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### **Internationalization of a Psychology of Gender course:**

#### **Is it possible to change students' attitudes in three months?**

As a result of living in the Wheeling community which is not culturally diverse, I am concerned about our students' knowledge of cultures other than our own. I attempt to expose students to diverse cultures; in a Psychology of Gender course I include a variety of culturally based viewpoints on gender. Since many of our students come from the Appalachian region and are white, I want these undergraduates to be able to think critically about cultural differences and influences in terms of how males and females behave within a wider world, not just in our region. In particular, I want students to see how and why males and females act similarly and differently to one another in the U.S., but I also want them to recognize these cultural gendered influences when making comparisons between people in the U.S. and in other countries.

A recent issue of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* devoted an entire issue to the critical analysis of the international potential of the Jesuit educational mission. Maria Krane (2003) suggested that the manner in which we measure "internationalization" at Jesuit universities should include opportunities to study abroad, a significant international presence, and a curriculum with global perspectives. However, Krane stated that Jesuit institutions lag behind their non-Jesuit counterparts in terms of participation in study abroad programs and in maintaining a significant international

presence on campus. Krane further stated that “the typical definition of global competence – internationalization being the process that achieves global competence – includes knowledge of world issues and interdependence, interest in current events, functional foreign language ability, cultural empathy, and facility in cross-cultural communication” (p. 18). Krane indicates that such a curriculum is at the heart of an internationalization process and of attaining global competence. From an individual instructor’s perspective, we must ask how much change in our students’ knowledge of other countries can we expect from a single, semester-long course?

In Spring 2000 Wheeling Jesuit University received a Title VI grant from the Department of Education to infuse “cross-cultural” aspects into the curriculum. Clearly the federal government has made a financial commitment to increase the students’ global competence by infusing the college curriculum with cross-cultural components and/or courses. Likewise, in the field of psychology there have been many presentations and articles about the importance of including different cultures in the psychology curriculum (Gloria, Rieckmann, & Rush, 2000; Goldstein, 2001; Hill, 2000; Huang, 2001; Hull, 2001; Ruffin & Chadda, 2001). Both Debra Hull and I received portions of the Title VI grant money to infuse cross-cultural components into two courses in the psychology curriculum at WJU. In addition to the inclusion of cultural theories and research, I wanted to measure whether there were changes in the students’ knowledge of different cultures associated with my specific class. In order to measure any changes, I conducted a pre- and post-semester survey of the students in the course.

In the Psychology of Gender course, fourteen students participated in the “multicultural” awareness survey. Twelve participants were female and two were male. The majority of the students were juniors or seniors. The majority also had traveled outside of the U.S. and had taken a course with a multicultural or diversity component prior to my course. Only ten actually completed both the pre- and post-semester survey

for the course. The pre- and post-semester surveys shared sixteen statements to which the students were to respond using a Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) with the middle response being “undecided.”

Of the sixteen statements used to measure the students’ attitudes toward cultural awareness and the usefulness of multicultural issues in the curriculum, only three were significantly changed at the end of the course. Students were more likely to agree that their knowledge of other worldviews and cultural assumptions, values and biases is good following the course as compared to their knowledge at the beginning of the course. Following the course, students were less likely to agree that their parents and family members encourage learning about different cultures or societies. After the course students were more likely to be undecided about multicultural issues and education being necessary for troubled, racially tense schools and neighborhoods than for our school and college campus. At the beginning of the course the students were more likely to disagree with this statement.

In addition to using a textbook that featured cross-cultural studies (Peplau, DeBro, Veniegas, & Taylor’s, *Gender, culture and ethnicity*), an oral presentation and written paper on a country other than the U.S. undoubtedly helped to create the changes in knowledge. Student comments after the course support this conclusion:

“Learned a lot about specific country, learned bits and pieces of other countries from presentation by other students.” “The presentation of each country was a great way to incorporate other ethnicities and cultures into the classroom.” “The conclusions we came to about different cultures were vague but it was useful to look at the different cultures from a social perspective.”

