

4-1998

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Recommended Citation

Ray, Reshell and Gillespie, Diane, "Critical Moments: A Case Study Approach for Easing the Cultural Isolation of Underrepresented College Students" (1998). *Teacher Education Faculty Proceedings & Presentations*. 10.

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Critical Moments: A Case Study Approach for Easing the Cultural Isolation of Underrepresented College Students

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Diane Gillespie

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This workshop will familiarize participants with a cultural diversity case study approach for curriculum reform called "Critical Moments." It was piloted in the Goodrich Scholarship Program, an academic program for students who demonstrate significant financial need at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The program has a culturally diverse student body and a multicultural curriculum in the humanities and social sciences. It has won national and local awards for its retention and teaching of underrepresented students. Critical Moments is now being implemented at the Metropolitan Community College. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln it will be a central academic component for diversity learning communities which will be composed of first- and second-year students of color and white students interested in diversity.

The critical moments case study approach begins with in-depth interviews with culturally diverse students who describe troubling events from their experiences at the university. Special attention is paid to how they interpreted those incidents as they lived through them. Using student language and thinking (from interview notes or transcripts), a multicultural team constructs cases where an understanding of race, gender and class braid together with the existential circumstances of a student's original problematic situation. In discussion of these cases, students examine the problematic issues and entertain alternative ways of framing and solving the problem. The team has found that in such discussions students bring to the surface patterns of thoughts and feelings that are causing them to feel isolated. Their isolation is eased by the group networking opportunities and through their growing ability to connect thinking, feeling and action around issues of difference.

Workshop participants will go through the case-study process experientially in small groups: analyzing a student transcript for generative themes and discussing a case study written from that transcript. The workshop also will focus on how to teach diversity case studies to promote critical thinking. In the final part of the workshop, participants will have a chance to explore how to create a diversity case study communication laboratory and how to embed those in diversity learning communities. In addition to the case study laboratory, students take a course in ethnic studies and/or English or communications so

that they can draw on concepts from those courses to enrich the discussions of the cases.

Even if participants will not adopt the methodology as a whole, its component parts are very relevant to those who wish to teach diversity as a way to enhance their student's problem-solving and critical reasoning skills.

PRESENTERS

Reshell Ray is an Assistant Director in the Student Involvement office at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is responsible for the area of minority student development and management of the UNL Culture Center. Ray has been involved in cross-cultural communication, racial reconciliation and serves as a consultant on community development with the Heartland Center for Leadership Development.

Diane Gillespie is a Professor in the Goodrich Scholarship Program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She teaches multicultural social science courses in the Goodrich Program and graduate courses in qualitative research. Her research interests include narrative and case study as reflective teaching/learning practices. Her book "The Mind's We: Contextualism in Cognitive Psychology" emphasizes the importance of social interaction and context in cognition and learning. She has won numerous teaching awards, including the 1992 All-University Outstanding Teaching and Creativity Award and the 1992 Nebraska CASE Professor of the year.