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Diverse Student Groups: *Teaching with a Goal of Inclusivity*

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College and university classrooms comprise diverse learners with diverse needs. Too often, faculty members forget that such diversity exists, teaching in monolithic ways and failing to, or opting not to, vary their instruction in the classroom. According to Kuh *et al.*, (2005), “students flourish when their prior learning is valued and their preferred learning styles are recognized” (p. 285). Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of diverse student learners based on an examination of available research. Though there are many different aspects of student diversity, we focus on issues of race and ethnicity, class, gender and ability. In addition, we consider how teaching and learning strategies can be adapted to enhance the learning process for these students. In order to counteract the exclusion of particular groups from consideration in the classroom, research shows that students should be given ample opportunity to self-reflect and “interrogate assumptions and bias”—thus helping them feel included in the learning process (Mayhew and Fernandez, 2007, p. 58). In the words of higher education scholar and pioneer Arthur Chickering, “we need to learn how to recognize, respect, and respond to the wide-ranging individual differences among our diverse learners. If we do this—and it is a big if—then many more of our students will achieve learning that lasts” (2006, p. 11).

Diverse Learner Experiences

Issues of Race and Ethnicity

One of the hallmarks of Western higher education is competition, stemming from European academic traditions and supported by the Protestant ethic. However, for many students of colour and women, “co-operation rather than competition is highly valued” in academic endeavours (Morey, 2000, p. 32). In many non-Western cultures, working together towards a common goal is stressed, and collective efforts—as opposed to individual efforts—are emphasized. Notably, this approach can have an adverse impact in classrooms that are shaped by Western thought and an emphasis on individualism. For example, the notion of collectivism is much more important than individualism for Latino, American Indians and indigenous peoples, and Asian students, which has important learning implications (Castellanos and Jones, 2003; Lynch, 1997; Morey, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Latino

students foster strong ties to their immediate and extended families, and often rely on these relatives for support through the educational process. American Indian students tend to place similar emphasis on the importance of family; as Tatum (1997) describes: "as with Latinos (who often share Indian ancestry), extended family and kinship obligations are considered very important. Consequently, group needs are more important than individual needs" (p. 145). Many Asian cultures also stress collectivism over the American ideal of individualism (Pratt, 1991). Considering these points, students from these diverse racial and cultural backgrounds may excel in more collaborative learning environments and on assignments that emphasize group interaction (Tatum, 1997).

In recent years, researchers interested in the experiences of all students in college and university classrooms have also explored how "Whiteness" manifests in these settings. According to Maher and Tetrault (1997), "A necessary part of perceiving how the assumption of Whiteness shapes the construction of classroom knowledge is understanding its centrality to the academy's practices of intellectual domination, namely, the imposition of certain ways of constructing the world through the lenses of traditional disciplines" (p. 4). Often times, both faculty and students are unaware of the way Whiteness permeates classroom discussions. As a result, faculty members pursuing a *laissez-faire* model of classroom participation—for example, allowing a few outspoken students to dominate the classroom discussion—may become unwitting accomplices of White domination (Maher and Tetrault, 1997). Along these lines, faculty members sometimes display a lack of intellectual support for culturally-based research and discussion (Margolis and Romero, 1998). For instance, research papers that focus on minority issues may be considered "unworthy" by some White faculty (Pruitt and Isaac, 1985, p. 534). These phenomena leave many students of colour feeling ignored and in effect silenced.

According to Gasman *et al.*, (2004), students of colour often feel academically isolated in the classroom due to the lack of alignment between their viewpoints and those of their White professors. Moreover, according to Carter and Wilson's (1995) research, faculty members ask questions of "greater complexity and give more complete answers to mainstream (white) students than to students from underrepresented/minority groups" (p. 33). In addition, students of color often frequently feel discouraged from participating in class discussions if there are no other minority students in the classroom (Pruitt and Isaac, 1985). Research also shows that students of color tend to be viewed as the "token" representative of their race in classrooms with few minorities, which generates feelings of anger and frustration that may prevent these students from participating in group conversations (Jackson, 2003; Taylor and Antony, 2000). This sense of tokenization is not limited to peer stereotyping; faculty members often unwittingly hold expectations of students from certain racial backgrounds, such as Asian Americans, who are seen as the "model minority" (Chang and Kiang, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Furthermore, due to the "risky" nature of racial issues, faculty members may not feel comfortable addressing these concerns in the classroom (Gasman *et al.*, 2004). This, of course, is unfortunate as research shows that faculty members play the most critical role in facilitating learning and interaction for diverse learners (Mayhew and Fernandez, 2007).

