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Teaching Diversity for Adaptation and Change: A Case Study

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**Abstract**

Preparing teachers and leaders to become culturally competent has become a global concern and a priority. To date, there has been little research conducted among school leaders regarding how new diversity knowledge is transferred to schools. Therefore, the purpose of the present qualitative study is to explore the extent to which future educational leaders enrolled in a graduate course regarding diversity are able to transfer the newly acquired knowledge to their professional lives and to understand what hinders and enhances their transfer of knowledge. Using the multidimensional model of learning transfer as a theoretical framework and analyzing the findings, I suggest that participants of this present study were able to use new diversity knowledge in their personal and professional lives. Further analysis identified enhancers and inhibitors to the transfer of such diversity knowledge. Based on the present study's findings, I provide recommendations for practice and research related to facilitating and sustaining the transfer of diversity knowledge among aspiring school leaders.

### Teaching Diversity for Adaptation and Change: A Case Study

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), developed by the United Nations in 2015, aim at transforming the world by achieving quality education for all students at all levels of study regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, age, language, abilities, or religion (United Nations, 2016). Due to recent economic hardships and changes in the socio-political contexts of certain countries, there has been an increase in human migrations. This new demographic make-over has resulted in more diversity in communities, schools, and universities. As a result of this increase in diversity, preparing aspiring teachers and educational leaders to be culturally competent should be a priority. Teaching diversity courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels is an essential step towards developing culturally competent teachers and leaders, possibly making a substantial contribution towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. If future teachers and leaders transfer the newly acquired diversity knowledge to their schools and universities, over time they may alter their students' mindsets, reactions, and actions. As new generations of students benefit from a more inclusive education, they may also model and (formally or informally) teach cultural competency and respect to others.

The transfer of learning is the primary objective of teaching yet this transfer is the most challenging goal to attain (Foley & Kaiser, 2013; Furman & Sibthorp, 2013; Hung, 2013). Every year, billions of dollars are spent on training in the United States and only 10% of such training results in transfer of knowledge, skills, or behaviors in the workplace or at home (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Broad & Newstrom, 1992). Studies from the private sector indicate that only 10% to 13% of learned skills are transferred, translating to a loss of \$0.87 to \$0.90 per dollar spent on training (Curry, Caplan, & Knuppel, 1994; Hess, 2013). These seminal studies address the lack of attention placed on learning transfer. Educational results indicate that it may not be sufficient

to simply offer training programs. Programs are often not adapted to the participants' needs and do not take into consideration the local context and culture (Cafarella, 2002). Understanding the role that culture plays in positively or negatively affecting the transfer of learning is paramount to enhancing the implementation of new knowledge yet culture has been absent in the literature regarding transfer learning.

Researchers in educational leadership have established that school leaders at all levels play a key role in improving student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Further, researchers have demonstrated that educating school leadership teams is fundamental to improving learning and transferring knowledge (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004). To this end, limited published studies have directly addressed how, if at all, aspiring educational leaders enrolled in a graduate level diversity course are able to transfer the newly acquired knowledge to their lives or workplaces.

Using the multidimensional model of learning transfer (MMLT) as a theoretical framework in the present study, I examined how graduate students, aiming to become educational leaders and enrolled in a graduate level diversity course called Leadership in Diverse Communities, effectively transfer knowledge to their lives and workplaces. Through the present study, I offer insights regarding how culture influences learning transfer and what enhances and hinders the transfer of learning of newly acquired diversity knowledge after students complete the 15-week course. Currently, there are a limited number of recently published research studies regarding the efficacy of adult learning transfer in the area of diversity among educational leaders. Through the present study, I add to the learning transfer literature and offer practical recommendations for practitioners and scholars.

### **Operational Definitions of Learning Transfer and Diversity**

Learning transfer is defined as “the effective and continuing application by learners—to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities—of knowledge and skills gained in the learning activities” (Broad, 1997, p. 2). The literature also refers to learning transfer as training transfer. In the present study, I used learning transfer since learning does not just occur in a training context and can occur months after attending a professional development event. In the present study, diversity refers to the inclusion of people with various social identities: race, age, abilities, gender, socio-economic status, religion, education level, etc.

### **Diversity Courses**

Taking a diversity course when enrolled in a higher education program has become either a requirement or an elective depending on the institution, its values, and its priorities. In educational administration, leadership standards call for leaders to be equitable and culturally responsive. As a result, there has been an increasing number of leadership preparation programs that focus on social justice. The literature concerning the teaching of a diversity course consistently demonstrates that such a course is challenging for both students and facilitators because of the emotions, beliefs, and biases that conversations concerning equity, gender, race, and other topics related to social justice trigger (Gayles, Kelly, Grays, Zhang, & Porter, 2015; Ingram & Walters, 2007; Marbley, Burley, Bonner, & Ross 2009).

