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The Perspectives of African American Higher Education Learners On Arts-Based Activities

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Abstract

Five African American professors and nine of their African American students were interviewed for this qualitative study. The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of students who have taken arts-based courses and to investigate the purposes of the professors for incorporating this way of knowing into their higher education classrooms. Dillard's (2006) notion of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology guided this narrative inquiry that was informed by autoethnography. This manuscript reports how arts-based learning activities influence the learning experiences of these educators and learners.

Introduction

Increasingly, the discussion surrounding the experiences of marginalized groups, including African Americans, in higher and adult education is growing. The increase is due in part to adult education scholars who during the early 1990s critically highlighted the lack of representation of people of color not only in the scholarship from the field but also in the curriculum of many adult and higher education programs (Colin, 1994; Guy, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Smith & Colin, 2001). Those who critically assess higher education procedures and classroom practices have made similar observations; some of these scholars suggest that marginalization of people of color within these settings can prevent them from even applying to or entering higher education because of the non-harmonious nature of these environments (Howard, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Jones, 2001).

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Furthermore, these scholars note that the curriculum and pedagogy are often based on the insights and interests of the White majority, which suggests that many higher education institutions are not as culturally responsive to the concerns and needs of students of color, including African American students (Banks, 1993; Guy, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000). The task of achievement for African Americans within these institutions often becomes a challenge because the curriculum is more representative of the dominant culture. In addition, academic pursuits require confronting and negating a prevailing ideology held by many members representing the dominant group who question Black competence (hooks, 2003). While this many be changing, this commonly held belief has existed since the harsh ravages of slavery, through segregation, and into contemporary times. Most African Americans are keenly aware of such a commonly held belief; thus, the task of achievement requires a concerted effort on our part to suppress and dismantle such a belief, while simultaneously dealing with the rigors of gaining an education. Thus, the question is how can we not only develop a curriculum that represents the interests of all learners, but also develop a pedagogy that could appeal to a wide representation of learners, African American students in particular? A small portion of my own story might shed light on the wider story of how this question developed.

As an African American woman I have dealt with the consequences of the prevailing ideology of the dominant group many times in my academic life in higher education, but the strongest memories occurred when I was a traditional college age student 30 years ago. When I assess my collegiate experience, most of the instructors did not draw on other aspects of knowing and learning beyond rationality and rarely did they include my cultural heritage in the classroom. I speculate that their reluctance simultaneously limited the acquisition of cognitive knowledge. The majority of decision-makers and educators from the institutions I attended placed a high value on the limited role of rational abilities and ignored other equally important aspects of learning. Their exclusive focus on this particular intellectual talent created formidable and needless challenges within the classroom for me and possibly for other learners. Thus, my personal experiences support some of the previously discussed notions of adult and higher education educators who note that most of the curriculum in higher education has revered the works and interests of those who are White and represent the dominant culture (Banks, 1993; Guy, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Including

arts-based ways of knowing in higher education classrooms might be a way that learners can easily include their own cultures in the learning. Arts-based activities could be particularly important to African American and other learners whose cultures are often not represented in the curriculum.

Arts-Based Learning

Educators from the wider field of education (Eisner, 1972, 2001, 2002, 2005; Greene, 1995), and those from adult education (Clover, 2006; hooks, 1995; Finley, 2005; Lawrence, 2005; Wesley, 2006) have suggested that artistic ways of knowing broaden cultural perspectives by allowing and honoring diverse ways of knowing and learning (Eisner, 2005; Lawrence, 2005). Eisner and Lawrence also maintain that classroom activities that involve the arts are likely to help learners make these new connections and transcend previous limitations because the learners are inspired to be creative and to use their imagination.

