SIX

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING: INFLUENCE OF A SEXISM AND HETEROSEXISM COURSE ON STUDENT ATTITUDES AND THOUGHT DEVELOPMENT

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One of the significant goals of a liberal education, particularly at a public institution, is a broadly constructed comprehension of and appreciation in disciplines across the arts, humanities and sciences. Curriculum developments over the past decade have de-emphasized traditional, Western coursework and focused instead on a variety of multicultural issues, in part, to prepare students for operating in global and complex societies (Ford, Grossman, & Jordan, 1997; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Mayo & Larke, 2011). Awareness of the societal changes required by this increasing global complexity has altered both perceptions of, and the experience of, cultural values in American society. Often, cultural values conflict, both within and between societies, and higher education is under increasing pressure to adequately meet the cultural education needs of students who will enter careers in a global society (Gurin et al., 2002; Laird, Engberg & Hurtado, 2005). Concurrently, with increasing budget cuts to higher education, institutions are forced to reduce faculty and staff, and this often results in diminishing the variety of course offerings across the curricula. Courses on diversity are still viewed by many as ancillary to, but not fundamental to, students' education, and

educators are constantly challenged to provide evidence that such courses provide value that extends beyond the appearance of simply providing diverse educational experiences (Gurin et al., 2002).

Compared to the wide availability of prejudice and discrimination or multicultural/diversity courses on college campuses, little empirical evidence exists to suggest that student beliefs change due to taking courses which challenge underlying notions of power and privilege –specifically courses related to issues of sexual orientation. A study by Iyriboz and Carter (1986) revealed changes in attitudes toward homosexuals, but not abortion or sexual variance after a class on human sexuality. Evidence of the effectiveness of a single panel or workshop on attitudes toward homosexuals has been mixed; some studies report panels and workshops lead to positive attitude change (Anderson, 1981; Nelson & Krieger, 1997), while other studies reveal panels to be ineffective at generating attitude change (Chng & Moore, 1991). Although Anderson (1981) found change in attitudes toward homosexuals, no change was found in more global social attitudes such as social distance. Other studies have investigated the inclusion of a brief focus within a course on attitudes toward homosexuals through the use of units or adjunctive materials with only slight success (Ford et al, 1997; Mahoney & Schamber, 2004).

More recent research provides some evidence that students who received a psychology course with diversity content had less prejudiced views compared to students who received a psychology course without diversity content; specifically post-course student attitudes on racism and classism were more positive but there were no changes in students' sexist, ageist or heterosexist views (Hussey, Fleck, & Warner, 2010). Similarly, a study by Pettijohn and Walzer (2008) revealed a reduction of prejudice for students who completed a psychology of prejudice class compared to an introductory psychology class. Still, little empirical evidence exists

regarding changes in beliefs and attitudes for students who complete a course specifically focused on the topics related to prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals and women.

The Current Study

This study investigated potential changes in attitudes for students in a course specifically focused on prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals and women (target group) compared to students not exposed to this type of content (control group). Attitudes towards gays and lesbians, modern sexism, feelings of social dominance and anti-obese attitudes were assessed pre and post course. In addition, qualitative responses of students' personal reflections in the target group were examined to assess the stages of students' thought development.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that the target group would have significant positive changes in their attitudes towards gays, lesbians, modern sexism, and lower feelings of social dominance after completion of the course, compared to the control groups whose attitudes are not expected to change. Attitudes toward obese people were not expected to change for either group since there was no material related to this topic in the target group course. The measurement of this attitude was a control measure to assess whether potential positive changes in the target group responses were just an indication of students becoming generally more accepting of anyone different, rather than specific attitude changes expected based on the course content.

