

*Review*

## Diversity and complexity in the classroom: valuing racial and cultural diversity

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Accepted 14 September, 2018

From a diversity perspective, all students should receive an education that continuously affirms human diversity – one that embraces the history and culture of all racial groups and that teaches people of colour to take change of their own destinies. With regards to teaching, a diversity perspective assumes that teachers will hold high expectations for all students and that they will challenge these students who are trapped in the cycle of poverty and despair to rise above it. Individual teachers in individual classrooms play an important role in providing equity of opportunity to learn and in ameliorating racism, but more comprehensive conceptions of diversity education capture the school's crucial role as well. This article wants to address diversity in the classroom and how racial and cultural diversity are valued and what can be done to improve it.

**Key words:** Diversity, learning styles, academic culture, collaborative learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Visions of educations for a multicultural society, strive for equity for opportunity to learn, largely through the conveyance of three policies: heterogeneous grouping, highly interactive instruction that appeals to a wide variety of learning styles, and inclusive curricula. This call for total reform strongly suggests that existing conceptions of education are inadequate for promoting multicultural equity. Unfortunately, these same conceptions have shaped the schooling of prospective teachers. Their education likely has been characterised by tracking (the process of assigning students to different groups, classes or programmes based on measure of intelligence, achievement or aptitude) traditional instruction that aspects to a narrow range of learning styles and curricula that exclude the contributions of woman and people of diverse cultures. Competition drives this model of schooling, in which students tend to be viewed as products coming off an assembly line.

Universities continue to attract a rich mix of racial and culturally diverse students. These groups have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education, and every effort should be made to help them complete univ-

ersity programmes. Many educators believe that such students are much more likely to succeed when allowed to learn math, science, or technology in small working groups. Especially at the start of a course, these students might learn more if they are allowed to choose their own working groups.

Multicultural education is as essential to teaching as nurturing is to human development. To be effective teachers, education students must understand and appreciate human diversity when preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms, emphasis should be placed on a broad education in the liberal arts an initial course in multicultural education, infusion of multiculturalism throughout the education curriculum, field experiences in a multicultural setting and assessment of the cultural competency of each student.

The classroom in many societies is a representation of people with different social class, gender, age, ability, ableness, sexuality, religious, racial, and/or ethnic backgrounds as well as different personalities. Many of these differences are reflected in the multiplicity of learning styles of students. The irony is that most classrooms tend to cater mainly to the learning style needs of a particular group. According to Ginsburg (2001a), "Most diversity instruction is geared for abstract sequential learning. We emphasise the development of analytical skills and focus most classes on theoretical and conceptual issues; we

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eagerly give “corrective feedback” and often inadvertently, encourage perfectionism; we rely more on lectures than group discussions and in our small groups we feature the cut and thrust of debate over the exchange of feelings and spiritual insights”.

The above observation of Jerry Ginsburg’s seems very true even in most pre-university classrooms in many societies. So far, because of lack of recognition and facilitation of differences in learning styles, diversity in the classroom frustrates many students and teachers. The result is that development of fruitful learning and teaching is stunted. If the classroom is to motivate students to learn effectively, efficiently, and with joy rather than pain, the differences in their learning styles should be taken into account in the design and delivery of courses. To succeed in facilitating productive diversification in the classroom, the main principles of productive diversity – full inclusion and accommodation – must be diligently applied to course content, materials, assessment criteria, and delivery. Since the practice of these diversity principles is tedious, teachers must be convinced of diversity benefits first.

When people find commonalities of honour diversity, it allows them to function together with another in different situations including classroom settings (McArthur -Blair, 1995), creating one of the foundations of inclusion. Thus, it is important to promote diversity in teaching and learning to create an inclusive community of critical independent learners. Addressing diversity can also help alleviate anxiety in courses with complex subject matter such as introductory statistics courses.

### **Perceived diversity**

When we speak of diversity in the classroom, we usually focus on the diversity of the students in the room. We often forget that the teacher also brings a range of diversity issues to the classroom. Every teacher brings his or her physical appearance and culture into the room at the same time as the students do. How teachers look, how they speak, how they act upon the opinions of the role of academics (and particularly of the class teachers teach), and the extent to which these differ from the physical, cultural and intellectual background of teachers; a teacher’s student will have a profound effect on the interactions in the classroom. Thus, teachers need to be aware of possible reactions among the students to teacher’s race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical attributes and abilities. Preparing for such reactions will involve not only knowing as much as you can about students, but also turning the mirror to yourself, and finding out more about your own diversity issues.