At the undergraduate levels, the literature has focused on the areas of business (Phillips & Wood, 2017), teacher education (Cardona-Moltó, Tichá, & Aberly, 2018; Jett & Cross, 2016), psychology (Allen & Porter, 2002), sociology (Steinkopf Rice & Horn, 2014), and medicine (Dogra et al., 2016). At the graduate level, there have been empirical or conceptual studies

written in the domains of student affairs (Gayles et al., 2015) and counseling (Locke & Kiselica, 1999). In the field of educational leadership, Andrews and Ridenour (2006) have written in regard to gender equity but there are limited recent empirical studies focusing on educational leaders and the transfer of diversity knowledge. Through this current research, I sought to fill the gap in the literature by exploring how aspiring educational leaders transferred diversity knowledge to their lives or workplaces after taking an elective class called Leadership in Diverse Communities.

### **Learning Transfer**

Being able to transfer newly acquired knowledge is the ultimate goal of teaching (Thomas, 2007). It has been challenging for scholars to measure learning transfer and its impact. Even so, authors have written extensively throughout seminal studies regarding what enhances and inhibits the transfer of learning (e.g., Caffarella, 2002; Ford, 1994; Hung, 2013; Illeris, 2009; Knowles, 1980; Lightner, Benander, & Kramer, 2008; Taylor, 2000; Thomas, 2007). Broad and Newstrom (1992) identified six key factors that can either hinder or promote learning transfer: (1) program participants, including their motivation, dispositions, and previous knowledge, (2) program design and execution, including the strategies for learning transfer, (3) program content, which is adapted to the needs of the learners, (4) changes required to apply new learning, (5) organizational context, such as people, structure, and cultural milieu that can support or prevent transfer of learning values (Continuing Professional Development [CPD]), and (6) societal, community forces.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I used the multidimensional model of learning transfer (MMLT) as a theoretical framework for this present study. I combined two of Broad and Newstrom's factors, namely

organizational context and societal community forces, into one category called context and environment. I posit that the context and environment category encompasses Broad and Newstrom's (1992) ideas by including the micro- and macro-contexts of both organizations and societies. I also added two dimensions to learning transfer: pretraining and follow-up. I used a MMLT in which culture influences all other dimensions of learning transfer. I used this MMLT as a theoretical framework in order to organize and interpret the data for the present study.

Using this MMLT, I suggest that pretraining and follow-up play a key role in enhancing learning transfer and that culture is the overarching factor that affects all dimensions of learning transfer. Specifically, I propose that culture affects the six other dimensions of learning transfer: (1) pretraining, (2) learner, (3) facilitator, (4) material and content, (5) context and environment, and (6) sustainable follow-up. Ignoring cultural issues in schools and organizations presents numerous risks including reinforcing stereotyping, increasing intolerance among the groups, raising potential misunderstandings, escalation of frustrations and defensiveness, and learner and facilitator withdrawals (Williams & Green, 1994). As Figure 1 indicates, pretraining includes the orientation of supervisors and facilitators so that they can support the training when it begins. Pretraining also includes communicating expectations to trainers and trainees, explaining who will benefit from training, stating that participants are accountable to implement new knowledge (Yang, Wang, & Drewry, 2009), and sharing the schedule, goals, and information perceived as mandatory (Baldwin, Magjuka, & Loher, 1991).

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The term “learner” refers to the learner’s levels of motivation, understanding of the cultural background of the facilitators and self, and comprehending how history and social events effect stakeholders (including self, facilitator, peers, and colleagues). The learner dimension also includes understanding cultural differences in learning styles (including collectivistic versus individualistic cultures), as well as language and writing differences. Learner is also comprised of the participants’ beliefs and attitudes towards their job (Yelon, Ford, & Golden, 2013), whether or not they have the freedom to act, and the positive consequences of that application. Finally, it involves the participants’ belief of the efficacy of the knowledge and skills learned (Yelon et al., 2013). The term “facilitator” includes the understanding of the cultural background of the participants and self as well as how history and social events affect stakeholders (including self, students, peers, and colleagues). It also refers to the understanding of language and writing differences, setting goals, and the selection of participants (Yang, Wang, & Drewry, 2009).

“Content and materials” involves the use of evidence-based, culturally relevant, and contextualized materials. Additionally, content and materials involves using a pedagogical approach based on andragogy: how adults learn best (Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000). This dimension also includes using symbols and meaningful artifacts in order to cue and help recall (Debebe, 2011). The category “Context and environment” is comprised of the training environment and the work environment (including micro- and macro-cultures within context), socio-cultural context, transfer climate, peer contact, and the presence of social networks. It also refers to having enough time in order to transfer knowledge, the support for action or resources, the freedom to act, and peer support (Facteau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd, & Kudisch, 1995). Finally, the category of context and environment refers to the training incentives: intrinsic

incentives (which provides employees with growth opportunities) and extrinsic incentives (including rewards and promotions) (Facteau et al., 1995). “Sustainable follow-up” is for the purpose of avoiding skill decay; training relapse can include tutor-facilitated networks via mobile technology, micro-learning using mobile technology, coaching, testimonials, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Community of Practice (COPs), apprenticeships, coaching, and E-coaching (Wang & Wentling, 2001).

