

Improvement of Academic Competency and Emotional Self-Awareness in a Course Focused on Race and Culture

Christin DePouw, Education

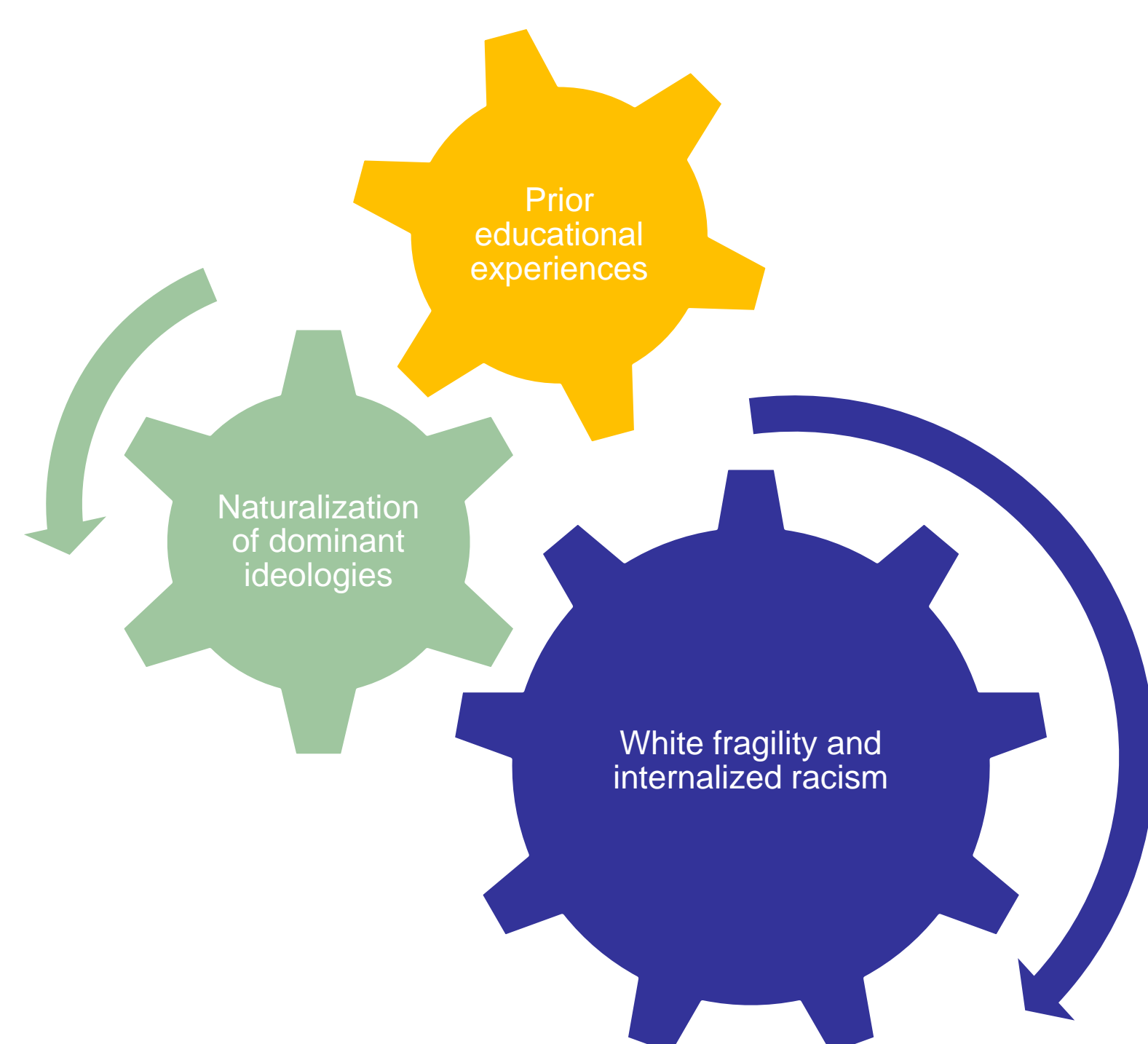
Introduction

This research project employs a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005) and discourse analysis methodology (Perakyla, 2005; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015) in order to observe whether students experience growth over time in developing academic competency and emotional self-awareness in relation to race, racism, and other social inequities.

