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Thriving in academe: The value of diversity

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REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe

The Value of Diversity

Diversity involves more than celebrating differences.

BY KATHRYN M. PLANK AND STEPHANIE V. ROHDIECK, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Although sometimes it's more obvious than others, diversity plays a role in all classrooms.

“That’s all well and good, but diversity isn’t an issue in my class ...” We may have heard some variation of this comment or have said it ourselves. We want to create inclusive classrooms, but the task can be challenging.

While most of us want our classrooms to be inclusive, we often find it difficult to figure out exactly how to make that happen, particularly if we teach supposedly “neutral” subjects—math, for example—that don’t seem to lend themselves to discussions of diversity or if the students in our classes appear to be homogeneous.

One way to consider how diversity comes into play in all classrooms is to first recog-

nize the countless and sometimes invisible ways that both we and our students, as well as the course content and teaching methods, bring diversity into the classroom.

It is important that we not stop at simply appreciating differences, but that we place classroom diversity in a larger context and examine issues of societal power dynamics and social justice. Working on the premise that there is no “neutral,” we can analyze how our identities and cultural context have an impact on our language, on what we value and make visible in our courses, and on the interactions in our classrooms. We can then begin to explore how diversity is an integral part of our students’ development as critical thinkers.



MEET THE AUTHORS

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Tales from Real Life

EXPLORING OUR DIFFERENCES

SINCE WE BOTH LIKE TO REFLECT ON teaching issues we’ve encountered, it was no surprise that one day we found ourselves deep in discussion of how diversity issues affect us both in and out of the classroom.

We came across an example of this when we began a discussion of high unemployment rates among military spouses. This is an interesting and innocuous topic that could be used in a variety of courses—as a case study for analyzing the economic impact of the unemployment, for example, or in a business class concerned with creating business plans for employers.

We quickly agreed that if we were students in a class discussing this issue, we would react in very different and perhaps unexpected ways. Looking at us, a teacher could easily assume we would have similar responses simply because we have similar physical features.

But there are several important, yet invisible differences between us. One of us is a military spouse herself, with a husband on military deployment overseas. The other is gay, and thus legally excluded from both marriage and the military.

If we were students in this class, we would each have very real but different emotional reactions to this case study. These reactions would impact our engagement in the learning process, as well as provide perspectives and experiences that could enrich, broaden, and deepen the discussion of the case in ways the teacher might not have foreseen.

—Kathryn M. Plank and
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The Assumptions We Make About Diversity

Diversity isn't always visible, but it's always present, relevant, and an integral part of student learning.

Most faculty want to make their classes as inclusive as possible, but sometimes we have assumptions that get in the way of exploring all of the possibilities for inclusion. We can begin by examining some assumptions about diversity.

Assumption 1: "My students aren't diverse."

Many faculty teach at institutions or in departments where students appear to be relatively homogenous. We often talk to teachers who will comment, for example, that most of their students are white, male, and 20 years old.

First, this raises the question, "Why isn't there more diversity in your school or department?" The apparent lack of diversity is what makes diversity an issue in your class.

Second, simply because your students are visibly similar does not mean they are homogeneous. Think about all the aspects of your own identity: ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, country or region of origin, age, physical ability, family background, sexual orientation, educational history, physical appearance, learning style. You could probably identify many aspects of your identity that influence who you are in the classroom.

Our students are no less complex. Each student is a unique combination of experiences and identities, most of which will be invisible to us. We may see them for three hours per week for a lifetime total of only 45 hours or so. Our classes take place in the larger context of their lives. Anything we bring into the classroom has the potential to connect to their lives, often having an emotional impact (good or bad) that can affect their learning. We won't always know when, how, or why these connections occur, but we need to assume they will and be open to them.

It's all too easy to slip into the bad habit of making assumptions based on outward appearance. We knew one student who looked like a typical 20-year-old white male from the Midwest, a category that is often dismissed as immature and provincial. This student, however, was a veteran who had recently been in combat in Iraq and brought to class a set of experiences that one could not expect just looking at him.

Students are diverse in more ways than we will probably ever know, but starting with the assumption of great diversity opens our classrooms up to exciting and constantly changing possibilities.



Assumption 2: "If everyone is diverse, then why does it matter?"

Sometimes discussion of diversity stops at recognizing that we're all different. As teachers we also need to consider how those differences can affect the learning environment in both positive and negative ways. Not only do our classes take place in the context of our students' (and our own) lives, they also occur in the larger context of the world around us. We do not teach in a vacuum. We live within the power dynamics of society at large, and our classes can reinforce, interrupt, or make visible that power.

What happens in the classroom sometimes reinforces inequities outside the classroom. We found an example in this student quote from *Interrupting Heteronormativity* (Gupta, Farrell, & Queen, 2004):

I took French classes last year, and even though my TA seemed very liberal, as part of getting us to speak in French, she'd ask questions like, "How would you describe your ideal boyfriend?" and "How would you describe your future plans for marriage and children?" I know it was unintentional, but it felt like my whole existence was erased.

The instructor in this case obviously didn't intend to hurt anyone, but nonetheless, the impact the student felt was powerful, given greater weight because of inequality outside the classroom.

Contrast this to a sample math problem from the same article:

"If Dave and Bob want to buy a \$200,000 house but only make \$25,000 annually, how should they budget?"

It's a simple example, but one that teaches more than simple math. It interrupts heteronormativity and makes visible the invisibility the previous student commented on, while also creating the opportunity for all students in the class to stop and think. A student who goes on to become a mortgage broker will not only know how to calculate the numbers (and perhaps counsel Dave and Bob to look for a smaller house), but also be more aware of the variety of potential clients.

