

## **Toward an Empowering Multicultural Assessment Technique**

**By Russell L. Young**

For the past three decades, teacher educators have grappled with the challenge of making schooling more equitable in America. University teacher-training programs across the United States have responded by supporting multicultural education programs and courses. In the mid-1970s, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education recommended that all teacher education students study and experience other cultures for preparation of the multicultural classroom environment (Howsam, 1976).

Among the several approaches used to address a diverse student population (Sleeter & Grant, 1993), many advocate the promotion of student empowerment. Students who are empowered develop a positive cultural identity through interaction with teachers and experience a sense of control over their own lives while developing confidence and motivation to succeed academically (Cummins, 1989).

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*Russell L. Young is an  
associate professor in the  
Department of Policy  
Studies in Language and  
Cross-Cultural  
Education, College of  
Education, San Diego  
State University, San  
Diego, California.*

Students who are empowered develop a positive cultural identity through interaction with teachers and experience a sense of control over their own lives while developing confidence and motivation to succeed academically (Cummins, 1989).

Sonia Nieto (1992) suggests that an empowering school expands the role of the student from a passive to an active participant. Schools are organized more often around issues of control than around issues of

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collaboration or consultation (Nieto, 1992). Education is very teacher oriented. Teachers are seen as the repository of knowledge whose traditional role is to transfer that knowledge to students. This type of education treats students as uninvolved in their own learning (Freire, 1970). What they learn is decided, designed, and executed by others (Nieto, 1992). Ira Shor (1980) believes that students should be seen as subjects and not objects. Students should direct their own learning and do so responsibly rather than have it be directed by others.

Teacher education faculty involved in multicultural education can greatly advocate student empowerment by modeling empowering pedagogical strategies. Teacher education students who have experienced an empowered classroom would be more likely to employ them in their own classes. Faculty can involve students in their own educational process through increased decision making, goal setting, and cooperative activities.

Cooperative learning strategies work well as empowering pedagogy, especially in a culturally diverse setting (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1991). Spencer Kagan (1990) believes that a cooperative format of learning increases academic achievement, ethnic relations, and social develop of students. Students in cooperatively structured learning activities take responsibility for both themselves and others. The keys to cooperative learning are positive interdependence and individual accountability which are congruent with the goals of empowerment.

Perhaps the most difficult area to empower students is that of student evaluation. Empowerment is often defined as moving from a teacher to student orientation where students become more responsible for their learning. However, student evaluation is often seen as a teacher responsibility. The teacher needs to evaluate or assess the students' understanding or mastery of the course content. A problem arises because evaluation as a means of assessment (grading) assumes a bureaucratic standard model of education, which is antithetical to individual goals and needs (Thousand, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a cooperative learning method of student assessment in a teacher training multicultural education course that utilizes an empowering model.

## **Methods**

### ***Subjects***

Students exposed to the new midterm format were enrolled in an introduction to multicultural education course taught by the author. Students were enrolled in the Spring and Summer 1995 sessions. A total of 49 students in the Spring and 29 students in the Summer were evaluated. Fifty-six were females and twenty-two were males.

### **Procedures**

The introduction to multicultural education course is a prerequisite to applying to the teacher credential program. Typically, about two-thirds of the students are seniors in their early twenties. The other third are transfer or returning students. The course covers such topics as language acquisition, prejudice and discrimination, assimilation, pluralism, education as a cultural process, stereotypes, and teaching strategies for the diverse classroom. The teaching format includes lectures, small and large group discussions, guest speakers, film presentations, experiential activities, student presentations, and readings.

The midterm format was designed to nurture student involvement and responsibility for learning. Empowerment was defined by setting up goals to be evaluated. Goals of the revised midterm format were to: (1) develop student learning; (2) develop critical thinking skills; (3) develop test-making skills; (4) develop interaction skills with diverse classmates; (5) understand different perspectives; and (6) develop cooperative learning skills.

