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First-year students' perspectives on intercultural learning

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Faculty can play a critical role in supporting students' intercultural development, but studies indicate that instructors report a lack of formal understanding about how to maximize this opportunity. Through the investigation of 115 first-year students' written reflections, this study provides faculty with students' perspectives on intercultural learning moments that were supported by pedagogical and curricular components. The findings suggest that moments students note as critical to their intercultural development may be initiated within the classroom through intentional knowledge sharing and awareness building, yet extended further by students both inside and outside of the classroom context. This article explores student intercultural learning from the perspective of the student and discusses implications for both classroom and campus culture.

Keywords: intercultural learning; first-year students; faculty; intercultural competence; holistic development

Introduction

Multiple research studies have found that while faculty generally report a willingness to support diversity-related interactions and outcomes in their classroom practice, they also report a lack of confidence or perceived capacity to effectively facilitate the process (Johnson and Inoue 2003; Mayhew and Grunwald 2006; Pope and Mueller 2005; Rothwell 2005; Schuerholz-Lehr 2007). As we have written elsewhere (Lee et al. 2012), it is one thing to attend trainings or workshops related to inclusive pedagogy, and it is another to engage in and reflect on the day-to-day realities of designing, implementing, and managing the complex dynamics of a classroom, including the interactions between students, texts, and instructors.

In this study, we work from the assumption that an important resource for faculty learning about our classrooms is the students themselves. Listening to students reflect on how, what, and when their intercultural learning happened may guide instructors in designing and implementing programs that facilitate intercultural outcomes. Students' perspectives on their intercultural learning experiences may contribute to instructors' awareness of subtle elements of classroom climate, as well as ways to support the usage of classroom knowledge in extra-curricular contexts. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to enhance practitioners' understanding of intercultural competence development in the

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college years by presenting first-year students' reflections on their intercultural learning and development, both inside and outside the classroom. The data presented were collected over multiple years in a first-year experience (FYE) program, characterized by structural diversity, multicultural curricula, and collaborative learning practices.

Focus on early college years

It has long been established that human development depends on periods of discontinuity and dissonance, when new information or experience clashes with previously held mental schemes (Gauvain 2001). Courses taken early in students' college career are especially impactful for students' development related to diversity (Bowman 2010b). For many first-year students, the transition to a college environment represents the most significant episode of relational discontinuity encountered at any point in their lives. Separation from the community of origin at the crucial period of late adolescence and early adulthood creates optimal conditions for the formation of a mature identity. Early adulthood in particular is a critical period of young adults' holistic development, and their level of openness to new experience depends on experiences in prior stages of life (Erikson 1956, 1968). The framework of Erikson's developmental psychology suggests that the early college years represent the time when strengthening or interrupting existing student narratives is developmentally most appropriate.

This is underscored by Braddock's (1980) classic perpetuation hypothesis. While the hypothesis was formed on the basis of research into desegregation practices, its scope easily extends to other types of human difference. Braddock (1980) suggests that individuals with limited experience interacting across difference tend to approach all subsequent encounters with previously established narratives of who the 'Other' is, and how 'different' they are from themselves. Unless a significant interruption occurs, the individual's existent narrative is likely to perpetuate, and he or she is less likely to engage across difference in meaningful ways. Therefore, in designing pedagogy that supports intercultural development, instructors should structure purposeful, supported interactions that give students the opportunity to confront previously held knowledge with complicating human realities.

Intercultural effectiveness

Intercultural research emphasizes that communicating effectively across difference requires not just cognitive knowledge, but more importantly, the ability to adapt to changing contexts and diverse values (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006). Intercultural effectiveness is thus known to encompass not just the cognitive domain of learning, but the affective and behavioral as well (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006; Okayama, Furuto, and Edmondson 2001; Yershova, DeJaeghere, and Mestenhauser 2000).

It is only in the last decade that research has shed more light on the factors that determine the course of young adults' development in diversity-related outcomes during the formative period of early adulthood (Hu and Kuh 2003; Bowman 2010a; Bowman and Denson 2012). Intercultural effectiveness is not singularly achieved in one context or point in time, rather, it is developed continuously across multiple time points and experiences (Bowman 2010a; Deardorff 2006; Gurin, Hurtado, and Lopez 2004; Hurtado 2001).

