

Fostering Diversity in a Medium-Sized Classroom

Professor Brenda J. Allen

Communication Department
University of Colorado at Boulder

In her inaugural speech (October 4, 1991), President Judith Albino encouraged all members of the University community to become involved in the daily commitment to "the imperative of diversity." One essential area where faculty members can fulfill their obligation to this imperative is the classroom. Billingsley (1991) delineates difficulties that they must overcome in order to foster diversity while teaching, and he offers excellent guidelines for "creating an atmosphere which embraces diversity."

His suggestions, however, are geared toward discussion courses. Consequently, some of his ideas may not be easy for faculty members to employ when working with more than 15 to 20 students. Here, I submit a few tips for those of us who work with medium-sized groups of 80 to 100 learners, as contrasted to what Middleton (1987) calls "thundering herds" of 200 or more.

Pedagogical style is a key factor in the formula for being a successful teacher. I tend to use an interactive approach, which encourages students to engage themselves actively in the learning process. Although this strategy is harder to exercise in large lectures than in seminars, using it is both possible and crucial to promoting diversity in the classroom.

In some ways, an interactive approach is similar to the discussion method Billingsley describes. For instance, he advocates creating an atmosphere of comfort, trust, and mutual respect, and he emphasizes the importance of "the faculty member's *behavior* as well as her *rhetoric*."

Middleton (1987) cites an element of teaching large classes that also applies to an interactive approach for medium-sized classes: "an awareness of a personalized relationship between the professor and the students, first as a group but then, at first gradually but with quickening pace, between the professor and individual students" (p.24).

To establish such an environment in a medium-sized classroom, however, a professor cannot literally involve each student in every

discussion. But she *can* set a tone that allows all students to feel like part of the process, whether they express themselves through speech or not.

Delineated below are some practical tips for creating an interactive scenario that fosters diversity in the classroom. I also strongly recommend Billingsley's brochure as a complement to these ideas.

1. Establish and maintain a climate of openness and interaction by disclosing personal information about yourself. As an African-American professor, I often divulge facts about myself that illuminate my similarities to and differences from my students.

For example, I usually share my abbreviated autobiography with students during one of the first class sessions. Then, I ask them to tell me about themselves as a homework assignment. Invariably, their autobiographies include the same kind of information as mine does.

Furthermore, I periodically reread their autobiographies throughout the semester and personalize discussions by referring to them. For example, if a student is from Ohio (as I am), I might make a comment about midwesterners and say, "Isn't that right, Susie?"

These kinds of tactics help to maintain an interactive atmosphere and to reinforce Billingsley's point that WE ARE ALL THE SAME IN DIFFERENT WAYS.

2. Those of you who are members of ethnic plurality groups should help students to understand that you *do not represent* your group. Rather, you are an individual, as are any students in your class who happen to be nonmajority persons.
3. Since "actions speak louder than words," try always to be mindful of your nonverbal behavior. To help students feel like part of the process, establish eye contact with each one during the session. Move around the classroom as you talk (especially when

you expect students to contribute to the discussion, but also while you are lecturing). Also, try to appear enthusiastic, relaxed, and comfortable.

4. Consider assigning seats according to alphabetical order, for at least two reasons: (1) you can learn students' names more easily; and (2) students who otherwise might not sit next to each other may have an opportunity to meet someone who is "different" from them.
5. If your subject matter permits, incorporate a few exercises that require groups of students to interact with each other. Billingsley recommends:

"Be sure to give students many opportunities to work together in small groups on a variety of problem-solving activities which stress the importance of using personal experience. Problems that are of universal significance are particularly useful for small group work."

6. Wherever possible, integrate (no pun intended) information about diversity into your classroom materials. Again, Billingsley recommends:

"Establish respect for the values of diverse peoples by using specific examples, from your field of study, to show how culturally varied people have contributed to western history and civilization. In particular, use examples that illustrate the value and beauty of the ethnic/racial/gender group under discussion."

"Use specific examples and ideas from your discipline which serve to exhibit the functions of stereotypes and their destructiveness. Try to introduce exercises which show the extent to which most of us are susceptible to belief in some kinds of stereotypes. In the field of American literature examples are abundant. The black child, Pecola Breedlove, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, accepts Euro-American stereotypes of beauty so completely that she fully believes her dark eyes and brown skin are emblems of absolute ugliness. She prays for the blue eyes of white girls whom she sees,

stereotypically, as beautiful and eternally happy."

7. Before the middle of the semester, devise an assignment that requires students to meet with you individually. If possible, review the student's autobiography before the meeting. The purpose of this activity is to give the students a chance to talk with you privately and to let them know that you are approachable. This may be particularly meaningful for ethnic plurality students, who (in my experience) sometimes seem apprehensive about talking one-on-one with their professors.

References

- Billingsley, Ron. "Fostering Diversity In the Classroom: Teaching by Discussion." *On Diversity in Teaching and Learning*, no. 1. Boulder: Faculty Teaching Excellence Program, Univ. of Colorado at Boulder, 1991.
- Middleton, Charles. "Teaching the Thundering Herd: Surviving In a Large Classroom." In *On Teaching*, Vol. I, edited by Mary Ann Shea. Boulder: Faculty Teaching Excellence Program, Univ. of Colorado at Boulder, 1987.

Brenda J. Allen

Biography

Brenda J. Allen is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Colorado. She received her Ph.D. in Organizational Communication from Howard University in Washington D.C. Her specialty area is computer-mediated communication. Brenda is a member of the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Minority Affairs, the University's Outreach Council, and the Alumni Association Board of Directors. She also has been a faculty advisor for the Black Student Alliance and the Black Athletes Association. As service to the community she has given lectures and seminars on such topics as "Language and Race," "Celebrating Diversity" and "Communication and Racism" at public schools and government agencies. In 1990 she received the Outstanding Faculty Member Award of the Black Student Association.

As an African-American educator at a predominantly white university, Allen has

become quite aware of the importance of fostering diversity within the university's community. She has noticed that many students segregate themselves according to their ethnic backgrounds, and she has heard disturbing reports about incidents of racial discrimination. Through diligence as well as trial and error, Allen has developed techniques which help to promote diversity in teaching and learning during her first three years at CU.

Brenda Allen strives to encourage students to embrace and celebrate diversity by addressing relevant issues in the classes she teaches, and by helping to coordinate campus activities which engender interaction among a variety of groups. She believes that through these types of activities, students and other members of the community will have wonderful opportunities to enhance their educational experience by getting to know more about others (and themselves).