

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT: TEACHING DIVERSITY STILL MATTERS

This article represents how three teaching assistant view the concept of diversity. As students, these individuals encounter diversity and construct their own definitions as they train for the careers that they wish to pursue after completing their graduate degrees. As instructors, they also assist other students in understanding diversity, making sense of various elements of the concept, identifying perspectives and experiences that differ from their own, and preparing to use this knowledge as future educators and human services professionals. Recognizing that diversity has multiple definitions and perspectives, the viewpoints expressed by these three teaching assistants explains why diversity matters to both instructors and students.

Johnathan Flowers

Traditionally, the value of teaching diversity is assumed to lie in the way in which diversity education can improve students. Against this traditional perspective, I would like to present diversity education as having specific advantages for the educators charged with teaching diversity. Foremost, teaching diversity can enable an educator to understand the ways in which the concepts they intend to communicate to students are not made present in their pedagogy outside of their work within diversity classes.

This benefit of teaching diversity course work is predicated on the assumption that teaching courses on diversity, broadly construed, requires an educator to have a thorough-going understanding of the impact of diversity on the organization of society. In so far as institutions of education are subject to the same modes of social organization, the same social inequities faced in more specialized areas, the general knowledge of diversity that an educator gains in the

preparation of courses on diversity can equip them with the intellectual and pedagogical tools to diversify their work in other areas.

Put another way, one part of the value of teaching diversity for educators lies in the way the preparation, and implementation, of diversity course work enables educators to understand how our society is *not* diverse, and how that lack of diversity serves as an organizing principle which diversity is said to resist. In coming to understand the lack of diversity through the teaching of diversity, an educator can come to see the ways in which their own work does not reflect the diversity embodied in the material that they are communicating to their students. Teaching diversity coursework can thus provide educators with a conceptual mirror to analyze their own teaching outside their focused work on diversity.

Using diversity coursework as a conceptual mirror can also reveal the ways in which educators' own diversity work is itself not diverse. As part of developing diversity pedagogy, educators must determine which materials best communicate the concept of "diversity." However, the selection of materials requires an understanding of what diversity "looks like," in order to determine which materials can appropriately communicate the concept. This concept, or the development of the ability to define diversity, that comprises another part of the value of teaching diversity for educators: teaching diversity allows us to understand *how* we define diversity, and how we expect diversity to "appear."

If we are to take my experience as a case study, when I initially began to teach diversity centered education, I selected materials that reflected an understanding of diversity that was centered on race. More specifically, as my course focused on diversity in education, I centered my work on the measured disparities between racial groups within the education system and how those disparities were the end result of the same disparities in society at large. In so doing, I

appealed to an understanding of diversity that only limitedly engaged with the range of experience that make up the diversity of our society.

What can be gathered from my experience in developing my diversity coursework is the necessity to diversify my understanding of diversity: as educators, if we only understand diversity in the mode of race, as in my example, then we will have failed to actively engage the multiplicity of identities within our educational institutions. This, then, is one of the primary values of teaching diversity for educators: it enables an educator to engage with their own internalized understandings of diversity through the conscious effort of defining diversity through the structure of the course.

By understanding how they reproduce the ideological structures that generate systems of oppression through the way that they define diversity in their coursework, diversity educators can move to engage these structures in other places. The value in teaching a diversity course for an educator fundamentally lies in the way in which the practice of education holds up a mirror to that educator's pedagogical practices and the ways in which they reproduce the lack of diversity in other spaces. Further, the presence of the absence of some forms of diversity, indicated in the organization of a diversity course, can serve as a valuable insight to furthering the educator's own understanding of diversity.

That being said, an educator can expand this understanding beyond how they structure their coursework and into how the institution itself is structured. More specifically, this conceptual mirror can be applied to how diversity is confined within specific sections of an institutional structure. Put another way, diversity education can enable educators to engage in valuable critique of their departments and their institutions. This understanding can allow educators to make proactive change in their institutions.

For educators, understanding how diversity education is confined to particular sections of the curriculum, thereby preventing it from disrupting comfort zones, is essential to understanding *how* diversity works in the institution and in the educator's work. As an example, many of my students report that my course, Diversity in Education, is their first and only course that specifically addresses the structural inequalities within our social institutions and tensions between social groups in our society. The coursework for their primary area of study, they claim, does not engage with diversity within their discipline.