While it is in daily interactions with diverse others that the outcomes of intercultural education are subjected to the most pertinent test, faculty can provide a basis for

developing the skills, habits, and tools of intercultural effectiveness that will support respectful and substantive interaction (Deardorff 2006; Paige 1993; Lee et al. 2012; UNESCO 2013; Yershova, DeJaeghere, and Mestenhauser 2000). Without the development of intercultural skills and awareness, Otten (2003) notes that intercultural encounters 'can even reinforce stereotypes and prejudices', which tends to happen 'if the experiences of critical incidents in intercultural contexts are not evaluated on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels' (p. 15). Hurtado (2001) also notes that '[m]erely encountering differences can promote feelings of superiority or inferiority among students rather than growth and development' (p. 189).

Pedagogy designed to support the intercultural learning process

According to Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez (2004), 'Faculty can play an important role by facilitating effective skill development related to intercultural communication and interaction by bringing diverse students together in meaningful, civil discourse to learn from each other' (p. 32). Facilitated interaction with diverse peers is consistently cited as a critical component to realizing the educational benefits of a racially and ethnically diverse environment in higher-education institutions (Maruyama and Mareno 2000). However, both intercultural theory and research on diversity and equity consistently differentiate intercultural encounters from intercultural learning.

Successful intercultural learning requires curricula and teaching pedagogies whose impact extends beyond the classroom (Eisenchlas and Trevaskes 2007; Lee et al. 2012). The conditions conducive to acquiring intercultural skills are consistent with those advocated in classic theories of learning, such as Kolb's (1984, 2006) conceptualization of the learning cycle. As Lee, Williams, and Kilaberia (2012) have argued using Kolb's (1984) terminology, intercultural learning requires a mixture of four ingredients: concrete experiences with diverse individuals, reflective observation on one's own learning process, abstract conceptualization of new rules of behavior, and active experimentation with the new rules in the course of interacting with diverse others. A holistic approach looks at intercultural learning in terms of both process, 'what happens when learning takes place' (Deardorff, Pysarchik, and Yun 2009, 30), and product, the *outcomes* of learning – the knowledge, behaviors, and awareness that were acquired or developed. As our earlier research has shown, intercultural learning tends to happen in an environment where students have purposeful interactions toward a common goal, instructors value and utilize the assets brought by their students to the classroom, and dissonance is balanced with relational support (Lee et al. 2012).

Students' intercultural development benefits from instructors' mindfulness of classroom dynamics and ways in which learning are applied outside the classroom. In turn, instructors can design intercultural pedagogy more thoughtfully when they are informed by students' direct impressions and assessments of their experience integrating classroom and real-life encounters with difference. In this article, we focus on how students themselves reflect on their intercultural learning experiences and on how they apply this knowledge in and outside of classrooms settings.

Research site and methodology

The primary data source for this article is student reflective writing collected from the students enrolled in the College of Education and Human Development's FYE program at

the University of Minnesota a large, public, doctoral-granting, research institution. These reflective writing samples were collected in 2008, 2009, 2010 academic years (fall semesters of 2008 ($n = 401$) and 2009 ($n = 457$), spring semester of 2010 ($n = 344$). Overall, there were 115 student responses across the 3 years in which students chose to reflect upon critical intercultural learning moments.

Required of all students, FYE provides three key elements to support the growth of students' intercultural competence: (a) structural diversity in the student demographic and multidisciplinary curriculum that emphasize multicultural perspectives; (b) learning objectives that facilitate substantive peer interactions; and (c) structured opportunities that encourage student reflection on learning and development experiences. The program consists of three academic content courses that implement high-impact practices, i.e. common experiences and active and integrated learning. In the first semester, students enroll in First-Year Inquiry (FYI), a four-credit, writing-intensive course that engages students in interdisciplinary, academic inquiry focused on the question, 'How can one person make a difference?' In the second semester, students select a learning community (LC) that consists of two discipline-based courses that are intentionally integrated around a theme, teaching approach, shared goal, or final project.

