The Influence of Attitudes, Feelings and Behavior Toward Diversity on Teaching and Learning

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Developing an inclusive curriculum and creating classroom environments to foster diversity offer excellent opportunities for faculty members as conveyors of knowledge to examine their own ideas and feelings about gender and diversity. Most professors are socialized to believe that once they have begun their first teaching position, much of their personal (self-) development is complete. Frequently we think of our initial years in the professorial ranks as the time to focus on professional development. Self-development activities (e.g., seminars, faculty development, self-help groups, therapy), however, are important components of professional development. Self-development, self-acceptance in particular, is inextricably tied to our performance in the classroom, especially with respect to how we handle differing perspectives and perceptions and how we relate to others who are different. As we become more comfortable with who we are, we also become more comfortable with “differentness”: different worldviews, as well as cultural, ethnic, racial or gender “differentness.”

Teaching about ethnic and gender diversity, therefore, allows us to examine our own feelings about gender, race and diversity and to determine how our feelings affect what kind of material we present in class and how we present the material. Questions that we might ask of ourselves in this regard are: Do I have biases? Do I really believe in the equality of members of all ethnic and gender groups, and if not, how do I convey this attitude to my students? What aspects of racial or gender diversity make me feel uncomfortable? Why? For example, am I comfortable being around successful women? What kind of general attitudes do I hold about specific types of people (e.g., Black males, White females)? Where did these attitudes and feelings originate? Hence the process of creating an open classroom environment where students feel comfortable discussing often volatile issues begins with an examination of our own attitudes, feelings and behavior regarding diversity.

Examining our own personal reading habits provides another way to determine our underlying attitudes about ethnicity and gender: Do I read widely? More specifically, when have I read any fiction or non-fiction written about or by an Asian-, African-, Native- or Latino-American or female writers? Do I value these literatures and the lives and experiences of people who are racially, ethnically and culturally different? How much do I really know about the origin and history of Asian or African, Latin or Native American culture? What do I know about women’s studies or women’s history?

An exploration of attitudes, feelings and behavior about diversity can be extended to how we relate to colleagues and graduate students who are different. In this domain we might address such questions as: Do I feel uncomfortable when a woman or a professor of color publishes a paper in a prestigious journal in my discipline or acquires a major grant or fellowship? Do I attribute most or all of their successes to “affirmative action” and not to their hard work, intelligence, perseverance and competence? Do I seek out the expertise of my female colleagues or colleagues of color or do I see my role as primarily a mentor to them? In summary, how symmetrical or egalitarian are our relationships with colleagues, graduate students and staff members who are “different”?

We may also need to explore whether we have developed competencies outside our own area or domain of specialization. Do we see other disciplines or the cultural experiences of others as an opportunity to enhance our own research or teaching? Do we make use of what is known in literature or history in our research in the social sciences? In turn, can scholars in the humanities and sciences learn from anthropology, sociology or psychology? In studying identity, for example, can I utilize information from African-American or Latino-American studies? In understanding environmental design, how can the literature and history of
Native American people elucidate my thinking?

Exploring the personal and professional issues outlined above are excellent guides to understanding how we may present issues of ethnicity and gender in the classroom. Student-teacher relationships, in particular, help us to realize that students are teachers also, and our interactions with them offer a wealth of opportunities to learn about ourselves and the differing perceptions of the world that people have constructed.

Behavior Toward Students Who Are Different

Given that we can learn from teacher-student relationships, we might ask ourselves about how we respond to different kinds of students inside and outside of the classroom.

1. Can you see beyond a student's ethnic or racial background and see an intelligent, evolving person? Do you treat your students differently? Do you have different expectations for them? Are you surprised when a Black or Latino student earns the best grade on an exam or writes the best paper in the class? Claude Steele in his work on student achievement asks the question of all educators—Do you see ability and intelligence as a limited capacity or an expandable commodity?

2. Have I encouraged any bright students of color to assist me with my research or join my research lab? Have I encouraged him or her to pursue graduate school? Have I encouraged students struggling with diversity issues to work with professors who are conducting research on such topics?

3. How do I feel about students of color and women at the graduate level? Am I eager to engage in research with them?

Specific Teaching Tips

1. Advise every student to take an ethnic studies or women's studies class no matter what their ethnic background or gender is. Being immersed in the literature and history of another group is an enlightening experience and will help to loosen rigid conceptions of "other people."

2. Attempt to provide a variety of perspectives about all of the topics you teach. Rather than always beginning with the Western societal version of a topic and then talking about "the other people" as an aside, try to introduce alternative ways of looking at issues from the beginning. Also try to help students understand the origins of different epistemologies or worldviews associated with ethnic, racial or gender groups. It is quite evident that most epistemological traditions are linked to different ecologies (i.e., ways of surviving). Rather than showing that a particular worldview is wrong, discuss with students why groups of people developed a particular epistemology, cognitive style or behavioral tradition.