Although research suggests that males will report greater prejudice toward gays and lesbians than females will (Herek, 1988; LaMar & Kite, 1998), gender differences were not a primary target of interest because of the low number of males in the target group; however, we did include gender in our initial analysis. Finally, a

phenomenological, qualitative review of student thought development was assessed by examining the personal reflections of students in the target group.[1] Using Perry's (1970) nine-stage process theory of intellectual and ethical development of college students as a guide we devised a coding scheme of student thoughts for this study. Although we hypothesized the target course would impact student thought development we did not have a priori predictions with regard to specific developmental trajectories.

Method

Participants

This study consisted of college students from two courses at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast. The target group consisted of first-semester, first-year students, who were undeclared majors (i.e., pre-majors) enrolled in general education course designed to inform students about issues and concepts regarding prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals and women.[2] The control group consisted of sophomores, juniors, and seniors enrolled in a statistical methods for the behavioral sciences course which contained no material regarding prejudice and discrimination. All students read and signed an informed consent and were free to refuse to answer any survey at any time.

A total of 45 students completed both pre and post-course assessments which occurred on the first and last day the 15-week semester. The final sample consisted of 19 students in the target group and 26 in the control group (two students from the target group were unable to complete the post-assessment).

Because of the sensitive nature of the survey, students' identity was kept anonymous by collecting only minimal demographic information. Students created their own 6 digit code and used this code on both the pre and post tests. Thus, ensuring participants felt

they could not be identified. Information on age and race/ethnicity was not collected because it was expected that there would be little variation and this information could leave the few underrepresented students feeling identifiable (almost all the students were Caucasian and between the ages of 18 and 21). The final sample then consisted of 16 males and 29 female students who were single and heterosexual, with the exception of one student who identified as bisexual.

Materials and Procedure

Students' attitudes toward gays and lesbians, modern sexist beliefs, their dislike for obese people, and social dominance were assessed on the first and last days of a 15-week course. Both courses were taught by the same female instructor, occurred on the same days of the week and over the same 15-week semester. Students participated for extra credit. Their responses were anonymous and the complete purpose of the survey was not disclosed until post-course assessments were collected.

Attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Students' attitudes towards gays (ATG) and lesbians (ATL) were assessed by the 20-item Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians Scale (ATGL; Herek 1984). Of these 20 items, 10 assess attitudes toward gay men (ATG) and 10 assess attitudes towards lesbians (ATL). Example items include questions such as: "Lesbians just can't fit into our society", and "Male homosexuality is a perversion". Each statement was followed by a 7-point scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), in which higher scores indicated more negative attitudes. The 10 items assessing ATG were combined and the average was computed as an index of ATG and were reliable across both assessment periods ($\alpha_{T1} = .94$ and $\alpha_{T2} = .93$). The 10 items assessing ATL were combined and the average was computed as an index of ATL and were reliable across both assessment periods ($\alpha_{T1} = .89$ and $\alpha_{T2} = .88$).

Anti-obese attitudes. Dislike of obese people was assessed by using the 8-item Dislike subscale of the Anti-Fat scale (ATF: Crandall, 1994). Example items include questions such as: "I have a hard time taking fat people seriously" and "Fat people make me feel somewhat uncomfortable." Each statement was followed by a 7-point scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), in which higher scores indicated more negative attitudes toward obese people. The 8 items assessing ATF were combined and the average was computed as an index of ATF and were less reliable across both assessment periods (α_{T1} = .73 and α_{T2} = .65). Thus, any results using this scale should be interpreted with caution.

Modern Sexism. Modern sexism was assessed using the 8-item Modern Sexism Scale (MSS; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Examples include questions such as: "Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States" and "It is rare to see a woman treated in a sexist manner on television." Each statement was followed by a 7-point scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), in which higher scores indicate greater feelings of modern sexism. One item was inadvertently left off the scale, so the remaining 7 items assessing MSS were combined and the average was computed as an index of MSS and were fairly reliable across both assessment periods (α_{T1} = .70 and α_{T2} = .77).

