quality teacher preparation through the process of professional accreditation of schools, colleges and departments of education:

NCATE Standard 4: *Diversity says* "...the unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for teacher candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to **diversity**. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher educators and P–12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P–12 schools" (NCATE Standard 4: Diversity).

The author adopted the accreditation standards in the design, instruction and assess of this course and aligned the course description, objectives and assignment with these standards, so that candidates can achieve the course objective which is to demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity through the field experiences.

2.3 Content Literacy

Most teacher candidates planned to teach in fields such as Art Education, Communication Disorder, Early Childhood Education, Middle & Secondary & Reading & Deaf Education, Music Education, Speech Therapy, PE & Kinesiology, and Special Education. The candidates are required to develop a lesson according to his/her/their major to fit diverse student populations. The lessons are created based on the WIDA Can Do Descriptors in different levels of listening, speaking, reading and writing across contents. Their students from diversity will obtain the knowledge of the contents while learn and acquire the English language.

2.3.1 Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction is Transformative

To Tomlinson (2000), there is no “recipe” for culturally responsive instruction. However, the author shared the following five pillars of culturally responsive differentiated instruction (Huber, 2010) with the class so that the candidates might apply them in creating their lessons and differentiate their instruction in various stages (i.e. pre-assessment, design, ongoing assessment, justification) to meet the special needs of their students from diversity:

1. Assessment is ongoing, diagnostics and influences instruction (Assessment, climate, instruction, and curricula use students' strengths, interests, background, home life, and lived experiences to validate student identities)
2. Variety of instructional strategies used within a classroom. (Recognizes culture's influence and then uses cultural resources to mediate instruction)
3. Multiple types of materials are utilized as resources. (Includes resources that legitimize the cultural and historical legacies of all cultural and ethnic groups by including these legacies in the materials)
4. Students are engaged in problem solving and inquiry. (Students are active in all aspects of learning and teaching)
5. Qualitative focus to assignments (Assignments are meaningful and purposeful to students, families, and teachers)

2.3.2 Paradigm Shift by Integrating Literacy, Culture and Contents

The author designed this course for the exploring and understanding of cultural diversity (Ariza, 2009; Bennett, 2011; Gollnick, & Chinn, 2013; Spradlin, 2012) in terms of two approaches: culture-general approach (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2015) and culture-specific approach (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2015):

2.3.2.1 Culture-General Approach

Activities based on this approach are more universal from reviewing the popular cultural groups (Ariza, 2009) for the tradition, value, religion, languages, family of people of diversity, and the inclusion of multicultural literature and multicultural movies.

Multicultural literature plays a considerable role in the development of understanding across cultures (Norton, 2001): to get rid of xenophobia, the fear or mistrust of a people from different culture, and to foster candidates' cross-cultural awareness. Candidates can survey information about literature, movies, arts, music, dance, theatre and festivals about people from different cultural groups by surveying the web site of National Association of Multicultural Education www.name.name.org, and International Children Digital Library at www.icdlb.org

2.3.2.2 Culture-Specific Approach

Activities based on this approach are to acquaint candidates with individuals from diverse background. Candidates interviewed and observed people who were international students on the campus or foreigners in the community including African, European, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Muslims, Hispanics, Indians, etc. whom they met at a local international festival. The candidate inquired about the interviewee's family, education, religion, customs, habits, politics, value, culture, society, tradition, behavior, food, dressing, and etiquette in depth and shared the findings with the class.

3. Assessment and Assignments

As well as the four tests that the author designed for evaluating candidates' knowledge about diversity, the candidates completed the following seven assignments in terms of field experiences to make the concepts of diversity more realistic and concrete.

3.1 Assignment 1: My cultural autobiography

Each candidate wrote an essay in which he/she traced back his/her cultural background, family experiences, school education, religious inspiration, community activities, and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) that shape "what I am". This assignment activated teacher candidates' cultural consciousness for cultural identity.