3. Attempt to help students understand how we (as a society or as individuals) construct the meanings attached to certain racial, ethnic, gender or social class, and other groups and how each person also has the ability and the responsibility to examine these meanings. For example, why does being female mean being "less valuable than a male" in many cultures? What is the verity of this meaning associated with gender and why is it perpetuated?

4. Ask students to write a paper about the meaning of race (and its relevance for your academic discipline). Ask them to talk with another person who is not of the same race or ethnic background about what race and ethnicity means to them and then have students compare the two views.

5. Do not allow students to make unsubstantiated statements (e.g., most African-American college students are athletes, Asian students study more than the average student, women are not good at math and science) about members of ethnic, racial or gender groups. Ask any student who makes such a claim to conduct research in the library or obtain statistical information from the appropriate sources to support such claims.

6. Try to answer personal questions about gender and racial issues as honestly as you can (e.g., what would you do if your son or
daughter chose to date someone of another race?).

7. Do not avoid controversy. In fact, have students openly discuss stereotypes that they have about different racial, ethnic and gender groups. Talk about where these stereotypes originate and why they are perpetuated.

8. Encourage students to engage in individuation. This is the process by which we attempt to move beyond stereotyping a person to seeing him or her as an individual. Help students to understand that stereotyping people and acting on these stereotypes are bad habits that can be dissipated with each interaction. Assist them in trying to see beyond social categories to the individual (e.g., Do you say hello to the janitor? Why not? Can you have a conversation with a server in the dining hall? If not, what is inhibiting you?).

9. Stop the class when students are having trouble talking about a topic. For example, students often have difficulty talking about racial issues. Ask them to talk about their discomfort, especially their feelings (which often range from guilt and anger to fear). Once the class is able to transcend the inhibitory affect, you can return to discussing the relevant issues at a more conceptual and abstract level.

10. Do not allow students to attack each other in class. Instead, try to get them to explain why they feel the way they do. It is helpful for them to rephrase an attack such as "You are so racist and sexist" to "When you stereotype all members of a racial or gender group, I feel offended and angry."

11. Encourage students, especially those who seem to be angry about racial or gender diversity to come by your office to discuss the matter in greater detail. Usually such anger stems from personal feelings of insecurity or fears about one's future occupational success. In extreme cases, such students might benefit from a referral to the counseling services.

12. Try to assist students in understanding how their specific racial or gender makeup may help them to get more in touch with their humanity. Being a member of a particular ethnic or racial minority group may teach one strength or compassion that one might not have been a member of a majority racial group. Or certain characteristics associated with gender groups (e.g., gentleness or autonomy) are attributes that exist in everyone and can be nurtured and developed for the good of all. Basically, try to help students understand that there might be some greater purpose for their ethnic, racial or gender background (besides being angry at the "outgroup") that can help them be more comfortable with who they are and make the world a better place for all of us.

References

Recommended Reading
To explore the topic further, Lerita Coleman suggests the following books and articles:


**Lerita Coleman**

**Biography**

Lerita Coleman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and an Adjunct Professor at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race in America at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She received her B.A. with Highest Honors from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Harvard University. Among the many academic honors Lerita has received as a student and professional, she has been a Fellow of the Rockefeller, Ford, and Spencer Foundations and a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. She was the recipient of the Colorado Black Women for Political Action Education Award in 1991. Lerita is an ad-hoc reviewer for numerous psychology journals and was a visiting scholar at Western Michigan University in 1991 and Kalamazoo College in 1992. In 1990 and 1991 she served as a Faculty Mentor for the SMART (Summer Minority Access to Research Training) Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on stigma, identity and self-concept.

Lerita Coleman's first conscious encounter with issues of diversity came when, as a student at UC Santa Cruz, she was required to take a core course on World Civilization. To her great surprise the course material focused solely on Greek and Roman history and art. Being a rather astute but naive student, Lerita approached her professor with the question, "What happened to the rest of the world?" She believes she is still a bit resentful about not being exposed to African, Chinese, South American history and art as well as the history and literature of a host of other cultures. Much of what Lerita knows about people other than Northern Europeans and Americans is self-taught.

Several years later, as a new assistant professor at the University of Michigan, Lerita realized that she had an extraordinary opportunity to ensure that the students she taught had a different experience than she had had as an undergraduate. She thought, if as an African-American woman she does not make changes in the curriculum, who will? Therefore, in every class she taught, in addition to covering the "basics," she made certain that students understood what was known about how women and people from a variety of cultures experience social psychological phenomena. She wanted them to understand that many of the concepts they discuss in psychology may carry a very different meaning for women and for people in other cultures. Lerita emphasizes how epistemologies and worldviews play a major role in how people perceive and construct reality.

Lerita Coleman's recent work on stigma, identity and self-concept has helped her to understand how one's concept or construction of self may be related to how comfortable he or she is with embracing diversity. Many students reveal that people who are comfortable with themselves (accepting one's own positive and negative attributes) and people who have high self-esteem are much more comfortable with people who are different. To celebrate and learn from our differences as well as to acknowledge our similarities with all human beings is perhaps the greatest challenge Lerita faces and that she believes others face as well.