

Building Culturally Responsive Learning Environments Through Franciscan Values

Introduction

According to the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU), “diversity is a gift to be respected” (AFCU, 2023). In higher education learning environments, each student possesses unique characteristics that make them valuable to the learning environment. Creation of a classroom where discourse occurs that is meaningful to all participants is an essential role of the faculty who facilitates learning (Garrison, 2012; Holtz-Deal & Hyde, 2004; Williams et al., 2020). In Franciscan universities, there is a unique opportunity to prepare faculty to create diverse learning environments through a Franciscan values lens. In one small Franciscan Hispanic-Serving-Institution (HSI) in the Midwest, faculty in both social work and education infuse their Franciscan values of respect, compassion, service, and integrity into culturally responsive teaching preparation and practices. This paper presents an overview of implicit and explicit steps for faculty preparation and student support of culturally responsive learning experiences.

Franciscan higher education

The foundation of Franciscan education encompasses unique yet universal values and tradition as well as a history rooted in shared beliefs about humanity. To begin, Franciscan tradition, with God at its center, focuses on the development of individuals who share God’s goodness which includes a celebration of diversity. Further, it views the individual as a reflection of that goodness, calling upon all to recognize dignity in each person and participate in caring for underserved and oppressed groups (AFCU, 2023). The tradition of Franciscan education centers on learning as a gift to be encouraged and nurtured. It extends to viewing education as relational, supporting *communities of learning* (AFCU, 2023), opening opportunities for students to receive knowledge, and in turn share their gifts with others. By beginning with an evaluation of one's own approaches to higher education

and construction of a learning environment through a Franciscan lens, faculty engage in an implicit approach to establishing a classroom dynamic of open discourse (██████████, 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogies in higher education are more commonly found in human service disciplines but may not be as prevalent in less person-centered fields. Education and Social Work are two examples of fields where the faculty's role more routinely includes consideration of diversity and inclusivity in classroom dynamics. Yet, little research supports how faculty are to prepare themselves to facilitate those pedagogies as part of an implicit and culturally responsive approach. For example: What strategies do faculty use? Are they engaging in faculty development focused on integrating diversity into their teaching practices? Do faculty feel competent to facilitate discourse focused on topics of diversity and difference? Further, how do faculty in disciplines not intuitively designed to be person-centered participate in culturally responsive practices? From a Franciscan values perspective all faculty can approach their students with an inherent level of *respect*, mindful of the need for *compassion* toward students as human beings and with a servant's heart as they work toward maintaining the *integrity* of their role in the Franciscan higher educational system. The engage-assess-integrate-evaluate model works in classrooms from all disciplines (██████████, 2023).

Rationale for faculty in higher education to do the self-work lies in reports that St. Francis worked to reinforce an existing foundation centered on the teachings of Jesus Christ rather than build anew (AFCU, 2023). In this way faculty can look to their Franciscan values for guidance when building their culturally responsive approaches whether they are beginning their journey or continually honing their knowledge and skills. Coinciding with a Franciscan approach is the tenet found within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework which presents a process by which faculty become the *expert facilitator* of their classroom where meaningful learning is experienced by both students and faculty (Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison, 2012). Therefore, a review of the faculty-as-

facilitator approach can be viewed as fostering the Franciscan values of respect, compassion, service, and integrity using an engage-assess-integrate-evaluate model. Faculty-as-facilitator considers the dynamics of their role as leader, nuances among student and faculty diversity, engagement in mutual learning, and infusion of Franciscan values in the process of faculty preparation to engage the learning environment (██████████, 2023).

