Social-emotional learning in higher education: Through the lens of culture, identity, and community concepts in teaching and learning

Isalena Gilzene

Relevant context of culture, identity, and community-based teaching and learning approaches are presented as critical components of social-emotional learning in college students. These contexts, when incorporated into curriculum design and teaching pedagogies, authentically engage students in learning. Educators are professionally obligated to promote healthy faculty-to-student and student-to-faculty engagement through consistent teaching practices that include representation of students' culture, identity, and community concepts in active-learning.

Social-emotional learning

By broad definition, social-emotional learning (SEL) involves one's ability to develop self-regulatory skills that aid in the process of managing emotions and building healthy social relationships with others, (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environment (n.d). In the context of higher education, the range of self-regulation in college students is extensive and presents in many forms; these forms ultimately impact how students encode, store, and retrieve course content. It also includes students' ability to focus on lecture presentations, shift attention to new tasks and activities, regulate reactions to difficult topics discussed in courses, manage conflict and disagreement, manage time, and learn socially acceptable behaviors. While the SEL process of regulating oneself is a typical developmental expectation for college students, the reality is some struggle with developing healthy self-regulatory skills to successfully meet course learning outcomes and the demands of their degree programs. College students bring to the classroom a laundry list of personal dynamics that influence how they engage faculty and peers, and manage their own emotions. These student dynamics support the need for faculty to design learning environments (with purpose and explicitness) that promote the interconnection of students' social-emotional learning with their culture and identity.

An Invitation

A proposal is made to invite educators, curriculum designers, and department administrators to critically reevaluate how degree programs and curriculum create learning activities that incorporate students' culture and identity as meaningful parts of teaching and learning. In addition, students' self-reported identity and cultural experiences should be integrated with community approaches of teaching and learning. Examples of community teaching include: encouraging students to apply course content to their respective communities, working across the classroom in project-based assignments, scheduling guest speakers, soliciting students' community service work, designing assessments that require students to engage with the community, and inviting community members to join class discussions. The integration of community concepts of teaching with course content is most successful when it includes consistent representation of students' culture and identity. If the goal is to support college students' social-emotional learning, then it is essential and culturally relevant that self-representation (culture and identity) are embedded into instructional design and teaching practices. As faculty, we must create learning environments that encourage students while creating opportunities for them to bring "the whole self" to the learning experience. Culturally responsive and effective educators know this to be true when students engage in activities, they experience to be relevant to them; they are likely to build self-regulatory skills as they manage social relationships and multiple layers of emotions that pertain to personal health, school responsibilities, and work-life balance. Further, the application of course concepts is deepened when students can relate and make sense of how the concepts are experienced in their world. The invitation is open for all educators, and higher education administration, to reevaluate and employ a flexible approach to dialoging with students about what represents them as individual learners.

Culture gets a permanent seat

The subject of students' *culture* seems forgotten in some aspects of teaching in higher education — and perhaps clichéd for some educators. Culture, as a critical topic in the learning environment, has aged; it is even more aged in that educators sometimes fail to intentionally incorporate student-generated culture contexts as a relevant component in discussions, learning activities, and assessments. Even so, there is significant work done by collective institutions of higher education to recognize the critical nature of culture context in learning. For decades, institutions continue to develop best practice standards in efforts to promote a culturally inclusive society along with standards that respond to social justice needs for all. Higher education institutions have long provided scholarly databases that include an abundance

of supporting research on why cultural competence, sensitivity, and responsiveness are critical to the learning process for all college students. Degree programs at most institutions embed general education requirements, substantive courses, and electives, all of which allow for advance training where students are challenged to expand their knowledge-base and competence to work across cultures. Contrary to these advancement and practice standards, institutions and program departments have come short of sustaining critical focus and deliberateness on how students' individual cultures are fostered in the learning environment. In order to truly support healthy social-emotional development in college students, educators must acknowledge the need to create learning environments that provide students with opportunities to experience learning through a cultural lens.

As colleges and universities respond to the pandemic, global turbulence, and socio-economic levels of impact, the classroom has become increasingly vulnerable for learning. This shift in vulnerability generates opportunities for faculty to examine culture practices in teaching and learning that impact how students make connections and apply course content. Faculty must create learning environments that are socially and emotionally conducive to how students experience the world. In addition, students are likely to engage at a high level of learning when given the opportunity to embrace a true representation of themselves in the learning environment — bringing with them their own culture frames and representations. For example, the ways in which students discuss personal stress, trauma, and coping during the pandemic will uncover unique cultural references and varying degrees of self-regulatory skills. Faculty must employ flexible approaches to how they engage students and include critical dialog to create culturally-responsive climates for learning; conscious flexibility allows students to actively use their own cultural references as they apply content knowledge to the real-world — and as they experience it. We know this to be true for students who enter higher education with a wide range of social-emotional challenges that impact the learning processes and connections with faculty and peers. To this end, cultural representations in the learning environment are critical components to effectively assess and respond to students' social-emotional states in learning; the collective goal is to support students towards building healthy, self-regulatory skills as college students.