Approximately, 45% (about 200) of the students who annually enter our college and enroll in FYE are admitted through the University's Access to Success (ATS) program. The ATS program admits students with strong academic potential, even if they do not meet the university's threshold admissions criteria as determined mainly by high school rank and American College Testing (ACT) scores. In the COLLEGE, ATS students are fully integrated into the FYE and not distinguished internally by their admissions cohort. The self-reported ethnic and racial demographics of the 2008 ($n = 400$) and 2009 ($n = 457$) cohorts who entered the college and enrolled in FYE show an average population of: 17% Black, 3.5% American Indian, 17.5% Asian, 4.5% Hispanic, and 57% White. The college had notably greater structural diversity than the institution at large during the same 3-year period; overall institutional demographics (2008, $n = 4706$; 2009, $n = 4943$) were as follows: 3.5% Black, 1% American Indian, 15% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 75.5% White.

Data collection and analysis

This study is qualitative in nature, and uses data collected as part of a larger assessment project that aimed to investigate students' academic and social engagement as well as learning and development outcomes in the FYE program. The subset of data used in this study was collected from an open-ended prompt given to students at end of first and second semesters. Students were asked to write about a 'critical moment', one that they viewed as exemplifying what they had learned over the course of the semester:

> … think about a scenario, event or incident that occurred as a result of your participation in the FYI/LC this semester. Pick an incident that you feel best illustrates being a participant … Describe that incident in detail.

> NOTE: this "incident" does not have to be a huge event. Whatever event you pick, please describe it thoroughly and talk about why you picked this particular incident.

The prompts were intentionally open-ended in order to invite students to self-select and actively reflect, thereby providing what Haines (2007) refers to as a 'clear window on emerging modes of thought'.

The research team consisted of a faculty member, the director of FYE assessment, and a graduate research assistant; no members of the research team taught in the FYE program. The analysis involved three phases: (a) identifying student responses that pertained to intercultural learning (Denzin and Lincoln 1994); (b) utilized intercultural learning domains (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) to independently code student responses selected in phase 1; and (c) established consensus on coding of student responses (Yeh and Inman 2007).

In phase one, each team member individually read through the student responses from each year (2008, 2009, and 2010) and identified those that featured experiences related to intercultural learning and development. Out of a total of 652 student responses, 115 were identified and selected for our final analysis.

In phase two, the three researchers analyzed students' written responses using both deductive and inductive analysis procedures (Creswell 1998; Merriam 2002). Initially, each researcher conducted independent, open coding of the 115 student responses, and wrote memos on what types of opportunities or conditions students described as supportive of intercultural growth. More specifically, the research team focused their coding on conditions that helped students productively engage the potential dissonance of encountering a new person or idea.

In phase three, the team discussed and collated the emergent codes. We conducted two rounds of coding of a random selection of student responses until we came to an 88% inter-rater agreement on codes. Then, all 115 student responses were divided among the team to code. After each journal had been coded by two team members, we discussed discrepancies in coding, and came to a consensus on each one.

Findings: first-year students' critical intercultural moments

Three themes emerged as significant in our analysis of students' reflections on critical learning moments related to intercultural development. These included encounters across a broad range of contexts (not just the classroom) where the students described having had the opportunity to: (1) gain new knowledge about self or others; (2) practice mindfulness of their own communication; and (3) interpret and relate to diverse others. Rather than include many short excerpts, we have opted to include a few longer student responses within each theme with the goal of illustrating the depth and complexity of students' emerging intercultural learning.

Structured opportunities to gain first-hand knowledge about others

Responses identified within this theme describe novel intercultural interaction as stimulating self-awareness about previously held assumptions or behaviors. Whether describing formal interactions (class discussions, collaborative assignments) or informal ones (meeting outside class to work on an assignment, conversations before class starts), students described the conditions under which coming in contact with their peers' perspectives and experiences made the knowledge acquired in a classroom more relevant, and decreased discomfort in communicating across differences.

Many students, both from majority and minority ethnic groups, described common characteristics of novel interactions that supported their appreciation for diverse perspectives and created a deeper sense of the limitations of their own lens. Engagement with the subject matter in class tended to be deepened by the opportunity to hear the

perspective of students whose personal experience directly connected to the subject matter. The theme is illustrated in a student's reflection about a class discussion about research on the experience of Chinese immigrants in the USA:

> For the discussion I enjoyed everyone's opinion because it related to my own confusion and shock about Chinese immigrant mistreatment and the poem or quotes from the immigrant were even more shocking … We have a very diverse class as well which I am thankful for because it gives us a variety of opinions … I felt like I have been blind to this nation's horrible … acts to shape immigration. My understanding of everything so far makes me more aware of the different ethnicities around me (and of) everything people do to come to America. And then there is me, European American born in Milwaukee, WI, and I take everything here for granted and get frustrated daily because of all the problems not even realizing what immigrants go through to come here.