The Implicit process

This paper describes how using implicit preparation by faculty toward creating an inclusive classroom aligns with the Franciscan values of *respect, compassion, service, and integrity*. Below are the steps used by the author which describe how Franciscan values are infused into facilitating a culturally responsive classroom. An implicit approach is accomplished when faculty:

- **Engage** with learners from a place of empathy, *respect* (for difference, unique perspectives, and individual lived experiences), and *compassion*,
- **Assess** students' level of knowledge around diversity and social justice by including faculty's awareness of their own social and cultural locatedness ensuring the *integrity* of the learning experience
- **Integrate** the varying levels of experience and knowledge that exist in the classroom and create brave spaces where discourse is welcome and facilitated by experienced faculty for students at their various levels of knowledge and restructuring with culturally responsive pedagogies as a form of *service* to their students
- **Evaluate** the learning experiences on an ongoing basis, ensuring the *integrity* of the learning experiences

Culturally responsive teaching is the validation and incorporation of students' cultural frameworks and background experiences into the learning environment (Castillo-Montoya, 2019; Gay 2010; Hammond, 2015). Culturally responsive teaching has been shown to improve student engagement and a sense of belonging in the classroom because students feel respected, valued, and part of a community (Abacioglu et al, 2020; Garrison, 2012; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Williams et. al, 2020). These tenets connect with the Franciscan ideology that, as a community, we live together, work together, and support one another as a community (Horan, 2022). Furthermore, utilizing these practices in facilitating classroom learning can enhance student engagement and model what it

means to be Franciscan. Next is an overview of how faculty can engage with their students from a values perspective linked with the engage - assess - integrate - evaluate approach to implicit preparation.

Engaging learning through respect

Faculty leadership in the classroom must include creating a sense of belonging and academic discourse that is personally meaningful to participants. (Garrison, 2012). The process of inquiry and connection is evident in concepts of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, including questioning, a personal desire for meaning among all participants, and a collaborative effort in seeking the truth Garrison et al., (2010). Rooted in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, *teaching presence* considers the dynamic of the teacher as facilitator of discourse as well as nuances among all participants in the classroom, including how faculty manage diversity of students and themselves. Specifically, teaching presence calls upon the teacher to manage the direction of both social and cognitive factors in the learning environment in addition to any challenges (Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Swan et al., 2009). Working for the common good and support for one's peers is a central tenet of the Franciscan value of *respect* (). According to the literature, use of reflective self-inquiry by the faculty member allows students to view the other's social construction, power and control dynamic within their lived experience, and enhances multicultural learning (Castillo-Montoya, 2019; Garrison et al., 2010). Trust can be built between faculty and students when a foundational level of respect is present and serves as a building block that leads to compassion and understanding.

Creating a community of respect and compassion

Including *compassion* in the learning environment means creating space for discourse and dialogue that is coercion and intimidation free and facilitated by faculty who collaborate with students to achieve academic goals. The Franciscan value of *respect* is further implemented when

faculty examine their own social locatedness, assess the diversity of their students, and adjust for these variables in designing their learning environments. According to Garrison (2012), faculty then enhance the learning experience for all participants no matter the discipline. Further, when engaged in *teaching presence* rather than identifying an unsolvable problem, faculty-as-facilitator considers the dynamic of their role, nuances among students, and how they manage diversity of students and themselves (Garrison, 2012). Learning activities that allow participants to make connections become an essential piece in developing classroom culture.

Assessing learning with compassion

Creation of an inclusive classroom is arguably achieved in any discipline from a faculty-as-facilitator approach. Literature shows that development of knowledge and skills around matters of oppression, the role of difference and power in minority-majority groups, the importance of developing sensitivity, and the ability to apply knowledge in practice are all shared objectives of teaching strategies and not necessarily unique to social work education (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Comerford, 2004; Williams et al., 2020). The element of teaching presence offers faculty a framework from which they can assess their approach to developing the learning environment including from the perspective of respect and *compassion*. Inclusion of discourse in the classroom centered on differences among culture, ethnicity, and other elements of diversity requires faculty to serve as the expert facilitator with students who may be experiencing this type of discourse for the first time.

St. Francis was ahead of his time as he saw himself, like today's environmentalists, as part of the ecosystem (AFCU, 2023). His perspective reflects the person-in-environment framework found at the core of social work's Generalist Practice Model (Hepworth et. al, 2017).