Social dominance. Social dominance assesses how people view and evaluate members of subordinate groups. Social Dominance was assessed by the 17-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Examples include questions such as: "Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place" and "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups." Each statement was followed by a 7-point scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), in which higher scores indicate greater feelings of social dominance. The 17 items assessing SDO were combined and the average was computed as

an index of SDO and were reliable across both assessment periods (α_{T1} = .92 and α_{T2} = .90).

Personal Reflections. Personal reflections were gathered from students in the target group only and were part of a typical assignment given in this course. On the first day of the course students were asked to take a few minutes and write on the first page of their note books "what do you think this class will be like?" They were then told they would revisit that question later in the course. At the end of the semester, students were given the personal reflections as an out of class assignment and were told the following instructions: "Please look back at what you wrote in your notebook on the first day of class. Consider what you thought and how you felt about the topics in this course and then consider what you think and feel now. Describe your journey as detailed or general as you would like. Do not put any identifying information on your reflection paper. Type your paper. The assignment is worth 10 points no matter what you write." These reflections were then collected by a student peer during the last day of class, who recorded 10 points for each student who completed the assignment (the peer did not read the reports but only noted that the student provided some type of writing). The peer then sealed these in an envelope and took them to the department assistant to hold until official grades were posted (this is the same procedure used to collect course teacher evaluations at this institution). Both researchers independently coded the highest stage of thought development reached for each reflection paper to establish inter-rater agreement. There was a 94% agreement rate, and differences were resolved by discussion.

Course Content and Structure. The target course was a lower-level undergraduate course that focused on the integration of sexism and heterosexism from an interdisciplinary perspective. The curriculum was divided into four major content areas: introduction and overview of basic concepts, individual sexism/heterosexism, organizational and societal

sexism/heterosexism, and institutional sexism/heterosexism. Each unit was comprised of readings which focused on one of the four content areas. With the exception of some of the basic concepts (e.g., definitions), the course was conducted as a facilitated discussion. The instructor would generally start the class with a discussion question (what do you think it means to be a girl in Western culture?), with the instructor's primary duty as facilitator only. The instructor generally did not disrupt or generate the discussion, unless there was a violation of class rules (e.g., name calling), a movement in the discussion unrelated to the current material, or a stall in the discussion. Thus, with the exception of some parts of the course overview, lecturing was not used for delivery of course content; instead, facilitated discussion was designed to allow students to reflect on their own assumptions and values. In this manner learning takes place as a function of self-examination and self-discovery which can lead to shifts in beliefs (Salvich, 2005; Salvich & Zimbardo, 2012) or shifts in frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997). This pedagogical model was implemented based on research indicating greater cognitive growth occurs with transformative teaching methods which require individuals to work at reaching their own conclusions about the material in a manner and time that is most appropriate for them (cf. Banks, 2002; Kitano, 1997). We would, therefore, classify our teaching approach in this course as experiential (Slavich et al., 2012) or transformative (Banks, 2002).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations for all attitude scales pre and post course are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Attitudes Scales for Target and Control Groups Pre and Post Course

		Target n = 19		Control n = 26	
		Pre	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**
ATG	Mean	2.21	1.66	1.75	1.76
	SD	1.74	1.52	1.62	1.57
ATL	Mean	1.63	1.09	1.25	1.23
	SD	1.27	.94	1.30	1.23
MSS	Mean	2.14	1.20	1.98	1.92
	SD	.99	.71	.66	.78
SDO	Mean	2.06	1.37	1.64	1.70
	SD	1.17	.97	.83	.83
ATF	Mean	1.42	1.21	1.55	1.44
	SD	.86	.68	.79	.74

Note: Lower scores indicate less negative attitudes.