Teachers should be aware of the comfort level they have in discussion these topics before they enter the classroom. It is crucial to understand how teachers feel about these issues and what they say in a room where some might not understand their particular position. If di-

versity becomes a topic of discussion in the class, students will expect the teacher to be able to explain his or her own perspective. Try to have thought of a formulation that clarifies the teacher’s perspective, while leaving enough room for student’s perspectives in the discussion. Students who perceive the teacher as belonging to a particular racial or ethnic group and who then draw initial conclusions from that classification can affect the class atmosphere either negatively or positively from the first day.

The best way to minimise the likelihood that a teacher’s own perceived diversity will affect students behaviour is to establish a “safe” environment in which the class can discuss both the teacher’s and the student’s diversity. Such a safe atmosphere establishes the difference between a highly successful class, and one where both teacher and students fear one another, experiencing discomfort when it comes to discussing the “real” issues. This fear can be the fear of being labelled as an outsider, or the fear of offending someone and making him or her feel unwanted in the groups. Either way, fear is not a good basis on which to start any discussion.

### **Invisible diversity**

In addition to such visible differences as race, gender, and physical attributes, any teacher also brings invisible diversity to the classroom. Invisible diversity such as political opinion, sexual orientation, ethnicity when it is separate from distinct racial characteristics, teaching and learning styles, regionalism, class, family, history, and religion have more to do with an individual’s own self-perceptions and definitions than with others’ immediate perceptions. These internal perspectives influence how a person sees the world, and are a source of personal identity. All people are shaped by a complex mix of experiences, backgrounds, as their visible identity. Everyone in the classroom is struggling with the tension between group identity and the feeling of individual worth that transcends the group.

The assumption that diversity has only to do with the students in the classroom can make it hard for a teacher to recognise personal hidden assumptions. This may in turn hinder proper learning in class, as a teacher may unwittingly slant the choice of reading materials or the direction or form of class discussions. Of course, any choice of class materials presupposes an exclusion of other materials; any organisation of those materials into a coherent syllabus involves decisions about which elements to emphasise. These devices are necessary for structuring any class and most often benefit from the teacher’s perspective. As long as teachers are aware of their own presuppositions, however, they can avoid the kinds of slant in their class that can be harmful to student, or unnecessarily strain a teacher’s relationship with them.

The diversity in classrooms can serve as a catalyst for intellectual or emotional growth, both for teachers and for

students. Seen as an opportunity rather than as a handicap, the diversity of class can facilitate the kinds of change that a university education is designed to promote. A motivated teacher can challenge hidden assumptions in the classroom, and provide equal and fair access from students of all walks of life to his or her chosen field. As students graduate and begin work in their professions they may carry the enthusiasm and openness they have experienced in academia out into society.

### **Diversity issues and assumptions**

Instructors commonly assume that students share the same perspectives and full life experiences and will therefore learn about diversity on their own. However, students can easily misinterpret that honouring diversity is not essential for them to succeed either in the education or future career. Thus, to help individual students to succeed, instructors need to balance between holding high expectations for all the students regardless of who they are as well as use different techniques to teach each individual effectively (Bucher, 2000).

Main issues on diversity in the classroom are culture, age and gender. Another type of diversity is the difference in learning styles.

### **Cultural differences**

One student interviewee said, "My classmate who did not like me to compare between the Canadian society and my country, gave me mean comments when I did so. Most of my instructors neither acknowledge my cultural experiences and ideas nor allowed me to share my ideas freely." Instructors need to recognise that acknowledging the differences between cultures and letting students articulate their different experiences is important in making students feel part of the learning community. Quoting the student, "it will enable me to blend into their circle so we can learn from each other's cultures."

"Difficult to find a job with only homemaker skills", while the others wanted to "upgrade my qualifications so that I can work as a resident care assistant in hospitals." They are both mature students, there is an obvious age gap between them and fresh high school graduates. The two interviewees gave similar responses in their expectations of their instructors and fellow students.

Instructors need not give me special treatment, but consider me at the same time as the rest of the class and don't put me down. I would also prefer classmates to better understand and respect my reasons for returning to school."

### **Gender differences**

Various literatures assert the differences in learning context between males and females (especially mathematics

and science). Although rapid technological advancement might affect men to some extent, it is a hurdle for some woman. "I feel totally uncomfortable with high technology equipment like computers; I get nervous whenever I have to sit in front of the computer to type my essays," said a female student returning to school after 19 years as a homemaker. Instructors need to be aware of the gender context of previous learning that might become an obstacle in the current learning (Hartman, 2000).

