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# Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom: A Faculty and TA Partnership Program

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*On most campuses, diversity education and faculty development are separate initiatives. This article describes a new program that successfully combines the two functions by building on methods and practices from both. The program has had beneficial outcomes for individual teachers as well as for their departments.*

In recent years, higher education has begun to pay more serious attention to issues of diversity in the college classroom. Diversity has always existed in the classroom, of course; but changing demographics and the readiness of many students to be more vocal about their social identities have made us more keenly aware of their diversity in ability, age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and learning style. This awareness, in turn, has presented TAs, faculty, administrators, and faculty developers with a variety of instructional and institutional challenges as they work together to explore methods of making the classroom an effective and inclusive learning environment for all students.

As an assistant director and director of a center for teaching, we have worked collaboratively with other campus offices over the past

year to achieve a common goal: to develop and implement a new TA and faculty development program that creates linkages among the domains of teaching, learning, and diversity education. In this case study, we will describe the kinds of programs we've developed, identify some of the key strategies that have proven to be the catalysts for change in our institution, and summarize lessons we've learned. We hope that some of what worked well for us can be applied by faculty developers on other campuses that are grappling with how to value diversity in the classroom.\*

## **The Institutional Context**

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst has a rich and complex history of social activism. For more than two decades, various faculty members and student groups have been engaged in developing institutional and curricular structures to promote a more multiculturally inclusive campus. For example, in 1980 the Provost's Office established a broadly representative Civility Commission with an Office of Human Relations as its administrative arm. Their aim was to help articulate an appropriate institutional perspective and to attempt cohesion among the variety of agendas being put forth on diversity issues. During the same time period, the faculty led a curriculum revision that resulted in the requirement that all students take two social diversity courses within the campus-wide general education curriculum, and instituted diversity programs in the residence halls (Adams, 1992; Dethier, 1984; Hunt, Bell, Wei & Ingle, 1992). Still, the needs of teaching assistants and faculty members for support and skills development in *teaching* these and other courses had never been directly or comprehensively addressed. Instructors had little opportunity to explore teaching practices that relate to diverse learning styles, to become better equipped to handle classroom dynamics that result from student diversity, and to incorporate teaching methods that address the needs and interests of our broadly diverse student population.

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\* The authors wish to thank their colleague, Elizabeth Caldwell, for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

In response to these changing learning and teaching needs, the Center For Teaching (CFT) and the Graduate Student Senate cosponsored a three year grant to develop a new TA and faculty development program. The grant proposed a variety of programming initiatives under the title of “Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom” (TLDC). In retrospect, getting the money and the ideas together was the easy part; it was much harder to implement of a meaningful TA and faculty development program on social diversity.

## **Designing Initiatives in Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom**

During the initial phase of program design and development we conducted in-depth interviews with stakeholders from across the campus. A wide array of TAs, faculty members, chairs, and deans generously shared their time, ideas, and resources. They provided practical ideas about the needs of TAs and faculty, what would make a sound professional preparation program for TAs, and offered suggestions on what would constitute an appealing and useful professional development opportunity for faculty. We also sought their suggestions about the content and format of the program, strategies that would enable us to navigate the tides of campus politics, and materials that might be included in a packet of readings or in a video library. Based on their recommendations and on our own experiences in faculty development and social diversity training, we decided that our efforts should include several tiers of activities and materials that would provide multiple points of entry into the conversation on diversity. We sketched out ideas on a continuum—from “lower-risk” activities that focused on the experiences and needs of others (e.g. watching videos or responding to reading materials) to activities that asked participants to engage in “higher-risk” activities (e.g. workshops requiring self reflection, dialogues and personal disclosure).

We launched the project at the start of the 1994-95 academic year by offering tested, self-contained workshops such as “Social Diversity Issues in the Classroom,” and “Cross-Cultural Teaching and Learning” at our annual campus-wide TA Orientation Day. Throughout the year we piloted a luncheon seminar series for TAs, and produced

collections of print and video resources focusing on teaching and learning in the diverse classroom. These three initiatives all offered accessible, relatively low-threat means to learn about and improve one's teaching in a diverse classroom. The cornerstone of our program, and also the one with the highest risk factors, was an intensive, year-long TA and Faculty Partnership Project. The following section describes the development of this key program. We believe it is unique in the field in terms of goals, design, format and outcomes.

## **The TA and Faculty Partnership Program**

This pilot project brought together a group of nine TAs and nine faculty members in a year-long, four-tier program: an intensive, two-day immersion workshop at the outset of the year; a monthly seminar on teaching and learning in the diverse classroom; individual consultation on teaching and learning; and a discipline-based project to be designed by each team to implement in their home department.