3.2 Assignment 2: Other peoples' stories

Each candidate reviewed a multicultural literature book from the International Children Digital Library www.icdlbook.org, and watched a multicultural movie from www.bridgesweb.org by authors, illustrators or directors of the target culture for authenticity and reliability, yet without bias or stereotype (Melendez & Beck, 2013; Norton 2001). Multicultural literature and movies help candidates become aware of people from diversity.

3.3 Assignment 3: Global issues

Each candidate surveyed the recent news from www.linktv.org or Time magazine for a global issue that affected the whole universe.

3.4 Assignment 4: His/her story

Each candidate (1) interviewed an adult (at least 15 years old) from cultural/linguistic/religious diversity, (2) inquired about his/her experiences of racism, discrimination, and struggle since he/she immigrated into this country, (3) used WIDA-The Can Do Descriptors to evaluate the interviewee's English Language Proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and (4) offered strategies to improve the interviewee's English Language Proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing at appropriate grade level.

3.5 Assignment 5

My spiritual experience. Each candidate attended one religious activity, and described the activity including the service in verses, hymns, lecture, and his/her reflection on the sermons. This assignment opened candidates' minds to religious pluralism by infusing the religion into academic content (Wicht, 2014).

3.6 Assignment 6

Research on diversity. Each candidate selected a topic about diversity, conducted the research, submitted a 150-word proposal of the research, made PowerPoint or poster, and presented the research at one of the conferences (i.e. cross-culture conference, state conference on Teacher Education, or the university's Undergraduate Research Symposium).

3.7 Assignment 7

Group lesson. Each candidate group created a lesson based on the principles of culturally responsive differentiated instructional strategy (Huber, 2010; Tomlinson, 2000) across the content areas at various English Language Proficiency (ELP) levels.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The candidates are required to take this course, "Exploring social and cultural perspectives on diversity", one of the six major courses in the Core Curriculum before being admitted into the Teacher Education Program. Usually there are approximately 110 enrollments in this course every semester. Most candidates are Caucasians and African Americans, and some are from diverse backgrounds. For example, I had four Native Americans (Cherokee), two Mexicans, four Korean, one Vietnamese, one Chinese, one from South Africa (Zulu), one from Columbia, and one from Peru, last year in 2013. The author encouraged the candidates from diverse backgrounds to share their cultural/linguistic/religious experiences with the class.

4.2 Data Collection

The author supported candidates to submit their 150-word proposals of their research on diversity to the cross-cultural conference, conference on teacher education, University Symposium on Undergraduate Research, etc. Twenty candidates' proposals were accepted and they presented their research in the University symposium in April, 2014. Their topics were listed on the symposium program (p. 19-21). The other data were lessons created by candidates based on WIDA consortium and culturally responsive differentiated instruction strategies (Huber, 2010).

4.3 Findings

There are two categories of finding in this study: Candidates' concerns about the issues of diversity, and candidates' group lessons for culturally responsive differentiated instruction strategies.

5. Discussions

5.1 Candidates' Concerns about the Issues of Diversity (excerpts from candidates' presentation in the university undergraduate research symposium in 2014):

5.1.1 "Bible in education". One candidate advocated the inclusion of the Bible in public school setting to overcome "violence" and create a more peaceful living and learning environment.

5.1.2 "Victims of school bullying". One candidate was greatly concerned about the victims by school bullying, and offered advices to the victims and the bully as well.

5.1.3 "Child abuse in the U.S.". One candidate proposed to support the abused child in his classroom.

5.1.4 "Chiraq – The fallen city of Chicago". One candidate was very anxious to see Chicago, his home city, became a city of violence, and danger like Iraq.

5.1.5 "Deforestation – Environmental issue". On candidate offered to minimize deforestation for a better living environment.

5.1.6 "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – My hero". One candidate confirmed that Dr. M.L.K, Jr. was his hero who guided him to righteousness.

5.1.7 "Dropout nation". One candidate advocated the school districts to hire more teachers and counselors who are committed to help the at-risk youth.

5.1.8 "Homeless people in the U.S". One candidate felt sorry for the homeless children in his classroom and offered to give them more support economically and academically.