Using the conceptual mirror of diversity education, educators can make clear the problems within their institution where the institution engages with the lived experience of a diverse student body. By pointing out the ways that confining diversity education to specialized sections of the curriculum, as opposed to ensuring that diversity education is suffused throughout the institution, treats the experiences of diverse student as an "addition" to a course of study, an educator can argue for the transformation of their institution such that the experiences of all students are reflected in the curriculum.

Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to turn our attention to the effects of diversity education on marginalized students, specifically students of color. While diversity courses are slowly embracing a more inclusive definition of diversity that includes gender and sexuality, the primary way in which diversity is articulated in an educational context is through engagement with the lived experience of students of color. That being said, generally, diversity education is presumed to allow white students to understand the ways in which people of color are disadvantaged by historical inequalities made manifest in social barriers.

Despite this focus on educating white students, many students confirmed the value of diversity education in the mode of giving students them the language to articulate their

experience. That is, while the texts confirmed the lived experience of many students of color, the real value of the course for the students lay in providing the words to describe something that they had experienced throughout the course of their lives. Put simply, in contrast to the assertion that diversity education would enable students to become more “well rounded,” what students of color discovered in the course of diversity education was an enhanced ability to communicate their experiences of marginalization.

While this is important, in my view, the real value of diversity education for students of color comes in the form of recognizing the nuanced ways in which the experiences of other students of color are different yet still connected to an overarching structure of institutional oppression. In my experience, many students of color fail to recognize the way in which their understanding of the structures of oppression that condition their lives, and the lives of other people of color, are grounded in a particular understanding of those structures as rooted in the black experience of racism.

Diversity education, rightly focused, can disrupt the organization of students’ perceptions of race as organized along the relationship between Blackness and whiteness, thereby making clear to Black students the way in which the oppression of other students of color functions differently than their own. Understanding the oppression of others as a difference in the manifestation of the social structures that condition their own oppression, can aid in the construction relationships of solidarity in opposition to the structures that oppress them. That is, diversity education, for students of color and other marginalized students, can demonstrate that they are not alone in their struggles against oppressive ideologies and systems.

Thus, the value for diversity education for educators and students lies in the way in which diversity education can disrupt many of the understandings that we hold to be implicitly true

about the world and about what diversity “looks like.” Through the disruption of these implicit understandings, educators and students can come to recognize the diversity of experiences that comprise the world in which we all live. Further, diversity education can also provide educators and marginalized students with the language necessary to make clear their own inequality and engage in the hard work of transforming the world around them.

Jon Gorgosz

Why teaching diversity matters as an instructor?

Why does teaching diversity matter to me as an instructor? As an educator, I believe higher education performs a civic function that prepares students to interact within our diverse, pluralistic society. By teaching about diversity—the notion that individuals should embrace and celebrate the myriad of differences present within society and the individual—I believe that I am helping fulfill the University’s civic mission.

At its core, diversity recognizes and celebrates individual difference. Likewise, since the establishment of the Bill of Rights in 1789, the American political system has aimed to protect and enable the prospering of individual choice and difference—albeit often failing to live up this objective. The liberty of the individual is the fundamental source of the political experience in the United States. Teaching diversity allows me to prepare students to tolerate difference in society and fulfill the lofty aims of our Constitution. While focusing on diversity permits me to shed light on a number of prominent social issues, I find real worth from being able to develop in my students the importance of protecting and celebrating individual difference to help prepare them to participate in our diverse, pluralistic democracy—realizing the civic mission of the University.

Why teaching diversity matters as a student?

Students in my class often are ignorant of the connections between the diverse nature of American society and the inequitable outcomes present within the public sphere. While many are conscious of racial, gender and socioeconomic divisions in the United States, students do not consider how these differences manifest within public life. Instead, I often encounter an attitude that acknowledges difference but ignores the outcomes connected to it.

In my EDUC 211 course, I educate aspiring teachers about the importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity (difference) within an educational setting—and society at large. Many students are initially shocked by the inequalities present within the U.S. educational system. Teaching about diversity allows students to comprehend that education does not function as a *right* in the United States. While the majority of children receive a primary education, the opportunities afforded to them are not equitable. Many students become disheartened when learning about the realities of inequality in the United States; however, this realization leads to the understanding that differences generate inequitable outcomes.