While changes were noted, the overall results from the gender course were not as positive as I would have predicted. For example, the changes regarding family encouragement and troubled communities that I consider to be less positive may have

been due to events occurring at the same time on the university's campus. In the Spring 2002, when the class was being taught, the university was undergoing its own climate change with regard to multicultural issues, in the development of an Office of Multicultural Affairs and a Black Student Union (student club). The student newspaper published several student editorials asking why there was a need for a black student union and for the focus on multicultural issues. Perhaps some of the "negative" results were due to this climate change and not the course.

Since there were changes on the campus during the gender course, I chose to evaluate changes in students' attitudes toward multicultural issues during the following semester. I taught Social Psychology during this time and used a textbook with research from various cultural settings (Myers', *Social psychology, 7<sup>th</sup> edition*). I had these students complete the same surveys as the Psychology of Gender students. There were twelve students who participated in the pre-semester survey but only nine of those completed the post-semester survey with a majority of the students being female.

Only two of the sixteen statements were found to be significantly different at the end of the semester for the Social Psychology students. These students were more likely to agree that their knowledge of other worldviews and cultural assumptions, values and biases is good following the course. Students at the end of the semester also tended to show change in their attitude that multicultural education should be taught in all courses; however, the average ratings were still in the undecided range.

I further tested for differences between the students in the two classes on both their pre- and post-semester responses. The only significant difference on the pre-semester survey was on the item, "I feel personally unprepared for the task of modifying the class to include multicultural issues." The gender course students had a stronger disagreement with this statement than those in the social course. Several students indicated to me that this item was strange to them since it was not their task to modify the

course. I specifically included this item, however, in an attempt to identify if students are comfortable with multicultural issues, and the item takes an active learning approach with the student playing a part in the active learning classroom. The results of this item indicate that at the beginning of their respective semesters the students in the gender course may have been more comfortable with multicultural issues than were the students in the social course.

Several significant differences arose between the two courses at their respective ends. The students in the gender course had a stronger agreement than the students in the social course with the items, “The course increased my awareness and consciousness to different countries and cultures,” “The course promoted an attitude change in me – my attitude towards diversity issues changed,” “There was good interaction among the students,” and “Multicultural education should be taught in all courses.” The students in the social course had a stronger agreement than the students in the gender course with the item, “My family is accepting of cultural differences in other people.” This difference indicates that the gender course may be challenging the students to think about their own families’ acceptance of diversity. An additional difference was found in the overall rating of the courses. The students in the gender course rated the course more favorably than the students in the social course and rated their level of learning higher than the social course.

Why the differences between the two courses? Both courses used textbooks that incorporate cross-cultural readings and research. But in the Psychology of Gender course, I have each student engage in a more active examination of a particular country in which the student presents in front of the class on his/her country in addition to submitting a research-based paper. This project requires students to learn more about a particular country and how gender is culturally defined within that country. In contrast, I have the social psychology students conduct brief research assignments on a variety of

social phenomenon (e.g., social norm violations and content analyses of magazine advertisements). In the social course I do not focus specifically on cross-cultural aspects beyond class discussion and the textbook. In addition to considering these distinctions in course requirements, the differences in student responses between the gender and the social courses must also be interpreted with caution because of the small sample size.

Even though I have demonstrated limited positive change over three months in students' attitudes toward knowledge of other countries (part of global competence), I am hesitant to say that this change is long-term. One factor that may influence the impact of an international course is how well the student performed in the course. In my study I did not measure how well the students performed, e.g., their class grade, and their actual change in knowledge during the semester. I only measured the students' self-reported changes in attitudes and changes in knowledge about diverse cultures. Future research should look at the long-term impact of WJU's internationalization on our students' global competence by examining the number of courses with a cultural component that our students take and their performance within those courses in addition to the students' self-reported changes in knowledge. Certainly if students are exposed to numerous courses that attempt to encourage an active examination of behavior in many cultures and do well in those courses, then these changes may be long-term. But a one shot, "booster" class on the value of looking at other cultures to understand human behavior is more than likely not going to have long-term changes. In order to enhance the global competence of undergraduates, many instructors must incorporate research from other cultures into the classroom curriculum. Through the efforts of the entire curriculum, I am hopeful that this increase in our students' knowledge of the world will be long-term.

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