Primary Analyses

Scores on all attitude assessments were subjected to a Group (target vs. control) X Time (pre vs. post-course) X Gender (male vs. female) repeated measures ANOVA. Results revealed no significant interaction with gender and thus all analyses were collapsed across gender. The primary results were as anticipated; the target group's attitudes towards both gay men and lesbians became less negative after completion of the 15-week course, whereas no changes occurred in these attitudes for the control group during the same time period, Fs $(1, 41) > 8.27$, $ps < .02$). Similarly, modern sexism scores were less negative after completion of the 15-week course for the target group compared to the control group, $F (1, 41) = 23.00$, $p < .001$). In addition, although the general topic of oppression was discussed minimally at the beginning of the course, students in the target group experienced a sharp decline in their feelings of social dominance after the completion of the course compared to before the course;

no such change in social dominance occurred in the control group $F(1,41) = 14.86$, $p < .001$). Additionally, as predicted, no change in attitudes toward obese people occurred for either group, $F < 1.00$. Means and change scores for significant findings are presented in Table 2 and change scores are illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 2. Target vs. Control Pre and Post Course Attitudes

	Target $n = 19$					Control $n = 26$				
	Pre	**Post**	**c**	**t**	**p**	**Pre**	**Post**	**c**	**t**	**p**
ATG	2.21	1.66	.55	3.57	.001	1.75	1.73	.02	.15	.88
ATL	1.63	1.09	.54	4.53	.001	1.25	1.23	.02	.20	.84
MSS	2.14	1.20	.94	6.83	.001	1.98	1.92	.06	.51	.61
SDO	2.06	1.37	.69	4.11	.001	1.64	1.70	-.06	-.42	.68

Note: c = change score; Positive change indicates a decline in negative attitude from pre-course assessments; *t* change is calculated via a protected t-test (Fisher, 1935).

Figure 1. Target Vs. Control Attitude Change Scores
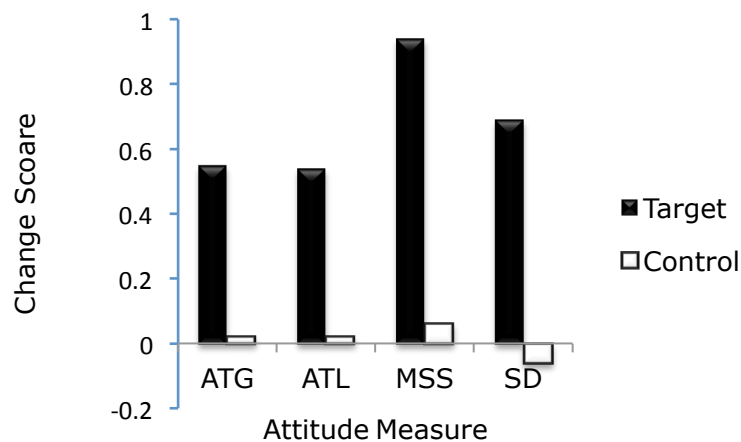
Qualitative Analysis

As stated previously, our analysis of student's personal reflections was phenomenological in nature. The primary objective of examining the student personal reflections was to identify the student's highest stage of thought development as they described their journey through the course. We used, as our framework, Perry's (1970) nine stage theory of intellectual and ethical development and Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) revision of Perry's stages. We then developed our own six common stages of thought and awareness development as we believed it related to the current course.

We summarize Perry's (1970) positions as follows:

- Position 1: Students believe there is a correct and incorrect answer to everything.
- Position 2: Students begin to recognize diversity and uncertainty of opinions either because the authority is poorly qualified or is providing them with an exercise to learn the answers for themselves.
- Position 3: Students believe uncertainty and differences in truth; but believe it is because the answers have not been discovered yet by the authority.
- Position 4: Students believe that everyone has a right to their own opinion and also believes that they need to respond to authorities with what they (authorities) want to hear.
- Position 5: Students believe that all values and knowledge have different truths based on the context of the situation.
- Position 6: Students capture the importance of commitment to something within a relativistic world.
- Position 7: Students commit initially to some area.
- Position 8: Students explore the responsibilities of the commitment to a specific area.

- Position 9: Students establish an identity and accept multiple responsibilities and realize their commitment requires continuous adjustment.