As such, the arts can elicit a learner's imagination by engaging the heart, mind, and body (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2009). Tisdell and Tolliver argue that classroom activities that fully engage the learners allow them to absorb new knowledge in multiple ways until it ultimately "becomes them" (p. 93). Learning activities that include artistic forms of expression typically engage learners in a way that acknowledges their identity and simultaneously enhances their ability to reflect on and relate to learning experiences. However, artistic ways of knowing, unlike experiential learning in general, involves more than experiencing a life event or occurrence and the subsequent knowledge. Artistic ways of knowing include another significant component; according to Eisner (2005), they also result in achievement. The skills to negotiate life are learned through experience, but they are refined through accomplishments and engagement with the art just as viewers of paintings by Romare Bearden are able to experience the Harlem Renaissance without actually residing in Harlem during this timeframe.

Artistic expression includes forms of non-performing and performing art. The non-performance form of creative expression includes paintings, drawings, or creative writing, while the performing arts include dramatizations, the creation of films, music, or dance. Creative expression and artistic expression are used interchangeably in much of the adult education and the education literature in general (Dewey, 1934; Finley, 2005; Greene, 1978, 1995). Eisner (2001) and Lawrence (2005) suggest

that these forms of expression present a way to build group identity and solidarity, which can lead to collective knowledge. Wesley (2006) saw evidence of this in her research study of community-based art programs that had a social justice agenda.

There are several key assumptions that inform an artistic way of knowing. Greene (1978, 1995) notes that these assumptions are: (a) the learners and the educators are engaged by becoming active participants; (b) arts-based activities provide learners with a vocabulary to name what they are seeing and hearing and offer educators a means for recognizing commonality and differences with their vocabulary; (c) arts-based learning offers a way of noticing the learner's and educator's needs; and, (d) activities based on the arts connect the cultural and personal identity of the learner with the educator.

Despite the favorable educational outcomes associated with arts-based learning activities, many teaching in higher education have given little thought to how to incorporate art as a way of knowing into their pedagogy. They rely on cognitive ways of knowing that emphasize rational thinking/learning practices. As Gardner (1983, 1994, 1999, 2004) observes, this can result in students who are not fully engaged and who are not motivated to remain in these settings.

Some educators suggest we should move beyond cognitive practices and the sole reliance on an autonomous view of relating to thinking/learning and the associated intelligence levels (Gardner, 1983, 1994, 1999, 2004; Lawrence, 2005). In fact, Gardner defines intelligence as the capacity in one or more cultures to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued research. He asserts that there are at least eight forms of intelligence, but this discussion will be limited to seven of the eight: (a) logical/mathematical - logical or numerical patterns; (b) linguistic - sensitivity to sounds, rhythms, and meanings of words; (c) musical - ability to produce rhythm, pitch, and timbre; (d) spatial - to perceive visually; (e) bodily/kinesthetic - control of body movements; (f) interpersonal - response to others; and (g) intrapersonal- to draw upon one's own feelings to guide behavior. The intelligences are not independent entities; they can at times affect or enhance another form of intelligence. These categories are further separated by their relationship to external objects. External objects, otherwise known as structures, have particular functions and are embodied in some intelligences. The intelligences that rely on objects are the spatial, logical, and bodily intelligences. These intelligences are fashioned by the physical world. Artistic ways of knowing

emanate from spatial intelligence and rely on interaction with objects created by the physical world.

Humans have evolved in a manner that they embody a range of these intelligences. Yet, as previously stated, most educators within higher education settings are preoccupied with two forms of intelligence, the logical/mathematical and linguistic (Gardner, 1983, 1994, 1999, 2004). Many fail to acknowledge the similarities that exist between the arts and rational thinking. These educators do not see how the arts and rational forms of thinking rely on similar prototypes to classify, represent, compare, and appraise the qualities of the world (Eisner, 2005). Each form of intelligence and each form of our senses help us convey meaning in our experience. As exemplified, when some scientists lecture students and other interested individuals about the flow of blood through humans, they typically use intricate artistic renderings to visually clarify their explanations. To a certain extent the disciplines are co-dependent.