### **Context for the Leadership in Diverse Communities Course**

Students in the Leadership in Diverse Communities course met weekly for two and one half hours for 15 weeks. I was the facilitator of learning for this course. I asked students to write a weekly journal, allowing them to reflect on current events, discussions, and/or readings assigned. I also requested that students read blogs from the [gloaledleadership.org](http://gloaledleadership.org) website which displays issues of social justice around the world. This practice allowed students to gain a world view and understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. Furthermore, students had to complete two short essays regarding the topics of cultural proficiency and social justice using some of the theories studied in class as well as their own experiences. In this way, students engaged in weekly group work and discussions in addition to being exposed to case studies. Finally, students wrote an autoethnography throughout the semester.

Classwork included mini-lectures with the presentations of various leadership frameworks, debates, and discussions. Guest speakers were also invited to share their expertise and experiences in various school settings. Finally, online forums and a *WhatsApp* group were set up so that students could share resources with each other and with the professor between class sessions. The *WhatsApp* group allowed for immediate feedback and also built a community of practice which facilitated learning transfer (Brion & Cordeiro, 2018).

### **Method**

In the present exploratory qualitative study, I sought to better understand whether and how transfer of learning occurred five months after the Leadership in Diverse Communities course ended. As such, the present study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) What learning, if any, do graduate students transfer to their lives or work-places after completing the diversity course? and (2) What dimensions of the MMLT supported and inhibited the transfer of learning? In this research project, I utilized a case study approach with six students. Multiple case studies aim at increasing the transferability by providing more sophisticated descriptions, more powerful explanations, and by allowing me to look beyond initial impressions and see the evidence through multiple lenses while accounting for contextual conditions (Yin, 2014).

### **Sample and Data Collection**

I used a purposeful, convenient sampling for the present study. The present study's participants were six graduate students enrolled in the Leadership for Diverse Communities course during the Fall semester of 2019. All students aspired to hold leadership roles in the region or in their home country. Four students were White American and two were international students (one from Kenya and one from China). There were two men and four women in the class. Ages ranged from late 20s to early 50s. Two students worked at a university, two were full-time students, and two students were full-time middle school teachers. Data collection included in-depth interviews and the analysis of documents such as students' journals, papers, case study presentations, auto-ethnographies, the qualitative analysis of a pre- and post-Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES), narrative conversations collected via text messaging from August to May on a *WhatsApp* platform, and observations and interactions during the 15-week class.

**Interviews and Document Analysis.** I interviewed the students two times after the fall semester class ended. The first interview took place in December. During this interview the participants reviewed and signed the consent form. The second interview was held in May. I created a semi-structured interview protocol for each set of interviews. The interviews consisted of questions such as the following: “Can you tell me about your experience in the course?” or “Tell me about challenges you faced to implement concepts from the course.” The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each for a total of over 12 hours of interview data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The two in-depth interviews of each participant allowed me to understand whether or not the students implemented some new diversity practices in their personal and professional lives as well as helped me to comprehend the extent to which they were able to sustain these new practices throughout the academic year. I analyzed participants’ assignments, journals, and student evaluations. The analysis of documents helped me to determine whether learning transfer took place and to qualitatively measure the progress of the students related to issues of social justice and cultural competency.

**Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES).** The IES was developed specifically in order to evaluate the skills critical to interacting effectively with people who are from cultures other than our own. This instrument is used primarily by non-profit organizations including government agencies and educational institutions. Students took the IES in August and then again in December. The purpose of taking the test twice was to assess whether students had become more comfortable interacting with people from other cultures. At the end of the semester, students were asked to write a two-page paper reflecting on their two sets of scores.

**Observations.** I was the facilitator of learning and a silent observer of all classes. I facilitated conversations and provided theoretical explanations during the mini-lectures. I also

observed students. I was a silent observer when students worked in groups and when they interacted with guest speakers. The observations allowed me to notice when learning took place, when participants were struggling, and their reactions. I also kept a journal, wrote field notes, and wrote memos after each data collection day. I used the journals, field notes, and memos in order to compare observational notes and corroborate my interpretation of the data.

*WhatsApp*. After obtaining the consent of the students, I created a *WhatsApp* group for the course. The purpose of the group was to create a community of practice for the class.

*WhatsApp* allows for anyone to post links, texts, videos, and record messages. After explaining the purpose and setting some norms for the *WhatsApp* group, students (on their own) shared resources, questions, and comments related to diversity on the platform. I also used the *WhatsApp* group in order to send reminders when there was an assignment due, a change in schedule, or information about the class. The *WhatsApp* log served as another way to triangulate the data and to assess if the use of *WhatsApp* enhanced or hindered the students' transfer of learning.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to preserve the confidentiality of the present study, schools, and participants, I used pseudonyms during the transcription and coding process. I coded all transcripts and documents using a qualitative software called *atlas.ti*. Coding served as the base of the analysis since it is the interpretation of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Coding began immediately after interviewing and after writing preliminary field notes, analytical memos, and journal notes. I used the participants' own words as themes for the first research question and then used the MMLT in order to analyze, code, and categorize the data for the second question.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to enhance the present study's internal validity, I included four particular strategies into the design of the present study. First, I utilized triangulation in order to bolster the internal validity and trustworthiness of the present study's analysis. Triangulation was used with several different sources of data such as the in-depth interviews, the pre- and post-scales, the observations, and the narratives on the *WhatsApp* application as well as the analysis of documents such as the students' journals, assignments, and presentations. I used the different sources of data in order to corroborate the findings and reach data saturation (Patton, 2002).

