Engaging Diversity in First-Year College Classrooms

Amy Lee · Rhiannon Williams · Rusudan Kilaberia

Abstract The increasing calls for diversity research signal a need to explore strategies through which we attempt to interact with and respond to diversity intentionally in courses and curricula. This case study of a first-year inquiry course in a college of education fills a gap in the literature by documenting and analyzing instances of educators actively working with multiple dimensions of diversity in the classroom so as to support students’ development of diversity-related competencies. The guiding research question for this study was to explore what curricular and/or pedagogical activities students in a first-year experience course identified as facilitating their engagement with diversity in an intentional, purposeful manner.

Key words Diversity · Pedagogy · Higher education classrooms

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I did not just like the presentations, but I also like the idea of what this assignment brought out. These stories I heard from everyone gave me a whack on the side of my head; I suddenly realized we are all having different lives, and we are all experiencing different things. Who we are now is from what experiences we have gone through; what I was hearing from them made a change in my life because I listened to all their stories and experience that made me have different points of view in things.—Mairen

With these words Mairen described a critical-learning moment in her first-year experience course. Her reflection illustrates the potential for courses simultaneously to develop students’ disciplinary knowledge and skills and to provide purposeful opportunities for interaction. As Mairen noted, the assignment provided an opportunity to “listen” to other students’ stories about their experiences and enabled her to consider “different points of view . . .” Mairen’s reflective assessment demonstrates how classrooms can serve as sites of engaged diversity, sites where concern is focused on both the act and process of engaging diversity in an intentional manner.

Developing the ability to communicate and interact effectively in diverse groups and settings is commonly articulated as a fundamental priority for higher education in the twenty-first century. The American Association for Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007) report entitled College Learning for a New Global Century identified intercultural competency as “one of the new basics in a contemporary liberal education,” one that is “essential for work, civil society, and social life” (p. 15). In their monograph on institutional climate and diverse perspectives Dey et al. (2010) highlighted findings from the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI), which demonstrated “that, while higher education places high value on engaging diverse perspectives, [institutions] need to do much more to ensure that . . . students actually develop these [intercultural] capacities across several years in college” (p. ix). We believe that it is imperative to learn how to increase such opportunities over the course of the undergraduate experience.

A significant body of quantitative research has established the impact of intentional, facilitated peer interactions in fostering intercultural awareness, knowledge, and behavioral competencies (Bowman 2010a; Denson 2009; Milem 2003). However, little is understood about students’ perspectives or experiences in support of the development of such competencies. There is a need for qualitative studies that look at the classroom climate, focusing on students’ interactions relating to diversity so as to understand how and why particular outcomes are achieved (Eisenchlas and Trevaskes 2007; Gesche and Makeham 2008; Marin 2000). Directly consulting students regarding the nature and quality of their experiences in classrooms can enhance our understanding of diversity-related learning and development (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators 2004; Harper & Quaye 2009).

Given that intercultural competencies are not produced in a single course, this study focused on the classroom as a domain for engaging diversity, and we investigated students’ reflections on a required first-year multidisciplinary course that does not fulfill the institution’s diversity requirement. Drawing on the premise that all students come into higher education institutions with a wealth of diversity capital, the case study was framed by AAC & U’s Inclusive Excellence framework (Clayton-Pedersen et al. (2009). The guiding research question for this study was as follows. What curricular components and/or pedagogical activities did students in a first-year experience course identify and reflect upon as facilitating their engagement with diversity?
Background

Key Concepts: Engaging Diversity and Inclusive Excellence

First, it is essential to explain how we defined diversity for this study. Diversity is frequently conceptualized in terms of racial and ethnic identity and defined in the higher education context in three ways: 1) structural diversity, i.e., the demographic diversity of a campus; 2) interactional diversity, i.e., deliberate and facilitated interactions with structural diversity; and 3) curricular diversity, i.e., diverse ideas and peers in classroom or co-curricular contexts (Bowman 2010a; Gottfredson et al. 2008; Gurin et al. 2002).

