

(IN)VISIBILITY: TEACHING DIVERSITY ON AN “HOMOGENEOUS” CAMPUS

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Living and teaching at a predominantly white college with a predominantly white faculty in a predominantly white city, the task of teaching about diversity begins with a question of “why”: why is diversity important? Staring back at us on the first day of our classes are groups of people who generally look homogeneous; students looking around our classrooms see others, including their teachers, who look “just like” them. Although as instructors we are aware that diversity is present, because students often conflate diversity with race, and see the faces that surround them mirror their own, many students find no need to talk about diversity because it appears to be absent. In this situation, when we teachers invoke “diversity,” students react as if we somehow are *creating* a problem. Diversity as a concept has become oversimplified and strictly “academic.” Consequently, we turn to the underlying problem: students’ complacency in the face of the diversity that is present, albeit invisible and often marginalized, that is, sexual orientation.

To further complicate matters, students’ early anti-racist education has programmed them with a mantra that, because we are all human, if difference does exist, it doesn’t matter. As a result, we often hear “I don’t see color” or “Women can do anything men can do.” Many elements of identity are erased by this assimilative tactic—gender, sexual orientation, age, class, experience, even ultimately race itself. What diversity there is in the classroom is collapsed under the pressure of the dominant culture belief that one must ignore difference in order to combat racism. In addition, students whose diversity is more marginalized remain hidden due to perceived, and too often real, intolerance toward that “type” of diversity. This intolerance, based on the deepest held religious and cultural beliefs and perpetuated in traditional family and educational structures, can be the most subtle threat to achieving educational equity. For example, dominant culture, heterosexual students feel free to release their most homophobic thoughts because they are in a classroom of like-looking (and therefore like-minded) individuals; they might even be proud of their heterosexism, wielding it as a badge of honor that marks them as

morally superior. Although most students of color on our campus are relatively assured that they won't be blatantly attacked in our classrooms, such assurance is not available to students whose diversity is more invisible. As Hoffman, Bakken, and Stone contend, "due to homophobia, students who are struggling with their sexual orientation may not be able to learn while they are attending class; rather, these students must learn how to survive" (2001, 76).

Furthermore, lesbian and gay students often have internalized cultural homophobia, turning their own diversity into a source of pain and contributing to their need to cloak their identities. The more adept these students are at manipulating what W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) calls "double-consciousness," the more adept they are at blending in and playing the dominant culture game, the more culturally invisible they become. The more invisible they become, the more difficult is our task of disrupting simplistic notions of diversity. As these problems compound, the task of teaching students about the diversity that surrounds us becomes even more difficult. Although for this examination we've narrowed our focus to addressing sexual orientation, this aspect of diversity is merely one face of the larger issue of oppression in our world. While the multi-layered, complex nature of oppression makes it "virtually impossible to view one oppression . . . in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism" (Pharr 1988, 53), attempting a more limited scope does allow for an easier entrance into the murky issues surrounding the teaching of diversity. Learning communities, because of their unique structure, offer an ideal environment for deconstructing narrower notions of diversity and creating a more inclusive definition, one that accounts for the complexity of diversity present even in an all-white classroom.

Because so much of the learning that takes place in a learning community is dependent on community, instructors and students must take time to establish and nurture it. This emphasis eventually translates into a classroom where students and teachers are secure enough to confront hard issues. Like bell hooks (1994), we believe that teaching requires a "transformative space" that often is not safe, but we must begin by establishing a level of comfort from which students may venture. Whereas in a stand-alone class we might spend an hour or two throughout the quarter fostering relationships, in a learning community this fostering becomes a focus. In the first week of our learning community pairing American literature with three levels of composition, we begin like many instructors with an opening day

icebreaker in which each student must learn surprising facts about his or her peers that separate each student from the others in the class. An example we will always remember is our student of several years ago, Steve, who was run over by a golf cart. Although most of the facts reported are silly and humorous, what does emerge is a sense that despite our homogeneous appearance, the forty-seven people in the class are unique. The fact may seem obvious but, when highlighted, it begins to quietly disrupt “sameness,” the notion that sustains an invisibility ultimately dangerous to lesbian and gay students. As Connie Chan points out, “The greatest obstacle to combating heterosexism is the invisibility of lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues [and] individuals . . . on campuses” (1996, 27). While such an exercise in establishing difference does little to bring gay issues to the forefront specifically, it does allow difference to take center stage in the classroom.