Second, I applied member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Following data analysis, I contacted the participants in order to share with them the results section of the present study. The participants confirmed that the findings reflected their own perspectives. Third, I created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008). This is a qualitative research practice where I copied the participants' quotes from this present study's transcripts data and pasted them under each theme that emerged from the data analysis. This strategy helped ensure that sufficient transcript data supported the results that I reported in the present study. Following this process also ensured that I, as the researcher, was not sharing my viewpoint but, rather, the perspectives of the participants. Fourth, I used low-inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012). In this qualitative protocol, researchers use participants' quotes from various transcripts in order to ensure that their perspectives are reported accurately. I believe that I employed a rigorous study design along with robust qualitative strategies in order to enhance the internal validity and trustworthiness of the present study's findings.

## **Results**

Results indicated that students benefited from the course in various ways. As a result of taking this course, students shared that they developed an understanding about principles of

equity, acquired an equity lens, became social justice advocates, and gained confidence in order to speak about matters of equity. Students also shared factors that supported and inhibited the implementation of the new diversity knowledge.

### **Developing an Understanding of Principles of Equity**

Before having taken the course, all six students shared that their knowledge (in terms of diversity and equity) was limited because they had little previous exposure to individuals different than themselves. Participants affirmed that they were close-minded and that their diversity knowledge was confined to their own countries or communities. Zoe, a student from China, captured the sentiments of the group when she said: “Before the class I was blindness [sic] when it came to race issues because I did not know and had not been raised with different races in China.” Other learners stated that the class opened their eyes and made them understand what equity was and what it included. Susan illustrated the dynamic that was shared among the participants when she indicated: “I thought diversity and equity were only related to race, only to find out it includes gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, religion, and abilities to name a few.”

From the analysis of documents such as journal entries and assignments, I noticed that students were deeply reflecting on their beliefs and understanding of social justice issues. In their initial journals, students admitted to not knowing about concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion because of the way they grew up. At the beginning of the semester, students were listening in class and their body language showed resistance to topics such as homosexuality. With each class, students participated more, were able to articulate their questions, and talk about their discomfort. In one of my journal entries, I wrote:

I can see growth in these six students. They were indeed blind to some social justice issues. They are now awakening to issues of race and privilege in America and other issues globally. They are also now questioning me, each other, and guest speakers.

Learners also indicated that the course gave them another lens through which to look at the world and that the new lens impacted their actions and reactions at school, work, and in their lives.

### **Acquiring an Equity Lens**

All students affirmed that the class altered the way they looked at themselves, their peers, friends, and the world in general. Students shared having an equity lens as a result of the course which allowed them to have different and deeper conversations regarding diversity with others.

The perspective of all participants was illustrated by Matt, when he remarked:

I am now more attune in class with what I tell the kids and how I approach when a teenager joked and says things like “that is so gay.” I address it both individually and as a class, if needed, and make it part of a day’s lesson.

Because participants acquired new diversity knowledge, they were able to gain new perspectives that affected their actions and reactions which is evidence of transfer of learning. Laurie, a student working at the university level, captured this sentiment when she said:

I now look at our work through the lens of equity and question others if our actions are not equitable. I just think that this class gave us more tools to put in our toolbox to respond to inequities. We are now accountable to be more equitable.

In addition to being more open-minded and having an equity lens through which to look at the world, students mentioned becoming “social justice warriors” as a result of the class.

### **Becoming a “Social Justice Warrior”**



Participants talked about the impact the course had on them professionally and personally. They identified themselves as social justice warriors because they thought about diversity and equity all the time. Laurie illustrated this sentiment when she indicated:

One day, I needed to buy Band-Aids and I had heard in a workshop at the university the presenter talking about colored Band-Aids. While the regular Band-Aids were right there and easy to find, I could not locate the colored ones. I finally found them. They were double the price of the regular ones. I was furious because why would colored Band-Aids need to cost more, be hidden, and be considered less than?

As social justice warriors, students shared that they significantly improved or altered their professional practice. An example of new practices included Mary making eye contact with everyone and her leading weekly office hours at the university's office of multicultural affairs in order to ensure that minority students did not miss opportunities to apply for scholarships and fellowships. In addition, Matt offered free GRE courses for students who would not be able to afford them otherwise. Students also shared that, as a result of the course, they were more confident in their ability to express themselves and to speak up about social justice issues.

