

## DIVERSITY AND COMPLEXITY IN THE CLASSROOM

### CONSIDERATIONS OF RACE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER

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Since the 1960s and the rise of the civil rights movement, American colleges and universities have been engaged in an ongoing debate about how best to enroll, educate, and graduate students from groups historically underrepresented in higher education: women, African Americans, Chicanos and Latinos, Native Americans, American-born students of Asian ancestry, and immigrants. As enrollment statistics show, changes in both the demographics of the applicant pool and college admissions policies are bringing about a measure of greater diversity in entering classes (Levine and Associates, 1990).

Once they are on campus, though, many of these students feel that they are treated as unwelcome outsiders, and they describe having encountered subtle forms of bias (Cones, Noonan, and Janha, 1983; Fleming, 1988; Green, 1989; Hall and Sandler, 1982; Pemberton, 1988; Sadker and Sadker, 1992; Simpson, 1987; Woolbright, 1989). Some students of color have labeled this bias "the problem of ignorance" or the "look through me" syndrome (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991). As reported by the Institute for the Study of Social Change, students talk about subtle discrimination in certain facial expressions, in not being acknowledged, in how white students "take over a class" and speak past students of color, or in small everyday slights in which they perceive that their value and perspective are not appreciated or respected. Though often unwitting or inadvertent, such behaviors reinforce the students' sense of alienation and hinder their personal, academic, and professional development.

There are no universal solutions or specific rules for responding to ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity in the classroom, and research on best practices is limited (Solomon, 1991). Indeed, the topic is complicated, confusing, and dynamic, and for some faculty it is fraught with uneasiness, difficulty, and discomfort. Perhaps the overriding principle is to be thoughtful and sensitive and do what you think is best. The material in this section is intended to help you increase your awareness of matters that some faculty and students have indicated are particularly sensitive for women and students of color. Some of these problems affect all students, but they may be exacerbated by ethnic and gender differences between faculty members and their students.

The following ideas, based on the teaching practices of faculty across the country and on current sociological and educational research, are intended to help you work effectively with the broad range of students enrolled in your classes.

### General Strategies

**Recognize any biases or stereotypes you may have absorbed.** Do you interact with students in ways that manifest double standards? For example, do you discourage women students from undertaking projects that require quantitative work? Do you undervalue comments made by speakers whose English is accented differently than your own? Do you assume that most African American, Chicano/Latino, or Native American students on your campus are enrolled under special admissions programs? Do you assume that most students of color are majoring in Ethnic Studies?

**Treat each student as an individual, and respect each student for who he or she is.** Each of us has some characteristics in common with others of our gender, race, place of origin, and sociocultural group, but these are outweighed by the many differences among members of any group. We tend to recognize this point about groups we belong to ("Don't put me in the same category as all those other New Yorkers/Californians/Texans you know") but sometimes fail to recognize it about others. However, any group label subsumes a wide variety of individuals-people of different social and economic backgrounds, historical and generational experience, and levels of consciousness. Try not to project your experiences with, feelings about, or expectations of an entire group onto any one student. Keep in mind, though, that group identity can be very important for some students. College may be their first opportunity to experience affirmation of their national, ethnic, racial, or cultural identity, and they feel both empowered and enhanced by joining monoethnic organizations or groups. (Source: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991)

**Rectify any language patterns or case examples that exclude or demean any groups.** Do you

- Use terms of equal weight when referring to parallel groups: men and women rather than men and ladies?
- Use both he and she during lectures, discussions, and in writing, and encourage your students to do the same?
- Recognize that your students may come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds?
- Refrain from remarks that make assumptions about your students' experiences, such as, "Now, when your parents were in college . . . "?
- Refrain from remarks that make assumptions about the nature of your students' families, such as, "Are you going to visit your parents over spring break?"
- Avoid comments about students' social activities that tacitly assume that all students are heterosexual?
- Try to draw case studies, examples, and anecdotes from a variety of cultural and social contexts?

**Do your best to be sensitive to terminology.** Terminology changes over time, as ethnic and cultural groups continue to define their identity, their history, and their

relationship to the dominant culture. In the 1960s, for example, negroes gave way to blacks and Afro-Americans. In the 1990s, the term African American gained general acceptance. Most Americans of Mexican ancestry prefer Chicano or Latino or Mexican American to Hispanic, hearing in the last the echo of Spanish colonialism. Most Asian Americans are offended by the term Oriental, which connotes British imperialism; and many individuals want to be identified not by a continent but by the nationality of their ancestors—for example, Thai American or Japanese American. In California, Pacific Islander and South Asian are currently preferred by students whose forebears are from those regions. To find out what terms are used and accepted on your campus, you could raise the question with your students, consult the listing of campuswide student groups, or speak with your faculty affirmative action officer.