Lest these differences, small though they may be, drive a budding community into individual isolation, after finding out several unique facts about each student, we ask students to get together in groups of four or five people whom they did not know before the class began, and discover a quality or characteristic that binds the members of this small group together yet distinguishes the group from the rest of the class. Having accomplished this, they name their group “We Who _____,” filling in the blank with their group’s identity. For instance, one group chose the name “We Who Eat Pizza with Forks,” while another chose the name “We Who Have Never Been to the Ocean.” Once their group identity is established, each group and its members are introduced to the class, explaining the significance of its name and how they came to find it. This juxtaposition of finding difference and similarity within our own learning community serves as a microcosm of the diversity work we will continue throughout the quarter. The next day, we establish two other types of quarterlong groups: seminar and book club. From their first meetings with each group, students must work together to accomplish a given task, be it brainstorming discussion expectations in seminar or planning a reading schedule in book club, thus establishing the foundation for communal learning intrinsic to the course.

Each type of group—named, seminar, and book—is made up of different students. Each student belongs to three distinct groups with three different sets of students, and each group has ongoing opportunities to bond over the course of the quarter. Beyond the many learning opportunities such bonds create, the simple opportunity to develop sustained relationships with many people throughout the

quarter promotes “the identification of similarities in values and beliefs [and] also enhances mutual understanding and liking. Since these factors are not compatible with hostility, their presence produces a decrease in prejudice” (Lance 2002, 414), a valuable goal in itself. In our paired class, then, in the first week alone, we spend six to eight hours establishing community, in contrast to two hours over the course of the entire quarter in our stand-alone classes. Additionally, students feel a part of several micro-communities, each of which is designed to both challenge and support them. Most important, from the first day of class, students are forced to confront their assumptions that a safe space is based on sameness, and that if someone looks like them, they must believe like them. From the first day of class, establishing community becomes about confronting the assumptions upon which the equation of safety to sameness is based. Because of the varying characteristics of their groups and the unique make-up of each, each space can be “safe” in different ways.

Once we have begun to establish a community that disrupts the simplistic thinking that visual homogeneity equals hegemony, the next hurdle comes with a tendency to “tokenize” the diversity that is now becoming apparent. Again, learning communities provide the perfect forum for combating this tendency. In an ideal learning community, each student becomes irreplaceable, an integral part of the learning process. To borrow Jim Harnish’s instructions to his seminar students, the learning community “should be a better place because you were there.” The value placed on the individual student has two effects. In the first, each student, and whatever diversity he or she brings to the table, feels a valuable part of the community. In the second, each individual is *individualized*, so that his or her knowledge is not artificially forced to represent the attitudes of entire groups of people. Because students spend so much time getting to know each other, each student becomes more fully human and less a compendium of characteristics, which mitigates the tendency to require a particular student to speak for an entire group.

An examination of a seminar discussion demonstrates this “anti-tokenizing” force of community. Early in the quarter, during a seminar in which Adrienne Rich’s poetry was being examined, students were intrigued by the relationship between Rich’s biography and her writing. In fact, her lesbianism became the overriding issue in seminar, subsuming not only her writing but all other aspects of her identity as well, perhaps due to the students’ lack of exposure to issues of sexual diversity. Although some students tried to steer the conversation back

to Rich's poetry, the seminar kept circling back to Rich's sexual orientation. Throughout the seminar, several students turned and addressed Katy, an out lesbian, specifically, asking, "Why would lesbians get married in the first place?" and "Why do lesbians hate men?" Understandably frustrated, Katy snapped back, "Lesbians don't hate men." Her seminar mate then replied, "You don't have to be so sensitive." Even though the experience was uncomfortable for Katy (and others as well), during seminar debriefing the next day, Katy volunteered what it felt like when she was asked to speak for all lesbians. She recognized that no malice was intended on the part of her seminar companions; they simply had not thought about what it was they were doing.