### **Gaining Confidence in Order to Speak Up**

The course seemed to empower and give agency to students in order to speak up and not take as much for granted when it comes to diversity. Study participants spoke about asking social justice related questions in meetings, classes, or social encounters. Tom exemplified the students' positions when he shared:

I now ask different questions. For example, in my internship course when I did my internship, I talked and asked about social justice with my mentor. I asked about students with different abilities and LGBTQ+ students because that remains a taboo in my country

and I want to know and take ideas concerning what to do for these students and how to address inequities.

In addition to speaking up and asking different questions, students affirmed that they did not gossip anymore after better understanding how destructive gossip and bullying can be. Martha shared this perspective and said: “I know we do not gossip anymore because, after this class, we can see the impact of our actions.”

Data indicated that all students transferred equity knowledge to their personal and professional lives. While some students transferred more than others, there is evidence for transfer among all six students. The next section presents the findings related to the second research question: What dimensions of MMLT supported and inhibited the transfer of learning? The findings are categorized using the MMLT and, as mentioned earlier, the MMLT offers seven dimensions that can enhance or hinder the transfer of learning. These dimensions are culture, pretraining, learner, facilitator, content and materials, context and environment, and sustainable follow-up.

### **Enhancers and Inhibitors of Learning Transfer**

I used the categories of the MMLT as the basis for analysis. Enhancers to the transfer of learning included dimensions of the MMLT related to culture, pretraining, learner, facilitator, materials and content, context and environment, as well as sustainable follow-up. The inhibitors were related to two categories of the MMLT, specifically the learner and culture.

**Culture.** Regarding the dimension of culture, students stated that, because the class was small enough, all stakeholders were able to connect and engage in dialogue quickly. Matt’s quote summarized the sentiment of the group, when he said: “The facilitator created a culture and climate in which we were free to talk, respected, and allowed to voice how we felt without

being judged or assessed.” Students also claimed that having a diverse class with international students and a French professor positively affected the classroom’s culture.

In terms of inhibitors to transfer, international students reflected upon the fact that culture could be an inhibitor to learning transfer because these students found it challenging to talk to American students about diversity. Tom’s quote is illustrative of the international students’ perspective. He said: “You know I would like to have conversations with White people about social justice and share my culture but Whites are hard to reach and do not seem interested sometimes.” In the same way, this student was unsure of how to address elders in his country regarding social justice and equity issues around sexual orientation because his country condemns people who are homosexual.

**Pretraining.** Students commented on the Isidore site, a platform typically used for online courses. In this course I used Isidore in order to organize assignments, readings, and resources. Participants affirmed that having an Isidore site for the class helped them to stay on target and allowed them to be in touch with each other. Zoe exemplified this idea by asserting: “I like Isidore because we can blog, download and upload assignments, easily find readings, and it is all there for us. It also helped me to be timely and reminded me my duty.” It appeared that the Isidore site provided some clarity and eased some anxiety among students, hence fostering a culture of transparency and learning.

**Learner.** Students indicated that they appreciated the fact that the class was an elective and, hence, small. Tom summarized the group’s perspective regarding this point, when he affirmed:

The thing is I am shy so to speak about biases and privilege, notions that I did not know much about in a large group would not have worked for me. I would have kept for

myself but not in this group. I was happy to share. These classes need to not be electives. These should be masters and doctoral classes parts of the cognate. This is too important of a topic but these classes need to remain small.

In this context, findings revealed that the class size enhanced learning transfer by keeping students engaged and motivated.

In terms of inhibitors to learning transfer, students indicated being fearful about speaking up in specific situations. Three learners mentioned being unsure regarding how to talk to everyone about social justice issues. These students were motivated to change others or influence others in the way the class opened their eyes but they were confronted with situations when people refused to listen or engage in a social justice conversation. Mary, for example, expressed what the students were feeling when she shared: “I have come to realize that not everyone will be receptive or willing to listen or change. I have to become ok with that, even you said it and the guest speakers too.”

**Facilitator.** All students stated that what helped them to implement equity knowledge was the facilitator’s dispositions, knowledge of the subject matter, and teaching skills. As such, students seemed to appreciate that the class was student-centered and conversation-based. In this class, I asked students to formulate two questions from their assigned readings. I asked them to submit their questions to me the day before class, allowing me to prepare the conversation prompts that were later discussed in class. I used this strategy in order to individualize the learning and in order to make sure we talked about what preoccupied the students most. I also used videos, music, and online resources in order to engage students differently. Mary illustrated the participants’ perspectives in this regard by stating:

The professor really cared about us as students and individuals. She asked us to be involved in the development of class by asking us to write questions from which she would differentiate our learning and she used different teaching modalities.

In addition to the facilitator's dispositions, the students related that the content and materials used during the class had an impact on their ability to transfer new diversity knowledge to their work and personal lives.

