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Communicating and Creating Safe Spaces

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Communicating and Creating Safe Spaces

Cultural centers remain one of the most viable venues through which a university's commitment to diversity can be demonstrated. The ability to communicate and create a "safe space" in which all students partake in a cultural center is crucial to demonstrating university diversity values. Safe spaces include physical aspects of bodily safety, but can also be communicated through cultural and structural practices designed to encourage feelings of belonging, mattering and community, especially for those in traditionally under-represented or marginalized populations.

This service learning presentation draws on my ethnographic research with a university cultural center, and will share the importance of cultural centers as safe spaces for students. I'll begin by exploring the impact and importance of cultural centers as well as safe spaces.

Contextualizing Cultural Centers as "Safe Spaces:" Literature Review
One useful theoretical framework for examining cultural centers is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT came from legal scholarship and "challenges the experience of whites as the normative standard" and instead places emphasis on the experiences of people of color (Colosson, 2010, pg. 264).CRT brings light on how race, as a social construct, shapes university structures, practices, and discourse (Patton, 2010). By applying CRT, we see that cultural centers empower students to resist and disrupt White privilege and entitlement by providing an academic, social, epistemological and physical counter-space for students of color (Patton, 2010, pg. 84).

Cultural centers have a significant history, dating back to the late 1960's at the time of civil rights. But it wasn't until the 1980's that multi/cross cultural centers were introduced and spread amongst university campuses. Cultural centers serve the needs of populations where the broader university lacks the cultural engagement or resources. Cultivation of safe spaces are noted as productive and reactive sites for negotiating difference and challenging oppression, but also where students feel pride, comfort, affirmed, and addressed (Fox & Ore , 2010). Cultural centers can advocate for the needs of underserved students and can reduce the sense of isolation for underserved students (Patton, 2006), thus promoting retention and academic achievement (Jones et al., 2002).The concept and categories of "safe" and "unsafe" spaces are context-dependent and socially produced. Safe spaces on college campuses are often created in response to the "patriarchal, heteronormative, racialized, and classed 'imaginary construction[s]' of

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safety" (Roestone Collective, 2014). For example, centers that focus on identities—whether gender, sexual orientation or race—all challenge "normative" notions. Producing safe spaces requires continually embracing, negotiating and facing paradoxical binaries: private/public, exclusivity /inclusivity, danger /safety and so forth (Roestone Collective, 2014). Safe spaces are places where students are empowered, encouraged and willing to share lived experiences and opinions, develop a feeling of trust, and accept each other's differences (Fox & Ore, 2010; Roestone Collective, 2014). Cultural centers therefore build solidarity while challenging the status quo.

Today's racism on college and university campuses has become increasingly subtle and cumulative "miniassault", students of color daily experience racial microaggressions in social and academic spaces on college campuses. Chester Pierce coined the term microaggression, to describe the subtle and yet stunning interpersonal and institutional racial assaults and racial jokes (Yosso et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2007). Racial microaggressions can be framed and displayed through many avenues but all send a pattern of disrespect, racial snubs, put-downs or explicit and implicit messages that serve to keep students of color in their place (Yosso et al., 2009; Sue et al.,2007). In response to these messages of rejection students of color seek and need safe spaces to build a culturally supportive community and develop skills to navigate between worlds of home, school, academia and community.

Based on this past research, my study was guided by the following research question:
RQ: How do multi/cross cultural centers at a university communicate safe spaces?

Exploring a Cultural Center: Methodology

This study used an ethnographic approach to gather data as part of a research methods class. I volunteered at a local cultural center, which I'll call the "Pan Cultural Center."[1]. My time in the site consisted of working on a project to organize an educational series that provides an opportunity for faculty of color to share a little about their research interests as well as their path to a doctoral degree. I conducted a total of 13 hours in participant observation from which I composed field notes that helped organize data that I observed (Tracy, 2013). . In addition, I conducted ethnographic interviews with a variety of people in the center, and formal interviews with a student peer educator, the associate director of the center, and an intern (Tracy, 2013). Through a grounded coded analysis (Tracy, 2013), I discovered that there were patterns that

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[1] The names of the university, organizations on campus, and all participants have been changed. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect participants' identity.

emerged from the data, which resulted in four key findings for creating a safe space: the use of Innovative Programs, the creation of Communal Space, access to Cultural Resources, and facilitation of Open Dialogue.

Strategies for Communicating and Creating Safe Spaces: Findings
Today's racism on university campuses has become increasingly subtle, consisting of microaggressions that take the form of disrespect, put-downs, or explicit and implicit messages that serve to keep students of color "in their place" (Yasso et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2007). Micro-aggressions have a cumulative result that call for the need for safe spaces, wherein students develop skills to navigate between worlds of home, school, and the community at large. However, in educational settings, "safe spaces" don't necessarily refer to an environmental without discomfort. Instead of denying or eliminating danger, safe spaces may also challenge binaries of difference (Rosetone Collective, 2014). In order for students to grow and learn, they may need to confront issues that are uncomfortable, but safe spaces can provide a venue in which opinions may be articulated and learning processes may occur without fear of reprisal.