**Goals.** The Partnership project had four closely related goals. The primary goal was to increase the ability of these teachers to create inclusive classroom climates. We decided, however, that it would be a mistake to focus at the outset on diversity as a "student issue." The best way to address the needs of students would be to start by addressing the needs, experiences, and belief systems of the instructors. Thus, a corollary goal was to expand the teachers' self awareness in order to engender empathy and greater sensitivity to the feelings, experiences and concerns of students typically underrepresented in the academy. Reflecting on how their own unique social identities inform their perspectives on the classroom and their experiences with students would be crucial to this process of self-exploration. It would also lay the foundation for better understanding the complex dynamics of classroom behaviors and interactions. To this end, we were careful to present awareness of individual students' issues of social identity as only one of many important perspectives on the continuum of teaching practices that promote excellence in teaching and learning.

We also wanted the teams to discuss the impact that organization-level norms and values have on diversity issues in the classroom, encouraging them to examine the values overtly and covertly main-

tained by the institution and manifested via departments. The decision to build the project around teams (a faculty member and a TA from the same department made up a team) emerged from this organizational perspective. We were convinced that unless a supportive climate could be nurtured within the departments, it would be difficult for the team members to sustain newly learned views and skills. Measures that helped emphasize the idea that effective work for change must address issues at the organizational as well as at the individual level included involving a TA and a faculty member as a team from each department, inviting senior colleagues and chairs to department seminars and the closing dinner, and asking the teams to share what they had learned in their home departments. In addition, we pointed to links between the program and institutional goals by firmly placing it in the context of system-wide mandates for excellence in teaching and campus initiatives to improve student access, retention, graduation rates, and campus climate.

A final goal was to encourage participants to make a long-term commitment to enhance their skills for teaching in the diverse classroom. We readily acknowledged that we were asking participants to reflect upon and perhaps radically shift their perspectives and interpretation of the dynamics of their classrooms—to unlearn perhaps deeply held perspectives and values and to replace them with new ones. Effective change on this scale generally comes only from sustained work over time, so we emphasized that this was a program designed to “get us started.”

**Criteria for Selection...** Selection of participants for the partnership program was based on a variety of considerations. We wanted a group that represented a variety of academic disciplines, different levels of seniority in the academy, both genders, and that had racial balance. TAs needed at least one year of teaching experience to qualify. We invited some participants on recommendations from faculty colleagues, chairs and deans. Sometimes we found the TA first and took her suggestion on a “receptive” faculty member, and sometimes the reverse. The key consideration was that the faculty member and TA should feel comfortable working together. At the conclusion of the selection process we had a group of eighteen who were representative in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. They were

drawn from every rank—TAs to full professors—and from seven academic departments in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and professional schools. Each participant received a \$500.00 professional development award for participation in the project.

**Elements of the Program.** We feel that the TLDC program's components are uniquely suited to supporting participants as they grapple with the difficult dialogues that emerge in the discussion of diversity. These elements include a two-day immersion retreat; a monthly seminar on teaching and learning; collaborative team work on discipline-based projects designed by TA/faculty partners and individual support and consultation for participants throughout the program; and regular opportunities to socialize informally at dinners before each seminar and at a more formal closing dinner (with selected guests) at the end of the program.

*Immersion Experience.* Operationally, the retreat and seminars modeled three cornerstone concepts: collaborative facilitation, role modeling how to participate and effectively sustain difficult dialogues, and commitment to cooperative learning. We began the program with a two-day immersion experience to build team relationships and group trust quickly. Since most participants knew only one other member of the group, we endeavored to spend this time on the critical tasks of establishing group identity and norms, creating a shared vocabulary around diversity issues, and presenting several models of social identity development (with applications to the university or college classroom). We included many opportunities for participants to share their personal stories, their own backgrounds, experiences in teaching, and personal perspectives on working through issues of prejudice in the classroom. We also wanted to emphasize that these issues are *everyone's* issues. The two-day immersion worked successfully to bring us together as a small group at the threshold of the experience and to acquire a sense of each other's perspectives and interests. By quickly establishing a level of intimacy and comfort, we were able to get right to the heart of sensitive issues during the later seminar sessions.

*Seminar Series.* Once a month we brought the group together for an informal dinner and a 2 1/2 hour seminar on selected issues related to diversity in the classroom. The participants generated the topics for the seminars, based on what they wanted to know about teaching in a

diverse classroom. We balanced topics on social justice awareness training (e.g. discussions with a panel of undergraduate students about experiences of racism in the classroom) with skill-specific topics (e.g. application models of cooperative learning). We included very little direct lecturing from “expert” presenters. We focused on eliciting the experience and perspectives of participants and then provided key information in brief lecturettes, numerous handouts and referrals to other resources. The bulk of our time was spent in dialogues (in dyads, small groups, and large groups) about implications, applications, discipline-specific needs and universal strategies for creating more inclusive classroom environments. At the end of each seminar, we conducted formative evaluations that helped us plan subsequent sessions. A fundamental turning point in the group process came for us when the group decided spontaneously to meet an extra time between two seminars to continue the discussion and invited the facilitation team to join them. It is obvious that this incident marked the point at which participants had achieved an understanding of (and openness toward) each other’s viewpoints, leaving behind the desire to convince others that theirs was the “right” way of teaching.