### **Learning styles**

Both Kolb (1976) and Tobias (1990) have detailed discussions on different learning styles. However, many instructors do not take it into consideration the diversity of learning styles and their implications to the success of learning. I have previously discussed how instructor can get students to focus on the material by accommodating different learning styles, thereby helping students who are learning complex subjects such as statistics to feel less anxious (Chan, 2002). Formation of discussions groups and open-ended questions can be one of the ways to create a comfortable atmosphere where students can ask questions and think critically (Chan, 2002).

### **Teaching and learning styles: the academic culture**

#### **Learning styles**

In recent decades, studies have shown that students have varying learning styles, and that no single teaching style fulfils all students' needs. Learning styles have very little to do with the students' motivation or attitude toward the class or the material. Often, professors complain that some students do not apply themselves to their studies, and therefore do not learn well. However, it may be that the teacher has simply not yet addressed these students' particular needs in class, and that new approaches will reach the students more effectively. A student's learning style has to do with the way he or she processes the information in order to learn it and then apply it. Professor Richard Felder of North Carolina State University (Felder and Porter, 1994) has described some of these varied learning preferences.

Some students may be visual learners, and prefer to study graphs, look at models and pictures, and take notes to review later. Such students react well to extensive blackboards use, (especially drawings, models etc.) and handouts with appropriate illustrations.

Others are aural learners – they listen closely in class, often read out loud when studying or sub-vocalize during lectures in class, and find it helpful to confer with their peers in class to confirm information. These students work well in study groups where discussions of the material reinforce class discussions and lectures. They might also react well to tapes and films in class.

Verbal learners are likely to absorb reading materials and lectures more easily than other students. They seem to learn best from written materials, rather than from visual materials such as graphs and illustrations. Most university teachers are verbal learners, and thus find it easiest to relate to and teach such students.

Still others may be sensing learners. Such students may be tactile learners who favour subjects that allow them to work with their hands. These students learn best by handling the textures and shapes of objects as they apply their knowledge: they enjoy looking at and handling objects of interest to the topic, such as original documents, photos, magazines, natural objects etc. Or sensing learners may be kinaesthetic learners who learn and remember by moving around physically. Moving them into small groups or pairs for discussion, having them participate effectively in an experiment, or getting them to "act out" a debate by placing them on opposite sides of the room will help this type of student to remember the content of the discussion.

Both tactile and kinaesthetic learners prefer "real-life" connections to the topic, rather than theoretical approaches. They are "active learners" who learn best by physically doing things, rather than reflecting about them by themselves, and thus they react well to group work.

Inductive learners prefer to begin with experience or hard data, and infer the principles behind them. Deductive learners prefer to start with abstractions or principles, and enjoy deducing the consequences. Most classes are taught in a deductive manner. Not only because it is easier and less time-consuming to teach a class this way, but also because most often the teachers themselves are deductive learners. Deductive learners may often be reflective learners who prefer to think about the topic by themselves, or at most in pairs, and to work out the solutions. They do not react as well as others to group work.

These different learning styles explain why in most classes, the student evaluation shows that some students see group work as the most important part of their learning experience, while others from the same class complain that they dislike group work and find it unhelpful. Providing a variety of approaches to the material can keep most of the students engaged in the class throughout the semester.

Global learners seem more likely to see a project as a whole and have trouble breaking it down into its component parts. Teachers who expect them to start analysis from abstract concepts in order to reach a conclusion may find themselves as frustrated with the result of the students. Abstractions may be difficult for this type of learner, because they grasp information in large chunks and have a hard time analysing a topic from incomplete information. This type of student is excellent at synthesis, and by the end of a class may even outpace his or her peers in coming to appropriate conclusions quickly, but he or she often has trouble understanding material when

first faced with a variety of pieces of information that make an incomplete picture.

Sequential learners, on the other hand, are good at analysis of concepts because they learn linearly. When doing a project, they can take partial information and organise it into a logical order, and they can see what must be done first, next and last. They are patient with the fact that a typical class gives them information in a certain order, and that they must wait until the end of the semester to get the full picture the teacher is trying to present. Since most classes are organised sequentially, this type of learner excels in the typical college class.

No teachers can make all students happy all the time, partly because of the diversity of learning styles in any class, and partly because each person uses a particular mix of these learning styles discussed above. No student is 100% a global learner or 100% a tactile learner. Preference for one style or another may be strong, moderate, or balance. However, it is important to recognise that learning styles differ, and that your students may not learn well if you use only your style. In order to teach everyone most effectively, a teacher cannot consistently ignore a whole sector of the class simply because their learning styles do not correspond to the teacher's preferred teaching habits. To reach as many students as possible, the teacher must incorporate varying teaching techniques and strategies into the classroom. Lectures may be appropriate for verbal and aural learners, group work may be appropriate for kinaesthetic learners, but any teaching style to the exclusion of the others will also exclude those students who do not learn best by that style.