Culturally Responsive Education and Arts-Based Learning

Most of the educators cited previously who discuss multicultural or culturally responsive education do not specifically address artistic ways of knowing; however, their views do imply that classroom practices should reflect the experiences of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups, and they imply support of this form of knowing. However, the conceptual literature devoted to the needs of marginalized adult learners does not respond to the use of arts-based activities. Additionally, there is a limited amount of empirical research that explores how marginalized learners respond to these ways of knowing in the higher education classroom.

Despite the paucity of literature regarding arts-based learning from a multicultural perspective, the discussion surrounding the impact of this type of the learning on the achievement levels of marginalized learners and students of color needs to occur. The noteworthy presence of these learners within the collegiate environment necessitates a discussion. Furthermore, retention statistics indicate that enrollment levels are often not maintained through to graduation. For example, retention statistics from 2000 – 2001 for African Americans as reported by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2000/2001, Winter) noted that 28 of the 54 prestigious colleges and universities surveyed indicated that Black graduation rates were 10 percentage points or more below the graduation rates for White students.. Those involved with adult and higher educa-

tion need to become more concerned with addressing the educational needs of this growing segment of the classroom and their low graduation rate. (Black enterprise's ranking, 2000/2001, Winter).

Discussion of the importance of multiple ways of knowing in higher education and adult education (including the arts) is increasing, but there are some key factors overlooked by the current literature, such as how drawing on these ways of knowing in the curriculum can facilitate learning on multiple levels, how these ways of knowing affect cognitive knowledge, and how these ways of knowing can be used within culturally responsive pedagogy. While there is some research on multiple ways of knowing, some research on culturally responsive education and African American learners, there is a lack of research specifically on incorporating arts-based learning and its effects on African American learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of African American students in higher education who have taken classes that incorporate artistic ways of knowing, in light of the faculty's purposes for incorporating such ways of knowing into their classrooms. The primary research questions that guided this study were aimed at the students and included:

a. How do students perceive the use of artistic ways of knowing within the classroom?
b. How do they perceive that the combined use of cognitive experiences and arts-based experiences is affecting their overall learning?

In order to have a fuller understanding of the student's context for learning, a secondary research question was aimed at the faculty who teach such classes: "Why do faculty include arts-based approaches in the learning environment, and how do these approaches relate to their overall goals for student learning?"

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the work of those such as Eisner (2005) and Goldberg (1997, 2006), who advocate the importance of arts-based knowing in the learning environment and who also note that learners eventually develop intellectually and emotionally as they develop greater understanding and comprehension. It is also based on Dillard's (2006) notion of an Endarkened Feminist

Epistemology—an epistemology that includes teaching practices that address the concerns of African American learners. Dillard's framework embraces a need to make the world a better place and recognizes that teaching practices are not solely for the mind, but they are dynamic and creative.

The Endarkened Feminist Epistemology is grounded in the historical roots of Black feminist and feminist thought. It considers teaching practices and addresses the concerns of African American learners largely from a black feminist perspective, drawing on the work of both Collins (1991) and hooks (1994, 2003). hooks (1994, 2003) offers insights about how to make classrooms places of liberation where learner and educator work together in partnership. To bring a spirit of partnership into learning environments, hooks proposes that educators need to recognize that learning should take place inside and outside of the classroom: she views learning as an experience that enriches life in its entirety. Furthermore, she challenges educators to share their knowledge beyond their classrooms, to keep up with the changing world. Secondly, hooks holds that educators should commit to giving their best in classrooms and serving their students. Serving learners according to hooks is determined by the degree to which educators nurture both the emotional and academic growth of their students. While this study is not a feminist study given that gender is not a primary unit of analysis, there are many aspects of Dillard's framework that are germane to this study, particularly her emphasis on the African American experience.