During Spring 1995, a cooperative midterm format was utilized. Students self-selected themselves into five groups. Each group was given instructions to create essay questions on one of the five topics: (1) language acquisition and bilingual education; (2) foundations of multicultural education; (3) assimilation, values, and ethnic identification; (4) racism; and (5) educational concerns based on religion, gender, exceptionality, or age. Students were instructed to formulate essay questions to reflect the theories or general ideas concerning the topic, apply them to an educational context, and employ one's own thought and opinion on the subject matter. Students were asked to be aware of framing questions so as to limit answers (so a student knows how much to write), break up into parts to be graded, and vocabulary (words such as justify and compare rather than discuss). The author then chose one essay from each group to be on the finalized version of the exam. Selection of essays were done in a way to give students a breadth of topics to study relevant to the course. Students could then get into their groups to discuss how to answer the questions. The midterms were take-home examinations. Students were to answer three of the five questions. Upon return, answers were given to the original groups to be graded. Students were asked to develop their own criteria for grading before evaluating the essays. Grading ranged from pass to redo. The student would have an opportunity to redo any essay until all three were passed. Students were given a chance to evaluate the midterm process during the next class meeting.

The midterm format for the Summer session was revised according to the comments from students in the Spring. There were two major objections to the format in the Spring. First, some students felt that they worked much harder on the exam essay than other students. They wished to be rewarded for their efforts more than those who did not work as hard. However, all students were eventually given a passing grade (those that had to redo the essays did so until passed by their peers).

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A second criticism was that some students did not like to be responsible for grading the exams. They commented that it was too stressful for them. Some students objected when they were asked to rewrite part of their essay. The following revisions were implemented in the summer to counter these initial difficulties. First, students were asked to comment on the essays. However, the final decision to rewrite or redo an essay would be decided by the author. Second, students were given a list of ten essay questions to take home and study. They were also given time in groups to discuss the questions. Students were given five questions to answer (they were to select three) in class (rather than take home) on midterm day. Lastly, students were given more freedom in making up essay questions. Rather than assign each group a topic, they were asked to discuss the major themes of the course and design a comprehensive test based on those themes. A form to evaluate the midterm process was given after the test. The form was the same as that used in the spring.

#### **Instrument**

After the midterm process was completed, students were asked to complete an evaluation form. The four open-ended questions included: (1) What were the positive aspects of the midterm? (2) What were the negative aspects of the midterm format? (3) In what ways would you improve the midterm format? and (4) Would you prefer a cooperative format of testing or the individualized format? Why or why not?

The evaluation form also included eight Likert-style statements ranging from not useful at all (1) to very useful (5) where 3 represented no opinion. Students were to rate the amount of growth experienced from the midterm in the following eight areas using the Likert scale: (1) developing critical thinking skills; (2) developing cooperative learning skills; (3) developing essay writing skills; (4) developing analysis skills; (5) understanding different perspectives; (6) learning course content that are multicultural; (7) developing interaction skills with diverse classmates; and (8) overall growth toward being a better teacher in a diverse classroom.

#### **Results**

Results indicate that the midterm format had a positive effect for students in the Spring and Summer sessions. Means for the eight statements ranged from 3.4 to 4.4 in the Spring and 4.0 to 4.8 in the Summer on a five-point scale (1=not very useful, 5=very useful) thus indicating positive growth resulting from the midterm (See Tables 1 and 2). Confidence intervals were calculated to assess the degree to which students agreed with the statements. All eight statements had a 95 percent confidence interval whose range was greater than and not including 3.0, indicating a high degree of agreement.

Means of the statements were compared between the Spring and Summer to assess the impact of the revisions. Means for all the statements were higher in the

**Table 1**  
**Means and Confidence Intervals of Spring Students**

<u>Statement</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>95% C.I.</u>
Developing critical thinking skills	4.1	.8	47	(3.9,4.4)
Developing cooperative learning skills	4.2	.8	49	(3.9,4.4)
Developing essay writing skills	3.4	1.1	49	(3.1,3.8)
Developing analysis skills	4.0	.9	48	(3.7,4.3)
Understanding different perspectives	4.3	.8	48	(4.1,4.6)
Learning course content that is multicultural	4.4	.6	49	(4.3,4.6)
Developing interaction skills with diverse classmates	4.3	.7	48	(4.1,4.4)
Overall growth toward being a better teacher in a diverse classroom	4.3	.8	48	(4.1,4.5)