**Content and Materials.** All six students referred to the content and materials as enhancers for their transfer of learning. They all reportedly enjoyed the readings, including two books used during the class: *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders* (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2009) and *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Singleton, 2015). Students also indicated that they appreciated having the opportunity to Skype with the authors of the first book. Laurie, for instance, spoke on behalf of the group when she shared: "It helped me understand where they came from when they wrote the book and it made it more concrete and personable for me." Students also mentioned some additional readings to be beneficial such as the *Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh, 1988), the *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018), and various resources taken from websites such as *Teaching Tolerance* or *The Equity Literacy Institute*. Two students shared that they had used the resources and books in other classes or in their jobs.

All six students spoke very highly of the weekly guest speakers who joined us for part of the class. These guest speakers came from different walks of life, backgrounds, and had various positions in education. While some guest speakers were principals, others were consultants, change agents in their communities, district office workers, or, as mentioned before, authors of

books or other materials the class read. Out of the numerous guest speakers, their favorite speakers included the panel of local change agents working to help certain groups in the community, the authors of the various books, and the district person who talked about the use of data to make decisions.

Aside the readings and guest speakers, students valued the exposure to the website [globaledleadership.org](http://globaledleadership.org) and other international blogs that exposed them to diverse social justice issues around the world. Students also insisted that the various videos and modalities were helpful. All students affirmed they were deeply impacted by the video called “The Making of Ferguson.” Mary shared the perspective of the group by stating: “The video made us understand the issues of race in this country, and for us Americans we learned about redlining before and why we are where we are now.”

Additionally, students asserted that the assignments, particularly the journal, helped them to transfer the new knowledge because it forced them to reflect and to see themselves in a mirror. Students also said that they enjoyed the autoethnography for similar reasons. Finally, all respondents indicated that they enjoyed the case studies because they were problems of practice. In my journal, I wrote: “Week 6: I continue to see tremendous growth in the students, in the way they ask questions, how they question things and how they approach our conversations and assignments. The material challenged them enough.”

Last, all students mentioned having appreciated the fact that they had to write two questions regarding their readings. These questions guided the content of the class meeting. Students submitted them on the Isidore site a day prior to the class, so that I could prepare mini-lectures accordingly, if needed. Matt captured the perspectives of his classmates by saying:

This was a great practice because we had a say in the direction the class was going to go for that day. It was not all planned and static, the professor looked at the questions and from that filled some gaps or added knowledge into us.

Another area that affected the students' ability to transfer new knowledge pertained to the classroom climate.

**Context and Environment.** Regarding the dimension of context and environment, students spoke about the climate of the class as an enhancer of learning transfer because they wanted to be in class, see each other, and talk about social justice issues with each other. Mary illustrated the group's perspectives when she asserted:

I loved our group. First it was small, second it was diverse, and third we felt comfortable with each other quickly. I think the fact that we had group norms and that the professor made us feel like we were in it together and there was no hierarchy.

Two American students shared how much they appreciated having international students in the class in order to learn from them regarding their countries and also in order to learn what they go through in terms of moving to the United States. The two international students also said they appreciated the fact that they were asked and given the opportunity to present regarding their countries, culture, and the struggles they experienced when moving to the United States. The climate and culture of the class seemed to have played an important role in transferring knowledge because students revealed that they had a positive experience with the class and with each other and wanting to stay connected and pursue their learning.

**Sustainable Follow-up.** In terms of follow-up, participants shared that what helped them transfer knowledge five months after the end of the course were the following: The *WhatsApp* group and other social media outlets. All students approved of the *WhatsApp* group that I

created at the beginning of the course. The intent for the *WhatsApp* group was to share materials, thoughts, and resources with each other during the course and after the end of the semester. The goal was for the six students and facilitator to become a community of practice beyond the class time. Examples of posts included videos, links to news or articles, personal reflection or wishes, asking for clarity for topics, assignments or projects, and asking questions regarding an event, guest speaker, or world news. Students shared that *WhatsApp* was effective because it allowed them to share news, vent, ask questions, and periodically hear from the facilitator. Tom shared the sentiment of the group regarding *WhatsApp* when he claimed:

For me it is normal to be on *WhatsApp* so using it is great, easier than phone, email, or regular text. I think it is a good choice because we are all on *WhatsApp* these days. It is free and all of us around the world use it. I like that we are a family, a group once in class and now on *WhatsApp* and we keep in touch and chat about equity. It also reminds us about social justice specially because the professor encouraged us to continue our equity journey. It was like a call to action she gave us.

*WhatsApp* appeared to be useful in terms of accountability, networking, storing resources, asking questions, serving as a reminder of social justice content, and maintaining relationships among peers. Students also used Twitter or other social media as a way to follow-up with social justice issues. As an example, one student shared:

I received social justice materials from the author of the book because I tweeted [sic] him after our class interaction with him. And now, he sends me things and I have a circle of people on Twitter with the same interest.

### **Discussion**



I used the Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer in order to frame the discussion. As noted earlier, MMLT is comprised of seven dimensions: culture, pretraining, learner, facilitator, content and materials, context and environment, and finally sustainable follow-up. Culture comes first because it influences all the other dimensions of the MMLT.

