Dialogue on Diversity in the Classroom

Professor Janet Jacobs
and
Michele D. Simpson
Instructor/ Research Associate
Women Studies Program
University of Colorado at Boulder

Below, we present a dialogue that addresses some of the concerns we believe are important for teaching diversity. In turn, we have asked each other questions about our teaching, our classrooms, and the problems we encounter in diversifying education and the curriculum in the university. These questions, along with our responses, provide a framework for integrating perspectives that can challenge students while transforming the academy.

Michele: Janet, thanks again for asking me to co-author this piece with you. Since you extended the offer, I have been doing even more thinking about diversity in teaching and learning. More specifically, I have been thinking about the teaching methods I employ in my own classes and reviewing what has worked well and what has fallen flat.

Janet: I am really pleased that you agreed to make this a collaborative effort. We have talked at length about our experiences in the classroom, the problems and challenges we encounter as women who take a feminist perspective and who have strong cultural ties to African American and Jewish communities. Maybe we could begin our discussion with your ideas about diversity in the classroom.

Michele: I find that a lot of my ideas about diversity in teaching and learning are captured in the following words from Vincent Harding's *Hope and History*:

> In a society increasingly populated by peoples of color, by those who have known the disdain and domination of the Euro-American world, it would be fascinating to ponder self-love as a religious calling. How are people, beginning in their earliest years, nurtured to act with self-respect and self-responsibility? How are they encouraged to move through the world with a spirit which unsafely

challenges everything that threatens to crush the human spirit, the human ability to love ourselves and others? Can we explore such fundamental questions with our students, wondering aloud with them about the fascinating possible spiritual connections between the capacity to love ourselves and the willingness to love and serve others?

My classes at CU are typically small (20 or more) or medium-sized (40 or fewer). I would say that 90 percent of my students are women, and usually 25 percent are women of color. In-depth classroom discussion is possible in a course of this size. Student participation is essential. Through discussion students can be encouraged to analyze critically what they think and hear. And of course classroom discussions can sharpen listening skills. Additionally, through this public exchange of ideas, students can begin to interweave concepts like race, class, and gender—issues we revisit again and again.

Janet: One of the most significant challenges for me was pointed out in an earlier essay in this series by Deborah Flick, who discussed the problem of reinforcing stereotypes. It has been my experience that introducing diversity into the classroom may reinforce rather than eliminate stereotypes. This unintended consequence is more likely to occur in schools where students have little interaction with individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and come from communities that are similarly homogeneous.

Michele: Janet, how do you incorporate diversity into your classes?

Michele: What is the typical make-up of your classes?

Janet: My introductory classes tend to have about 100 students, of whom 10 percent may be from diverse backgrounds. Under these conditions, interaction with cultural diversity may in fact be limited to the classroom and the course material. The result is that students tend to approach this material with preconceived assumptions and biases that may
be strengthened rather than diminished by the reading of autobiographies, the discussion of cultural values, and the examination of culturally diverse social behavior. To limit this effect of a relatively homogeneous student population, it is important that the instructor discuss stereotypes and the way in which racism, sexism, and homophobia are reinforced. This exposure to difference affirms the "we and they" understanding of cultural pluralism.

**Janet:** What kind of experiences have you encountered when you introduce diversity into the classroom, **Michele**?

**Michele:** Well, often my mere presence is an introduction of diversity into the classroom. However, many students feel threatened by topics that focus on race, class, sexual orientation, and gender. And even students with a fair degree of openness may still find the process of exploring diversity difficult, even painful.

When fear and pain are present in the classroom, both instructor and students usually experience discomfort. While it may be difficult, it is best to confront the feelings that have been unleashed. Resist the impulse to discount or rationalize the pain. Generate a discussion around the idea that we can begin changing how we perceive pain. Talk about our society's approach to pain. Talk about the prevailing notion that to experience pain is bad or a signal that something is wrong. Encourage students to consider that the pain may manifest new perspectives, increased knowledge, and ultimately growth. Instructors sometimes hesitate to call attention to more than one topic at a time. If one is teaching a unit on the institutionalization of racism in the academy, for example, one may be reluctant to focus on how racism, when it intersects with gender, causes problems specific to women of color. Calling attention to gender does not necessarily devalue or subordinate a discussion of race.

It has been my experience that at predominantly white institutions, students fear that courses which have a decidedly diverse focus will detract from their academic achievement and progress. For students who already feel alienated and unwelcome, certain courses will appear to be beyond the pale (no pun intended), not mainstream enough. And students entering these classes do so with some perceived risk to themselves. This risk I think is worth acknowledging.

It is important to emphasize that courses which incorporate diversity can broaden the intellectual scope of all students. And for students whose lived experiences are explored and discussed in these courses, the information they gain can deepen self-awareness, while simultaneously providing an intellectual and methodological base that can be used in other courses of study.

