

## A History of the Diversity in Teaching and Learning Series

This is a collection of monographs on embracing diversity in teaching and learning published by the Faculty Teaching Excellence Program and mailed to faculty at the University of Colorado. The original mailings were funded by the Faculty Teaching Excellence Program, Academic Affairs and a modest grant from the President's Fund for the Retention of Minorities and Women.

In order to begin and develop the project, a committee was established whose members included:

- Ron Billingsley, English
- Lerita Coleman, Psychology
- Shu-Ling Everett, Journalism
- Deborah Flick, Women Studies
- Estevan Flores, Sociology
- Robert Pois, History
- William Wei, History

It took the Faculty Teaching Excellence Program several semesters to develop the appropriate format to address issues of diversity in teaching and learning at the University of Colorado. The Program first set out to put together a *Compendium of Good Ideas on Teaching and Learning: Focus on Diversity*. The committee members served as advisors in developing a 19-item survey of descriptors which asked students to assess the impact that diversity had on their learning experiences. These surveys were then administered to classes of selected faculty on the Boulder campus.

The next step was to interview these faculty members and to ask them to comment on the categories in which students had rated them very highly. Then tapes of the conversations were reviewed to identify concrete teaching tips for the improvement of teaching and learning with respect to diversity.

While the tips we extracted from these conversations were excellent, it quickly became apparent that they were relevant within different pedagogies and teaching methodologies of faculty. Since the Program's goal was to provide concrete teaching tips that could be readily adapted or adopted by faculty who wanted to honor diversity in their classrooms, the pedagogy had to be examined and explained. The tips would only be useful to other faculty if they were framed in a pedagogical context.

The Program therefore decided to ask faculty members known to be experienced in creating an atmosphere in their classes that fosters diversity to author a brochure with concrete teaching tips. Those tips are prefaced here by a short narrative in which the framework is set within which the teaching tips are suggested.

The response our first brochures received was very positive and clearly reflected the need our faculty colleagues and the community had for more such information. It also suggested that we had chosen an appropriate format to address the complex issues of diversity in teaching and learning at our university. We therefore decided to make our *Series on Diversity in Teaching and Learning* available to you in this form.

This volume may be purchased through the University Book Center at the University of Colorado.<sup>1</sup> We hope it will assist you in fostering diversity in your classroom.

Mary Ann Shea, Editor

### Fostering Diversity in the Classroom: Teaching by Discussion

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<sup>1</sup> **Mail orders:** Univ. of Colorado Book Center, Attn: Deborah Silverman, Order Dept., Campus Box 36, Boulder, CO 80309-0036. The cost is \$8.50 per copy. Please include \$3.50 shipping and handling for one copy, \$4.00 for two copies. For three or more copies you will be charged the actual postage cost.

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## Professor Ron Billingsley

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Cultural diversity is a fact, often unacknowledged, of our national history. And while it is true that fostering diversity is an idea which is consistent with some of our most enduring national ideals, such as respect for the right of each individual to pursue life in their own fashion, promoting these ideals in the classroom can often prove very difficult. The difficulties which must be overcome stem from several sources:

1. A basic lack of knowledge about the diverse peoples and lifestyles that have always been a part of the American experience.
2. Inherited prejudices and stereotypes, many of which are unacknowledged and/or unknown.
3. Deep seated feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and anxiety which are stirred by discussion of diversity issues.

A successful pedagogy must start with an awareness of these difficulties and some fundamental strategies for overcoming them.

While a variety of pedagogies can be fruitful, it seems especially helpful to provide an environment where students can comfortably engage in discussion (as opposed to recitation in which a "right" answer is sought). True discussion sends a message of empowerment between equal agents who all have something significant to contribute to a common enterprise. Although sharing the principles and facts of one's discipline with students is very important, preparing an environment of comfort, trust and mutual respect must also be seen as a primary task. Such an environment makes it possible for meaningful human exchange to take place on complex and often frightening issues. It can enable students to experience a common ground of mutual experiences and respect which can bind students together and simultaneously make it easier to understand and celebrate many differences.