Dillard (2006) focuses on multiple intersections and cultural spaces, namely the academic disciplines of education, African American studies, Black feminist studies, and spiritual studies. Fundamentally, the theoretical framework presented by Dillard is similar to those. This epistemology is distinguishable because it considers the intersection/overlap of culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, but it mainly considers the historical and contemporary contexts of oppression and resistance for African American women. Therefore, this study draws on aspects of Dillard's (2006) epistemology, mainly race, but not so much on gendered aspects.

There are six assumptions that inform this theoretical framework: (a) it recognizes that self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community and, thus, the researcher/educator is respon sible to the members of their community and for their well-being; (b) there is both an intellectual and a spiritual component to doing research;

(c) dialogue between community members positively impacts the research process; (d) "concrete experience within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the 'matrix of meaning making'" (Dillard, 2006, p. 23); (e) there is a connectedness with the past; and finally, (f) "power relations, manifested as racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research" (p. 26). Broadly speaking, this framework connects with artistic ways of knowing because it also broadens cultural perspectives by allowing and honoring diverse ways of knowing and learning.

Methodology Overview

This qualitative study was designed to learn more about African American students' perceptions of arts-based practices and how they perceived that these practices influenced their overall learning. According to Merriam and Simpson (1995), one of the goals of qualitative research is to understand how people make sense out of their lives and how they interpret what they experience. As such, qualitative research was the most appropriate form of research for this study because it clarified the perceptions held by African American higher education students on how the use of arts-based experiences in their classes affects their learning. Further, some forms of qualitative research can easily reflect the cultural standpoint of the researcher and the research participants (Tillman, 2006). A qualitative approach grounded in some of the principles of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, as previously discussed, directly attends to cultural issues in that it incorporates a "methodology of surrender" (Dillard, 2006, p. 82). Dillard suggests that the "methodology of surrender" embraces "an intimate research space that is both meditative (that is, that listens and heeds the wisdom of the ancestors and the Creator) and faith filled (that is, prayerfully attentive and grateful to the spirits and the Creator)" (p. 82). Therefore, this study respected the participants' culture and the multiple ways they construct knowledge.

While this qualitative study was grounded in the principles of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology that highlights the importance of attending to cultural issues and how participants make meaning on a deep level through a spiritual and cultural approach, the methodology for the study is informed by narrative analysis and autoethnography, a particular form of ethnography. Ethnographic studies focus on how individuals create and pass on culture. Autoethnography is an alternative form of describing lived experiences that is derived through cultural interaction

and incorporates autobiographical information about the researcher who produces the text (Goodall, 2000). Autoethnographies typically connect shared voice and culture using narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005). While narratives may be oral or written conversations about a particular event or person, Chase holds that researchers use several forms of analysis when interpreting the means projected within these stories. This discussion is limited to those that related to autoethnography and the purpose of this study. First, researchers treat narratives, whether written or oral, as distinct discourse that provides a retrospective view of the narrator's experience. The narrator's experience expresses his or her emotions, thoughts, and interpretations about past occurrences. Second, "researchers view narratives as verbal actions-- [which entail] doing or accomplishing something" (Chase, p. 657). Actions portrayed in narratives may be in the form of complaints, challenges, or represent other forms of activity; however, these descriptors are primarily used to tell the story as the narrator experienced it. Third, narrative researchers recognize that narratives are enabled and constrained by the social circumstances that influence the narrator's existence. Researchers will take into consideration the narrator's community, local setting, organizational or social membership, and cultural and historical location. They are known to use this form of analysis because this lens tends to accentuate similarities and differences between narratives. And finally, narratives are considered socially situated reenactments by researchers. Narratives are geared to a particular audience, for a particular setting and for a particular purpose; therefore, it becomes a creation of the narrator and the listener. This particular lens receives a lot of attention within autoethnographies. Autoethnographers are known to write, interpret, and/or perform their own narratives about their experiences to reveal something of cultural significance (Chase, 2005). Thus, narrative inquiry contains key features of autoethnography. This study draws on key features of narrative inquiry and attempted to gather stories of how students perceive that artistic ways of knowing affect their learning and included stories of why faculty who teach such classes draw on these methods in their teaching.