**Michele:** Janet, what do you do when you have created a relatively safe space for students to discuss ideas and the discussion leads to negative remarks?

**Janet:** Discussions of diversity, whether focused on gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation, can create a class environment that lends itself to open discussion and the honest expression of thoughts, opinions, and attitudes. While this academic environment is conducive to learning, open discussion of difference may also result in public remarks that, however intended, are discriminatory in content. A student might begin a discussion of Italian-American culture by saying, "I'm not prejudiced or anything, but when I was growing up my father always said how Italians were all in the Mafia." Comments such as these, which may be expressed about any number of marginalized groups, are frequently heard in classrooms in which diversity is stressed. These remarks can be used to explore biases and assumptions that permeate the culture as a whole. Rather than ignore such statements, the instructor should ask the class to consider the kinds of ideas about a group that are generated from beliefs such as these.

A second question to pursue is "How do ideas about difference affect our understanding of diversity?" While it is not helpful to label a student as anti-semitic or racist, it is helpful to acknowledge that we are all socialized with stereotypes of the "other"—whether these stereotypes are based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. Discriminatory remarks become an expression of negative stereotyping that can be pointed out. Ignoring such statements out of embarrassment or discomfort confirms to the class that ideas such as these will go unchallenged.
Janet: Michele, since you teach a course on Black women, how do you incorporate your own experience into the classroom?

Michele: I always begin my classes by talking about my own life. I do not give a verbal résumé. Instead, I try to convey some sense of how I arrived at this place, teaching this class. I talk about my own discoveries regarding the intersection of race, sex, and class, speaking as ONE Black woman.

It is important to provide space for students to tell their own stories. This gives all of them an opportunity to give voice to their own historical and ethnic links, differences, similarities. Encourage the students to interact with all the storytellers. They usually ask each other questions and get excited when they hear something in another's story that strikes a chord or warrants further explanation or discussion.

Janet: How do you incorporate other perspectives in your class?

Michele: I love inviting different voices into the classroom. No matter how often I try to make the point that Black women are not a monolithic group, nothing drives home the idea better than living, breathing Black women. Panels, guest speakers, and films can also be helpful, but I always work up to them. Without a context, students do not have any place to put what they will hear.

Janet: What about issues of authority and authenticity in the classroom?

Michele: Try to recognize where the class materials fall short and provide supplementary texts, films, and so forth. For example, I sometimes use Paula Giddings' book *When and Where I Enter*. However, that text makes no mention of the contribution of lesbians. And I am not just talking about a "chapter on lesbians" missing. Lesbians who have been integral to the struggle of African American women are not even mentioned by name. Acknowledging this shortcoming allows us to work together as a class to fill in the gaps. Of course I use other texts that do recognize the contributions of lesbians to the richness and complexity of Black life.

Gay men, lesbians, people of color, white women, and various ethnic groups share the dubious historical distinction of having our experiences interpreted and written about by a group with greater power. And it did not stop there; this same powerful group then became the "experts," the "authorities" to consult about the experiences of the "other."

In the classroom, when we teach, discuss, and analyze the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we must think about what Bell Hooks calls "the ethics of our action." We must consider whether or not our work and words will be used to reinforce and perpetuate biases, stereotypes, and supremacist attitudes.

Can we make room, in our introductions to the works of groups to which we do not belong, for a discussion of the ethical issues of privilege? Extra-group perspectives, however provocative and informed, are limited. When a student in the class or a colleague has the same or deeper knowledge, coupled with a lived experience of the culture being studied, can more of us consider sharing our role as instructor/authority?

Michele: Janet, what is it like to teach a predominantly white group when the discussion turns to issues of race and inequality?

Janet: Discussing social oppression and injustice in the classroom elicits a variety of responses from students who, consciously or not, are identified with the dominant culture that is held responsible for racism, sexism, and homophobia. The reactions may vary from extreme defensiveness to deeply felt guilt. In classrooms where diverse student populations are being educated about the meaning of diversity in the lives of those who have been marginalized and excluded, the expression of guilt may evoke anger from students who have experienced discrimination and injustice. At the same time, students who feel guilty may seek approval and acceptance from those who have suffered discrimination.

One approach to this situation is to discuss with the class how guilt limits the discourse on diversity. Guilt tends to shift the focus of learning away from difference and inequality and toward the subjective experience of the dominant culture. While "feeling bad" about social injustice may be a first step toward
breaking down cultural bias and oppression, learning cannot take place unless students move beyond guilt and into an intellectual dialogue where they seek knowledge of the other for its own value rather than out of a sense of guilt or obligation.

Guilt allows students to remain focused on themselves rather than on the subject matter of the class. Because guilt tends to inform classrooms that validate a sensitivity to diversity, it is important that the instructor examine his or her own attitudes toward discrimination and social injustice so that the class does not become polarized by reactions of anger on one side and shame on the other.