### **Culture**

Based on the findings, the MMLT proved to be an effective way to assess learning transfer. I suggested that culture influences all other areas of the MMLT, and the present study suggested that culture positively and negatively affected learning transfer. Participants shared that having a positive classroom culture and being taught by a culturally competent facilitator of learning enhanced the transfer of learning. However, some students from the minority found it hard to transfer some knowledge with the dominant group because of cultural differences. In MMLT, I posit that culture influences all dimensions of the model, specifically pretraining, learner, facilitator, material and content, context and environment, and sustainable follow-up. I assert that the transfer of training is influenced by various cultures, whether it be the national culture of a person or a facilitator, the school, or classroom culture. Ignoring cultural issues results in stereotyping, increasing intolerance among the groups, raising potential misunderstandings, as well as decreasing motivation of learners (Williams & Green, 1994).

Culture incorporates the differential effects of age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities. As educators, we should train school leaders to become culturally competent so that they can then teach teachers and students. School leaders should foster equity and have the capacity to adapt to various cultures (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2018). Hence, when it comes to assessing learning transfer in such courses, or any other professional development events, there is a need for a multidimensional

model that includes culture such as the MMLT. In the present study, culture influenced the pretraining, learner, facilitator, and content and materials as well as the context and environment and the sustainable follow-up.

### **Pretraining**

Before the class officially started, students had access to their Isidore site, a platform used by the university for online and face-to-face classes in order to organize materials, post announcements, and view and submit assignments. Although the institution does not require to have a site on Isidore for face-to-face courses, I built a site for the class so that students could view in advance the content, readings, syllabus, expectations, and assignments. This platform enabled students to see the valence of the course and it contributed to building transparency and a culture of trust prior to the start of the course. Students knew what to expect and when to expect it and were give resources in order to meet the expectations (Baldwin et al., 1991).

### **Learner**

Culture affected the learners' lens by which they saw the world and learned. When talking about culture, biases, and privilege for example, the students' experiences were vastly different between the White American students and the international students. The national and local cultures of all students and the facilitator affected their identities, their biases, their actions, their reactions, and their learning (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2018; Singleton, 2015). As a facilitator of learning, it is important to understand the students' cultures in order to understand how they learn and how best to support them in order to transfer knowledge (Cafarella, 2002).

### **Facilitator**

Specifically, I influenced the delivery of the content because I was passionate about the content and was culturally competent. I was able to respect and advocate for differences. I

purposefully chose class materials and guest speakers in order to reveal differences among groups. I invited guest speakers from all walks of life in order to show students' various perspectives concerning how inequities manifest themselves in the daily lives of particular groups of people and not in others. Moreover, I understood my students' cultures and, when I did not, I was eager to learn about them. This dynamic was manifested by the time I gave the international students time in order to give presentations regarding their countries. I presented materials and assignments that were culturally relevant to students so that they could apply the new knowledge to their context.

Additionally, I intentionally scheduled guest speakers to come starting on the fourth week of the course because I wanted to first create a culture of learning and trust in my classroom. I aspired for students to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences concerning challenging topics such as race, sexual orientation, and other cultural dimensions. I was interested in creating a climate in which students felt valued and would be motivated to transfer the new diversity and equity knowledge to their personal and professional lives. Rouiller and Goldstein (1993) referred to this dynamic as climate transfer.

Purkey and Novak (2008) assert that a school culture needs to be intentionally inviting. Bryk and Schneider (2003) posit that in order to have inviting school cultures, it is crucial to first focus on relational trust among all stakeholders. In this course, I focused on relational trust the first few weeks of my class by collaboratively crafting norms for the class, being clear with regard to expectations, growing to know the students through conversations and assignments, and being vulnerable myself. Without creating robust relationships based on trust, it would not be possible to produce a culture of learning and a climate of transfer within the class (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003). It would be challenging to teach topics such as race, sexual orientation, gender, abilities, socio-economic status, age, and ethnicity.

### **Content and Materials**

In terms of the delivery of the course content, I used student-centered teaching pedagogy. Knowles (1980) stipulated that adults learn by doing and by participating in their own learning. As a result, students engaged in journaling and deep reflection (Mezirow, 2000) and were exposed to various guest speakers, discussed case studies, and wrote assignments that enabled them to reflect such as writing an autoethnography. Since all knowledge is situated in social and cultural contexts, the learners in the present study learned by engaging with various stakeholders in the community. These guests were principals, district personnel, consultants, community change agents, authors of books regarding equity, scholars, and other professors. Learning in context not only allowed students to link theory to practice and learn from others but it also enhanced the transfer of learning since active learning enhances the transfer of training (Brion & Cordeiro, 2018).