The powerful nexus between classroom learning and first-hand encounters with diverse individuals is also illustrated by the narratives of students who were able to inquire more deeply into class content during discussions that occurred with classmates in more informal contexts. For instance, having read an article about the Islamic hijab, one student had the opportunity for more conversation with one of his classmates:

> (Three of us) went to lunch one day not too long ago and decided to start talking … It was the first time I went with anyone to eat that was from my classes. Anyways one day just the three of us decided to talk about the article we had to read for John's (LC) class that day which was about the "hijab" the headdress of women that are Islamic. We were asking questions about the cultural context of Najma's religion and the significance of the hijab. *Then we talked about our cultures related to how we identified ourselves looking at what we are talking about in John's class*.[1]

Students also described how gaining first-hand knowledge of others facilitated their own self-awareness, and frequently described a resulting decrease in uncertainty and anxiety when interacting. For example, for a recent immigrant to the USA, coming to college initially elicited feelings of anxiety about interacting with peers. In the initial weeks, the fear of being made fun of or not being treated with respect inhibited her interactions with others whom she perceived as different. She then attributes a change in attitude to a spontaneous, informal interaction in class that gave her first-hand exposure to people about whom she had previously made unfair assumptions.

> One day a white girl and her Latino friend come and sat next to me in my biology class. They started talking to me and asking me some personal question like where I went to high school and my homeland. I was afraid to talk to them. The last time somebody had come and started talking to me like that she ended up making funny of my accent. Something surprised me with the Latino and White girl. They understood … I started opening up to them. We started sitting together and … become close and got to know each other … At first I thought that was weird because through what my friends were telling me before coming to college was that people outside Africa never liked it at all … I was deceived because of accepting a single story and not listening to others perspective.

Her story illustrates the potential significance of informal interactions in our classes, and how likely they are to be influenced by and in turn to influence classroom climate. As students accumulated both experience practicing intercultural communication and

opportunities for reflecting on what worked and what did not, they often express increased confidence in and tools for participating in interactions across diversity.

Opportunities to practice mindfulness

The second group of responses describes intercultural growth being facilitated by classroom guidelines that promoted mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as 'being cognitively aware of [one's] own communication and the process of interaction with others' (Pusch 2009, 69). According to Brake (1997), a mindful individual will be able to recognize differences, discover what they mean, and create new ways of relating as well as be able to reflect on and learn from the experience. In terms of students engaging in intercultural interactions in classrooms, mindfulness is displayed in asking oneself such questions as 'How are we reacting to each other?' or 'What can I say or do to help this process?' It can also entail listening to one another and reflecting on intercultural encounters. In other words, a student's mindfulness becomes evident in how competently they demonstrate empathy for others, self-awareness, or listening. Respectful and purposeful engagement with diverse others can foster mindfulness.

An element of instructional design frequently referenced as helpful for intercultural growth was the development of guidelines for classroom conduct or climate early in the term. It was not unusual for students to refer back to that activity and to discuss the importance it had it proactively setting a tone and stage for students to be active participants in creating an actively inclusive supportive learning environment or class climate. Students sometimes did not realize the impact of this activity at the time, but as the excerpt below illustrates, they recalled it in their end-of-semester reflections and described its formative influence:

> We were and still are able to show our abilities to do those things that we spoke about on that first day. We … respect each other's opinions and don't hold different opinions against each other and work as a team when we are put together, whether we know one another or not … We really delight in talking about it and having all of the discussions we do in class. This is part of the respect that we all have for each other and our opinions. We are all courteous towards each other during discussion and can speak freely.[2] Finally, we all learn from each other, gaining new ideas and beliefs that we may never have considered before … I also believe that the adjectives that we all thought up about this class has really had an effect on where it's gone, and ultimately it's made it a more likeable class that people enjoy going to, because we have really taken these ideas to heart and used them and their meanings in our everyday discussions. I believe because our class not only has respect for the limitations and guidelines we set for ourselves but respect for each other.