The retreat and the seminars were intended to foster change at two levels. The first was at the organization level, by enhancing participants’ general awareness of the dynamics of social group oppression and how this principle operates in the context of the classroom. For example, members of the group targeted by prejudice often know much more about the group that is doing the targeting, or acting as the agents of prejudice, than agent group members know about target group members. The second level of change was at the individual level, by asking participants to articulate and explore the personal implications of theories of teaching and learning in the diverse classroom. By constantly linking the exploration of organization and personal values, assumptions, and social identities with how participants taught, we hoped to create a richer interpretation of the dynamics a diverse classroom and deeper understanding of students’ needs and behaviors.

*Team Projects and Consultation.* The project staff from the Center For Teaching worked with each team to define (and refine) goals for their discipline-based project. As a result, participants often began to



look closely at their own teaching and learning and at their department's interest in issues of teaching, learning and diversity. For example, one team asked the CFT to offer a set of workshops on teaching and learning in the diverse classroom for the department's faculty members and TAs. Another team developed their own seminar using consultation, videotapes and print resources from the Center. Additionally, several members sought out CFT staff for help with specific personal questions around diversity issues. In the program evaluations at the end of the first year, participants credited the availability and positive relationship with CFT staff with helping them to gain greater personal clarity on diversity issues, to create focused and manageable goals, to develop as teachers, and to bring their projects to fruition.

*Social Dinners.* The informal socializing and networking over the "working dinners" before the seminars became a crucial factor in maintaining group cohesion and an amiable climate. At the close of the partnership project's pilot year, we decided to provide an occasion at which participants and guests could come together to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments of the group. Participants clearly did not want an award dinner, but rather a "signpost" event in which they could share what they had learned with colleagues committed to teaching, learning and social diversity. Each team invited two or three guests: deans, department chairs, senior colleagues, and "kindred spirits" in the academic community. Each team member was presented with a certificate and a book about teaching and learning in the diverse classroom. All of the formal speeches were finished in about fifteen minutes, after which the evening became what we called "open mike," with participants sharing memorable experiences they had had during the partnership project.

## **Lessons Learned**

Our commitment to bringing together the two streams of teaching development and diversity education into one program required flexibility and responsive facilitation throughout the course of the program. We were committed to meeting the needs of the individuals and teams (as these emerged), as well as being committed to achieving the overall

goals of the program . We gathered informal feedback from individual participants almost weekly, we asked for formative evaluations at the end of every activity, and we performed a summative evaluation at the end of the program. Intensive study of our pilot project activities suggests nine general lessons that might be of value to other campuses.

**Define “diversity.”** We defined diversity as reflecting all the elements of one’s social identity where issues of power and prejudice come into play—gender, race, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, economic class, religion, and age—as well as issues which are specific to the classroom, such as academic preparation. Our experience suggests that this broad definition affords multiple points of entry into the dialogue and provides a model of an inclusive framework.

**Model collaboration.** This project was a collaboration from its inception: it started as a joint proposal between the CFT and the Graduate Student Senate. Planning and facilitating activities were team efforts, too. The fact that facilitators were representative in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and academic status possessed symbolic power (reiterating that we are all responsible for diversity issues ) and also provided role models. Selecting a faculty/TA team from each participating department helped prevent feelings of isolation and opened up the practical, local dimensions of working with diversity issues. Finally, having participants with varied knowledge and experience with diversity issues modeled the pivotal concept that each participant in a learning situation has something to teach as well as to learn.

**Start with commitment, not expertise.** Ideally, we were looking for teachers who were not necessarily *experts* on diversity, but who expressed a genuine interest in diversity issues, possessed the desire to be effective educators, and who were willing to participate in a pilot program that would necessarily include some bumps and unexpected turns.

**Create multiple points of entry into the process.** Our first priority was to engage participants at their level of interest in diversity in the classroom. We also realized that there are few places where instructors find the opportunity to talk about teaching so we needed to build in time for wide-ranging discussions about teaching in its broadest sense, as well as specific issues related to diversity. By first

connecting with their perceptions of important issues on teaching and learning, we were later able to focus the discussions specifically on diversity issues and create connections between different expressions of oppression. We were heartened by the degree of interest and gratitude that participants brought to these discussions of teaching and learning.