The pedagogy of teaching by discussion places a heavy burden on the Professor. She

must establish not just a *content* of diversity but a *process* that actualizes and **demonstrates** appreciation of diversity. It is important to bear in mind that students are observing and learning the faculty member's *behavior* as well as her *rhetoric*. This type of classroom environment not only embodies the fundamental value of appreciation of diversity but it can also yield great rewards in terms of critical thinking skills, especially the ability to appreciate sophisticated multiple perspectives on complex intellectual and moral issues.

The following tips are practical suggestions that undergird the pedagogy of teaching by discussion. In addition, the tips on teaching and learning suggested below assist in creating an atmosphere which embraces diversity in the classroom.

1. Create an environment of trust and mutual respect so that discussion is not inhibited by fear. Introduce one or more ice-breaking activities that allow students to get to know one another fairly well. They should know each other's first and last names, hobbies, majors, place of birth etc. Think up questions that are of interest to you and related to your subject area on which students can exchange information. Use some class time to mention things that students have in common. Let students know of others in the class that have similar interest.
2. You must make it absolutely clear that no one in the classroom is under attack, or is seen as the official representative of a particular group. Explain that no one in the class is viewed as responsible for the ethnocentric behavior of anyone else or of any other group (majority or minority) past or present. Students must be assured that one important point of the class is to explore and understand diversity. The strategy must be to **celebrate everyone and to**

- denigrate no one.** Surely, many aspects of the historical and cultural past will be discussed. Many of them will be negative. But it will not be the job of the professor or other students to point the finger of blame at anyone in the classroom. The right of each person to choose what group and what issues to identify with or to disregard must always be protected and respected. Above all the instructor models appropriate behavior by treating all students with great respect, even though he may not, for a variety of very legitimate reasons, agree with some of their opinions.
3. Minority students must be viewed and treated as *individuals* rather than racial, ethnic or gender *categories*. No one should be forced to assume the position of a particular group. If they choose to speak as a member of a minority group, their remarks become one more resource that can be utilized in the same way that a contribution from any non-minority person would be incorporated into the classroom dialogue.
  4. Universalize the ethnic/gender experience whenever possible so that students can identify with those that they might have previously seen as "other." Find examples from your subject area that illustrate how people of diverse identities share many common problems, issues and solutions. Activities such as eating, dancing, making art, courting, child-rearing, playing etc. can be explored in the search for commonalities. Students need to experience the marvelous paradox of human diversity, that **WE ARE ALL THE SAME IN DIFFERENT WAYS.**
  5. When there is a sharp difference of opinion between two students ask both of them to explain their positions. The listener must explain in his own words what was said by the first person. When the first speaker is satisfied that she has been understood accurately, then the two can reverse roles. In this way you can build accuracy of communication and encourage mutual respect. Often differences that seemed great initially are minimized and even eliminated.
  6. If arguments between students start to become abusive, interpose yourself between them. Take the place of the student that is being attacked and answer for him until tempers cool and the two initial adversaries can safely face one another again. This is your opportunity to clarify language, but above all it is your opportunity to demonstrate that the essence of diversity in the classroom is mutual respect.
  7. Use your discipline to make clear what the rewards have been historically for various forms of prejudicial behavior that have opposed the expression of diversity. Students need to understand the psychological, economic, and political reasons why diversity has often been undermined in various societies in the past. Use examples from the immediate society/ environment, so long as they are not embarrassing or accusative of participants in the class.
  8. 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.
  9. Try to attract students to your classroom who represent diversity. For example, you might notify people from counseling and advising staffs that you are interested in issues of diversity. Although such students would not be "used" as representatives of their group (see #3 above), their participation will inevitably provide a wider range of input than is available from a homogeneous group.
  10. Be sure to give students many opportunities to work together in small groups (3-5) on a variety of problem-solving activities which stress the importance of using personal experience. Problems that are of universal significance (see #4 above) are particularly useful for small group work.
  11. Use language that is gender neutral or that

uses female pronouns as often as male pronouns. This can be done with great effect when describing unknown or hypothetical individuals in positive, creative, or authoritative positions.