According to the literature, students of colour frequently sense that their perspectives are not valued in the classroom. For example, Gasman *et al.*, (2008) found that Black students at a highly selective school of education felt that their voices were not fairly represented in course discussions, or expressed difficulty relating to conversations in the classroom. In addition, students in the study described their course readings and classroom environments as overwhelmingly Eurocentric. These findings are substantiated by other research related to Blacks and students of color in general (Cheatham and Phelps, 1995; Gasman *et al.*, 2004; Pruitt and Isaac, 1985).

Building on Gasman *et al.*'s (2008) findings, research shows that many faculty members and institutions have historically privileged Eurocentric knowledge on their syllabi and in the classroom. Due to the lack of inclusion of alternative racial and ethnic perspectives, this prevalent

Eurocentrism often creates an inhospitable environment for students of colour (Gasman *et al.*, 2004). For example, in their study of 26 female students of colour in a sociology program, Margolis and Romero (1998) noted that the academic experience “simultaneously reproduces gender, race, class, and other forms of inequality” (p. 2). According to the authors, there are two aspects of racism that occur in college curricula: 1) the “weak” form, which takes place in the specific courses required to complete the program and 2) the “strong” form, which systematically “acts to reproduce stratified and unequal social relations” (Margolis and Romero, 1998, p. 2). To illustrate this subtle discrimination, one participant in Gasman *et al.*'s (2008) study stated: “The same three or four Black authors are accessed in my experience (Audre Lourde, bell hooks, and Gloria Ladson-Billings). I've never been in a class where any Afrocentric literature is interrogated for usefulness. I guess the majority of Black people aren't qualified to intelligently discuss the state of black education and the needs of black children (hint: I'm being ironic and a little cynical here)”. The lack of racial representation on college and university syllabi not only limits students' exposure to diverse perspectives on important issues, but also creates frustration that could spill over into classroom discussions—which could consequently silence students of color or discourage them from playing an active role in the learning process.

Despite having ample research on what works well in terms of educating diverse learners, some classrooms continue to maintain a hidden curriculum or the “unstated but clearly enforced rules about knowledge and behaviours valued in the classroom” (Morey, 2000, p. 33). Through this hidden curriculum, faculty members often unknowingly propagate “an ideology, thought, and action that works to perpetuate power relationships, cultural hegemony, and political relationships”, that puts a damper on the progress of all students, especially diverse learners (*ibid.*). In turn, this can prevent students from developing thoughts and research that challenge the dominant social structure, which is an educational goal for many learners.

Issues of Gender

Although often ignored, gender shapes students' classroom experiences in several ways (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Severiens and ten Dam, 1994). For example, research shows that women tend to excel in classrooms that offer greater socio-emotional support, though they also perform well on independent research projects. Men, on the other hand, tend to work better in teams, yet they don't need the same kinds of emotional support as their female counterparts (Harrop *et al.*, 2007; Robson *et al.*, 2004; Sutton and Henry, 2005).

Frequently, issues of gender intersect with issues of race in college and university classrooms. In her study of Black women attending various institutions, Jackson (2003) found that participants struggled to be recognized for both elements of their identity, as faculty and administrators often focus on race and neglect gender. Women of colour need support in both arenas, and one strategy for doing so is creating curricula that contain more female and racial minority perspectives. This call for inclusive curricula is encouraged by several other authors (hooks, 1994; Schmitz *et al.*, 2001). Expanding on this intersection of race and gender, Sadker and Sadker (1992) found that “White male students are most likely to be involved in classroom discussions while under-represented/minority group students and white women tend to be quieter and to assume a less powerful role in discussions. When women do speak, they are more likely than men to be interrupted” (p. 33). Moreover, faculty members tend to maintain greater eye contact with White male students, and are more inclined to remember their names (Morey, 2000; Sadker and Sadker, 1994). Of greater concern is Sadker and Sadker's (1992) finding that faculty members allow more time for White male students to respond to questions, and give more positive reinforcement or praise for their responses.