This study incorporated participant stories largely in the form of narratives and my own story as the researcher, but it did not include the lengthy observations normally associated with ethnography or autoethnography. Instead, the traditions of narrative analysis were used to review and situate each story, while also drawing on many of the principles of autoethnography.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

Participant selection. Qualitative studies tend to focus on the unique circumstances that involve the people being studied. Typically, these studies rely on small and purposeful sampling techniques to select participants, such as case sampling, critical case sampling, or snowball sampling. The participants for this study were gathered through snowballing techniques; namely, professional contacts referred participants. The study was primarily concerned with how the nine African American students perceived experiences of arts-based ways of knowing in higher education classrooms and their perceptions of how it influenced their learning. This study also included the perspectives of five professors who specifically drew on artistic ways of knowing in their classes, to have a better understanding of how and why they incorporated such ways of knowing in the classroom. I observed and interviewed the faculty to increase my understanding of what it was that they did. My primary interest, however, was how the students experienced these ways of knowing and what they learned from them. What follows is a focus on their perspectives.

The student participants for this study were solicited from the classrooms of the faculty members who agreed to participate. During the class meetings, the research project was explained, and their participation was solicited using a planned script. The adult students who agreed to participate in this study met certain selection criteria:

1. They were either currently enrolled in or had completed an undergraduate course that included creative expression within the last 3 years. Three years was selected as the cutoff because of the uniqueness of collegiate courses that include artistic expression, and this timeframe increased the likelihood of locating study participants.
2. The selected participants were limited to African American higher education learners who were adults.
3. They self-identified as African Americans.

Data Collection. Data for this study were collected using several methods, namely, semi-structured narrative interviews, and classroom observations. Field notes and personal reflections generated by these experiences were maintained in a retrospective journal. The primary means of data collection were in-depth interviews with the nine African American students who had been in classes where the instructor drew on

artistic ways of knowing. These were appropriate because they helped me to understand the complex behavior of the participants rather than having them simply explain their behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005) from their own perspective.

Each interview opened with an account of the researcher's interest in the topic and how this knowledge of self impacts what the interviewee offers. The conversations, thoughts, observations and practices were captured during these tape-recorded sessions. This information helped the researcher piece together the everyday occurrences within classrooms that included artistic ways of knowing and the resulting impact on these African American higher education learners. The interviewee's commentary was incorporated within the final story, along with the researcher's story. Therefore, this final version of the autoethnography was a composite of our interactions and revealed the nature of our relationship.

All of the participants were interviewed on one occasion, followed by a member check. An interview guide was used during the participant interviews. Each interview lasted one hour for the most part and was tape-recorded. The recorded comments were transcribed. Each participant received a copy of the transcript for review and verification via electronic mail. During this follow up communication the study participants had an opportunity to discuss the initial transcript, make additional comments and/or clarify any misinterpretations. For the most part, they did not add any new information: two students corrected the demographic information regarding their age, and another corrected a course title. The interview transcript was modified to reflect the modifications, and their subsequent approval was gained via electronic mail.

In addition to interviewing, I observed most of the African American educators' classrooms once. I was unable to observe one of their classrooms because the faculty member was on a research sabbatical. The field notes from the classrooms I was able to observe were recorded in the retrospective journal. As suggested by Schensul and colleagues (1999), field notes are generally prepared while the researcher carries out tasks in his or her chosen setting or location and they capture the lived experiences of others. During the classroom observations I: (a) gained first-hand awareness of the verbal exchanges between the educator and the learners; (b) witnessed how arts-based practices are incorporated; (c) participated in the learning experience in a minor manner, and (d) interpreted educator and learner relations. These notes helped me be

come more familiar with classroom experiences that contain creative expression, and these notes were supplemented by information obtained through the interviews.