We used the definition of diversity developed by Clayton-Pedersen et al. (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2009), in which diversity in a campus context means “the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement” (p. 6) with differences in a purposeful manner so as to increase one’s diversity-related competencies. They defined differences as both “individual,” such as personality, learning styles, and life experiences, and group or social, such as race/ethnicity, gender, country of origin, religion (p. 6). According to this definition, diversity refers not to the presence of difference in student demographics or course content, but to the act and process of engaging those differences in an intentional, purposeful manner. This conceptual shift rejects the tendency to conflate multiculturalism and diversity (Milem et al. (2005)) and reflects the general agreement that context and conditions that engage diversity play a critical role in learning outcomes (Bowman 2010a; b; Milem 2003).

The concept of engaging diversity stems from new theoretical paradigms, in particular AACU’s Inclusive Excellence framework (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2009), which calls for higher education institutions and practitioners to transform the traditional model wherein diversity is approached as a target or outcome. In an Inclusive Excellence framework, diversity is understood to be a complex and essential thread that must be intentionally woven into the fabric of the institution at all levels: policy; leadership; institutional culture; student life; and last, but not least, the classroom (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2009; Milem et al. 2005; Williams et al. Williams et al. 2005). For this study, engaging diversity refers to intentional, comprehensive efforts to develop and implement pedagogy, policies, and practices that utilize the diversity resources of a campus for the benefit of students’ learning and development.

Interactions with Diverse Peers and Curricula

Several studies have identified cognitive, affective, and social outcomes associated with engaging diversity, including increased cognitive sophistication and complexity (Antonio 2004; Gurin et al. 2002), critical thinking skills (Hu & Kuh 2003; Milem 2003), academic skill development (Denson 2009), efficacy in reducing prejudice, growth in racial and cultural appreciation (Bowman 2010a), comprehension of others’ perspectives, and tolerance of ambiguity (Goodman 2008). Structural diversity is consistently identified as a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving these outcomes (Gurin et al. 2002; Hurtado 2001; Marin 2000; Milem 2003; Saenz et al. 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski 2005).

From (Allport 1954) contact theory to more recent studies on the relationship between intergroup contact and diversity-related student learning and development outcomes (Denson 2009; Gurin et al. 2002; Hu & Kuh 2003), it is clear that the frequency and quality of diverse interactions are significant factors in realizing the benefits of learning in a diverse environment. These findings demonstrate the importance of intentionally designed
intercultural interactions. In addition, several studies have concluded that it is important to provide sustained and coordinated efforts across and throughout the undergraduate experience in order to maximize the benefits of diversity on student development and learning (Gottfredson et al. 2008; Gurin et al. 2002) and to achieve the level of intercultural competency required to participate effectively and thoughtfully in diverse settings in our communities and workplaces (AAC&U 2010). For institutions and practitioners seeking to improve diversity-related outcomes, these findings draw attention to classes and the need to investigate how they can be intentionally designed so as to “activate” (Marin 2000) the diversity resources present in order to encourage students to develop, test, apply, and reflect upon the ability to use and build upon new knowledge.

Engaging Diversity in the Classroom

The conduct of classes can promote diversity-related outcomes if the three types of diversity, structural, curricular, and interactional, are engaged, regardless of whether a course is explicitly oriented to diversity in its content or discipline. Because students from varied backgrounds and social identity groups are drawn to common courses, patterns of segregation outside of classes can be disrupted and the potential for intergroup interactions and collaboration are present (Smith 2009).

Gurin et al. (2002) found that students benefited the most when there was structural diversity present as well as a “pedagogy that facilitates learning in a diverse environment” and “extensive and meaningful informal interracial interaction” (p. 359). While these findings may seem obvious to those engaged in research on diversity in higher education, there is evidence of a disconnect between what research has found and teaching practices in the classroom (Eisenchlas et al. 2003; Gesche and Makeham 2008). In a survey conducted by (Maruyama & Mareno 2000) of more than 500 faculty members from Carnegie Research-1 institutions regarding their attitudes and behaviors towards diversity on campus, only 27% of them reported having adjusted their pedagogy “to encourage discussion among students”; and 38% reported raising “racial/ethnic issues in classes” as a result of increased structural diversity in their classrooms (p. 17).