Issues of Class

Much like race, ethnicity, and gender, class plays a significant role in the classroom and in the learning experiences of diverse students. Although class is often ignored or rendered invisible in discussions, it permeates the daily lives of students. According to Ohmann (2003), "To notice or make a fuss about class would, then, spoil the illusion; it would remind all that they came to a selective college in part to preserve or upgrade their class standing. It would call into question their individuality, uniqueness, and freedom. So they enact class without allowing its reality" (p. 11). While class is frequently unseen and unaddressed in the classroom, research studies and national surveys have consistently found a "correlation between academic achievement and socio-economic status" (Howard, 2001, p. 7). Conversations that assume all students belong to a specific class, or the dominant class, can be alienating. For instance, hooks (1994) describes how the perception that loud, passionate or emotional comments in the classroom are often "associated with being a member of the lower classes" (p. 178). As a result, "students are often silenced by means of their acceptance of class values that teach them to maintain order at all costs" (p. 178). Thus, much like the silencing of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds may feel that their opinions are not respected in classrooms that emphasize conventional middle- to upper-class values. In addition, belonging to a specific class and having it hold them back can make learning a frustrating experience.

Students from low-income backgrounds may also suffer in the classroom because they spend too many hours working part-time or full-time jobs. Most of these students are forced to hold down jobs to support their education, and find themselves torn between studying and being able to fund it (Walpole, 2003). The majority of students in Walpole's study were working up to 16 hours per week, and low-income students were less involved in the classroom and had underdeveloped study habits compared with their middle- and high-income counterparts. Due to time committed to working, these students are also less likely to participate in individual projects with faculty members or visit them outside of class—two activities that tend to lead to greater intensity of learning and participation in graduate school.

Compared with the issues of race and gender, class receives virtually no attention in the scholarly literature pertaining to college students (Karabel and Astin, 1975; Karen, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Trow, 1992; Walpole, 2003). However, there is considerable overlap between these different aspects of students' identities. As described by Castellanos and Jones (2003), for example, class plays a significant role in the educational experiences of Latina/o students. The authors cite numerous empirical studies showing that financial concerns, including time spent working, produced increased levels of stress for these students, which may inhibit their ability to complete readings and course assignments, and in turn, their involvement in class discussions.

Issues of Disability

Another group that has been enrolling in greater numbers in colleges and universities is students with disabilities. These disabilities range from speech impediments to hearing difficulties to health-related issues. However, according to Scott *et al.*, (2003), 41 percent of student disabilities pertain to learning. As the authors describe, "common accommodation procedures require that a student with a disability self-identify as having a disability to the class instructor within the first weeks of class, provide documentation to authorized campus disability professionals that verifies eligibility for accommodations, request specific accommodations based on the disability, and wait for adjustments to be implemented" (p. 40). Yet even when faculty members follow these procedures and accommodate students with disabilities, this may not be enough. All students need to be welcomed

into the classroom and the course discussions in meaningful ways. Often times, students with disabilities, especially those with hearing and speech conditions, report feeling ignored and overlooked in the classroom by both faculty and student peers (Barga, 1996; Holmes-Siedle, 1994; Kame'enui and Carnine, 1998; Scott *et al.*, 2003). Some students with disabilities fear being labeled as "deviants" by faculty and fellow students (Luna, 2002).

According to research conducted by Luna, students with disabilities consider their relationships with peers and professors to be essential for learning, and an important strategy for success. For example, one of the participants in Luna's study noted that she learned better and retained more when she had the opportunity to talk through course content with the professor or her classmates. Luna found that learning disabled students may also benefit from more time to think through concepts in the classroom. Several participants in her study noted that thinking is a visual process for them and takes "more time than the pace of most classroom discussion allows" (p. 600). Finally, Luna found that students with learning disabilities suffered greatly when asked to conform to standard test-taking rules, especially timed tests. These students left the exam feeling "stupid" and in many cases "stopped trying" once they experienced failure.