The goal is not to try to make special accommodations for gay, African-American, or female students, which oversimplifies stu-

Students are diverse in more ways than we as their teachers will probably ever know.

dent identity and casts certain students as “the Other.” Disability studies such as by Ben-Moshe (*Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability in the University*), offer another useful way of examining the interaction of individual identity and cultural norm:

The social model of disability suggests that disability is not individual deficit but one way of understanding difference amidst narrow definitions of normal. An individual may experience an impairment, but this is not inherently negative. Further, it is not a disability until interacting with inaccessibility and ableism. In this way, difficulties in school must be considered from a broader environmental context. Rather than asking what the student needs to change to succeed in the classroom (or stating that certain students do not belong in our classrooms), the social model asks, “What needs to change about the classroom and the teaching to make learning happen for this student, to allow the student to show all that she or he knows?”

This model gives us the concept of Universal Design for Learning, in which teaching is designed to improve the learning of all students.

Assumption 3: “But this doesn’t have anything to do with learning.”

One reason many teachers avoid talking about diversity is the idea that teaching “values” is not our job. But in reality, value-free

teaching does not exist (McKeachie, 2002). When we choose what content to teach and what to leave out, when we select examples, when we develop our teaching methods, when we design our assignments, we make decisions about what we value and we communicate those values to our students.

Obviously, creating a safe and welcoming classroom environment has a lot to do with learning. But the relationship between understanding diversity and facilitating learning goes deeper. By helping our students appreciate diversity, we can also make them better thinkers.

Whenever we ask instructors what their goals for a course are, invariably they say, “critical thinking.” They talk about students understanding and evaluating multiple perspectives, becoming aware of the complexities

of their positions, and seeing alternative ways of solving problems.

William Perry’s scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1970) defines four main stages that students progress through, starting with “dualism” (there’s a right answer) to “multiplicity” (there’s no way to tell what’s right) to “contextual relativism” (there’s a way to use evidence to prove a position) and finally, to “commitment.” It is this final stage that instructors hope their students will achieve: when they will go out in the world and cope with uncertainty, define their own values and identity, make educated choices, evaluate options, create new knowledge, and become lifelong learners.

What better way to help them achieve those goals than to create a course which explicitly incorporates diversity, challenges assumptions, and invites multiple perspectives?

By helping our students appreciate diversity, we can also make them better thinkers.

BEST PRACTICES

Different ways of seeing

Virginia Anderson (Towson University, biology) shows a picture to her students of two people in a lab: a man doing a procedure and a woman watching. She asks them to describe what’s going on in the picture. Two-thirds of them say, “he is showing her how to do it” and the other third say, “she’s making sure he does it correctly.” Anderson uses this as an opening to discuss how our observations and interpretations are filtered through our own assumptions and experiences, and what the implications are for students’ future practice.



Michele diPietro (Carnegie-Mellon University, statistics) uses the statistics of the gay and lesbian population to help students think critically about how statistics are used and where they come from. In his course, students examine the features and limitations of various research methodologies, evaluate the content of research and popular press articles, and draw informed conclusions that reflect an understanding of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) sources of information. His course gives students the statistical and critical thinking tools necessary to take an informed position on important societal issues.

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ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Obstacles to addressing issues of diversity in class

◆ "I'm afraid I'll say something wrong."

Start by accepting that we will all unintentionally say things along the way that will hurt someone. We shouldn't beat ourselves up over it when it happens, but we have the responsibility to learn from it and acknowledge that our words have an impact regardless of our intentions and, when possible, to model this for our students.

◆ "I don't know how to respond when a student says something hurtful."

A typical response is to pretend it didn't happen. We don't want to make things worse or distract from the real learning, but the learning for many students has already been hindered if they feel excluded or unsafe.

There is no neutral response in this case. If we say nothing, we become complicit in the behavior, and students will assume we are condoning it. We can't be afraid to address the issue, even if we believe it is irrelevant to the content of the course. The disruption can be a powerful learning experience for our students.

◆ "The content in my class doesn't lend itself to incorporating diversity."

If your content lends itself to having students think critically, evaluate multiple perspectives, challenge assumptions, and create better ways of under-

standing the world, it lends itself to incorporating diversity. That does not mean we simply add, for example, three female Latino scientists to the content and call it a day. It means that we teach toward those higher levels of intellectual and ethical development that we want our students to achieve.

◆ "How can I make changes in my teaching and classroom when I don't see that anything is going wrong?"

It may be easier to see what we need to do in classes where diversity is front and center in content or student makeup, but that only means we have to be more intentional in looking for problems and opportunities in classes where they may be less visible. For example, we should

take a good look at the examples we use, at our course policies and the values they reflect, and at the ways students interact. It's easy for us to assume everything is OK if no one complains, so we need to make an added effort to watch. Are certain students always assigned the same role in groups? Are other students silent? And finally, consider getting feedback from students throughout the term rather than just at the end. If we show an interest in what they are thinking, there's a chance they will let us know about obstacles they are experiencing. But if we don't ask, chances are high that we'll never know.



THRIVING IN ACADEME

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of the National Education Association and the Professional and Organizational Development Network www.podnetwork.org in Higher Education. This section is intended to promote ever more effective teaching and learning in higher education through dialogue among colleagues. The opinions of this feature are solely the authors' and do not reflect the views of either organization. For more information contact the co-editors: Peter Felten (pfelten@elon.edu) or Kathryn Wymer (kwymmer@elon.edu) at Elon University, or Con Lehane (clehane@nea.org) at the NEA.

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