The existence of diversity in learning styles has serious pedagogical implications. However, many classrooms ignore the implications of diversity of learning styles. The result is the prevalence of a parochial approach to learning in the education system (Rogers, 2001) that homogenise the learning process of a diversity of students. This serves the interest of the status quo but kills initiative, innovation and creativity that are needed to produce productive workers and citizens. Students and society benefit from productive diversity in the classroom, and adapting pedagogy to different learning styles promotes productive diversity.

Although students have different learning styles, the conventional approach to learning presented to them in the school system makes them think that other pedagogies are either not right or are only useful outside the classroom. "Indeed, traditional schooling might have taught them [students] that...teachers are endowed with the information and their role is to listen, take notes and be ready to reproduce the notes in the examination" (James, 2001). Because of this privileging of the conventional learning/teaching style, students are likely to initially resist the introduction of other pedagogies. For example, in a class where I use a delivery system that involves small-group discussions on the selected topic to

identify problems with the text before I do a presentation on the topic, students initially complain that they expect to be lectured before group exercises. Many of the students come to like the approach later when they realise that it makes lecture presentations more meaningful. Introducing pedagogy that validates or legitimises the neglected learning styles in the classroom will initially be resisted but will eventually flourish when the benefits of such diversity become evident. The bigger challenge, however, is how to successfully design and deliver curricula relevant to the multiplicity of learning styles represented in the classroom.

From the literature (Anderson, 2001; Clarke, 2001; Ginsburg, 2001), it is clear that the main areas that require diversification are course content, material, assessment criteria, delivery, and accessibility.

### **Teaching techniques to address all learning styles**

Motivate learning as much as possible, relate the material being presented to what has come before and what is still to come in the same course; relate it to material in other courses, and particularly to the student's personal experience. Provide a balance of concrete information (facts, data, real or hypothetical experiments and their results (sensing) and abstract concepts (principles, theories, models). Balance materials that emphasize practical problem-solving methods (sensing/ active) with material that emphasizes fundamental understanding (intuitive/ reflective). Provide explicit illustrations of intuitive patterns (logical inference, pattern recognition, and generalisation) and sensing patterns (observation of surroundings, empirical experimentation, attention to detail). Encourage students to exercise both patterns. Do not expect either group to be able to exercise the other group's immediately. Follow the scientific method in presenting theoretical material: provide concrete examples of the phenomena the theory describes or predicts (sensing/ inductive); then develop the theory or formulate the model (intuitive/ inductive/ sequential); show how the theory or the model can be validated and deduce its consequences (deductive/ sequential); and present applications (sensing/ deductive/ sequential).

Use pictures, schematics, graphs and simple sketches liberally before, during and after the presentation of verbal material (sensing/ visual). Show films (sensing/ visual); provide demonstrations (sensing/ visual), hands-on if possible (active) (Felder, 1993). Use computer-assisted instruction when possible; students respond very well to it (sensing/ active). Do not use every minute of class time lecturing and writing on the board. Provide intervals, however brief, for students to think about what they have been told (reflective). Provide opportunities for students to do something active besides transcribing notes. Small-group brainstorming activities that take not more than 5 min are extremely effective for this purpose (active). Assigning some drill exercises to provide practice in the

basic methods being taught (sensing/ active/ sequential), but do not overdo them. Also provide some open-ended problems and exercises that call for analysis and synthesis (intuitive/ reflective/ global). Give students the option of cooperating on homework and class assignments to the greatest possible extent (active). Active learners generally learn best when they interact with others; if they are denied the opportunity to do so they are being deprived of their most effective learning tool. Applaud creative solutions, even incorrect ones (intuitive/ global). Talk to students about learning styles, both in advising and in classes. Students are reassured to find their academic difficulties may not all be due to personal inadequacies. Explaining to struggling students or active or global learners how they learn most effectively may be an important step in helping them reshape their learning experiences so that they can be successful (all types).

### **The academic culture and teaching styles**

As you saw in the previous section, students' learning styles vary, and a teacher might have a complex mixture in a single class. However, the average college teacher is much more likely to be sequential, verbal, deductive, and reflective than his or her students. Traditionally, teachers prefer to organise their class in a "logical" order during the semester, starting with simple premises and working up to a more complex view of the field in question. They use lectures and discussions as the primary means of transmitting information to the students, and classes are usually conducted in a deductive manner, with principles clearly laid out and the expectation that the students can draw consequences and come up with applications. Students are encouraged to work individually, and achievement is measured by their ability to produce "original" materials or answers. Instructors generally emphasise individual accomplishment, verbal assertiveness in class discussion and competition for grades among students instead of collaboration. As a matter of fact, the academic community often discourages or even punishes collaboration, because it fears a heightened potential for plagiarism and collaborative effort. Such a teaching method encourages learners who already share the teacher's learning style, but it slows down learners who must adapt to conditions of learning that do not come naturally to them.