The field notes were also balanced by my personal reflections, which were also recorded in the retrospective journal. Combining these insights provided a more in-depth representation of the lived experiences of these African American participants because of my inward gaze into similar (and different) experiences and outward gaze at the lived experience of the research participants (Goodall, 2000). This inward and outward gaze minimized an authoritative, omniscient feel to my narration. Collectively this information presents a legitimate consideration of the use of artistic ways of knowing within the selected higher education settings and also presents an interpretation largely from the students' perspectives of the impact of these learning activities.

Additionally, my commentary within these field notes contained reflections on classroom experiences that occurred during the last 4 years of my doctoral studies. My experiences were compared to the participants' experiences and together they provided deeper insights. As is the case for most autoethnographic notes, my reflections were recorded days, weeks or in some cases months after an experience (Ellis, 2004). They include the details of being a student within three classrooms using artistic ways of knowing. These details concentrated on my emotions as a researcher, the dialogues held, and provided vivid descriptions of the settings. As previously mentioned, all of this information was integrated into the write-up along with participant accounts. Since this qualitative study is informed both by narrative and autoethnography, and is not a classic autoethnography, the data from the researcher's journal and the field notes were crucial to the study in documenting how the researcher's and participants' insights unfolded, how they potentially relate to artistic expression, and how they relate to the write up of this study.

Dependability and credibility of this study was enhanced by conducting member checks with participants, through the triangulation of data collection methods, and by ongoing consultation with my advisor.

Findings

As previously mentioned, this discussion of learner perspectives is derived from a constant comparative analysis of the student narratives to determine the themes/patterns. Themes indicate that what the students

value in higher education classrooms are instructors and/or teaching activities that: (a) attend to cultural identity (acknowledge personal and cultural identity); (b) connect to others or the content through interaction and engagement; (c) create a classroom community (opportunities to form close relationships with participants); and, (d) deal effectively with classroom organizational issues (learning environment that values all present). The discussion that follows will focus on several of the student themes that are more closely related to the purposes of this study.

For contextual purposes it is important to state that, although all of the student participants attended higher education courses that included arts-based learning, they did not always choose to discuss the courses that led to their participation in this study. Instead, some discussed courses that included interactive experiences. Some of the interaction they described resulted from participation in arts-based activities as well as other learning activities that were equally engaging. They seemed to appreciate courses that combined cognitive experiences with a high level of interaction, and engagement with other individuals involved in the learning experience. For example, Charles, an undergraduate student participant, explained it best when he stated: "Overall, they [interactive courses] really help you learn better. It is not boring. That is the one thing I do not like about school, sometimes it seems like it is the same old thing. When I have an interest in something, I do better…" Therefore, the learners that participated in this study tend to appreciate cognitive practices that were combined with interactive experiences, (e.g. arts-based activities, debating, etc.) and any other kinds of experiences that connect with real life as a way to launch sense making within the learning environment. The student themes that particularly highlighted these insights are: 1. connect to others or content through interaction and engagement and, 2. attending to culture and identity concerns.

Connect to Others or Content Through Interaction and Engagement

The identification of a number of courses other than those that initiated their participation in this study does not necessarily minimize the value of the arts-based learning activities, nor does it negate the goals and purposes of the professors who instructed those courses. In fact, their comments suggest a strong appreciation for the use of these activities, but their enthusiasm can be released in a learning environment in multiple ways. It can be released by the professor's enthusiasm along with arts-based activities or if it was introduced in a manner that allowed the students to interact with the professor or other students. For

example, Robert, a graduate student, witnessed a passion for learning amongst his environmental science course classmates. He found that his classmates became so passionate that they collectively began to interact and excelled in this course, which generated further learning. Robert described his experience this way: "It was very interactive. He wanted us to [something creative] ---for our projects it was not just a paper. We actually brought in things, which was nice because I liked this and the other things. I could bring in some examples and people did all kinds of innovative things…"

Similar to Robert, Faith, a graduate student, also discussed the value of interaction in the classroom, but her comments focused more specifically on arts-based activities. Faith reflected on how arts-based learning experiences were more engaging and how these activities connect with her learning preferences: "I am learning that this [arts-based learning practice] works for me. I could listen for a certain amount of time then my brain goes on vacation. That part I do like. Having the different activities during a long day, like our Saturday classes, it does really help. It is really a big change for me. I think part of me is very concrete. This is really different for me. It is connecting with a different side of me. I think my learning style prefers the arts mixed in with the theory."