Focusing on diversity allows students to move from a prescriptive recognition of difference (it exists) to a more concrete, descriptive understanding of how it functions in society. This awareness provides students the ability to understand the roots of inequality present in public life and promote a more inclusive society that recognizes and celebrates difference.

Sylvia Gray

Why teaching diversity matters as an instructor?

The following anecdotes are authentic moments of student commentary and curiosity from a Diversity in Education course at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale:

“I was always confused about why there were no "black kids" at my school growing up and why they lived on one side of town and I lived on the other. When I questioned this I was never given satisfactory answers...”

“How can I possibly include everyone? That’s not possible right?”

At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students to fill out an information sheet. It includes, but is not limited to, things such as their learning style, reason for taking the course, things they hope we will or will not discuss, an example of a powerful teaching experience that they connected with, and what subjects or age groups they hope to teach. My main reason for doing this is to simply connect with my students and get to know who they are. More specifically, I do this because I want my students to see that their own diversity and inclusion matters in my class. I see some of myself in each student I teach. Like my students, as a high schooler and college undergraduate, I often thought that diversity involved only big things like race, sex, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion. I did not consider that these big things include several other components, such as my hair texture, accent, language, abilities, or worldview.

In the geographical area where I teach, a little more than a third of my class is just now interacting with students of other races and ethnicities. The idea of inclusion is familiar in definition, but alien in practice. According to Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera (2014) “At a

national level, the typical white student is now in a school whose student composition is nearly three-fourths white, one-eighth Latino and one-twelfth black. That is, in a classroom of 30 students, the classmates of the typical white student would include 22 whites, 2 blacks, 4 Latinos, one Asian and one Other” (p. 12). The students in my course have an opportunity to discuss how such a statistic has influenced their education, interactions, and how they have come to develop their worldview. In addition, we go through exercises designed to place them in positions where they must consider their own diversity in conjunction with others and how they might use their privilege to advocate for the cease of another’s oppression. Thus, as an instructor, I am in a powerful, yet delicate position of modeling in practice what many students may have only be exposed to in theory. For instance, two separate students once made the following statements:

“I want to teach kids woodshop. What does diversity have to do with my future woodshop class? I mean I’m teaching guys, so I don’t get how this class will connect with that?”

“I don’t see how there is inequality in a rural school. Maybe there is some stereotyping I guess, but other than that, there is no inequality.”

The mutual construction of knowledge implies that “one considers multiple perspectives in dialogue and interaction with others, who are seen as equal partners in the process” (Gardner, 2009, p. 221). Both students in the above excerpts had an opportunity to engage in dialogue about their perspectives with others who identified with the seemingly excluded population. In doing so, these students gained exposure to the blind spots that shaped their initial beliefs. They are now able to consider multiple perspectives of diversity within this class and for their own future class of students who they would typically have not been aware. This is why teaching diversity matters.

While it can sometimes seem like a broad and abstract concept, students also believe that learning about diversity is of value. The level of importance will differ depending on the exposure that a student has and is willing to receive. I share below some comments from students who have taken this course at SIUC. Each student offers their own assessment of the value of the course to their development as a student or future teacher.

“Thank you again for such an amazing semester and for teaching me things about the world as well as in the classroom. I still talk about your class to this day and have recommended that people request to take it with you.”

~Sophomore Asian Female Student

“I enjoy your teaching style. It is making me realize I need to come out of my shell more. Not only am I experiencing a new learning style and experience, but you are helping me transition my mind to education and thinking like a teacher. I love that you make us think out of the box with your unique teaching abilities. This makes the classroom environment more enjoyable. I think this class will help me grow and mature. By moving around the class room and giving examples have already made me realize things about the classroom I had not thought about before.”

~Junior White Female Student

“I’ve never been asked for my opinion or to tell my thoughts on something.”

~Junior Black Female Student

“Just wanted to say how much I truly enjoyed your class. Not only did I learn so much about communicating better with others but also learned a lot about myself. Honestly, I feel like I needed this class in my life to better understand and make sense of things that I have questioned for as long as I can remember.”

~Junior White Female Student

“Thank you for such a wonderful learning experience, you've truly affected my thoughts on learning and teaching.”

