

Caitlin Blake

Where I am Now: Critical Reflection 3

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Introduction

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at time of challenge and controversy” (District of Columbia, Martin Luther King, Jr.). I started my first reflection with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., and I thought starting my final reflection with another quote was appropriate, especially because this sums up what I have learned throughout the semester. I have learned that no matter what, it is more important to take the high road and to say something, to challenge a student or staff member, and to stand up for those without “privilege” even if it means going against the societal norm. We need to stand up to those who challenge what is right and who don’t have the ability or desire to treat everyone with respect.

As I reread my first reflection for this course, I know that I have come a long way in my definition of what I perceive identity to be, but I have also come a long way in my own personal identity growth. I now see identity for everything that it is, not just skin color or what can be seen on the outside. I find myself inquiring about others, and searching for whom others really are when I work with students and staff members. I realize that some identities may never be seen or heard, until a person feels comfortable enough to share that with you.

Identity

Just this past month, two of my coworkers/fellow staff members came out to me as identifying as something other than straight. I really had no idea about this identity that they carry until they felt comfortable sharing that with me. This real life example honestly gave me insight into how important it is to feel safe somewhere (in this case at the

institution I am working at) for people to truly be themselves. Both of these staff members were former students and have been working at Bluffton for several years. Just this past semester they have felt comfortable sharing their identities with others in the campus community, in former fear of being looked down upon, or even fired. This proves how important safety and inclusion is in helping others feel comfortable with themselves in a particular environment (Strange and Banning, 2001). If our own student affairs personnel don't feel able to share their own identity, how do our students feel? Are we using our multicultural competence in a way that is benefitting students? As a student affairs paraprofessional, I strongly believe one of our most important goals, if not the most important, is to make students feel welcome and safe on our campuses. If we do that, we won't need to worry about retention and money so much (which seems like the hot topic of the last few years). We need to be advocates for our students, no matter what.

Personal Identity Growth

As I stated, I have also grown in my own identity these past few months. I have been participating in our LGBTQ group, Safe Spaces, on campus. Technically this is not an organization, but is under advisement from the president of Bluffton, essentially meaning that he can disband this group if he deems it unfit for the campus community. I have wanted to attend the Safe Spaces meetings for the past year and get involved, but haven't really had the courage to go. I of course feel passionate about rights for LGBTQ folks, because I want equality for everyone. I am also questioning my own sexuality and thought that being a part of this group could help me grow as an individual, but also help students along in that process as well. While the general meetings for Safe Spaces are for everyone (and many of the members identify as allies), I also have started to attend a weekly caucus

group with those who identify as something other than straight or who are questioning. Having this multicultural competence course to back up my feelings and my passion on multicultural issues, I felt comfortable attending this meeting, even if it meant that other students would see me at this group, perhaps in a different way, since I am a hall director on campus. I want to be a support for students, and I want to help in any way I can, and joining Safe Spaces was one way I felt that my multicultural competence could be increased and utilized. I just joined the group in November, so I am looking forward to next semester and seeing how it goes. Developing that competency of equity, diversity, and inclusion has been something that I needed work in, and I feel my presence and involvement in Safe Spaces and the caucus group is helping me slowly achieve artifacts in that area.

Gender Roles

One of my favorite pieces of literature this semester has been from *Men speak out: Views on Gender, Sex, and Power*. The chapter we read really allowed me to assess my own ideals and values I was raised with about power and privilege, and figure out what to do when society challenges or confirms them. As a young child, I never remember hearing my parents say that I couldn't do something because I was a girl. I am the oldest of three, with a younger brother and sister. My brother is only 17, and although he is definitely a "masculine" young man, I certainly was never told I couldn't do what he enjoys doing, such as construction with my dad, or hunting. In fact, I was always offered rides on the bulldozer, and I have gone hunting and shooting with my dad on multiple occasions. Looking back, I appreciate that women were not treated as inferior in my home, and it was evident in the fact that my mom brought home more of the household income than my dad did. I appreciated the author's honest and heartfelt stories about growing up and seeing

gender roles in action, while showing the reader that gender roles, privilege, and sexuality are all connected (Taneja, 2007).

