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Teaching Tips: Infusing Diversity into the College/University Curriculum

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One of the results of the significant demographic changes taking place in the U.S.A. as well as this nation's continuous pursuit toward equity, equality, and social justice is the demand to diversify and expand the academic canon. This has become a long and arduous process as each new voice seeks to define and locate its place within the "traditional" curriculum. Over the last thirty years, African American and women's scholarship have fought to establish their voices within the canon. Their success has encouraged other silenced groups like Latino/as, gays, lesbians, and Native Americans to secure their place in the academy as well. While this process is necessary for micro inclusion, accreditation boards, like NCATE, and state and federal legislators are also holding academia accountable for the macro inclusion of diversity throughout the curriculum. As a result, many schools are struggling with this task. In this article I will discuss some of the obstacles colleges/universities must overcome to achieve this goal.

The Role of Culture

Without a doubt the role of culture in diversifying the curriculum is one of our greatest academic challenges. Far too many professors have reduced diversity to "food, music, and festivals" (Karenga 1999); therefore if their classes are outside the humanities or education the relevance of including diversity escapes them. This is especially true in math, technology, and the hard sciences. Their mantra across the nation is "we don't teach culture." My retort for twenty-five years has been, if you do not know you are teaching culture, you are teaching culture by default. The question then becomes, what is the default culture you are teaching? For many educators in this country it is some form of EuroAmericancentrism, which implies in many cases approaches that are hegemonic. Default cultures in the U.S.A. also tend to favor modern, democratic, capitalist, male, and Christian ideas as being superior to those cultures with different philosophies and practices, including the cultures of traditionally underrepresented groups in this country.

In order to better understand culture we must develop a comprehensive understanding of what it is. There are many definitions of culture; for example, John Barrett (1984) defines culture as "the body of learned beliefs, traditions, and guides for behavior that are shared among members of any human society" (54). Etta Hollins (1997) states that in relationship to school learning,

“culture can be defined as those values and practices that shape the content, process, and structure of initial and subsequent intellectual, emotional and social development among members of a particular group. Culture provides the conditions under which human growth and development most naturally occur. School learning is most efficient and productive when it is borne of the cultural value and practices of the learners” (74).

Kushner (2003) suggests that most of culture is hidden to the everyday person. He likens this to an iceberg where only a small portion of the top is visible above water, while a massive structure lurks invisible just below the surface. Whether visible or invisible, culture shapes beliefs and behavior and provides the context in which we view the world. It colors everything we do, including what we teach and how we teach it.

Cultural Approaches

There are a variety of cultural approaches an instructor can take to insure his or her course is meeting a fundamental level of diversity. The basic ones are contextual, i.e., historical, geographic, political, economic, and religious. On a more personal level ethnicity/race, gender, age, and ability all become cultural filters from which we teach. Recognizing the cultural values we favor when approaching a subject can help us acknowledge and, and with our students, consider, not just our own, but also alternative cultural values and perspectives.

History

All courses are presented from a historical perspective. Teaching from a futuristic, contemporary, recent or distant past perspective shapes how the materials are presented and interpreted. Historical context is always important because it frames the subjects involved. For example, a course on the causes of the Civil War must include the role of slavery, women’s suffrage, the economies of the North and South, and a myriad other issues.

Geography

Like history, the geographic setting of the course material is crucial. If the course involves research related to a particular group, homeless people in Los Angeles, for instance, the setting used for the observations as well as the settings in which the researchers grew up will have an impact on the phenomena being observed. The propriospect of each subject involved changes the interaction and, therefore, the results of the observation. That the investigators of the homeless come from upper- class families who attended private prep schools before studying at Stanford, Cal Berkeley or UCLA will color the research.

Political

All human events take place within the political context in which they unfold. In our republic the party in power can effect what is researched as well as what is taught. NCLB legislation is an excellent example that has ramifications throughout the educational sphere. The culture of politics is often neglected in courses, yet that context is critical to a full understanding of the issues being raised and explored. Who is in power makes a difference whether it is matters of civil rights, art criticism, or scientific discovery.

Economics

Macro and micro economics shape almost every aspect of the human experience. This is especially true in a socially stratified system like our own. What class one is born into has

powerful predictive consequences for one's future, influencing everything from the quality of one's health care, education, and neighborhood to one's life span. To accurately understand the human condition, educators need to understand the economic circumstances that affect that condition.

Religion

This country espouses a belief in the separation of church and state, although there are many contradictions of this principle. Issues like school prayer, abortion, and gay marriage challenge the very foundations of this nation. The country's strong Christian worldview often conflicts with our ability to understand the religious or non-religious views of individuals as well as nations and regions of the world that do not share a Christian perspective. Students need to know the religious context in which our course materials and lectures are being presented.

The Classroom Perspective

Professors need to know how their courses are perceived by the students, counselors, and significant players in their departments and colleges. Some courses have the reputation as being "gateway" classes that either open up opportunities to continue in a major or require students to change majors. This is especially significant when a course has a campus history of deciding the fates of minorities and women, especially in areas like math, business, or science. It is amazing how many students end up as communication majors because they could not get through the gateway or "weed-out" courses.

I have actually met professors who pride themselves on being gatekeepers for specific core sequences. One professor, who had been teaching for twenty-five years, told me he had yet to teach an African American student with the requisite skills to major in his field of psychology. As incredible as that may seem, most colleges and universities have one or more of these gatekeepers in their midst. How much is a failure to acknowledge diverse cultural perspectives and values responsible for such arrogance and for such unacknowledged failure? Unsound pedagogical practices can limit the learning opportunities of certain students whether by premeditation or ignorance. This is just as much an issue of diversity as any other cultural factor. Universities have a solemn commitment to the students they admit to do everything within their power to enable students to achieve their educational goals. All courses should be periodically reviewed to ascertain how students perform by race/ ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and social class. If a disproportionate number of d's, f's, and w's are found within and of the above categories, pedagogical strategies must be examined to identify possible obstacles to student success.

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