Katy's ability to speak about being forced into the role of "the token lesbian" allowed others in our class to see how being placed in such a position unfairly truncated Katy's own voice and inappropriately forced her to counter the negative stereotypes aired. Through discussion, students came to see Katy's double-bind: if she spoke up, she tokenized herself by speaking on behalf of "her people"; if she didn't speak, she allowed the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Because she functions on the margins of dominance, Katy was well aware of the political ramifications of voice whereas the dominant culture students in the class, having the luxury of a perceived hegemony, had never *needed* to be aware of the politics of discourse. As David Wallace reminds us:

[T]he problem for many people who have no experience in speaking/reading/acting as 'others' is that the performative nature of discourse is not readily visible. Because their experiences with discourse have not consistently placed them in positions in which they need to speak back to cultural values that define them in problematic ways, they have difficulty understanding why others must do so. Thus, for many people, the ideologies of culture and discourse appear neutral and their sense of agency as relatively unencumbered. (2002, 53)

In a learning community, then, through individualized contact, students begin to recognize the "ideologies of culture" and deconstruct their neutrality; they begin to see why others must speak for themselves but not for entire classes of people. Through building community, students begin to break down the tendency toward false representation and see each other as complex individuals, characterized by difference but not limited to it. Students become better equipped to deconstruct

preconceptions and reconstruct more complex ideas, both with their peers and on their own, regarding a multitude of topics, diversity being just one of them.

This safe space forms a foundation to both learning communities and to the teaching of diversity—particularly when addressing homophobia and heterosexism—that enables students to generate knowledge both communally and individually. Because learning communities deliberately move the teachers from the center of the classroom, knowledge becomes more of a shared phenomenon, as all participants become more aware of the social process of knowledge creation. Learning community students must become more participatory. They must construct and deconstruct knowledge in an authentically recursive process. Rather than *delivered* as in a traditional classroom, knowledge is *arrived at*. So, to return to the example of Katy, students weren't handed a definition of tokenization from on high and told it was "bad"; rather, as a class they experienced the phenomenon and learned in a more authentic (and risky) manner. Rather than listening to a teacher talk about tokenization and then preparing to regurgitate that information for a test, knowledge tied to actual experience transformed them (Kitano 1997). Additionally, because that knowledge is self- and peer-generated, it reduces the threat factor that occurs when fundamental belief structures are challenged. Students don't have to retreat because they aren't being attacked from the outside. Finally, because students share in the generation of new knowledge, they share more responsibility for its development and internalization. As such, it carries more weight. It is more authentic, more applicable to their own lives, more real to them.

The function of this self-generated knowledge emerges as well through an examination of student book clubs, a "faculty-free" space designed to allow students to take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of their peers, thus empowering students to find their own voices. In our American literature paired with composition class, for instance, students selected novels to be read in small groups from a list that included books by an Indian American woman, an African American lesbian, a Native American woman, a working class European American man, as well as a middle-class European American male academic. Our goal was to introduce students to voices reflecting a range of social identities and to their own voices as writers, to explore what it means to be an American.

Despite these opportunities for students to select from a range of writers, and despite our prompting that they choose something not in

their “comfort zone,” the two reading groups focusing on books by white males filled first; the books expressing diversity in its traditional form, race, filling next; and the book dealing with the diversity that might actually *be* in their classroom—sexual orientation—filling last. The students who were ultimately placed in the group reading *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde, were a mixed bag: a European-American 16-year-old heterosexual male; a European American 18-year-old heterosexual female; a 35-year-old Hispanic closeted lesbian; and a 22-year-old European American bisexual woman. Only the 35-year-old had chosen the book as her first choice, and because we were reluctant to push people into such a potentially polarizing situation, we did not “fill out” the club with students who selected *Zami* lower than second on their list of choices.

When the quarter began, as is typical with beginning students, the student-written discussion questions (required before each week’s meeting) were very superficial and tenuous, skating as far as possible from the heart of the book. For instance, “Do you like the book so far?” was a typical question. As the quarter progressed and the students in the club were forced to grapple on their own with the multiple oppressions expressed in the book as Lorde flips focus from lesbians to black Americans to women without allowing her readers to dismiss any one social identity, the students in the club became markedly more thoughtful, asking questions like “How does the fact that she’s black and a lesbian and a woman and first generation work together to create her identity?” and “What is the function of storytelling in identity creation?” As the quarter moved along and the students began to discuss how they would present the book to the class, a requirement for successful completion of their club, their discussions became richer and more complex. They wrestled with the intersection of oppression and privilege and various ways to communicate that complexity to their peers. The students in this group engaged in a process of ongoing self-generating knowledge, and ultimately, the book became a platform for the most engaging final presentation, a presentation reminiscent of Jane Elliot’s “Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes” exercise.