Thus a dominant "academic culture" exists in college classrooms, which encourages sequential, verbal, deductive and reflective learners to progress quickly to advance positions in a field. This leaves behind equally intelligent and resourceful students who must wonder if there is a place for them to excel in the academic world. Therefore teachers must look at course content and material as well.

### **Course content and material**

Whenever possible, select text and reading whose language is gender-neutral and free of stereotypes. If the re-

ading teaches assign use only masculine pronouns or incorporate stereotypes, cite the date the material was written, point out these shortcomings in class, and give students an opportunity to discuss them.

Aim for an inclusive curriculum. Ideally, a curriculum should reflect the perspective and experiences of a pluralistic society. At a minimum, creating an inclusive curriculum involves using text and readings that reflect new scholarship and research about previously underrepresented groups, discussing the contributions made to your field by women or by various ethnic groups, examining the obstacles these pioneering contributors had to overcome, and describing how recent scholarship about gender, race, and class is modifying your field of study. This minimum, however, tends to place women, people of colour, and non-European or non-American cultures as “asides” or special topics. Instead, try to recast your course content, if possible, so that one group’s experience is not held up as the norm or the standard against which everyone else is defined. (Coleman et al., 1983)

So not assume that all students will recognise cultural literary or historical references familiar to you. As the diversity of the student and faculty population’s increase, you may find that you and your students have fewer shared cultural experiences, literary allusions, historical references, and metaphors and analogies. If a certain type of cultural literacy is prerequisite to completing your course successfully, consider administering a diagnostic pre-test on the first day of class to determine what students know.

Consider students’ needs when assigning evening or weekend work. Be prepared to make accommodation for students who feel uncomfortable working in labs or at computer stations during the evening because of safety concerns. Students who are parents, particularly those who are single parents, may also appreciate alternatives to evening lab work or weekend field trips, as will students who work part-time.

Bring in guest lecturers. As appropriate, teachers should broaden and enrich the course by asking faculty or off-campus professionals of different ethnic groups to make presentations to classes. Class discussions prepare students to take part in the class with confidence and that they feel comfortable to discuss diversity matters in class.

### **Class discussion**

Emphasise the importance of considering the approaches and viewpoints. One of the primary goals of education is to show students different points of view and encourage them to evaluate their own beliefs. Help students begin to appreciate the number of situations that can be understood only by comparing several interpretations, and help them appreciate how one’s premises, observations, and interpretations are influenced by social identity and background. For example, research conducted by the Institute

for the Study of Social Change (1991) shows that while students and African-American students tend to view the term racism differently. Many white students, for example, believe that being friendly is evidence of goodwill and lack of racism. Many African-American students, however, distinguish between prejudice (personal attitudes) and racism (organisational or institutional bias); for them, friendliness evidences a lack of prejudice but not necessarily a wholehearted opposition to racism.

Make it clear that you value all comments. Students need to feel free to voice an opinion and empowered to defend it. Try not to allow that own difference of opinion prevent communication and debate. Step in if some students seem to be ignoring the viewpoints of others. For example, if male students tend to ignore comments made by female students, reintroduce the overlooked comments into the discussion (Hall and Sandier, 1982).

Encourage all students to participate in class discussion. During the first weeks of the term, you can prevent any one group of the students from monopolising the discussion by your active solicitation of alternate viewpoints. Encourage students to listen to and value comments made from perspectives other than their own. Teachers may want to have students work in small groups early in the term so that all students can participate in non-threatening circumstances. This may make it easier for students to speak up in a larger setting. Large classes also make it difficult to come to a consensus where ground rules are concerned; students may lose patience with the teachers who try to include everyone’s opinion. Despite difficulties, it is important for teachers to try to deliver their lessons in a way that accounts for the class diversity and various learning styles.

Monitor own behaviour in responding to students. Research studies show that teachers tend to interact differently with men and women students (Hall and Sandier, 1982; Sadker and Sadker, 1990) and with students who are or whom the instructor perceives to be – high or low achievers (Green, 1989). More often than not, these patterns of behaviour are unconscious, but they can and do demoralise students, making them feel intellectually inadequate or alienated or unwelcome in the institution.