From students' personal reflections we identified six stages of thought and awareness development which are consistent with both Perry's (1970), Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) stages. Listed below are the six stages of the students' thought and awareness development (TAD):

1. Initial Stage: Students' beliefs are based on conclusions that they have drawn from personal experiences and what they have been told.
2. Awareness Stage: Students learn new information, opinions, and perspectives.
3. Decision Stage: After learning new information, opinions, and listening to different perspectives:
   a. Students feel confident in their perspectives and conclusions
   b. Students are willing to consider new perspectives and draw different conclusions.
4. Recognition Stage: Students actively engaging in trying to understand different perspectives and start to recognize when other people are not open-minded or have limited their perspectives to reflect only their experiences.
5. Action Stage: Students help other people become aware of new information and perspectives and/or engage in behaviors that are consistent with their own thoughts and values of the recognition stage.
6. Continuously Adjusting Stage: Students realize that they will always be adjusting their thinking (in a continuous process) as they seek new information and different perspectives.

All students showed movement from the initial stage. A small number of students (4; 21%) moved only to the awareness stage

while 37% (7) of the students moved to the decision stage and 32% (6) moved to the recognition stage. Surprisingly, two students moved to the action or continuously adjusting stage. In sum, about 80% of the students showed movement past the awareness stage. Stage identification and example quotes for each student's personal reflections are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Stages of Thought Development Identified in Reflection Papers

Reflection Paper Number	Highest Stage Identified	Example Quotes
3	2	"I had never realized what levels people will go to."
11	2	"Usually when I would talk with my friends about these issues, it would all go along the same line of derogatory, disliking statements. Yet when I heard comments from random strangers, I came to understand the diversity of opinions that people held…(but) I have formulated my own opinions that really haven't changed."
15	2	"I think my biggest change that I am more aware of how people are treated."
16	2	"When we had the lesson on stereotypes of men, women, lesbians, and gays and the names given to them … I never really noticed how many bad names there was to label others."
1	3a	"If I had not been an open-minded person going into this class, I would probably be mush *(sic)* more open-minded now coming out of it."
19	3a	"I think that the topics we discussed in class helped me understand and define my opinions on certain issues."
2	3b	"Now that I have taken this class I can look at it differently and realize that the view that I had before was a stereotype."

5	3b	"I didn't really know what that [sexual identity] was and I probably would have just labeled someone with that as someone that is gay, or having trouble admitting it. But now I see that it isn't that and there are other things that go in to that".
12	3b	"My views on the issues presented in class have changed now from the beginning of the course."
14	3b	"I felt that a lot of the things that the queer community was doing such as their parades and television shows were completely a media stunt and nothing else. This was an absolutely ridiculous way of thinking and just shows how absurd my thought process was before taking this class."
17	3b	"A lot of guys here don't mind referring to sex or sexual things when talking to women. They think its *(sic)* funny and I used to not mind until I took this class."
4	4	"Now I have more things to say back, and I am more cautious and aware of sexist situations".
6	4	"I learned that I discriminate and am trying to stop and catch myself before I do it. It's hard to change so quickly but this class has created a starting point."
7	4	"I need to learn about people's pasts and be conscious of the fact that everyone is different. Also I have learned that some people just do not have opinions about gay marriage or things that happen in the world around us until it affects them immediately."
8	4	"I notice when people use the word gay as an adjective a lot more then *(sic)* before. I also notice comments that are made that are sexist."
10	4	"When I am out hanging out with people, and I hear people criticizing others by calling them names that are aimed at making fun of homosexuals, I take notice."

13	4	"I would like to continue learning about the powers of the norm and more of their effects on society. I hope I can use this knowledge and channel towards something powerful and constructive."
9	5	"Even though I am religious I began to believe strongly in the right for homosexuals to get married. I even began a letter writing campaign to try and sway our representatives."
18	6	"These ideas and thoughts still have developing to do and maybe will never be complete thoughts as new information and situations always come along to add new aspects."