On the day of the presentation, we were not allowed to enter the classroom as usual; instead, as folks arrived, some were randomly given ribbons to wear around their arms. They were then allowed into the classroom while those without ribbons waited without explanation outside the doors. Once we were all allowed inside, we were put into “neighborhoods,” and in each neighborhood, the beribboned were accorded various subtle and blatant privileges. While the rest of the

class watched what was going on, each neighborhood participated in an activity designed to highlight the inequality between sets of people. After all the activities, the book club students led a discussion about privilege and the way it functions in everyday life. Further, they asked students to reflect on how having a ribbon or not having a ribbon felt. For many beribboned students, it was the first time they had become aware of the notion of privilege in an immediate, albeit artificial, way. Many of our mostly dominant culture students had not only never experienced discrimination before but had not realized the ways they themselves had actively, if unconsciously, perpetrated discrimination. In particular, one beribboned student who had tried to refuse ice cream when others were not allowed to eat and who had been pressured not to refuse by other ribbon-wearers around her reported feeling discomfort, even disgust, at not being able to discard her privilege. Other ribbon-wearers reported feeling protective of their status, as when one wanted to make sure that all non-wearers had a clean-up job to do before “volunteering” to help clean up as well. Non-wearers reported feelings of anger at the ribbon-wearers, while still others wanted to know how they could earn a ribbon.

The book club students then led a discussion that allowed us to see that the issuing of ribbons had been an arbitrary process; those with them had done nothing to earn them while those without had merely happened into that situation, much like sexual orientation or race or gender, which is not chosen but simply randomly “assigned.” Additionally, while we could discard our ribbons—and the benefits and drawbacks of them—as we walked out the door, other privileges, like heterosexual privilege, stay with the bearers and cannot be discarded. The book club students acknowledged the artificiality of the situation but asked us to extrapolate the situation to real, lifelong, inescapable conditions. During the course of the presentation, all students were engaged in the process of generating knowledge; everyone in the classroom learned to reflect on these important issues. In fact, the students voted this presentation “most thought-provoking.” Students walked away from this presentation, and several others that week, with a much deeper sense of the pressures of marginalization. While book clubs are a practice that can be integrated into stand-alone classes, the possibilities for self- and communally-generated knowledge building on each other are greater in a learning community than in a stand-alone course.

Learning to generate knowledge is clearly a valuable experience in itself; however, the distinct type of knowledge generated by a learning

community classroom allows students to more fully deconstruct homophobia and heterosexism. Because dominant culture perpetuates its power by maintaining a focus on individual discrimination, beginning college students often feel challenged in understanding the multifaceted nature of systemic oppression, having only thought about oppression—if they thought of it at all—in terms of individualized discrimination. Also, recognizing oppression as systemic is viewed as almost antithetical to an “American” sensibility given the cultural emphasis on the individual as the locus of control. By nature of the interconnections of their disciplines, learning communities model the types of complex thinking necessary to conceptualize and engage with notions of systemic oppression. In order to make connections between disparate disciplines, students in learning communities must develop higher-level thinking skills that help them to see the intersection of the disciplines in question. Instructors can then utilize these skills to complicate students’ thinking about diversity as well.

For example, in a learning community combining sociology, literature, and composition, we regularly asked students to apply the sociological paradigms they were learning to the literature they were reading. To better understand how gender is socialized, for instance, we asked them to investigate the strategies used to succumb to, reinscribe, pass on, or resist gender roles in the poetry we had read. In our class combining global social problems, ecology, and composition, students drew a sociological issue from a hat, chose an environmental problem they were interested in, and used the country they had focused on in a previous paper to make a connection between a global sociological issue and an environmental problem. Both assignments asked students to make connections between disciplines. In the first example, falling toward the beginning of the quarter, students had to develop a connection we named for them whereas in the second example, which came near the end of the quarter, we asked students to make connections for themselves. What these assignments have in common is the deliberate bringing together of ideas across disciplines to investigate questions and issues in the world. Although these assignments don’t target an examination of oppression specifically, as students gain facility in this type of meaning-making, they become better able to recognize and deconstruct the connections that bind oppressions together as well.