The Inclusive Excellence framework presumes that institutions benefit from structural transformation so as to embed diversity throughout all levels and domains, from policy to demographics to curriculum. From the literature, we know that frequent and longitudinal opportunities to engage diversity are necessary for students to achieve the levels of cognitive and affective development needed for effective intercultural interactions. These opportunities need to be provided intentionally across the curriculum and over the course of students’ undergraduate education. The particular course we examined is a required freshman experience course that does not meet the campus diversity requirement, and we investigated how the faculty members structured opportunities for students to interact with diverse knowledge, experiences, and ideas presented by both the student demographics as well as the content of the course. This study illuminates facets of students’ self-reported experiences and developmental outcomes related to diversity competencies.

The First Year Inquiry Course

Since 2008, the First-Year Inquiry (FYI) course has been required of all first-year students in the University of Minnesota’s (U of M) College of Education and Human Development
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The U of M is located in an urban setting and draws students from the two surrounding metropolitan areas as well as the suburbs and nearby rural areas. Nearly 75% of the overall undergraduate student population and 25% of the first-year students live off campus. The First-Year Inquiry (FYI) course fulfills an intensive writing requirement and engages students in interdisciplinary studies to address the question, “How can one person make a difference?” Each fall, 18 faculty members, assigned to three-person teams, teach six sections of FYI to approximately 450 new students. The course meets twice a week, once in a lecture-style class with 80 students and the three faculty team members and once in a recitation of 25-27 students and one faculty member. Table I illustrates the racial and ethnic demographics and common indicators of academic preparation.

Two salient features of our study are important to note. First, we selected a first-year course because the literature suggests that the early college years offer an opportunity for significant cognitive growth relevant to diversity (Bowman 2010b; Saenz 2010). Students enter college with established habits of mind and social interaction; but experience with novel ideas, unfamiliar contexts, and diverse social groups can prompt the cognitive disequilibrium critical to supporting cognitive and affective development (Flurtado 2001; Milem et al. 2005).

Second, we selected the FYI because it is not a diversity course in content, nor is it offered by a department that is organized around multicultural or global studies. The program’s faculty members are united by a commitment to undergraduates, particularly first-year students; but their disciplinary affiliations range from biology to psychology to humanities, history, and mathematics education. Each of the six, three-person teams is responsible for course design, content, and pedagogy that support the learning outcomes. Beyond that, with the exception of working with a common book, teams bring their own expertise and teaching styles to course design style. Instructors are not provided with specific training related to diversity or multicultural education though they are provided workshops related to supporting students writing development, team teaching, and active learning.

Case Study Method and Analysis

We chose an interpretive case-study approach (Merriam 1998) in order to portray and analyze one example in which curricular, interactional, and structural diversity were incorporated into the design of a first-year experience course. This approach supported an in-depth exploration of the pedagogical framework that supported the holistic integration of curricular, interactional, and structural diversity in the class (Merriam 1998). This study had received the approval of the Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main source of data was the students’ reflective journals. According to (Brookfield 1995), student reflective journals offer insights into students’ experiences with the course and create an anchor for them to further their own learning and development. In the FYI, reflective journals garnered information throughout the semester about students’ learning and development as well as their perceptions about the course design and pedagogy.