As a teacher teaches, then, try to be even-handed in the following matter: 1. Recognising students who raise their hands or volunteer to participate in class (avoid calling on or hearing from only males or only members of one ethnic group). 2. Listening attentively or responding directly to students’ comments and questions. 3. Addressing students by name (and with the correct pronunciation). 4. Prompting students to provide a fuller answer or an explanation. 5. Giving students time to answer a question before moving on. 6. Interrupting students or allowing them to be interrupted by their peers. 7. Crediting students’ comments during your summary. 8. Giving feedback and balancing criticism and praise. 9. Making eye contact. Also, refrain from making seemingly helpful offers that are based on stereotypes and are therefore

patronising. An example to avoid: an economics faculty member announced, "I know that women have trouble with numbers, so I'll be glad to give you extra help, Jane." Teachers might want to observe their teaching on videotape to see whether they are unintentionally sending different messages to different groups. Sadker and Sadker (1992) list questions to ask about your teaching to explore gender and ethnic differences in treatment of students (Hall and Sandier, 1982; Sadker and Sadker, 1990; Sadker and Sadker, 1992).

In order to promote a positive classroom atmosphere that allow students to feel comfortable to take risks and make mistakes and respect the different dimensions of diversity, it is necessary to have consensus on the classroom's ground rules (Andrzejewski, 1995).

Re-evaluating your pedagogical methods for teaching in a diverse setting. Observers note that in discussion class's professors tend to evaluate positively students who question assumptions, challenge points of view, speak out, and participate actively (Collett, 1990; Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991). Recognise, however, that some of the students were brought up to believe that challenging people who are in positions of authority is disrespectful or rude. Some students may be reluctant to ask questions or participate out of reinforcing stereotypes about their ignorance. The challenge for teaching a diverse student body is to be able to engage both verbally assertive students and those with other styles and expressions of learning. By setting ground rules, allowing discussion of different opinions, and empowering prior experiences, different type of learners can be accommodated. In addition, the amount of anxiety that students experience either in learning complex subjects or upon returning to school after many years can be reduced significantly.

Speak up promptly if a student makes a distasteful remark even jokingly. Don't let disparaging comments pass unnoticed. Explain why a comment is offensive or insensitive. Let your students know that racist, sexist, and other types of discriminatory remark are unacceptable in class. For example: "What you said made me feel uncomfortable. Although you didn't mean it, it could be interpreted as saying..."

Avoid singling out students as spokespersons. It is unfair to ask X student to speak for his or her entire race, culture, or nationality. To do so not only ignores the wide differences in viewpoints among members of any group but also reinforces the mistaken notion that every member of a minority group is an ad hoc authority on his or her group (Pemberton, 1988). An example to avoid: after lecturing on population genetics and theories of racial intelligence, a faculty member singled out an African-American student in the class to ask his reactions to the theories. Relatedly, do not assume that all students are familiar with their ancestors' language, traditions, culture, or history.

Teachers should also be sensitive to students when it

comes to assignments and examinations, especially to those whose first language is not English.

## **Assignments and examinations**

Be sensitive to students whose first language is not English. Most colleges require students who are non-native speakers of English to achieve oral and written competency by taking ESL courses. Ask ESL specialists on your campus for advice on how to grade papers and for information about typical patterns of errors related to your students' native language. For example, some languages do not have two-word verbs, and speakers of those languages may need extra help – and patience – as they try to master English idioms. Such students should not be penalised for misusing, say, take after, take in, take off, take on, take out, and take over.

Suggest that students form study teams that meet outside class. By arranging for times and rooms where groups can meet, teachers can encourage students to study together. Peer support is an important factor in student persistence in school (Pascarella, 1986), but students of colour are sometimes left out of informal networks and study groups that help other students succeed (Simpson, 1987). By studying together, students can both improve their academic performance and overcome some of the out-of-class segregation common on many campuses.

Assigning group and collaborative activities. Students report having had their best encounters and achieved their greatest understandings of diversity as "side effects" of naturally occurring meaningful educational or community service experience (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991). Consider increasing students' opportunities for group projects in which three to five students complete a specific task, for small group work during class, or for collaborative research efforts among two or three students to develop instructional materials or carry out a piece of a research style. Collaborative learning can be as simple as randomly grouping (by counting off) two or three students in a class to solve a particular problem or to answer a specific question.

Give assignments and exams that recognise students' diverse backgrounds and special interests. As appropriate to your field, teachers can develop paper topics or term projects that encourage students to explore the roles, status, contribution, and experiences of groups traditionally underrepresented in scholarly research studies or in academia (Jenkins et al., 1983). For example, a faculty member teaching a course on medical and health training offered students a variety of topics for their term papers, including one on alternative healing belief system. A faculty member in the social sciences gave the students an assignment asking them to compare female-only, male-only, and male-female work groups.