**Get a sense of how students feel about the cultural climate in your classroom.**

Let students know that you want to hear from them if any aspect of the course is making them uncomfortable. During the term, invite them to write you a note (signed or unsigned) or ask on midsemester course evaluation forms one or more of the following questions (adapted from Cones, Janha, and Noonan, 1983):

- Does the course instructor treat students equally and evenhandedly?
- How comfortable do you feel participating in this class? What makes it easy or difficult for you?
- In what ways, if any, does your ethnicity, race, or gender affect your interactions with the teacher in this class? With fellow students?

**Introduce discussions of diversity at department meetings.** Concerned faculty can ask that the agenda of department meetings include topics such as classroom climate, course content and course requirements, graduation and placement rates, extracurricular activities, orientation for new students, and liaison with the English as a second language (ESL) program.

### **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 behavior and speech in cultures different from your own. Broder and Chism (1992) provide a reading list, organized by ethnic groups, on multicultural teaching in colleges and universities. Beyond professional books and articles, read fiction or nonfiction 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 organizations. Attend campuswide 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 expectations 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 your students that you expect them to work hard in class, that you want them to be challenged by the material, and that you hold high standards for their academic achievement. And then practice what you have said: expect your students to work hard, be challenged, and achieve high standards. (Sources: Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988)

**Don't try to "protect" any group of students.** Don't refrain from criticizing the performance of individual students in your class on account of their ethnicity or gender. If you attempt to favor or protect a given group of students by demanding less of them, you 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 color in her class by giving them extra time to complete assignments. She failed to realize that this action would cause hurt feelings on all sides: the students she was hoping to help felt patronized, and the rest of the class resented the preferential treatment.

**Be evenhanded in how you acknowledge students' good work.** Let students know that their work is meritorious and praise their accomplishments. But be sure to recognize the achievements of all students. For example, one Chicana student complained about her professor repeatedly singling out her papers as exemplary, although other students in the class were also doing well. The professor's lavish public praise, though well intended, made this student feel both uncomfortable and anxious about maintaining her high level of achievement.

**Recognize the complexity of diversity.** At one time the key issue at many colleges was how to recruit and retain African-American students and faculty. Today, demographics require a broader multicultural perspective and efforts to include many underrepresented groups. Although what we know about different ethnic groups is uneven, avoid generalizing from studies on African-American students (Smith, 1989).

## Course Content and Material

**Whenever possible select texts and readings whose language is gender-neutral and free of stereotypes.** If the readings you assign use only masculine pronouns or incorporate stereotypes, cite the date the material was written, point out these

shortcomings in class, and give your students an opportunity to discuss them.

**Aim for an inclusive curriculum.** Ideally, a college curriculum should reflect the perspectives and experiences of a pluralistic society. At a minimum, creating an inclusive curriculum involves using texts 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 color, 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. (Sources: Coleman, n.d.; Flick, n.d.; Jenkins, Gappa, and Pearce, 1983)

**Do not assume that all students will recognize cultural literary or historical references familiar to you.** As the diversity of the student and faculty populations increases, 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 pretest on the first day of class to determine what students know. Of course, you may choose to refer deliberately to individuals or events your students may not know to encourage them to do outside reading.

**Consider students' needs when assigning evening or weekend work.** Be prepared to make accommodations 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, you can broaden and enrich your course by asking faculty or off-campus professionals of different ethnic groups to make presentations to your class.

### Class Discussion

**Emphasize the importance of considering different 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 white 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 (organizational 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 your 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 students from monopolizing the discussion by your active solicitation of alternate viewpoints. Encourage students to listen to and value comments made from perspectives other than their own. You may want to have students work in small groups early in the term so that all students can participate in nonthreatening circumstances. This may make it easier for students to speak up in a larger setting. See "Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams," "Leading a Discussion," and "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion."

**Monitor your own behavior in responding to students.** Research studies show that teachers tend to interact differently with men and women students (Hall and Sandler, 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 behavior are unconscious, but they can and do demoralize students, making them feel intellectually inadequate or alienated and unwelcome at the institution.

As you teach, then, try to be evenhanded in the following matters:

- Recognizing 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)
- Listening attentively and responding directly to students' comments and questions
- Addressing students by name (and with the correct pronunciation)
- Prompting students to provide a fuller answer or an explanation
- Giving students time to answer a question before moving on
- Interrupting students or allowing them to be interrupted by their peers
- Crediting student comments during your summary ("As Akim said. . .")
- Giving feedback and balancing criticism and praise
- Making eye contact

Also, refrain from making seemingly helpful offers that are based on stereotypes and are therefore patronizing. 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."