**Janet:** What do you think is the ideal learning situation for diversity?

**Michele:** The ideal situation for learning is always one where there is a diversity of voices and an exchange of challenging ideas. We are all capable of teaching and learning about an ethnic/racial group and studying history, art, literature generated by cultural groups different from our own, even if no person from that group is present in the room. In one all-white class I taught, students were mindful that Black women might approach the texts, films, and questions we explored in a very different way, depending on a whole host of factors like class, sexual orientation, and geographical home. In that case I think it helped that students were encouraged to acknowledge that their insights and ideas, although they might be different from those of Black women, were of equal value.

Ideally, students and instructors would not abdicate responsibility for being in the world, for responding to works by men and women different from themselves. They would understand that to withdraw might very well reinforce racist attitudes. I am not comfortable with students or instructors who assume a passive position and do not assert their ideas about cultures of which they are not a part. On the other hand, problems arise when any of us, regardless of group affiliation, need to assume the questionable role of "authority."

One primary function of teaching is to prepare students to live and act more fully in the world, not protect them or ourselves from it.

None of this is easy.

**References**


**Teaching Tips**

1. Acknowledge, again and again, the difficulties inherent in exploring issues of diversity. Create an outlet for students to express their fears and discomfort both inside and outside the classroom.

2. As was pointed out by Lerita Coleman in a previous brochure on diversity entitled *The Influence of Attitudes, Feelings and Behavior Toward Diversity on Teaching and Learning,* it is essential that students be encouraged to take courses that challenge their world view. It is important to emphasize both the intellectual and personal benefits offered by courses that focus on diverse issues.

3. It is important to acknowledge the real and/or perceived personal risk(s) many students take when signing up for such courses.

4. Provide space for students to tell their own stories, thus laying the groundwork for discussions that focus on historical and ethnic links, differences and similarities.

5. Struggle with your own issues around being the only and final "authority" in the classroom. Recognize where your expertise and class materials fall short. Invite different voices into the classroom via films, guest speakers, campus and community groups.

6. Compile a list of resources (bibliographies, literature reviews, films, etc.) so that students can expand their interests outside the classroom.
7. Explore stereotypes and the ways in which racism, sexism, and homophobia may be reinforced through a "we and they" understanding of cultural pluralism.

8. In introducing topics of diversity, explore biases and assumptions that permeate the culture as a whole.

**Recommended Reading**

To explore the topic further, Janet Jacobs and Michele Simpson recommend the following:

- *Sage VI, no. 1: Black Women's Studies* (Summer 1989).

**Janet Jacobs**

**Biography**

Janet L. Jacobs is an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado, where she has been teaching women studies and sociology classes for over a decade. It has always been her goal to represent diverse perspectives on social and cultural experience so that knowledge and scientific truth are not limited by gender, race, or class.

Janet believes that the university classroom is the appropriate forum for expanding the knowledge base of students so that their college education truly reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences. Her approach to the discipline of women studies has by definition included diversity as an educational value, as differences among women must be respected and studied.

Throughout the years Janet Jacobs has taught, she has assigned texts that reflect diverse theoretical perspectives which are incorporated into class discussions on difference. This approach challenges students to examine world views that differ from their own.

**Michele D. Simpson**

**Biography**

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Michele Simpson has lived in the South, the Midwest, the West Indies, and, for the past twelve years, in Boulder, Colorado. She has worked as an attorney, as an employee relations specialist, as an entrepreneur, and as foundation program officer. Constants in her life have been short story writing, community work, and teaching. Once a year Michele teaches a class entitled Historical and Contemporary Issues of Black Women. Currently she is working on a film that will explore the possibility of friendship between Black and White women.

Having experienced firsthand the pain of invisibility, Michele's commitment to diversity in the classroom grows out of a need that is connected to a commitment to assist her students and herself in the process of becoming more fully human.

As an undergraduate she attended a historically Black university. There she made contact with some of the best teachers she has ever had at any time during her tenure as a formal student. They have been present in every class she teaches and continue to influence what she does in the classroom.

Women and men teachers, mostly Black, made sure that their students understood that there was much to learn about themselves as one group of the African diaspora and members of the world community. They introduced Michele to the idea that there were a host of ways of seeing and knowing. She and her fellow students were not given the choice to be anything but active learners at her school. A lot of emphasis was placed on taking what had been learned and applying it to the world. Education and service were not divisible.

Alice Walker, in several of her essays in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* says that her best teachers were those "who taught by the courage of their own lives." Her words reflect Michele Simpson's educational inheritance.

Some days Michele feels as though she had been struggling with issues related to diversity for a lifetime. Sometimes longer. And then there are those **other** days. . . .