Separately these learners implied that the classroom should not have a one-dimensional focus and that they are more likely to be engaged when other domains are also included within the learning environment. Goldberg (1997, 2006) holds that the type of artistic translation and representation alluded to in the previous discussions enabled the learners to develop intellectually and emotionally to the point that their passion for learning was released and simultaneously they gained greater understanding of the subject matter. As Goldberg's views suggest, the use of artistic strategies within curriculum can elicit novel thinking and this previously untapped way of thinking ultimately releases learner interest in the subject matter, along with increasing interest in other components of the classroom.

Attending to Culture/Identity Concerns

The most recurring theme that weaves through all of the student narratives is their appreciation of the arts-based and/or interactive activities that acknowledged their cultural and personal identity. They commented on how learning about other cultures and learning more about their own culture seemed to affirm their existence within the classroom and their identity overall. They provided many illustrations of how participation

in these activities facilitated demonstration of cultural pride, highlighted their capabilities and tapped into their creativity.

Tom, a graduate student, offered some comments on how an undergraduate linguistic course at a Historically Black University (HBU) enhanced his personal identity and also connected with different aspects of culture, "The class was offered at a Historically Black University. What he did was he introduced different languages and we had to do research. We learned a lot about different languages and different cultures. This was a White professor. He was very passionate about this as well. It was very engaging. It was in a small setting and a very interesting class."

Unlike Tom, Lorraine's comments were less about the classroom and more about the impact on her personal life, "When I took the class with Professor Authentic---- she was authentic, she made sure we learned. My spirituality developed and increased. My knowledge increased. I developed a sense of pride in who I was, and it helped me find out who my great, great aunt was. That is why the first class with Professor Authentic-----impacted me, it was a psychological impact---to let me know that---my God, they took my name. They took my name and pronounced it wrong. So, that was a really huge thing, learning and knowing I was thoroughly mis-educated. I mean, I was changed."

The sentiments expressed in Tom and Lorraine's commentaries suggest they prefer a classroom full of passion and culturally relevant experiences, and not one that is solely based on cognitive practices. Apparently, some of the participants of this study at one time or another were involved in nurturing learning environments. A number of the classrooms they spoke of allowed them to learn about other cultures while recognizing their own cultures using either arts-based or interactive activities.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

So what does all of this suggest for the field of adult education, particularly for higher education settings with African American learners? And what might it suggest for further research?

Adult/Higher Education Practice

There are three insights that this study offers that can potentially impact the adult education field related to African American learners in higher education: namely, (a) the importance of arts-based activities as a cultural form of engagement; (b) that artistic talent is not required; and

(c) that an interactive teaching-learning community also needs to tend to classroom dynamics and organizational issues.

Arts-based activities as cultural engagement. Many educators assume that achievement within higher education classrooms for African Americans should be similar to the cultural interest and experiences of the dominant, White culture. While this assumption affirms and engages learners that represent this group of people it does not simultaneously acknowledge or affirm the interest of some African American learners or other learners of color. While many educators in adult and higher education cited in this manuscript (Banks, 1993; Clover, 2006; Guy, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tisdell, 2003; Wesley, 2006) have discussed the importance of multicultural education and culturally responsive education, few have specifically discussed arts-based activities as a form of cultural engagement in higher education settings. Wesley (2006) does discuss this related to community settings. The aspect of learning that these educators seem to overlook is that achievement needs to be compatible with who you are and needs to connect with cultural experience.