## **The academic culture and re-acculturation**

The terms academic culture and academic community are used to describe what students encounter when they come into the university. These terms are chosen because they are particularly apt for what happens in university classrooms. Students arriving on campus must, in a sense, learn a new language and new rules of conduct to fit in with the expectations of university professors and other students who have already had university experiences. (Bruffe, 1993) The university classroom has norms and values which may be foreign to first generation university goers, or to students from a culturally minority.

University classroom culture values verbal assertiveness in discussions, active participation on an individual level in class, and competition among students for marks of excellence. Teachers prefer a certain form of self expression or style of speech: it should be rational, logical, and derive consequences from general principles. Styles of speech and emphasising personal experience or emotion or using vernacular dialects are not encouraged, and may even count against students when it comes times to grade them. Certain classroom decorum is expected: students are expected to come to class dressed in what is conceived of as "an appropriate style" (such styles usually include ethnic or religious costumes). Students are to follow rules of conduct in discussion which underline the teacher's power to direct and control the class and they must make and maintain eye contact with the teacher as they contribute to the discussion. A mix of lecturing and the Socratic method of questioning students in class dominate teaching styles. Verbal learning is assumed and deductive logic remains the dominant format. The fact that students must master the complex "grammar" of the university classroom to make passing marks means that all students coming to the university must be re-accultured.

Re-acculturation is thus not only an issue for "minorities" but is also important for any student who is the first family member to arrive at the university. First generation university students are disadvantaged because the academic culture is not a tradition in their family history, nor have they encountered it among their friends. Other "minority" cultures simply underline the problem most clearly because they often do not have the academic culture in their backgrounds. In addition, many minority cultures may even value things that are antithetical to the academic culture. The university classroom experience may be doubly difficult for cultures that do not value individual success over group results, or that value modesty over individual assertiveness. In all three cases, direct eye contact, maintained for even a minimum of time, may be considerate highly impolite, especially toward such figures of respect as teachers. Asserting oneself in discussion may seem to them dangerously close to challenging the teacher and may imply that the teacher does not have the authority or the knowledge to conduct the class adequately. These groups often view standing out among

one's fellows in a competitive manner as damaging to the peer group. These students may view the Anglo emphasis on "leadership qualities" as destructive and self-serving, while their teachers may admire such qualities in such students.

The predominant academic teaching style at universities is thus really an unexamined culture stance that involves complicated rules of conduct and its own language. The cultural norm is often foisted onto students under the guise of academic standards. Of course, academic standards are important, and should be to any teacher. The point here is that any single teaching style to the exclusion of other does not necessarily ensure any standards. It simply means that teachers may be leaving behind certain students who could be learning "up to standard" expected. Students need collaborative learning as a tool for re-acculturation.

## **Collaborative learning as a tool for re-acculturation**

A culture is based on a social and linguistic community. Re-acculturation in the first years of a university education teaches students the kind of language and behaviours necessary to be successful in the university world and in many professional situations beyond. Students coming to the university for the first time, or even starting a new class each semester, must find their place in a new group in which they must become members. Learning the "language" of their new group and understanding its rules will enable them to perform adequately and provide them with a passport to other groups. Kenneth A. Bruffe in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge* (1993) suggest that this re-acculturation happens most quickly and successfully for students when they work together with the other members of the class, rather than concentrating on solitary work.

People in all fields make advances through collaborative learning, learning which happens through interdependent work with others. Literary critics, chemists, lawyers, historians or journalists, the knowledge these people have of their chosen field is socially constructed, and has been arrived at through conversations among peers. Advances in the science community, among historians, and among literary critics are announced through published papers which are then discussed publicly in journals and at conferences. Writing, another form of discussion or conversation, airs a certain theory which the community either accepts or rejects. Knowledge is constructed interdependently by people who talk together and reach a consensus.

Since such a "conversation among peers" is necessary for establishing criteria and learning new facts in every arena of human learning, Bruffe (1993) suggests that the most effective way to learn-and thus to teach-is to incorporate collaborative strategies into the university classroom. In addition to the traditional lecture, structured sm-



small group discussions can be very useful to expose students from all learning styles and backgrounds to a new discipline. The teacher can divide classes into smaller groups who must each work toward a consensus on a specific problem. Then the teacher can conduct a whole-class discussion of the groups' results, with an eye toward create class consensus, but also taking into account those places where groups could not reach a consensus. The classroom strategy teaches the kinds of activities and skills that students will later need to use in their chosen fields.

Creating a classroom where students participate actively in such questions not only trains students for their future careers, but also make them learn the current material more solidly because it engages them more completely and it teaches them about negotiating within a diverse community. When the teacher attaches the actual class topic and material to the success of the class as a community, he or she puts each student in the position of establishing an important role for him or himself in that community and it gives each student responsibility for the success of the class.