During the assessment phase, faculty adopt an approach of *compassion* to understand their student's cultural frame of reference, contrast this with their own identity and intersectionality, and facilitate a

diverse learning environment. As faculty begin to examine their intersectionality, prepare to facilitate discourse, and plan how to integrate their knowledge and affective behaviors into the classroom, *integrity* must remain at the center of their work according to Franciscan educational guidelines.

Integrating awareness as service

As faculty in Franciscan higher education, we are guided by the example of St. Francis through our service to others including students. Faculty can prepare to integrate the varying levels of knowledge and experience found in their classrooms to create brave spaces for discourse. The establishment of a Franciscan values perspective using an engage-assess-integrate-evaluate framework provides educators an opportunity to establish a learning community where discourse centered on diversity, social justice and racial inequalities can occur while allowing for cultural humility to exist as a form of *service* in the classroom. Affective behaviors performed by faculty include modeling teaching presence through inclusivity, dynamic exchange of questions and answers, sharing of expertise, and a mutual faculty-student inquiry (Garrison, 2012). According to Garrison (2012), these concepts occur in an environment where there is inclusivity, active participation, modeling, and discourse, or where teaching presence exists.

From a strengths perspective, CoI teaching presence addresses diversity and anti-racist education where faculty-as-facilitator considers the dynamic of the teacher, nuances among students, and how faculty manage diversity of students and themselves rather than identifying an unsolvable problem (Garrison, 2012). Additionally, where the social work helping process allows the social worker to develop solutions through multidimensional/multicultural assessment, (Hepworth et al., 2017), from a Franciscan *service* perspective faculty can view the process of integrating participants in the learning process as servant leadership (AFCU, 2023). Applying this concept, faculty who engage with and assess their students' current knowledge and frame of reference for discussing diversity, develop a pathway to lead their students in discourse that may feel awkward for some participants.

However, when faculty remain engaged in the process, offer their mentorship and guidance, consider the cognitive processes of learning in addition to their multicultural attitudes, culturally responsive teaching can be experienced (Abacioglu et al., 2020).

Evaluation of learning to ensure integrity

The final step in the process of faculty's implicit preparation is to evaluate their practices in the learning environment. One question faculty can ask about their facilitation within the classroom is, "was the exchange or learning process worthwhile and meaningful for participants?" As faculty in a Franciscan university, we understand the importance and impact of our actions on our students and maintain an awareness of the challenges faced by all who participate in the learning process. Evaluation efforts can be both formal and informal. For example, at the end of each class posing questions like, "did we meet our objectives today" or "how well did today's class facilitate what we said was going to happen?" Formally, course evaluations are an opportunity to collect feedback from students focused on specific learning objectives quantitatively and qualitatively.

With new knowledge and a more informed understanding of where students are on the knowledge spectrum of race and cultural diversity faculty can facilitate discourse based on unlearning stereotypes and re-learning through an anti-racist lens. Finally, just as in social work practice, faculty in any classroom can continually evaluate the progress of the learning processes taking place and consider what adjustments may be necessary. By committing to open and honest self-reflection and excellence in our work, we are upholding the value of *integrity* and continuously modeling this value for our students (AFCU, 2023).

Franciscan values focus on maintaining an environment where all persons are treated with respect and compassion. To make these values actionable, faculty can provide a setting where learners feel protected and valued (Quin, 2017), and utilize instructional activities that allow students to reflect on how the new learning can promote change within the community. If we want our

students to understand that there is value in the exchange of ideas and every person possesses unique gifts, then instructional practices and classroom activities must validate students' individual knowledge, while also encouraging individuals to respect experiences and identities that are different from their own.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Franciscan Values

As Franciscans, we share a common vision that all people “[have] inherent dignity, encourage social goodness, and live in just prosperity” (Walsh, 2020). This vision coincides with that of culturally responsive teaching, in which we view “students as more than recipients of knowledge or learners of skills, but as complex individuals with a wide array of hopes, fears and aspirations” (Mintz, 2022)

A cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching is the interconnection of three critical attributes, 1) all students can achieve high academic standards and cognitive growth, 2) inclusion of all students, and 3) the development of sociopolitical consciousness (Johnston, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Each student brings to the classroom their own unique combination of cultural practices, beliefs, perceptions, and identities (Kozleski, 2010). This combination not only impacts how students perceive and process information (Hammond, 2015; Gay, 2018), but also contributes to the individuality of each student. As faculty, we need to create a classroom that nurtures this individuality and supports students' expansion of intellectual growth and critical analysis of the world around them. So, what elements might we find in a culturally responsive classroom?

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), a culturally responsive classroom that demonstrates respect, compassion, and inclusion

- communicates high expectations for all
- utilizes active teaching and learning methods
- identifies and nurtures students' strengths
- creates a learning environment that reflects students' cultures

- utilizes collaborative and small group instruction

While these components support the personal and cognitive growth of each student, they also contribute to an essential element to learning—ensurance that the brain is primed and open for new learning.

Priming the brain for new learning is twofold. First, we must consider the classroom itself as a component that allows the brain to be receptive to new information. Research has demonstrated that when the brain perceives the learning environment as stressful or unsupportive, the amygdala, or the part of the brain that is on alert for danger, becomes overly sensitive, resulting in the brain unable to thoroughly process new information (Cole et al., 2005). Conversely, when students perceive they are part of an inclusive, emotionally safe learning community, the brain is open to new learning and connecting this learning to previous experiences, resulting in optimal learning (Blaha & Kraus, 2023; Osaka et al. 2013). Therefore, in order to create a culturally responsive setting that engages students and allows them to find their purpose and place in the world (Barrett, 2021), instructors need to foster a collaborative and inclusive classroom where students are empowered by respect for individuals, a growth mindset, and view learning as a foundation to “... be agents of change for the larger community” (Walsh, 2020).

Second, instructors should choose instructional practices that encourage the exchange of ideas and organize students into a variety of groupings to support interactions, while also allowing the instructor to facilitate activities and assess students' understanding (Blaha & Kraus, 2023; Florida Gulf Coast University, 2020; CREDE, 2020).

Instructional Activities

Culturally responsive education uses instructional methods that allow students the opportunity to bring their cultural backgrounds to the forefront and build relationships within the classroom (Akcan & █████ 2022). For example, *Joint Production* is an instructional strategy in which

common experiences and understandings are developed through the collaboration of students and the instructor on a product. (██████████ 2023; CREDE, 2020). *Joint activity* provides a platform for discourse, sharing of ideas, opportunities to solve real-world issues, thus supporting the highest level of academic achievement.

Another activity that can make new learning relevant and engaging are *Instructional Conversations*. This is an activity in which new information is learned through dialogue and connects to students' personal and community experiences. The activity begins with students reflecting on information from home, community, and previous lessons. New learning is then introduced, and students discuss this new learning, and how it connects to their views, perceptions, and rationales using evidence and other support.

Finally, the instructional method of *Complex Thinking* involves a series of tasks created to expand students' thinking to critical and complex levels, and how this thinking can be applied to real-world problems solving. Such tasks support students to accomplish more complex understanding by building from their previous success. When instructors use challenging activities, they must consider a careful scaffolding of supports so students are motivated to go beyond their comfort zones, and grapple with learning and applying the new content. Supports such as chunking out tasks that build upon one another and delivering actionable feedback so students can progress.

Conclusion paragraph

A Franciscan learning environment celebrates diversity as an expression of God's love and respects the dignity of all as a gift from God (██████████, 2023). Culturally responsive education holds the same views, in that all students bring to the classroom a set of unique experiences, learning and backgrounds that impact how they make connections to new learning. Faculty are active participants in creating their learning environment and facilitating discourse

among themselves and their students mindful of Franciscan values and the inherent dignity and worth of all people. Support for faculty to be servant leaders is an essential part of the process and practice of building a culturally responsive classroom.

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