This reflection highlights the importance of bringing mindfulness to a collective, deliberative process of establishing how individuals will treat one another in a particular space.

For some students, mindfulness is an individual intercultural behavior learned primarily not in a large classroom, but rather in small group interactions. As one student reflects below, being mindful of others enables one to regulate one's own behavior appropriately:

> This class has helped me to realize that everyone's contribution is important, because we all come from diverse backgrounds. What each individual brings [is] a different perspective to the table, maybe shining a light on something that others haven't thought of yet. As an

individual, I've realized that what I have to say is important, but I should make sure that I've thought it through before I just go blurting things out in discussion. And I'm usually careful about thinking things over, but sometimes if I wait and just listen to the discussion, someone will say something I hadn't thought of yet, and it makes me rethink my idea.

Many students reported on the importance of opportunities to practice real listening, and of their own process of learning to listen. Listening, as many students note, is one of the most difficult skills to develop. They realize that really listening is an active process that involves focusing on the other person, not thinking about what you will say next, and reflecting while the other person speaks. The student below describes what the process of learning to listen looked like for him:

> My group and I were having a very educating discussion about immigration and how we could relate to it thereby answering the question. Everyone in my group was participating so I got to hear a lot of points and comments that I couldn't have come up with. It's really helped me to look at things more diversely, especially because of the Master Narrative concept. I try to really look at everything I do and see if there are other sides, other concepts that I am missing because of this. *My class experience has also taught me that sometimes it's better to keep quiet when everyone else is. I can be intimidating so when I constantly am voicing my opinion, not only does it get repetitive, but also I might be scaring someone else from voicing an opinion*.

> The small groups have really helped me to work to do better with this. Rather than just voice whatever I'm thinking I try to reflect more deeply.[3]

This student describes becoming more mindful of how his actions might be interpreted by his collaborators and also of how an individual's behavior influences group interactions. He is also reporting on becoming aware that his point of view represents only one of many plausible perspectives. As a result, he describes trying to adjust his behavior so as to create a bridge to relate with others instead of a barricade.

Opportunities to interpret and relate

Critical thinking and cognitive complexity depend on the degree to which an individual is able to interpret, relate, and apply a concept or idea to a particular situation. Students' critical-moment reflections suggest a range of not only levels of cognitive complexity but also spaces conducive to the application of their learning. In a moment illustrative of this theme, one student reflects on the concept of diaspora, which was a core concept in his FYI class. The student explained that one evening, loud music playing inside one of the large conference rooms in the student union led her to an event where students were celebrating Africa. From this experience, she reflects on developing her knowledge on a deeper, experiential level. The student writes:

> While I was there I had applied the concepts that were taught in class in a holistic view. As I observed the event as a whole, I came to a realization that even though everyone had an entirely different ethnic background with different beliefs, they all had acquired a sense of sameness … As an FYI student, I had concluded that these students defined a diaspora. Some of the students got on stage and talked about how their movements were either forced, experienced some kind of traumatic incident, or migrated here to the United States because they imagined our homeland as a way to success because of all the opportunities that are given.

> At the event I was involved in a conversation where a few students from Somalia were discussing the way they practice their culture. As an outsider, I had asked if any of them had changed their cultures and way of life by interacting with other people or classmates they had come across in their lifetime. They answered by telling me that they have changed dramatically by that very fact; interacting with a new culture. These students who were mostly immigrants are part of our idea as a nation. I've learned that some of these students have changed because by interacting with our idea of a nation, it consciously forces them to change in order to understand what it means to be American.

In the initial part of the excerpt, the student seems to be 'performing' knowledge that had been acquired in class, but the subsequent description illustrates a shift where something theoretical seems to come to life and to be applied within an authentic context.

Other students described relating intercultural learning from their FYE courses to already established relationships with friends and family members. One student describes going back to visit her former high school with several friends and observing the reality around here with a new lens acquired in her college classes:

> A boy passed by us and said hi. Everyone except me and my friend looked at him and started to laugh at him … [because of the fact] that she was a girl that dressed like a boy and whom they suspect is a lesbian. I thought that was really rude and [went] up to the girl to apologize … I stayed with [her and her friends] for the rest of the lunch break and found out that they're always treated that way. I felt really sorry for the girl to be treated badly just because she chose to dress differently, or look differently … [Through] this class I have learned that there are people who want to be themselves rather than what society expects them to be. And due to their difference they are treated badly. [Before,] I probably would have stayed with my friends thinking why that girl was different.