Small group activities release the students from the fear of speaking out in front of an entire class, or of being directly judged by the teacher all the time, while putting them in the limelight in a smaller setting, where participation counts even more because there are fewer people involved. Engaging students actively makes it possible for them to learn the rules (and thereby join a new community of knowledge) because they have to use those rules to solve the problems given in the class. Such exercises encourage students to think independently at the same time as they work interdependently in an academic field. In a small group, students must find a way to balance their earlier knowledge of the world with the new rules they are learning. They must also deal with their peers' preconceptions and prejudice that stem from their own particular experience and background. In group discussion, those peers become real to them in ways they cannot during a lecture where the teacher is the focus of attention. Active participation in a group work forces face-to-face encounters that do not allow for abstract preconceptions about other class members.

### **Tactics for overcoming stereotypes and biases**

Become more informed about the history and culture of groups other than your own. Avoid offending out of ignorance. Strive for some measure of "cultural competence" (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991): know what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and speech in cultures different from your own. Broder and Chism (1992) provide a reading list, organised by ethnic groups, on multicultural teaching in colleges and universities. Beyond professional books and articles, read fiction or non-fiction works by authors from different ethnic groups. Attend lectures, take courses, or team teach with

specialists in Ethnic Studies or Women's Studies. Sponsor mono-or multicultural student organisations. Attend campus wide activities celebrating diversity or events important to various ethnic and cultural groups. If you are unfamiliar with your own culture, you may want to learn more about its history as well.

Convey the same level of respect and confidence in the abilities of all your students. Research studies show that many instructors unconsciously base their expectation of student performance on such factors as gender, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, prior achievement, and appearance (Green, 1989). Research has also shown that an instructor's expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies: students who sense that more is expected of them tend to outperform students who believe that less is expected of them regardless of the students' actual abilities (Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988). Tell all students that it is expected to work hard in class and that high standards for their academic achievement are hold. And then practice what you have said: expect your students to work hard, be challenged, and achieve high standards (Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988).

Don't try to "protect" any group of students. Don't refrain from criticising the performance of individual students in class on account of their ethnicity or gender. If teachers attempt to favour or protect a given group of students by demanding less of them, they are likely to produce the opposite effect: such treatment undermines students' self-esteem and their view of their abilities and competence (Hall and Sandier, 1982). For example, one faculty member mistakenly believed she was being considerate to the students of colour in her class by giving them extra time to complete assignments. She failed to realise that this action would cause hurt feelings on all sides: the students she was hoping to help felt patronised and the rest of the class resented the preferential treatment.

Be even-handed in how you acknowledge students' good work. Let students know that their work is meritorious and praise their accomplishments. Be sure to recognise the achievements of all students.

### **Conclusion**

Various diversity issues come to mind as soon as you enter a classroom: the visible ones of gender, race, age, ethnicity, and physical abilities will, of course, receive the most immediate attention. Unseen diversity issues also have a great impact on classroom atmosphere, however these include: political orientation, sexual orientation, ethnicity if not related to distinct racial characteristics or dress style, teaching and learning styles, regionalism, class, family history, and religion.

From the above discussions on attempts to create and implement diversity pedagogy to reflect the variety of learning styles of students, it is clear that the process is

complex and tedious. However, it is worthwhile pursuing it because it enhances student success by providing students from various backgrounds with voices in the classroom, encouraging student-teacher and student-dialogue, and helping all students to identify with the learning process in the classroom. Not surprisingly, hardly do students fail or perform poorly in my courses in which diversity is conscientiously practiced. An important thing that I have learned from the classroom diversity efforts is that to be successful, one has to possess both diversity competency (Cox and Beale, 1997) and human factor competency (Adu-Febiri, 2001), apart from motivation. Diversity competency is the ability to use awareness of differences, knowledge and understanding of differences, and facilitation skills to leverage differences to benefit people and organisations. Teachers need this competency in addition to the human factor competencies of commitment, dedication, loving-kindness, acceptance, persistence, responsibility and accountability to affectively facilitate productive diversity in the classroom. The school system should provide teachers with the adequate incentives and support to acquire and apply the necessary competence to make classroom diversity work.

Diversity in learning styles exist in the classroom, and if not well facilitated frustrates both learners and teachers. Despite most situations most classrooms continue to experience monolithic approaches to learning. It takes a lot of work to facilitate productive diversity in the classroom, but it is doable and is worth the effort. Diversity works in the classroom, and it works well when teachers value full inclusion, are motivated, supported, and provided with the necessary competence. The growing diversity in the classroom represents learning style differences, and provides opportunity for the teacher to substantially continue to developing productive labour force and citizens.

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