Identity and self-representation

College students' *identities* are inadvertently overlooked as contributing elements for developing healthy social and emotional learning. There is a tendency to view culture and identity as an interconnected whole — overshadowing students' personal 'identity' as its own place-value in how educators create learning environments that build on self-representation in

learning. To add, students typically develop appreciation for the 'culture' aspect of their identity, yet sometimes struggle to fully embrace self-schemas as separate from cultural upbringing, family rituals, and customs. When students enter the learning environment—be it on-ground, synchronous, or asynchronous — they bring with them a collective-self that holds strong influence on how they process course content as they apply it to real-world contexts. The collective-self included in the learning environment supports students to feel validated, heard, and connected to faculty and peers. Furthermore, faculty who provide opportunities for students to include self-representation in learning are likely to adopt teaching practices that include higher levels of empathy and awareness to students' needs. This approach fosters a dynamic learning environment that engages students and faculty to experience teaching and learning, predicated on faculty recognition of students' identity and self-representation.

As faculty develop greater awareness to include students' self-representation in teaching and learning activities, they are likely to incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogies that support students in managing social relationships and emotional regulation. If the goal is to support students towards strengthening social-emotional learning, an authentic connection with faculty and a well-engaged learning environment is critical. To this end, self-representation in learning is pivotal to how faculty engage learners in meaningful activities that include individuality, personal representation, and the full integration of every student's identity. Learning activities must be prudently designed — adding relevant components that provide opportunities for students to incorporate self-schemas as a means to apply knowledge from course content. In doing so, faculty foster an environment that is collaborative, flexible, inclusive, diverse, and representative of every student in the shared space.

Although some faculty are deliberate in developing teaching practices that incorporate learners' identity, others might unintentionally miss opportunities to actively engage students in discussing the importance of self-representation in learning. Promoting a learning environment that is safe and inclusive encourages students to bring 'the whole self,' which makes achieving learning outcomes more likely. So why is the context of students' identity and self-representation so important in teaching and learning? *To teach without knowing is to teach in the absence of knowing. Thus, to teach without knowing is not teaching at all.* In order to achieve authentic teaching and learning, students' identity in the learning environment matters and should be embraced consistently by educators. Before holding faculty accountable for the delivery of a wholistic social-emotional learning environment, institutional outcomes, curriculum design, and program-level learning outcomes must show evidence that students' identity and self-representation are incorporated in major core

requirements and formative assessments. In sum, college students' identity — when fully embraced by educators — is fundamental to students' capacity to build social relationships and healthy emotional regulation in learning environments; it is how they make connections to the real-world, as they navigate the experiences of learning in higher education.

Community Concepts in Teaching and Learning

Previously, the position is made on why students' culture, identity, and self-representation is critical to promote healthy social-emotional learning in college students. For the purposes of this blog article, community concepts in teaching and learning are explained as the alignment of subject relevance and learning activities with principles of communal teaching and learning. These may include: project-based learning, field agency/organization partnerships, and local events relevant to the course subject. Educators who use these concepts in teaching are likely to experience student engagement at higher levels than those who employ traditional teaching methods; the faculty-to-student connection is primed and often transcends into long-term professional networking. Community concepts provide opportunities for students to dive deep and critically think about how content applies in real-time to themselves, peers, and in the larger community context. As college students develop self-regulatory skills to manage multiple roles and responsibilities, agents from their own communities are good resources to draw from and make relevant connections to what they are learning; the dialog is extended beyond the classroom to all aspects of the students' environment. This is best supported when faculty add 'community' value to teaching and learning. We must acknowledge that aligning course content with a model of community learning may present some challenges; however, thoughtfully designed learning activities (built on the principles and value of community learning) can reduce barriers between faculty and students, achieving learning goals and fostering strong faculty-to-student and student-to faculty connections.

Throughout this blog post, the position is made on why students' culture, identity, and community principles in teaching and learning are critical frames of reference to include in the learning environment. College students' management of self-regulation via social-emotional learning are interconnected with culture, identity, and a communal learning. The pandemic receives credit for the heightened attention faculty must provide to college students' self-regulatory skills and supports needed to achieve learning outcomes. Contextualizing 'the whole student' is pervasive to building strong faculty-to-student and student-to-faculty connections. Perhaps, it is a paradigm shift to envision students as the stake holders of learning, by creating learning environments that start and end with them. In the end, the

other side of social-emotional learning in higher education is a beautiful space waiting to be explored.

References

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environment (n.d). Social Emotional Learning. Retrieved from https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/hot-topics/social-emotional-learning.

About the Author:

Isalena Gilzene is an Assistant Professor in the Human Services program, and a UDL Teaching Fellow at Goodwin University. She currently serves as the Program Director and Internship Coordinator. She earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology with a Criminology focus from Eastern Connecticut State University, a master's degree in Social Work from the University of Connecticut.