Chapter 14
(Re)Assessing Student Thinking in Online Threaded Discussions

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ABSTRACT

A teacher educator examines the level of critical thinking of her preservice teachers participating in an urban education course through online discussions. The objective was to see if online discussions, which were the heart of the learning process, could be an effective strategy to promote critical thinking skills. Using the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) as a guide, participants' posts and responses were assessed to determine the quality of thinking that occurred in the online discussion forum. Results show that utilizing online discussion forums can be an effective pedagogy for classes where complex, often controversial issues such as social justice, equity, and white privilege are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This study took place at a large Midwestern university in the United States where I teach. Our mission is to prepare future teachers to teach children of racially and linguistically different backgrounds than their own and to promote meaningful, engaged learning for all students, regardless of their race, gender, ethnic heritage, or cultural background. Like most city-based teacher preparation programs, many students attending our university are not familiar with the unique assets children in the city bring to the classroom nor have they experienced the structural inequities around race, class, culture, abilities, and language that permeate urban schools. Our students match the typical profile of white, female, middle class, and rural or suburban teacher candidates (Banks

2000; Sleeter 1994). Yet, we know their future classrooms are not likely to have such homogeneous or affluent student populations.

Like many teacher educators, I have struggled with what my students take away from my urban education course. The course was originally designed to challenge prospective teachers' beliefs and transform their ideas about teaching, particularly in urban schools. My intention was to engage my students' existing beliefs about teaching and learning and to encourage their consideration of alternative beliefs presented in educational literature. I require my students to reflect on their field experience and discuss their learning. I plan lessons to arouse curiosity and to push my students to a higher level of knowledge. Students are encouraged to learn by doing and to interact with one another. Typically, I have students participate through discussions, group projects, case studies, and presentations. I strongly believe that through these types of activities, students will have richer experiences in the course and will retain more information long after the course is over. Unfortunately, often times the field experience reinforced or reproduced more stereotypes rather than changing beliefs (Tiezzi & Cross, 1997; Haberman & Post, 1992; Wiggins & Follo, 1999). With that in mind, I have been making changes in my course hoping to determine the best ways to scaffold high levels of reflection about field experiences and urban issues. In this chapter, I discuss my investigation into using an online discussion forum as a tool for promoting quality student participation and increasing the level of critical thinking amongst preservice teachers who are asked to discuss complex urban issues.

BACKGROUND

Students begin their professional coursework with an introductory teaching class. A capstone course for the School of Education, Introduction to Teaching, offers a thorough introduction and examination of urban education issues to approximately 200 teacher education students each semester who have an interest in pursuing a teaching career. Students are primarily white females from backgrounds very different from the students they will teach in urban areas. Students participate in weekly discussions designed to help them explore and understand the dynamics of teaching and learning in urban schools and complete 50 hours of field experience in a local school setting. Typically, students are uncomfortable addressing issues related to urban schooling, fearing awkwardness or conflict. For this reason, I use a variety of techniques to try and help overcome these barriers. For example, I begin with less controversial topics like parental involvement equity in urban schools before tackling more sensitive issues like white privilege. I share my expectations for class participation, based on an agreement to honor each other's differences and experiences; and I use role-playing or debates to help students see how others might perceive an issue differently. These activities require students to do some thinking beyond what they can recall from the textbook.

According to a recent NCEI report, 84% of teachers are white and students of color are growing. Therefore, it is imperative that we prepare future teachers who can effectively teach students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Banks, 2000; Howard, 2006). Unless preservice teachers become aware of their own preconceptions and how those preconceptions affect their notion of teaching and learning they are unlikely to deconstruct their preconceptions and construct a new vision that includes culturally responsive practices that are fair and equitable for all students.

During one urban education class, a teacher educator cannot possibly place special emphasis on every dimension of the complex issues facing urban schools. However, she can teach students to reason well through any issue, and, through this emphasis, help students develop the habits of

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