For this study, we looked at students’ reflections from two different points in the semester. At the mid-point, students reflected on their engagement, frustrations, and perceptions of classroom climate. At the end of the semester, they reflected upon a significant moment, event, or incident within the course, described it thoroughly, and...
Table I: Demographic comparison between CEHD and U of M freshmen 08-10 cohorts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Am. Indian</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>TRiO&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>ATS</th>
<th>CET&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Honors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cohort 10-11</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CEHD &lt;n=447)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>23% (n=102)</td>
<td>43% (n=193)</td>
<td>10% (n=45)</td>
<td>5% (n=22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rest of U of M</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5% (n=264)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11% (n=540)</td>
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<td><strong>Cohort 09-10</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CEHD &lt;n=457)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>21% (n=95)</td>
<td>45% (n=205)</td>
<td>12% (n=55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of U of M</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4% (n=229)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11% (n=571)</td>
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<td><strong>Cohort 08-09</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CEHD &lt;n=400)</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24% (n=97)</td>
<td>46% (n=183)</td>
<td>11% (n=44)</td>
<td>3.3% (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of U of M</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5% (n=256)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11% ( n=586)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>TRiO is a nationwide, federally-funded organization of projects committed to providing educational opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background, or economic circumstance

<sup>b</sup>CET is a program for immigrant students who have lived in the United States for seven years or less
explained why they selected it. Reflective journal responses ranged from 400 to 700 words. None of the questions explicitly solicited students’ perceptions of or experiences with regard to diversity (of classmates or content).

The research team consisted of a faculty member, a director of assessment, and a graduate student, none of whom taught the course. Thus, the team was detached from the journal content and had no direct experience with the class. Besides student journals, data collected included course syllabi and assignments given to students. The analysis involved three phases. In the first phase, researchers independently read journal entries from fall semesters of 2008 (n=401), 2009 (n=457), and 2010 (n=447) and identified moments where students reflected on engaging diversity. We identified 314 such moments (2008, n= 100; 2009, 121; and 2010, 93). In the second phase, we identified three main assignments that emerged most frequently among the 314 engaging diversity moments: the biographical object assignment (n= 111); the common book unit (n=87); and collaborative projects (n= 81). In the third phase, each researcher reviewed the 314 selected journal excerpts to look for emerging themes related to the pedagogy (how these assignments were designed and implemented) and engagement of diversity. Subsequent comparisons and discussions led to the identification of two major themes for each assignment.

Assignments and Engagement of Diversity

The focus of this case-study was not on the assignments in isolation, but rather on the context within which they were implemented. These assignments are an example of how instructors need not invent new activities or transform their courses in order to engage diversity in intentional and educationally beneficial ways. We now present an overview of each assignment, students’ reflections on how participating in the assignment furthered diversity competencies, and finally the implications for practitioners. We contend that in order to engage diversity effectively (i.e., facilitate interactions with structural and curricular diversity in an inclusive manner), instructors’ pedagogical approach should: 1) develop an environment of respect, reciprocity, and trust in class; 2) challenge students to develop cognitive and affective competencies in order to grapple with novel and complex ideas and issues; 3) provide multiple opportunities for purposeful collaboration that enable students to practice and hone skills over time; and 4) provide formal and informal opportunities for students to reflect on their learning.

Assignment One: Biographical Object

Students completed a biographical-object assignment early in the course. It required them to select an object that reflected an aspect of their identity, experience, or values. This assignment has two parts, written and oral presentation. Students were asked to describe the object so as to evoke a mental image and to explain its relevance to their cultural identity. This assignment thus taught traditional academic skills such as rhetorical awareness (i.e., knowing one’s audience, employing effective communication strategies), the construction of meaning through descriptive writing, and oral communication. At the same time, the biographical-object assignment supported informal, intercultural interactions. What stood out in students’ journals was that they consistently and explicitly identified this assignment as facilitating diversity-related outcomes, not only when the objects were presented, but extending several weeks or even months later in supporting subsequent group projects or their ability to engage perspectives that differed from their own.
The students who reflected on this assignment consistently described how the opportunity to exchange stories about meaningful personal objects facilitated the development of a respectful classroom environment characterized by comfortable peer-to-peer interaction. Many students described it as effective in breaking down barriers that can inhibit interaction among strangers in a classroom and as setting the stage for students’ active engagement in the class. One example was Phang1 (fall, 2009), who described how the biographical-object assignment served as a vehicle for establishing rapport and developing a positive learning environment.