We believe these stages represent a transformation of student's thinking process, or, in the least, a development of perspective taking (Gurin et al., 2002). Slavich (2005) describes forms of transformational teaching as an opportunity for teachers to create an environment that promotes life-changing experiences, as well as students' ability to engage in and use knowledge in way that is meaningful for them. Additionally, Rosebrough and Leverett (2011) describe outcomes of transformational teaching to include not only academic learning and thought, but also spiritual and social thought processes. Since the method of our course could be described as experiential (Slavich et al., 2012) or transformative (Banks, 2002) we were not surprised to find that students moved through a series of thought development stages (or perspective taking stages), and we believe students personal reflections about the course provide at least one way of assessing this kind of thought evolution.

Discussion

This study found a 15-week course, designed to inform students of issues of prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals and women, led to a significant decreases in students' negative

attitudes towards lesbians, gay men, and less modern sexist beliefs compared to students in the control group. Interestingly and importantly, there was also a significant decrease in students' scores on social dominance, indicating that student beliefs about their own superiority over other social groups declined. In comparison, students' attitudes toward obese individuals, which were not addressed in the content of the course, did not change -- suggesting that current findings are not simply explained by a lessening of biased attitudes, in general, in the target group (i.e., a history or maturation effect).

Our post hoc analysis of student's personal reflections indicated that students developed the ability to consider new perspectives and examined some harmful social norms that they either witnessed or unconsciously demonstrated. It could be reasoned that students' stages of thought development progressed as they learned new information, opinions, and perspectives. Thus, not only do students become less negative toward historically disadvantaged groups, but that they also mature in their thought development much like Perry (1970) found in his earliest work in which he noted that students "experienced the environments as offering…(an) opportunity (p. 50)" to grow. Progressing through different levels of thought early in the college career may provide students with tools by which to maneuver through material that requires a readiness and openness to new and possibly complex ideas (Gurin et al., 2002).

Indeed, students in this study showed evidence of double loop learning in which original assumptions and values were challenged and often amended. Double loop learning theory was devised by Argyris and Schon (1974) for use in organizational decision making. According to Argyris and Schon, double loop learning leads to better organizational decisions and actions by a continued questioning of the underlying rules, processes, and values governing the initial decisions. More recently, educators have used double loop learning theory to illustrate fundamental shifts in

thinking, which occur by questioning underlying assumptions and values of a student's initial beliefs (Brockbank and McGill, 2007). Arguably, these types of fundamental shifts in thinking are the foundations for transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2000); that is, they require a critical examination of original assumptions, openness to views of others, and acceptance of new ideas.

This study supports previous studies that have found that curricular offerings which focus on challenging underlying notions of power and privilege can lead to a decline in negative attitudes in the targeted area and extends these findings by showing that these types of courses may also lead to changes in students' thinking and perspective taking. While these changes may not immediately generalize to groups which are not targeted in course content, movement through stages of thought development may provide a foundation for student's continued revision and openness to other views. The notion that initial curricular experiences focusing on specific multicultural content may help students understand their world by broadening their perspectives and evaluating their original assumptions has implications for future research on diversity focused curricular planning. In this time of global community and political discourse regarding the civil rights of social and political minority groups, the current study supports the notion that courses intended to increase students' awareness of prejudice and discrimination of non-dominant social groups can be an effective tool for decreasing students' negative attitudes, social dominance, and may allow students to development more open, reflective, and transformational, modes of thinking.

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Footnotes

[1] Student personal reflections were a regular part of the course requirement for students in the target group but not the control group.

[2] These students were part of a learning community. All first-year students at this institution were required to be part of a learning community. Although students were able to provide their first three choices of learning community (and usually received their first choice) students did not have a choice about which courses were embedded into the learning community and had no prior knowledge of the courses in the learning community. Thus, it is unlikely that the results are due to a selection bias towards this type of course.

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