Artistic knowledge desirable, but not a requirement. The professors in this study use arts-based ways of knowing, value it more than the students, and use it as a tool for cultural engagement; they also highlighted the fact that doing so does require some creative and/or artistic talent. Specifically, Professor Stage commented, "the complicated thing with using the arts in higher education is you have to have an art background first. So, if you are a professor with no arts background, it is really hard to incorporate it into instruction." The professors also noted that some educators may shy away from the use of art or other interactive activities in higher education classrooms because they do not believe in their artistic talent or in their ability to facilitate these activities. However, the inner critic that is inhibiting these educators results from an understanding that is counter to the true nature of the arts. As London (1989) states, to create art one draws from within to create a world of their own and also uncovers an all-but-forgotten original, primal self. The key is to incorporate arts-based activities and/or other types of interactive activities that the educator is comfortable with and to also include those that allow them to maintain their authenticity. Therefore, these educators should not fixate on the term "art" and be confined by past associations and experiences. Instead, they should become interested in varying learning activities to the extent that they enhance the learning experience.

A teaching community that attends to organizational issues. According to hooks (2003), a teaching community "…offers practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating, mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (p. xv). As implied by this quote, achievement within higher education classrooms is dependent upon the overall environment of the classroom. In the opinion of the student participants in this study, educators who strictly adhere to attendance policies, traditional methods of assigning class work, or fail to properly manage classroom dynamics potentially create environments that force the course purpose and goals to become misaligned with the final outcomes. The learners reflected that their ability to achieve was restricted and impaired by the educators' need to adhere to institutionalized beliefs, policies, and procedures. Educators should take some responsibility for facilitating organized, fair learning environments that perpetuate a social and academic climate that does not allow one particular individual or group of individuals to dominant classroom discussions. Thus, their efforts should be invested in the achievement of all learners.

Suggestions for Further Research

What is discussed above gets at some theoretical and practical insights related to arts-based ways of knowing and African American learners. Although, I attempted to conduct a thorough investigation into the perspectives of African American learners who attended courses that used arts-based activities there are still some unanswered questions, and I offer three suggestions for further research. First, it must be acknowledged that the students who participated were not art students and what was most important for their learning experiences was that classes be interactive and engaging, and relevant to their lives. Arts-based ways of knowing were valued in so far as it led to these aspects of learning. It would thus be interesting to see how the perspectives of African American art students differ from those who participated in this study. While some of this study's participants valued arts-based ways of knowing particularly for their variety, a second possible study might be to explore what meaningful things occurred in classrooms that include arts-based activities for students who find great value in this particular way of knowing. The participants were asked a number of things and our discussion varied surrounding the use of arts-based learning activities a good deal; however, we did not consider directly what particularly meaningful occurrences (if any) that resulted. And a third possibility for

further research might be an action research study that explores how the process unfolds over time and what possibilities can result from learning environments that contain arts-based and cognitive activities as they are negotiated throughout the course. Educators who support the use of arts-based learning activities speak a good deal about the specific benefits of these activities (Eisner, 2005; Greene, 1978, 1995; Lawrence, 2005), but this discussion does not include to an equal degree the possibilities that can occur when arts-based and cognitive experiences are combined within higher education classrooms, or how this changes and unfolds over time. An action research study documenting this could offer further insights relating to the theory and practice of arts-based education.

Conclusion

As the researcher, I personally benefited from the completion of this study. As an African American female, I truly believe that higher education facilitates personal and professional success. Although there is no single solution to the high attrition rates of African American higher education students, exploration into classroom practices should produce more viable learning experiences. Incorporating alternative ways of knowing into classrooms with a multicultural focus offers a positive response that could reverse the current trend. Perhaps what is more important is that African Americans need to be involved in learning environments that have a multicultural emphasis, and these classrooms should be facilitated by educators who are invested in our success.

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