~Junior White Male Student

Conclusion

Educators and practitioners on collegiate campuses employ the word diversity to describe a number of different ideas as well as initiatives. Often, the term becomes conflated and difficult to define due to its various meanings. This article illustrates how three teaching assistants define and understand the concept of diversity for students and as instructors. Each individual employs and comprehends diversity in a different manner, which exhibits its complex influence in the classroom and on campus. Diversity is a concept that transcends a single definition or outcome, demonstrating its importance within the modern curriculum.

References

- Bowman, N. A., & Brandenberger, J.W. (2012). Experiencing the unexpected: Toward a model of college diversity experiences and attitude change. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35(2), 179-205. doi:10.1353/rhe.2012.0016
- Bowman, N. A., & Denson, N. (2011). The integral role of emotion in interracial interactions and college student outcomes. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 4(4), 223-235.
- Cabrera, N. L. (2014). "But I'm oppressed too": White male college students framing racial emotions as facts and recreating racism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(6), 768-784. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2014.901574
- Castellanos, M., & Cole, D. (2015). Disentangling the impact of diversity courses: Examining the influence of diversity course content on students' civic engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(8), 794-811.
- Doucet, F., Grayman-Simpson, N., & Wertheim, S. S. (2013). Steps along the journey: Documenting undergraduate white women's transformative processes in a diversity course. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 6(4), 276-291. doi: 10.1037/a0034334
- Grant, K. S. L., & Lee, V. J. (2014). Teacher educators wrestling with issues of diversity in online courses. *Qualitative Report*, 19(6), 1-25. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss6/2>
- Gurin, P., Dey, E. L., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 330-336.
- Hughes, G. (2013). Racial justice, hegemony, and bias incidents in U.S. higher education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 15(3), 126-132.

- Hurtado, S., & DeAngelo, L. (2012). Linking diversity and civic-minded practices with student outcomes: New evidence from national surveys. *Liberal Education*, 98(2), 14-23.
http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp12/hurtado_deangelo.cfm
- Hurtado, S., Mayhew, M. J., & Engberg, M. E. (2012). Diversity courses and students' moral reasoning: A model of predispositions and change. *Journal of Moral Education*, 41(2), 201-224.
- Iverson, S. V. (2007). Camouflaging power and privilege: A critical race analysis of university diversity policies. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 586-611.
- Johnston, M. P. (2014). The concept of race on campus: Exploring the nature of college students' racial concepts. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55(3), 225-242.
- Kerby, S. (2012). 10 reasons why we need diversity on college campuses. *Center for American Progress* [Online]. Retrieved from
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/10/09/41004/10-reasons-why-we-need-diversity-on-college-campuses/>
- Littleford, L. N. (2013). Diversity in the undergraduate curriculum: Perspectives held by undergraduate students at predominantly European American university. *Teaching of Psychology*, 40(2), 111-117. doi: 10.1177/0098628312475030
- Lucas, D., & Frazier, B. (2014). The effects of a service-learning introductory diversity course on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward teaching diverse student populations. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 18(2), 91-124.
- Lyke, S. B. (2013). Diversity as commons. *Tulane Law Review*, 88(2), 317-367.
- Nelson Laird, T. F. (2011). Measuring the diversity inclusivity of college courses. *Research in Higher Education*, 52, 572-588.

- Nelson Laird, T. F., Engberg, M. E., & Hurtado, S. (2005, July/August). Modeling accentuation effects: Enrolling in a diversity course and the importance of social action engagement. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(4), 448-476.
- Palmer, B. (n.d.). The impact of diversity courses: Research from Pennsylvania State University. *Diversity Web* [Online]. Retrieved from, <http://www.diversityweb.org/digest/w00/research.html#top>.
- Parker, E. T., III, Barnhardt, C. L., Pascarella, E. T., & McCowin, J. A. (2016). The impact of diversity courses on college students' moral development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(4), 395-410.
- Zuniga, X., Williams, E. A., & Berger, J. B. (2005, November/December). Action-oriented dramatic outcomes: The impact of student involvement with campus diversity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6), 660-678.

Additional Resources

- American Council on Education & American Association of University Professors. (2000). Does diversity make a difference? Three research studies on diversity in college classrooms. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from, <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/97003B7B-055F-4318-B14A-5336321FB742/0/DIVREP.PDF>
- Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute. (2010). *Benefits and challenges of diversity in academic settings*. Madison, WI: The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Retrieved from, http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/docs/Benefits_Challenges.pdf