12. Enhance the self-respect of individual students by referring to valuable ideas and comments they have made in previous classes.
13. 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.
14. Be sure to indicate to students the arbitrary nature of cultural and intellectual agendas. Students need to understand that while particular cultural forms may be useful (such as quantitative forms of analysis), they are not absolutes. We may judge specific forms of behavior by these standards, but never individual worth. In a diverse classroom it is essential to be able to separate worth from behavior. The worth of each student should never be questioned, and it must be clear that the value of individual levels of behavior or achievement is a convenient convention that is established in many different ways in various cultural groups.

#### References

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

#### Recommended Reading

To explore the topic further, Ron Billingsley suggests the following reading:

- Banks, James A. (Ed.) *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. National Council for the Social Studies, 1973.
- Freire, Paolo. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.
- Goodlad, John. *A Place Called School*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.
- Hawkins, David. "On Living in Trees," in *The Informed Vision*. New York: Agathon Press, 1974.
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- Kohl, Herbert. *36 Children*. New York: New American Library, 1967.
- Kozol, Jonathan. *Death at an Early Age*. New York: Bantam Books, 1968.
- Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Postman, Neil and Charles Weingartner. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1969.

#### Ronald G. Billingsley

##### Biography

Ron Billingsley was raised in Los Angeles, California and received his undergraduate degree in English from the University of Redlands. After serving five years in the Navy as an officer and aviator he went to the University of Oregon where he earned a Masters and Ph.D. in American Literature. While in Oregon he developed a love for photography, for the mountains, and for outdoor sports such as backpacking, cross country skiing, cycling and kayaking. During his twenty-one years at the University of Colorado his interest in teaching and curriculum development has been primary. While at C.U. he has taught some thirty different courses offered in six different programs and departments.

Billingsley has participated in a number of interdisciplinary and experimental programs such as the Honors Program, Experimental Studies, Farrand Hall Residential Academic Program, and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. His three voyages around the world with the Semester at Sea program served to raise his concern for global issues and environmental problems and prompted him to design a number of interdisciplinary global studies courses. Additionally he has a deep and sustained interest in teacher training and most

aspects of teaching and learning; he is especially concerned with interdisciplinary and multicultural approaches to education. His current role as the Associate Director of the President's Leadership Class allows him to exercise many of his abiding interests in interdisciplinary studies, curriculum development, and teacher training.

Over the years his interest in literary approaches to American culture has remained very strong. He is passionate about sharing the richness of American literature with his students. Although he started teaching African-American literature twenty-five years ago, in the last decade he has increasingly broadened his focus to include other ethnic literatures and issues of diversity. His pedagogy is the product of wide study and years of continual experimentation in the classroom. He feels very strongly that all education should strive to be experiential, but especially teaching that relates to issues of diversity. Students must come to know the people and materials they are studying in ways that are not narrow and abstract so that the great humanizing potential of ethnic and gender studies can be realized. Professor Billingsley feels that it is critically important to embrace diversity in the classroom because of its multiple benefits to the individual and the

larger society. Through such studies the individual is able to live in a larger and more varied cultural world and to experience a deeper sense of his or her own humanity by perceiving the underlying needs and impulses that all people have in common. An emphasis on diversity permits students to gain the seemingly paradoxical, but essential, ability to appreciate *both* the ways in which they are similar and the ways in which they seem different from others, to enjoy that fact that *we are all the same in different ways*. This capacity to appreciate differences while perceiving binding similarities provides a perspective and a set of experiences that are essential for structuring the kinds of creative dialogues that are necessary in democratic societies.

Ron Billingsley won the SOAR (Student Organization for Alumni Relations) Teaching Recognition Award in 1990 and the Farrand Hall "Teacher of the Year" Award in 1988. He has given public lectures on such topics as "The Mandala Earth," "Shadow Work: Teaching the Ethnic Experience," and "Leadership in the Multicultural Workplace." In 1988 his book *Women in the Workplace: A Man's Perspective*, coauthored with Lloyd S. Lewan, was published by Remington Press.