5.1.9 "Immigrant workers in the U.S.".One candidate advocated for the immigrant workers for solving the problem of labor shortage in this country.

5.1.10 "People living in poverty".One candidate supported a more healthy social security system to accommodate the people living in poverty.

5.1.11"People of vanity".One candidate offered the new tax policy which requires The rich people to pay more tax.

5.1.12 "So what is Linanity?".One candidate commented that the bias and stereotype prevented the Asian athletes from playing basketball in the U.S.

5.1.13 "Students of handicap in special education".One candidate advocatedthat the students with minor handicap should be placed in the inclusive classroom for equal learning opportunity.

5.1.14 "The different version of the Gypsies".One candidate commented that the Gypsies were mistreated because of our prejudice.

5.1.15"Gypsies the wondering people".The other candidate advocated for the human rights for the Gypsies in the world.

5.1.16"The image of Africa".One candidate complained that the social media misled the concept about Africa, and she presented many positive images of Africa based on her living experience in Egypt and Ghana through the Fulbright Scholarship.

5.1.17"Tiger Moms".One candidate worried that the Asian American children with "Tiger Moms" cannot endure the pressure for academic success.

5.1.18 "Where are the Taino people?".Two candidates were very curious about the

Taino people, who greeted Columbus in 1492, but disappeared within 20 years. They conducted the research and were excited to find out that the antecedents of the Taino people are still living in the Caribbean Islands, and are happy farmers and fishermen developing their own culture.

5.2 Candidates' Lessons Based on Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction:

5.2.1 "Pragmatics: Teaching natural conversation". (Houck, & Tatsuki, 2011): Candidates taught the students how to use language appropriately in various social and cultural context, like expressing gratitude, saying apology, paying compliment and talking over the phone, etc. Since most students from diversity are very shy and lack English language to express themselves, these strategies help them develop their social skills for interaction with teachers or their English-speaking peers.

5.2.2 "Read-aloud (Hickman, & Pollard-Durodola, 2009) & think-aloud" (Oczkus, 2009): Four candidates used these effective and interesting strategies to improve reading fluency and reading comprehension across the content like Science, Math, Social Studies as well as English Language Arts.

5.2.3 "Language experience approach" (Ashton-Warner, 1965)" and "Graphic Novel" (Lu, 2010) motivated students from diversity for multisensory learning (Siegel, 2006) by using storytelling, drawing and invented spelling to tell their family stories.

5.2.4 "The very expressive ASL": After watching a romantic drama film about a mute female piano player, 'The Piano' (Campion, 1993), three candidates with major in ASL (The American Sign Language) were surprised that sign languages can be so expressive, and they created a short story embedding ten vocabulary words in ASL.

5.2.5 "Movie script" (Gormly, 2013; Hoffner, 2003). Three candidates with major in Early Childhood & Special Education invited students to watch a piece of movie 'The Little Mermaid' for 5-10 minutes, and invited the students in small group to discuss the plot, pick up different characters, write movie script in terms of pictures and invented spelling, and acted. The candidates created a very pleasant atmosphere for students to improve their listening comprehension, speaking fluency, critical writing, and reading skills when they enjoy watching the movie, and acting it.

The popular movies candidates used in this class are *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo*, *Wizard of OZ*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Charlotte's Web*, etc.

5.2.6 "Echo or choral reading". Two candidates with music major used these two strategies to improve students' oral language by listening to and repeating after the candidates.

5.2.7 "Meaning vocabulary" (Stahl & Shiel, 1992): Three candidates used the Frayer Model to teach the vocabulary words in content. This model prompts students to articulate the sound, define the concept, make a sentence with the new vocabulary word, draw an illustration of the word from the four squares of the model, and help students understand the new vocabulary words thoroughly.

5.2.8 "Story grammar": The three candidates with psychology major demonstrated various graphic devices to organize their thought for reasoning, reading comprehension and persuasive writing.