... a lot of my classmates shared their own stories that I do not think that they will ever tell anyone, including me. ... it made me know my classmates better as a person. I do wish that at times all my classes created somewhat of a unit like this one because it helps build a bit of a relationship with everyone in the class, and the story behind the object gives a lot of information about one person, which I think ...help [ed] everyone to create a trust between one another.

Students reported that the assignment helped facilitate interaction among peers because it gave them an opportunity to narrate an aspect of their identity or experience and to build connections to or knowledge about one another on the basis of those narratives.

I still remember some of the objects that people brought: Walter’s hat, Leonard’s running shoes, and Martha’s picture of her dog. . . . The look on people’s faces when I (shared my object) was important to me, because I feel that they really understood me in that moment. Telling people what I value and believe in is important to me because I think that too often who we are is taken for granted. ... I learned more about Islam in that group session than in my last four years of high school. Perhaps the most important part of the sharing that I took away from it was the fact that people are more than they appear.

The second theme we identified in our coding was that students cited the biographical object assignment as a catalyst in helping them reconsider assumptions about their peers or suspend judgment. Leslie (fall 2010) described the assignment as functioning to “break a bit of the prejudgments and ideas that people have.”

Instead of being lectured or talked to we got to hear from peers. I also . . . got to share a bit about myself. I always feel like people judge me, and many times I judge classmates myself. So when given a chance to share a little about myself [I can] hopefully break a bit of the prejudgments and ideas that people have made.

Leslie’s reflection demonstrates the importance of reciprocity of openness in that the assignment supported her development of an awareness of her own stance as well as an opportunity to actively influence the perspectives of her peers regarding her own identity.

Students frequently attributed the establishment of a supportive classroom environment, one characterized by respect, reciprocity, and inclusivity, to this early assignment. For many, the assignment was a critical foundation for their subsequent learning and interactions in the class. Zara (fall 2010) connected the biographical-object assignment to discussions about the common book which took place more than a month later. She wrote, “I really felt a sense of connectedness when (sharing our biographical objects). It made me feel so much

1 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the students’ identity.
more comfortable discussing other things—like the *Prisoner of Tehran* book—knowing that they listened and respected my special object.”

Overall, this assignment established a foundation for interactions across difference. Students became less anxious about talking with their peers and were thus more confident in how they would react to sharing perspectives, opinions, and experiences.

**Assignment Two: Common Book**

Each year, our college selects a common book that is relevant to FYFs guiding question for interdisciplinary study. “How can one person make a difference?” All students in the course read this book. The goal is to provide shared intellectual content as well to build a sense of an academic cohort for the 450 students. Faculty members typically spend four weeks working with the common book in class, using cooperative, active-learning pedagogies to connect multiple disciplinary concepts and students’ experiences to the content with the goal of developing students’ communication, analytical, and research skills. Strategies include group discussion, researching the book’s historical and political context, revising scenes from a different perspective, or participating in debates around the book’s central issues. Cocurricular activities complement these strategies and consist of (a) the author’s visit to the FYI classes, (b) an evening lecture by the author that is open to the public and required of FYI students, and (c) related programming such as films or panel discussions. All students attend the author event as a single, first-year cohort; and they prepare by developing questions for a moderated dialogue with the writer.

In the three years of FYI to date, the books have been *Ordinary Man* by Paul Rusesabagina (Rusesabagina & Zoellner 2006), *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines (Gaines 1993), and *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat (Nemat 2007). The FYI faculty design assignments that support students’ development of the capacity to observe, apply, and reflect critically on multiple perspectives in relation to a common text. From journal reflections across three years, it is evident that the common book gave students opportunities to grapple with the intersections of new knowledge and perspectives and to consider how this applied to their own lives, experiences, views, and disciplinary frames.

Students described the common book experience as a platform for learning about and with one another. Mari (fall 2010) noted that these discussions yielded an understanding of how values and perspectives are shaped by an individual’s complex history and identity, which, in turn, form the lens through which one encounters texts and others’ stories.