Throughout the year, participants consistently sorted themselves into two groups: those who taught subjects where diversity issues are part of the curricular content (e.g. English, the Writing Program, the Schools of Public Health and Education) and those who felt their subject matter is “neutral” and thought of diversity issues in the classroom as a product of the student’s or teacher’s identities. Of course this is a false dichotomy, but we dealt with it by providing a balance between a focus on classroom-based teaching strategies and resources about social identity, diversity, and oppression education.

**Avoid any hint of political correctness.** Participants carried into this experience a kind of free-floating defensiveness that we came to understand as a reaction to prior experiences of not-so-subtle attempts to bully people into a specific ideological stance. We immediately set to work to dispel these anxieties and to create a climate of mutual discourse. We emphasized that the program was designed to provide as many approaches to thinking about and understanding diversity as possible. An effective analogy is one of building a big toolbox and wanting to place as many different tools into the box as possible. Depending on the teacher, the student, the curriculum and the classroom, a variety of different tools could be useful. The individual teacher must decide on the utility and application of different devices.

**Expect resistance.** Work on diversity issues is difficult and often emotional. Age and academic status are not necessarily indicators of sophistication on issues of social diversity or readiness to actively and openly engage in these issues. Group process, therefore, requires a careful balance between cognitive outcomes (teaching techniques and pedagogy) and affective outcomes (expression of and exploration of feelings). It was important to welcome challenges from all corners since each experience helped the other group members clarify their own positions, helped establish and reinforce shared ownership of the learning process and modeled strategies that might be effective re-

sponses in class situations as well. It can be helpful for the facilitation team to model being “in process” on their own relationship to diversity issues.

**Be prepared for complex TA/faculty dynamics.** The faculty/TA partnerships had many benefits and our evaluations resoundingly encouraged us to stay with the teams. However, trying to “level the playing field” also presented complex issues in the facilitation of the group process (e.g. faculty talked a lot more) and in various levels of cynicism about change (senior faculty were more likely to talk about having “seen it all before”). Over time, some activities also brought forward the differences in the perspectives and experiences of team members much more clearly than might otherwise ever have been articulated. Careful facilitation and pacing allowed conflicts to emerge in ways that contributed robustly to the experience rather than compromising it. Here again, co-facilitation allowed for focus on both content and process during activities.

**Honor personal stories.** The most powerful teaching experiences were also the moments in which program members shared their own stories, experiences and questions about teaching and learning. It is crucial not to “overprogram.” Reserve pockets of flexible time to explore issues in depth and to place personal experience in the context of knowledge about the aggregate experiences of social groups.

**Locate the program in an organizational context.** We placed this program as one point along the continuum of activities that the Center For Teaching conducts on teaching and learning. We resisted identifying the TLDC program as addressing “student problems” or as the answer to all diversity issues on campus. While some TAs and faculty are drawn to this work by moral arguments or personal commitment, we found it important to point to the long-term pragmatic interests of the institution in engaging both individual participants and their departments in this enterprise. We explained how, through the program, individuals and their departments could begin to address institutional concerns such as dealing with large classes, inconsistent academic preparation, and fewer resources for student success. We were also scrupulous about resisting expectations that this single program could solve the issues.

## **Conclusions**

The first year of the “Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom” initiative yielded several positive outcomes, especially from the TA and faculty partnership project. Three outcomes underscore the usefulness of a program like this for addressing faculty and TA skills for teaching and learning in the diverse classroom.

First of all, participants report that the program confirmed for them that there is a universal nature to good teaching which reaches beyond any single discipline. They reported that it increased their confidence that these skills can be learned. And they enjoyed being given the opportunity to work directly on issues of teaching and learning with colleagues. In retrospect, we underestimated the positive appeal of networking across disciplines and ranks and the impact that this experience would have on the participants.

A second important outcome of the program was the creation of a core of faculty and TA partners interested in issues of teaching, learning and social diversity. Many expressed strong satisfaction with being part of a university-wide network of people who clearly see the linkage between diversity issues in the classroom and excellence in education. Through this year-long process participants reported that they learned practical applications for linking the dimensions of good teaching with the tenets of diversity education in ways that they otherwise might not have been able to do. TLDC created opportunities for participants to explore issues of teaching and learning and diversity with a degree of depth and honesty with each other that was, for many, unprecedented.

Finally, participants reported that their self-concept as teachers underwent a transformation. Many, both graduate students and faculty, were already competent researchers, but they freely acknowledged that they were not as prepared as teachers—and even less prepared as facilitators of dialogues about diversity. Participants believed that they would return to the classroom with increased self-awareness and self-confidence as instructors, increased empathy for, and sensitivity to, the needs of diverse students, and with a new corpus of knowledge and useful strategies for teaching in the diverse classroom.

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