5.2.9 "Integrating children literature into math". A candidate with middle school math major created a math lesson, 'Dr. Seuss Comes to Math Class: Making sense of variables, expressions & equations with Dr. Seuss.' The lesson was related to students' life experience in using cash to pay the meal in a restaurant, and motivated students' interest in the basic math concepts.

5.2.10 "DR-TA" (Stauffer, 1969). Three candidates invited students to watch segments of a movie, and make prediction. Students used these strategies step by step to monitor their thinking while watching the detective movie by confirming, revising or modifying their previous prediction.

5.2.11 "SPAWN" (Martin, Martin, & O'Brein, 1984): Teacher candidates demonstrated how to use these strategies for creative writing because learners have "special power" for "problem solving" by "alternative viewpoints" following "what if" and "next". Candidates challenged students to exercise their critical thinking and changed the plots or the ending of stories or movies and rewrote the stories with alternative viewpoints.

5.2.12 "Reading as transmediation" (Lu, 1996; Siegel, 2006): Three candidates revised the story of "The ugly duckling" into a script for Readers Theater.

They divided the students into five intelligent groups and used the signs of drama/readers theater, arts (drawing), music, dance, and American Sign Language (ASL) to interpret the story. All students happily participated in this semiotic activity.

5.3 Candidates' Self-Reflection

Most teacher candidates commented that the seven assignments in this course help them

break through the cultural myths about immigration (Teaching Tolerance, 2011), free them from the cultural constraints, become more knowledgeable about students from diversity, feel more competent and willing to work with students and their parents from diversity when they were in clinical practicum and in student teaching.

5.4 Candidates Commitment Shift

From the 20 candidates' presentation in this year University annual symposium on undergraduate research, the candidates revealed their deep concerns over various issues as the educators of commitment advocating earnestly for the people from diverse backgrounds.

6. Significance

6.1 Paradigm Shift - Integration across the Curriculum

Recent research on successful integration of English across various content areas reveals a significant pedagogical "short cut." To students whose first language is not English, teaching them content knowledge through English as a medium to develop their content knowledge and English language proficiency simultaneously (Alvermann, Gillis, & Phelps, 2013; Ariza, 2009; Au, 2006; Lu, & Shieh, 2014; Nordmeyer & Barduhn, 2010; Ruiz, 2014). The teacher candidates, according to their experiences in integrating across the curriculum, are confident that the integration can be extended to English language arts, math, science, social studies, technology, even foreign language teaching.

6.2 Worldview & Globalization

To expand teacher candidates' worldview, the author required candidates to survey articles from Time magazine or www.linktv.org for current global issues that take place in the remote corners on the earth while having immediate and severe impact on our daily lives universally. The following articles were popularly surveyed by the candidates: *Doomsday at a glance* (Crowley, 2012) predicted life after the fiscal cliff in US; *The earthquake in Japan* (Walsh, 2013) caused the nuclear contamination over the ocean and the air; *A new border crossing* (Calabresi, 2013) might reform US immigration Bill for the issuing of new Work-Visa; and *How Wall Street won* (Feroz, 2013), etc. By surveying articles from Time magazine or the Internet www.linktv.org, candidates' English vocabulary words in the contents increased, and the immediate connection with the world became possible (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012).

6.3 Commitment Shift as Passionate Educators

According to Tomlinson (2000), there is no "recipe" for differentiation. However, teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, disposition, and most importantly, their passion for students of diversity, are the major ingredients in culturally responsive differentiated instruction.

7. Conclusion

The candidates possess an intellectual and emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all humans (Alvermann, Gillis, & Phelps, 2013) and, at the same time, accept and appreciate the differences that lie between people of different cultures (Bennett, 2013). They treasure diversity as assets. The semiotic triad deliberately interwove the three signs and contributes to the paradigm shift and the commitment shift, both strengthen candidates' cultural competence and antiracists. They embrace cultural pluralism (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013), but not intend to assimilate any of their students from diversity. Beyond the social and academic achievement of their students from diversity, the candidates as well as their students of diversity and mainstream culture were benefited to engage the world.

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