Applying knowledge acquired in the sociology course enables the student to reframe her previous assumptions and to be intentional about how she acts. In this reflection, she demonstrates mindfulness about how she interacts – both with her friends and with the individuals who are being laughed at by them.

Discussion

The data presented were collected over multiple years in a first-year experience program, characterized by structural diversity, multicultural curricula, and collaborative learning practices. The goal of this paper was to inform and enhance practitioners' understanding of intercultural competence development in the college years and to provide examples of what can be achieved. Having an informed understanding of the intercultural process is an important foundation for practitioners as it can help support intentional and informed instructional design that supports intercultural learning. The student reflections presented in this paper illustrate the intercultural development process and they also serve as demonstrations of low-stakes classroom activities (the focused reflection papers) can support this development.

Our analysis of students' reflections on their critical intercultural encounters made clear the range of time points, locations, and contexts in which these self-identified critical moments took place. Across this range of reported moments, two common denominators emerged: the importance of personal, first-hand interactions with people different than themselves; and the value of an authentic practice in structured settings (such as a course can be designed to provide) in supporting effective interactions in a

variety of contexts. Whether or not students described the critical moment as taking place in the classroom, they tended to refer back to elements of the course that supported the interaction wherever it took place. Students tended to positively associate perceived intercultural effectiveness with a course environment in which diversity was explicitly recognized, valued, and engaged in the form of course content, and activities, and stated learning outcomes.

Relatedly, the quality of the classroom environment emerged as a critical component in our analysis. Classroom environment encompasses the content of the course, pedagogies used, and expectations conveyed to students about course outcomes and the values or principles that will guide interaction. Even the students who selected moments that took place outside of the classroom described the connectedness between these extra-curricular (frequently personal) interactions and specific activities or assignments in their first-year course. The findings illustrate the importance of an actively, intentionally established classroom environment with opportunity for interaction and reflection.

The study suggests that practitioners can develop a deeper understanding of how to structure learning environments, design curricula, and implement pedagogical strategies that facilitate students' intercultural development. Several key ingredients emerged from student writing that characterize classrooms supporting students' intercultural development:

- Opportunities to connect course content and key concepts to lived experience, and to consider how personal experience influences individual perspectives on a complex topic or issue.
- Multiple opportunities for interpersonal interaction, sequenced over time and incorporated as a routine feature of the course.
- Explicit attention to identifying and implementing the elements that are conducive to establishing a climate that supports interpersonal interaction. In particular, students identified the importance and the impact of engaging in respect, listening, and guided purposeful activities that included time for reflection.

Finally, we note that the participants in our study tended to associate critical intercultural learning moments with low-stakes situations where they did not perceive something 'critical' to be at stake (such as a major project grade, or a personal relationship). In low-stakes situations, students could interact with difference, test out the application of new skills, or critically grapple with new ideas or concepts without the weight and intensity that a grade or of evaluation. Student reflections suggest that the low-stakes nature of these critical moments facilitated their willingness and confidence in engaging in conversations or considerations that were outside of their existing experiences or established comfort zones. Perhaps this response was related to the fact that our study population was first-year students and thus were more comfortable or confident in describing a low-stake situation.

It is apparent from student narratives that well-facilitated classroom interactions can increase students' confidence and effectiveness in intercultural encounters – yet does such development affect their capacity to question and challenge systemic inequalities? While beyond the scope of this study, the question is well worth further investigation. Future research could investigate the degree to which intercultural effectiveness is perceived and/ or acted upon (by students, by practitioners) as the capacity to get along within existing inequalities, or whether it forms the foundation for pursuing equitable relationships.

Notes

1. The last sentence of the paragraph (italicized) has been referenced as an illustration in our monograph 'Engaging Diversity in Undergraduate Classrooms' (Lee et al. 2012, 35).
2. Italicized portion cites Lee et al. (2012, 81).
3. Italicized portion cites Lee et al. (2012, 31).

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