Based on this research, it is clear that students' classroom experiences vary according to their race, gender, class, and ability. Though some of these elements may be concealed, it is important for faculty to recognize and acknowledge that different learners have different academic needs based on the complex intersection of their identities. In addition to including all students' voices in the classroom, faculty should be cognizant of developing curricula that reflect the perspectives of students' diverse personalities. The next section offers practical suggestions on how to achieve these goals.

Approaches to Enhancing Learning in the Classroom

Instruction

According to Morey (2000), "the instructional component of a course can be made inclusive by incorporating teaching strategies and learning activities that provide opportunities for personal participation and growth, capitalize on student experiences, and learning strengths" (p. 31). Thus, in addition to becoming more cognizant of diverse learners and their individual needs, faculty should make efforts to use inclusive teaching methods. As described by hooks (1994), one way to be more egalitarian in the classroom is to move the discussion around the room, giving each student an opportunity to talk and contribute significantly. In addition, she, as well as Maher and Tetrault (1997), remind faculty members not to let white males dominate the classroom conversation. Sadker and Sadker (1992) also suggest being cognizant of answering everyone's questions, giving people equal time to speak, and not letting people interrupt, which seems to be a particular issue for women.

bell hooks (1994) advocates an "engaged pedagogy", one in which the faculty member uses a holistic approach and treats students "as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seeking after compartmentalized bits of knowledge" (p. 15). Building on this point, it is important for faculty to recognize that students have different learning styles, but also realize that their personal characteristics combine to create a unique whole. For this reason, faculty should refrain from addressing only one characteristic of students without acknowledging all of the other qualities that form their identities and influence their experience in the classroom. These issues are exacerbated for female students of color, students of color with disabilities, or any combination of the characteristics discussed above. According to Morey (2000), faculty members "send powerful messages about their valuing or devaluing of diversity by how they initiate and respond to student questions, comments, and behaviours" (p. 33). Thus, in delivering lectures or

conversing in the classroom, faculty should remember to address questions and concerns from all students without preferencing one particular group.

Classroom Environment

As suggested in the previous section, classroom dynamics are an important aspect of the learning process, particularly for diverse learners (Kitano, 1997; Morey, 2000). According to Luna (2002), diverse students often have difficulty in classrooms with rigidly defined hierarchical power relationships between students and professors, and feel that the hierarchy constrains their role in shaping and contributing to their own educational experiences. To combat this effect, Luna suggests that faculty members allow students to “participate in shaping academic contexts”, and develop “shared understandings of what counts as learning in the classroom and creative strategies for demonstrating that learning” (p. 603). Morey (2000) concurs, noting that in an inclusive classroom, “dynamics include the challenging of biased views and the sharing of diverse perspectives within an environment of mutual respect. Students are equal participants in the learning process” (p. 29). In addition, she asserts that faculty members in this type of classroom “share power within the limits of responsibility and reality”, and learn from students. They also use instructional approaches that center on the “experiences and knowledge that students bring and can include critical pedagogy and issues-oriented approaches” (Morey, 2002, p. 29).

Translating this research to practice, faculty members must be willing to negotiate their power status in order to create an inclusive classroom environment (Gasman *et al.*, 2004). One approach that faculty can use is to ask students to lead a class discussion, or perhaps ask students to prepare questions for a class discussion, in effect, letting them steer the direction of the class. According to Rong (2002), “Inviting students to participate in class planning, organizing class activities, and other related decision-making begins the process of student empowerment. Small group activities also give many nontraditional students or underrepresented groups voices that might be lost within the large group” (p. 135). She also notes that when power is shared: “Students tend to take a closer look at the materials selected for class, and they listen more thoughtfully because their own insights have been valued” (p. 135)

Curricula

While faculty members’ teaching strategies and classroom behaviors are overt indicators of their dedication to inclusivity, curricula and course syllabi should be equally reflective of this commitment. According to Morey (2000), an inclusive course that fosters student learning “covers traditional views and adds alternative perspectives” (p. 29). Thus, curricula and syllabi should incorporate readings, topics and authors that address issues of race, gender, class and ability (Gasman *et al.*, 2008; Jackson, 2003; Renn, 2000). In doing so, faculty not only emphasize the value of diverse perspectives in the classroom—which could effectively prevent the “silencing” of many underrepresented students—but also expose all learners to different types of material and viewpoints based on authors’ individual identities. These varying opinions may help students personally connect to the material, which could promote a more positive and engaged learning experience.