Teaching to Leaders

Throughout the course, I have felt empowered; which I think is probably one of the goals of the course. My learning has certainly increased through class discussions and readings, as well as through bursts of inspiration I have in the class. When I think about how I could use this information, I always thinking of my RA staff. I supervise eight RAs, who are at all different levels of their identity and personal development. They all work well together as a team, and I think we get the job done here in Ropp Hall at Bluffton, but I don't see the growth in them that we talk so much about in theory and in our other courses. I don't normally get to have those conversations with students about the racist comment I heard or the inappropriate name that is being used for someone who doesn't identify as straight. Granted, I don't want to hear these things being said, but I am sure it happens behind closed doors.

One conversation sparked my interest in speaking to my RAs about multicultural issues. About a month and a half ago, right before the Presidential Election, one of my RAs asked what President Obama has done as President of the United States in his past term (she was writing a paper on both candidates). Being someone who is not political in the least bit, but is passionate for LGBTQ rights, I said, "He has helped legalize gay marriage in several states". Another one of my RAs, who was sitting there, replied, "That's a good thing?" and then both of my RAs high fived. At that moment, I knew a few things. One, they had no idea that I was questioning my own sexuality, as they both respect me very much and would never say something to hurt me; and two, that they probably haven't had that

much experience with the LGBTQ community or know how important it is to those who identify to have the same rights as any other human being who wishes to marry the person that they love. I know that both of these RAs are fairly conservative and very much Christians, and although I have no intention of changing their belief about those in the LGBTQ community, it made me feel that it is partially my job to help my staff become more multiculturally competent, and create an environment for them to explore different diversity and inclusion issues.

“Colleges and universities are prime environments for students, faculty, and staff to develop the skills necessary to create a world more congruent with the values of liberty and justice for all” (Washington, p. 13 2007). If I don’t teach the leaders that I supervise to be just and equal to everyone, no one is going to do that for them. In RA training, RAs get about one hour of Safe Spaces training, and a small amount on race and other diversity. To be (in my opinion) the most important leaders and mentors on our campus, these RAs need something more. They need to think about how to be better leaders and how to reach everyone on campus, and I think they also need a space to go through their own identity development. My first step is to make my RAs aware of these topics that are concerns for students on campus, to provide knowledge on the topics, to give them the skills they need to make multiculturally competent decisions, and to help them act on this new knowledge and skills that they have, but showing compassion and helpfulness to other students (Washington, 2007). Next semester, my goal is to take topics that I have learned throughout the course and work these in to my weekly staff meetings. Currently, we do activities each week that are meant to be fun, but I also want my meetings to be educational. I want my RAs to walk away from those meetings thinking and pondering more about how

this knowledge can affect their leadership on campus and that they can go out and act on this knowledge, as well as, stand up for those who are not as privileged as them in some way.

My Future Career

One more thing that I have been thinking about a lot throughout this semester is my future. Although I certainly love working with college students in such a neat and fascinating environment, I really miss the middle schools kids, as my bachelor's degree is in middle school education. I will most likely be searching for teaching jobs for next year, but the knowledge I have gained in this program have certainly provided me skills that I can utilize in any career. While doing my multicultural project, which was creating a class syllabus for a class called Multicultural Competence in K-12 Education, I learned a great deal about my future career and how to use this course. I wish I had had a class in my undergraduate career like the one I created for this course. Not only do I wish I had the knowledge that I do now to know where I need to develop, but knowing how to work with diverse students who identify differently than me in at least one area is very important. Finding sources and creating this project has made me very passionate about making sure that my classroom is inclusive of everyone that may enter and learn there. According to Cushner, McClelland, and Safford, authors of *Human Diversity in Education* (2009), there are six characteristics that make up a culturally responsive teacher, and these are six things that I strive to do in my future classroom. The culturally responsive teacher: "Understands how their learners construct knowledge, learn about students' lives, socioculturally conscious, hold affirming views about diversity, use appropriate instructional strategies, and advocates for all students" (p. 434-35). The last one is especially important, and is

something that I hope that all professionals, whether working higher education or K-12 education, can see as the most important aspect of the job. We need to make our students feel welcome and included, and learn how to do that. This course has certainly opened my eyes to more culture and to the differences in people; however, it has taught me that we all just want to be treated fairly and with respect. I hope that I never fail to do that for my students that I work with, and I hope that I can pass on this knowledge to other leaders.

References

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