You might want to observe your teaching on videotape to see whether you 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. (Sources: Hall and Sandier, 1982; Sadker and Sadker, 1990; Sadker and Sadker, 1992)

**Reevaluate your pedagogical methods for teaching in a diverse setting.**

Observers note that in discussion classes 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). Recognize, however, that some of your 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 fear 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. See "Leading a Discussion," "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion," and "Learning Styles and Preferences" for suggestions on how to actively involve all students. (Source: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991)

**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 remarks 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 all students are familiar with their ancestors' language, traditions, culture, or history. An example to avoid: asking an American-born student of Chinese descent, "What idiom do you use in Chinese?" (Sources: Flick, n.d.; Pemberton, 1988)

## Assignments and Exams

**Be sensitive to students whose first language is not English.** Most colleges require students who are nonnative speakers of English to achieve oral and written competency by taking ESL courses. Ask ESL specialists on your campus for advice about how to grade papers and for information about typical patterns of errors related to your students' native languages. 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 penalized 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 of class.** By arranging for times and rooms where groups can meet, you can encourage students to study together. Peer support is an important factor in student persistence in school (Pascarella, 1986), but students of color are sometimes left out of informal networks and study groups that help other students succeed (Simpson, 1987). By studying together, your students can both improve their academic performance and overcome some of the out-of-class segregation common on many campuses. See "Collaborative Learning" for suggestions on how to form study teams.

**Assign group work and collaborative learning 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 experiences (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 study. Collaborative learning can be as simple as randomly grouping (by counting off) two or three students in class to solve a particular problem or to answer a specific question. See "Collaborative Learning," "Leading a Discussion," and "Supplements and Alternatives to Lecturing" for ideas about incorporating group work into instruction.

**Give assignments and exams that recognize students' diverse backgrounds and special interests.** As appropriate to your field, you can develop paper topics or term projects that encourage students to explore the roles, status, contributions, and experiences of groups traditionally underrepresented in scholarly research studies or in academia (Jenkins, Gappa, and Pearce, 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 systems. A faculty member in the social sciences gave students an assignment asking them to compare female-only, male-only, and male-female work groups.

### Advising and Extracurricular Activities

**Meet with students informally.** Frequent and rewarding informal contact with faculty members is the single strongest predictor of whether or not a student will

voluntarily withdraw from a college (Tinto, 1989). Ongoing contact outside the classroom also provides strong motivation for students to perform well in your class and to participate in the broad social and intellectual life of the institution. In addition to inviting groups of your students for coffee or lunch, consider becoming involved in your campus orientation and academic advising programs or volunteering to speak informally to students living in residence halls or to other student groups. See "Academic Advising and Mentoring Undergraduates."

**Encourage students to come to office hours.** Of course, all students can benefit from the one-to-one conversation and attention that only office hours provide. In addition, students who feel alienated on campus or uncomfortable in class are more likely to discuss their concerns in private. (Source: Chism, Cano, and Pruitt, 1989)

**Don't shortchange any students of advice you might give to a member of your own gender or ethnic group.** Simpson (1987) reports the following unfortunate incident. A white male faculty member was asked by a female African-American student about whether she should drop an engineering class in which she was having difficulties. Worried that if he advised a drop, he might be perceived as lacking confidence in the intellectual abilities of African-American women, he suggested that she persevere. Had the student been a white male, the professor acknowledged, he would have placed the student's needs ahead of his own self-doubts and unhesitatingly advised a drop.

**Advise students to explore perspectives outside their own experiences.** For example, encourage students to take courses that will introduce them to the literature, history, and culture of other ethnic groups. (Source: Coleman, n.d.)

**Involve students in your research and scholarly activities.** Whenever you allow students to see or contribute to your own work, you are not only teaching them about your field's methodology and procedures but also helping them understand the dimensions of faculty life and helping them feel more a part of the college community (Blackwell, 1987). Consider sponsoring students in independent study courses, arranging internships, and providing opportunities for undergraduates to participate in research.

**Help students establish departmental organizations.** If your department does not have an undergraduate association, encourage students to create one. Your sponsorship can make it easier for student groups to obtain meeting rooms and become officially recognized. Student organizations can provide peer tutoring and advising as well as offer social and academic programs. In fields in which women and certain ethnic groups have traditionally been underrepresented, some students may prefer to form caucuses based on their gender or cultural affinities (for example, women in architecture). Research by the Institute for the Study of Social Change (1991) has documented the importance of associations for students of color as a basis for collective identification and individual support.

**Provide opportunities for all students to get to know each other.** Research shows that both African-American and white students, for example, would like greater interracial contact. African-American students tend to prefer institutional programs and commitments, while most white students prefer opportunities for individual, personal contacts. (Source: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991)

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