It is well-documented that many instructors who teach about racial and social inequities regularly experience resistance and/or disengagement on the part of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1996; DiAngelo, 2011; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Evans-Winter & Hoff, 2011; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016).

Causes of student resistance can be linked to

- White fragility or internalized racism. In both cases, it is the lack of emotional preparedness to engage in race-focused dialogue (DiAngelo, 2011; Kohli, 2014; Matias, 2016);
- Normalization of dominant ideology as universal worldview and habitus of race (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Matias, 2016); and
- An absence of prior education in how to recognize power and subjectivity in knowledge that leads many students to reject or feel frustrated when asked to do so in a university classroom.



Student resistance should also be contextualized within institutional norms such as the “one course” model (Sleeter, 2011) that diminishes the likelihood that students will move from awareness into problem-solving or relate course information to other contexts.



<http://empathyeducates.org/5-studies-debunking-the-myth-of-racial-colorblindness/>



<https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/>

Methodology

The study focused on one section of a Fall 2016 general education course on cultural images in media for children and adolescents.

- 30 student participants
- Most freshmen or sophomores
- Majority White, female classroom with three male students of color

Discourse analysis methodology ((Perakyla, 2005):

- Examined student production of texts throughout the semester and analyzed the discourses of these texts within the context of the course as well as the broader sociocultural context.

Informed consent:

- At the beginning of the semester, students were asked by a third party to provide written consent.
- Students returned the consent form regardless of their desire to participate in the study; forms were sealed in an envelope until grades for the Fall 2016 semester were submitted.
- After the Fall 2016 grades were submitted, I evaluated the texts of students who had consented to participate.

All examined texts were course assignments:

- Graphic organizers for each assigned text
- Reflection papers
- Analysis papers

Texts analyzed for discursive patterns:

- Consistent use of politically loaded vocabulary (i.e., “quotas” or “reverse racism”),
- Growth in use of preferred vocabulary (i.e., moving from “colored” to “people of color” during the course of the semester),
- Utilizing academic evidence rather than anecdotal evidence to support claims,
- Increased recognition of interrelatedness

Discussion

Students demonstrated increased academic competency after a semester within a race, racism, and social inequities-focused course. Each student improved in their use of academic vocabulary related to the course and increased the use of academic evidence to argue positions related to race and social inequity.

Several White students showed improvement in academic vocabulary and use of academic evidence, but did not appear to develop a deeper emotional self-awareness in regard to course topics.

For example, several White students continued to use phrases such as “it’s sad that today...” to introduce discussions of racial inequities. This phrase naturalizes racial inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) as inevitable or unchangeable, which allows the author to lament the issue while avoiding responsibility for addressing it.

The majority of White students increased use of academic vocabulary and evidence while also personalizing the issues in ways that recognized their relevance to their own lives. These students understood that they were implicated in social inequities and took responsibility for that.

However, most students also expressed concern and frustration in developing concrete strategies for action. Many felt that the course was “enough to make them feel bad” but not enough to move forward productively.

For the students of color in class, two of the three demonstrated increased use of academic vocabulary and evidence as well as increased emotional self-awareness. Both men were grappling with internalized racism and named this process toward the end of the semester.

Conclusion

Student “awareness” and academic competencies improve over time with a one-course model. However, students indicate more sustained education over time is needed to support action and real transformation.

However, broader social and institutional shifts are moving toward less rather than more social justice opportunities. Neoliberal education policies at all levels, for instance, make it difficult to do what research tells us is best. Instead, the one-course model may leave students feeling guilty or hopeless if not given sufficient time to reflect and develop self-efficacy.