In considering how to develop more inclusive curricula and course syllabi, research suggests several different approaches that are modifiable, based on the needs of the faculty member as well as the structure of the academic department or institution. For instance, while many institutions support programs and courses on specific racial groups (i.e. Black Studies, Latino Studies, Asian Studies, and Native American and Indigenous Studies), other colleges and universities may prefer to address racial issues in the broader arena of Ethnic Studies, which can serve as a department or a

group of interrelated courses (Hu-DeHart, 2002). Along these lines, issues of gender may be addressed through a course on women's studies, or simply by incorporating gender and sexuality issues into existing courses on sociology, history, literature or writing (Renn, 2000; Schmitz *et al.*, 2001). For example, faculty should update current syllabi and curricula to include topics of race, gender, class and ability; adding a lecture (or multiple lectures), discussion questions and readings by diverse authors can send a clear message to students that the faculty member values diversity and supports the needs and opinions of all learners.

Assignments and Assessment

In addition to creating more inclusive curricula, Morey (2000) suggests that "an inclusive course utilizes different types of assessments for students to demonstrate their mastery over the content, and ensures consideration of individual differences in expressing knowledge" (p. 29). Thus, faculty members should use alternative assessment practices that "support knowledge acquisition on the part of all students" (p. 32). By including non-traditional or innovative assessments and assignments in their courses, faculty can incorporate the learning styles of more diverse students, and increase their sense of control over their work as well as their motivation (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006).

Based on her research, Luna (2002) asserts that diverse students may benefit from writing exercises that allow them to explore thoughts and ideas, rather than assignments that simply focus on the mechanics of writing. Diverse learners have particular difficulty when they are not given opportunities to "demonstrate strengths such as leadership, creativity, and hands-on problem solving" (p. 602). Faculty members should provide more open-ended assignments that allow diverse learners to explore topics that interest and engage them in a holistic learning experience. In addition, faculty members should permit unique and non-traditional methods that allow students of all backgrounds to draw upon their talents. For instance, students could be given the option to write a collaborative paper for a shared grade, which would speak to the learning styles of those from cultures that value collective efforts as described earlier (Tatum, 1997). Faculty members could also allow students to use non-traditional reporting methods, such as story-telling, lyric-writing or photography, which could also speak to students' diverse learning strategies based on race, culture, gender and ability. Mayhew and Fernandez (2007) found that diverse students who reflected on course materials examined these materials from multiple perspectives, and "applied this knowledge to analyzing societal problems consistently gained a better understanding of themselves and issues related to diversity, regardless of course content" (p. 75). Most importantly, faculty should support students' ideas for papers and projects. As mentioned earlier, studies have shown that diverse learners are often discouraged from pursuing research on controversial issues such as race and ethnicity (Margolis and Romero, 1998; Pruitt and Isaac, 1985). In doing so, faculty members not only deprive students of their voice in creating the project, but of the joy and pride in researching a topic of personal significance.

Conclusion

Students from diverse backgrounds—including, but certainly not limited to, race, gender, class and ability—enter the classroom with different needs and learning styles that faculty may unwittingly neglect. However, this is not to say that faculty members are completely at fault; in most cases, they do not receive training on how to embrace diverse learners in the classroom, nor are there outlets for discussing these issues (hooks, 1994). In the words of Adam Howard (2001), "the majority of faculty members have not had the necessary training to create teaching and learning environments

that respond to different levels of academic skill and knowledge, and to students as individuals" (p. 8). Faculty members need to make conscious efforts to recognize students' different needs in the classroom, and address them in non-discriminatory manners. This involves advancing our instruction techniques, classroom environments, curricula and assessments/assignments to be inclusive of all learners. By adopting these changes, faculty can integrate a "flexible, responsive pedagogy based on an educational discourse that values diversity [and] may help us accommodate a wide range of students' abilities" (Luna, 2002, p. 602). Consequently, faculty members can enhance the classroom learning experience for students of all backgrounds.

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