In the remainder of this presentation, I'll focus on discussing the ways in which participants in my research discussed "safe space" as produced through the cultural center. These elements promote

Innovative Programs
The first finding was that the Pan Cultural Center used innovative programs to attract, educate and engage students of different backgrounds. Programs bring students together, and may include things like social events, performances, and educational workshops. According to the program director, programs are meant to "foster an inclusive environment to encourage full and equal participation of all students" and the programs serve as ways to "educate and spread awareness about social justice and multicultural issues."

The student staff members at the Pan-Cultural Center make their biggest contributions through programming by creating programs that encourage students to participate and learn. The center also supports and collaborates with multiple student organizations. During History months such as Latina/o, Black, and Native American History month, student clubs/orgs and the Pan-Cultural Center support each other to give opportunities to students to engage, dialogue, and gain exposure to multiculturalism. This educational programming helps students understand difference, social justice, and oppression by enhancing students' value, appreciation, and recognition for diverse students, thus aiding in the creation of a safe space.

Communal Space

Second, the Pan-Cultural Center communicated safe space through the creation of communal space. The use of communal space serves in three ways to make students feel as though the center is a safe space: there's the physical center, the educational function of the center, and then the relational-social space. Firstly, there is physical space in relation to location and aesthetics. The physical presence of a center provided tangible access to a community and served as a kind of "public relations" tool for the university. One administrator noted that the center was a great promotional tool for prospective students by "virtue of existing." The center is located within the student commons building, next to the other social justice centers. This placement communicates the sense that Pan-Cultural Center and cultural issues are of importance and encourages collaboration between the centers and therefore translates into a safe space.

As an educational space, the center provides both a physical and symbolic space to have discussion and conversations around topics relating to difference. Holley & Steiner (2005) argue that characteristics in an educational safe space should include welcoming discussion, supportiveness and approachability. As an educational space, the Pan Cultural Center created a climate that allowed students to explore their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors and feel secure enough to express their views honestly and take risks and share (Roestone Collective, 2014).

As a social space, students are able hang out and interact with other students, retreat from the larger campus, and focus on relationships. For example, a student I interviewed said the Pan-Cultural Center provides students with a "space where students can relax between classes", ultimately decreasing the feelings of alienation, isolation and lack of belonging (Patton, 2006). Similarly, another student said she wanted a cross-cultural center because students need a permanent space where they can stay longer than just a quick meeting. She articulated, "A home is somewhere that is always there when you need it, not just once a week." During my time volunteering, I observed many students that would sleep, eat, study and/or hang out in the space for long periods at a time and there wouldn't be any formal events or facilitating going on, illustrating the use of Center as a social safe space and "home away from home."

Cultural Resources

The third finding was that the Pan- Cultural Center gives students access to an array of resources in order to establish a safe space. Students were observed utilizing the computers, library of books, refrigerator, and printers. For example, many students would come up to the front desk and ask if they could print and after they signed in, the student staff would kindly give them the materials need to print from the print station.

Staff members in the cultural center are also resources, as they provide intangible resources such as giving referrals to appropriate offices and imparting knowledge of campus procedures (Patton, 2006). Staff can also help students make connections to the broader community outside of the university campus. For example, one student noted that many students lack knowledge about their own history and culture, and the Pan Cultural Center provides one place for gaining this knowledge.

Open Dialogue

The fourth finding was that the Pan-Cultural Center creates a safe space by facilitating open dialogue as a way to create relationships and discuss what may be considered challenging topics about identity. First, dialogue functioned as a way for staff to build relationships with students. One of the peer educators explained dialogue by saying "I interact with [the students] and hopefully make them feel at home." The center's staff and students engage in dialogue to create a sense of community. Dialogue and the encouragement of open and honest communication is an important attribute to a sense of community, and is equally imperative to creating a safe environment (Roestone Collective, 2014).

Dialogue also serves as a pathway to creating community and therefore a safe space to discuss new or challenging ideas (Toya, 2011). Conversations about various diversity, social justice and multicultural topics are a part of the purpose of the center. Since the Pan-Cultural Center is by design a "multi" cultural center, it prides itself in broad and inclusive formal and informal discussions. A student staff member noted, "we talk about different identities and the intersectionality of one's multiple identities, not just race or ethnicity." She went on to explain that they also discuss "socio-economic status, religion, and sexual orientation" and that these conversations, although sometimes difficult, still work to create a safe space precisely because students can voice their opinions and experiences without being judged.

Discussion & Conclusion

In conclusion, the Pan-Cultural Center used innovative programs, communal space, a variety of resources and open dialogue to build a community that promotes a sense of belonging and education. Overall, cultural centers such as the Pan-Cultural Center are an important part of the diversity efforts at institutions of higher education and play vital roles in the lives of students who utilize their resources. Safe spaces help in the creation of bridges that centers on solidarity rather than unity to launch understanding of how we are all subjects-in the-process (Fox & Ore, 2010). Much remains to be learned about the current status, and future presence of cultural centers on college campuses. For example, future research might focus on differences between "multi-cultural" centers and ethnic specific centers (such as a Latina/o Center or a Black Student

Union). Critical Race Theory helps bring insight to administrators, students, and the public who are unfamiliar with the importance of communicating and creating safe spaces through cultural centers on campuses.

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