### **Sustainable Follow-up**

Follow-up interventions prevent skill decay and training relapse (Caffarella, 2002). Such interventions could use mobile technology as a way to follow up and enhance the transfer of learning (Brion, 2019). Through the findings of the present study, I suggest that mobile technology, specifically the use of *WhatsApp*, was culturally appropriate for this group of students. In this course, I asked students if they wanted to create a *WhatsApp* group for the purpose of sharing materials, comments, questions, and reactions to social justice issues both during and after the course. All students agreed to the norms of the group being solely used as a community of practice in order to further our education concerning such topics. All students

used the application and made comments regarding how effective it was and how much they wanted to keep the group once the course ended. Currently, participants continue to send links, comment, and post materials related to equity. Culture influenced the choice of medium used for the follow-up.

In summary, the present study suggests that micro and macro cultures affect learning transfer in various ways. School leaders play a key role in improving student learning outcomes, hence there is a need to expose them to classes regarding diversity and social justice issues. The MMLT was used in this present research study in order to assess learning transfer. The findings suggest that the MMLT was an effective way to assess learning transfer because it helped organize what enhanced and hindered the transfer of learning and demonstrated that all dimensions are affected by culture.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

First, leadership preparation programs should include courses involving social justice, diversity, and equity as part of the cognate masters and doctoral students take. Such courses should be mandatory for all aspiring school leaders and should not remain as an elective. While demographics are changing globally, our institutions', schools', and communities' demographics are changing too. As a result, universities should prepare all students to become culturally competent, understand and recognize biases, and become equity advocates.

Second, universities are micro ecosystems of our larger society, hence, diversity courses should not only be taught by African American professors based on the fact that they are people of color and represent a minority (Gayles et al., 2015). These courses should be facilitated by non-African American people as well because studying diversity also means studying Whiteness and White privilege in order to foster authentic relationships based on compassion and

acceptance (Laubscher & Powell, 2003). Professors from various races and backgrounds could also co-teach these courses.

Third, the MMLT provides an effective way to assess learning transfer and could be used systematically by leadership preparation programs, training organizers, researchers, and practitioners. The MMLT includes seven dimensions that can enhance or hinder the transfer of learning. Those dimensions include culture, pretraining, learner, facilitator, content and materials, context and environment, and sustainable follow-up. Upon understanding which of the seven dimensions supported or prevented the transfer of training, learners and facilitators can adapt their teaching, content, conditions for learning, pretraining activities, and follow-up methods. The MMLT can be used in order to assess learning transfer after classes, university courses, trainings, workshops, e-learning activities, or any other professional development activity. The MMLT is an assessment tool that can be used for various areas of practice, whether it be education, business, human resources, or any others.

Fourth, when teaching university level classes concerning equity, I recommend that classes remain small in size. The small class in the present study allowed me to have time to build strong relationships based on trust with my students. Smaller classes also enable students to feel safe to discuss topics that can be uncomfortable and emotional.

Fifth, adult learning theory suggests that in order to learn and transfer new knowledge, adults need to experience things. As a result, social justice courses should be engaging and student-centered. Content should include experiential learning in the field, in schools, and in local organizations. Guest speakers should be invited to engage in dialogues with the students and students should be exposed to international news related to equity using blogs, videos, and

guest speakers. Additionally, the content needs to be culturally relevant to meet the needs of local and international students. Finally, students need ample time in order to reflect.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present qualitative research project used a case study approach in order to examine how, if at all, graduate students in the Leadership in Diverse Communities course were able to transfer new equity knowledge to their personal or professional lives. This present study also intended to understand what dimensions of the MMLT enhanced and inhibited the transfer of learning. As with any empirical study, there are limitations to this research project.

Patton (2002) speaks about outsider-insiders. I see myself as an outsider-insider because I was teaching the course under study. I am aware that a power relationship may have existed, even a tacit one, between the students and myself. Despite a potential for bias, I mitigated this possibility through a variety of strategies including the use of a case study approach and the collection of rich data. Case studies provide in-depth descriptions by allowing researchers to look beyond initial impressions and see the evidence through multiple lenses while accounting for contextual conditions (Yin, 2014). In order to enhance the internal validity of the present study, I triangulated the data, conducted member checking, created a data trail, and used low-inference descriptors. I also wrote memos after each class meeting and kept a journal in order to be mindful of personal bias.

Another limitation is in regard to the sample size. In the present study, I relied on six participants. However, given the richness that the case study approach offers, the present study generated crucial understandings concerning the role culture plays in the learning transfer phenomenon. Despite these limitations, I believe that the present study contributes to the body of literature regarding learning transfer, particularly since it is a concept that has not been readily

studied. Within this context, the present study has the potential for setting the stage for further studies. Nonetheless, external validity is a significant limitation to the present action research study.

Future research could use the MMLT as a framework for researchers in order to conduct additional studies. Further studies could be conducted with regard to each dimension of the model. For example, a study might focus on pretraining and examine what factors in the pretraining phase enhance the transfer of learning and why. Another study could be executed with the learner dimension and explore what specific dispositions of the learner yields the transfer of new knowledge. Additional studies could include using the MMLT in order to explore the transfer of different knowledge such as medical or business knowledge. The MMLT is a framework that can be used in order to assess any knowledge, in any field of work, and for anyone who participates in professional development events whether it be workshops, training, or course work.



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Figure 1.

*A Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer*