Once students have become more adept at navigating the critical pathways needed to conceptualize a complicated view of diversity, learning communities can be designed in ways that invite students to

notice entrenched patterns of “centrisms.” Learning to build connections between voices and ideas is a first step in breaking down the isolationist “us” and “them” thinking that perpetuates oppression. Again, because of the unique nature of a cross-disciplinary learning community, those alternate patterns of thinking are embedded in the curriculum, waiting to be activated. In our learning community pairing American literature and composition, for instance, we structured the class around an examination of the multiplicity of “American” as a concept, consciously including voices of diverse genders, sexual orientations, immigrant statuses, economic statuses, and ages as well as races, thus making it virtually impossible *not* to confront diversity on multiple levels. Set up as a series of dialogues, our texts deliberately spoke to notions of “American” from several perspectives. Our core texts, those we read as an entire class, were fairly canonical, several written by white, heterosexual male authors; our book club choices, as well as other core texts, introduced alternative voices into the dialogue. Having read Chopin’s version of the cult of domesticity and Rich’s reaction to the 1950s version of that cult, for instance, students in seminar deepened their understanding of the place of women in literary history by contrasting these two visions, by looking at how “woman” fits into “American.” Additionally, because our women writers were so different from one another, several students began to examine the validity of “woman” as a category in itself, arguing that due to the diversity in female voices, “woman” as a category had little meaning.

In another dialogue, we book-ended our course with two contrasting visions of the ramifications of American slavery, a white male perspective in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and an African American female perspective in *Beloved*. By placing these texts in dialogue, discussing and writing about them in community with one another, we came to see a wider, more complex vision of “American” than we would have had reading canonical texts in a stand-alone class. Furthermore, the luxury of time afforded by linking classes allowed students in a book club to discover other connections; for instance, a contrast between the way Bharati Mukherjee conceptualizes “American,” and Hemingway’s conception of “American.”

Because students had to share their newfound knowledge in community with others through writing and discussing, allowing others’ insights to deepen and solidify their own, they learned to think complexly. Again and again students told us that, having believed they had thoroughly prepared for seminar, having read the texts and written the required seminar paper, they would return home after seminar to

rewrite the entire paper because they now understood so much more deeply than before. One student told us that it was as if seminar were a mirror he stepped through to enter an entirely new world of knowledge, and that world required a more complex set of eyes. This multiplicity of perspectives, highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of knowledge, emerges in a learning community through shared discourse. The skills students use to create this knowledge belong to the same set of skills that are necessary to begin to understand the complexity inherent in notions of systemic oppression of all types. In fact, when students engage on this level, when they learn to think critically about the world around them, they turn to examinations of diversity almost organically as they attempt to sort out a world made richer by the differences surrounding them.

When diversity is more complicated than “race,” other dimensions of diversity become visible. Because a learning community is a politicized space, its very structure deconstructs neutrality, allowing students to see that, as Mary Elliot points out, “. . . the classroom is never a ‘neutral’ space. Neutrality . . . is a universal cultural default setting which is almost always presumed to be heterosexual and white; it is not available to those who cannot ‘pass’ as either or both” (1996, 698). In attenuating students to this “cultural default setting,” learning communities move students beyond their own comfort zones into what Emily Lardner calls epistemological humility, a growing recognition of the partiality of any one perspective on the world that enables them to grapple more effectively with diversity issues. Learning communities can be intentionally designed to help break open even a relatively monochromatic campus to reveal a much more “colorful” picture, one that moves beyond skin color to better reflect the realities of the richly textured communities in which we live. As the pluralism inherent in the larger community becomes visible within the safety of the learning community classroom, the ways in which learners exercise their white (and dominant culture) privileges are mitigated. The exposure of pluralism where none appears visible answers the “why” question: diversity education is important because people who look like you are not always like you. When pluralism is exposed within a learning community, students have a safe space inside which they may grapple with difficult issues, a space where diversity can be recognized and engaged—no longer ignored and certainly not simply tolerated.

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