**Table 2**  
**Means and Confidence Intervals of Summer Students**

<u>Statement</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>95% C.I.</u>
Developing critical thinking skills	4.4	.8	29	(4.1,4.7)
Developing cooperative learning skills	4.6	.5	29	(4.4,4.8)
Developing essay writing skills	4.0	.8	29	(3.7,4.3)
Developing analysis skills	4.4	.7	29	(4.2,4.7)
Understanding different perspectives	4.8	.4	29	(4.6,4.9)
Learning course content that is multicultural	4.7	.5	29	(4.5,4.9)
Developing interaction skills with diverse classmates	4.7	.6	29	(4.5,4.9)
Overall growth toward being a better teacher in a diverse classroom	4.7	.5	29	(4.5,4.9)

**Table 3**  
**T-tests Between Spring and Summer Students**

<u>Statement</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>t-value</u>	<u>p</u>
Developing critical thinking skills	74	-1.47	.15
Developing cooperative learning skills	76	-2.57	.01
Developing essay writing skills	76	-2.35	.02
Developing analysis skills	75	-2.09	.04
Understanding different perspectives	75	-2.68	.01
Learning course content that is multicultural	76	-2.06	.04
Developing interaction skills with diverse classmates	75	-2.43	.02
Overall growth toward being a better teacher in a diverse classroom	75	-2.53	.01

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Summer after revision than means for the Spring students. T-tests were run to evaluate the level of difference (See Table 3). The improvement was significant at the alpha level of .05 for seven of the eight statements.

There seems to be agreement between the students as to amount of growth in the eight different areas. Both the Summer and Spring students rated the amount of growth in developing essay writing skills as lowest. Development of cooperative learning skills, understanding different perspectives, learning course content that are multicultural, developing interaction skills with diverse classmates, and growth in becoming a better teacher in a diverse classroom were rated relatively higher for both groups. The correlation of the means between Spring and Summer students was quite high ( $r = .96$ ).

### **Discussion**

Those involved in the process of changing education to better meet the needs of a diverse student population have long sought ways to address individual and cultural issues. The term empowerment has been used loosely to describe an orientation that moves the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner. Empowered learners can work cooperatively with the teacher and other students to formulate an educational environment conducive to one's unique personality and character. With this shift of orientation, the student must go beyond the role of being a passive receptacle of knowledge. The student needs to set goals, make decisions, and monitor one's own progress.

This study analyzed the result of such an empowering activity in a university multicultural education class designed for pre-service teachers. The students were allowed to design, take, and evaluate an examination which was graded and calculated as part of the course. In many ways, relinquishing the responsibility of evaluation to students is very difficult. Not only must the teacher trust the students to "try their best," but students must trust their own abilities to decide on the content and grading of the examination. From the results of the study, the students seemed more at ease when the final say on the final grade was shared with the instructor. Growth, as rated by the students' self assessment, was significantly higher in the revised summer protocol than for students in the spring.

Despite the increase in scores from Spring to Summer, the relative degree of growth in the eight areas seems uniform as indicated by the high correlation coefficient. This would give credibility to the validity of the instrument.

Perhaps most significant was the students' response to the examination format as a learning experience. The large majority of the students related in the open-ended questions how much more they learned compared to traditional testing. They enjoyed working cooperatively. The stress level was greatly reduced. Many said that they never had a test using this format, yet would use it in their own teachings.

Some students did remark that they felt uncomfortable grading other students.

This may be explained by a discomfort switching from a student to teacher role. Traditionally, teachers are supposed to grade while students are to be graded. The responsibility thrust upon some students may have been too much, even after they were told in the Summer that the instructor would make the final decisions based on their recommendations.

In summary, faculty in teacher preparation programs not only must play the role of dispensers of knowledge, but role models for concepts and methods subscribed. Empowerment is a common theme to those interested in teaching in diverse classrooms. Yet empowerment cannot be merely taught as an intellectual pursuit; it must be experienced and incorporated into one's own teaching philosophy. This study introduced a method of empowering the assessment of pre-service teachers in a multicultural education course. It was evaluated and revised to alleviate initial problems. Hopefully, more such empowering activities can be incorporated into other teacher preparation courses.

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