Most importantly, discussing my culture and childhood with other students has changed my views on certain people’s backgrounds and behaviors . . . conversing about *Prisoner of Tehran* with my classmates has formed more connections. When discussions begin with topics about the novel, they usually end with conversations about our everyday lives. I am able to connect with my classmates and understand their values and understandings of certain parts of the novel.

Students often described how their study of the common book motivated them to feel a greater responsibility to understand issues and experiences that had previously seemed disconnected or irrelevant to their own experience. Pat’s (fall 2008) reflective writing echoed thoughts of other students who articulated a process of becoming more self-aware as they forned a sense of the relevance and purpose of connecting to issues, histories, and experiences that initially seem far removed and unrelated to their own contexts. Pat recalled attending Paul Rusesabagina’s lecture with his father. He noted, “I was never too concerned about other countries because I felt like it was too far away from me to focus on things that I really could have
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no part of.” However, Pat noted a shift in his thinking after reading *An Ordinary Man*, participating in class discussion, and listening to Paul Rusesabagina talk. He attached a greater importance to being aware of global events and issues outside of his immediate context:

I did not want to be like the people in power who he called but would not take the time to help him let alone listen. . . . I feel as though even if I may not be able to directly help . . . being aware of what is going on and not taking part in the ignorance that so many people take part in is better than nothing. Taking the time to read up on what is going on in places like Darfur is something that I have been inspired to do after learning about the things we have heard about in class.

Kathy’s (fall 2009) critical moment provided another example of how students described the common book assignment as facilitating their ability and interest in fostering connections between seemingly disparate worlds. In her case, the associations are closer to home: she brought a copy to her workplace to foster intercultural interactions and interpersonal communications in that context of the sort that the common book unit supported in her FYI class. Kathy’s account of the book prompted her co-workers to want to read it, and for two weeks they held informal discussions about the book during their breaks. In fact, Kathy stated that “we even have a copy sitting in our break room.” This group would compare individual understandings of various parts of the book, as Kathy related how her FYI classmates understood those same parts. In this generative process, according to Kathy, “we compared, explained, and finally understood each others’ perspectives.” Moreover, “we discussed the issues and applied them to similar issues of today.” Kathy attributes the ability to be involved in such a process to the design of FYI, “I would have never done that if FYI didn’t require me to read that book or teach me to be comfortable expressing my ideas and opinions on issues.” Although Kathy refers to the FYI as a catalyst, she demonstrates a cooperative and proactive posture in that she transfers her enthusiasm and knowledge of the book to an environment outside of the classroom, and involves new persons in a productive conversation about the book.

Kathy’s example reflects a low-stakes opportunity for engaging diversity, which students identified as instrumental in promoting their comfort and confidence in having discussions across diverse perspectives. Low-stakes moments enable relaxed, informal exchanges without the pressure to develop a particular product in a specified timeframe. In order for students to achieve cognitive and affective diversity-learning outcomes, such as mindfulness or tolerance of ambiguity, they need not only to be exposed to different ways of thinking and ideas, but to have many opportunities to fit these new perspectives in their existing frameworks.

Assignment Three: High-Stakes Collaborative Project

The FYI requires a substantive collaborative capstone project, which involves research on a particular topic, a group presentation at a public forum, and an individual written component. The project typically extends over three to five weeks and is designed to provide students with a higher-stakes experience in applying multiple perspectives through collaborative research. While the biographical-assignment and common-book sections of this paper document ways in which FYI regularly engages students in low-stakes collaborative assignments and activities, it is evident from students’ journals that the capstone project challenges them to advance their communication skills in small groups.

Social uncertainty and a lack of confidence in interpersonal communications with strangers were often described by students when they reflected on their early interactions
with peers, whether in class or at the start of a group project. Kevin (fall 2008) identified the capstone project as “the most valuable experience from this class” because it emphasized the importance of effective communication if one is to “to accomplish a goal or learn anything from anyone.” Kevin described this experience as a two-way street in which one learns about oneself and about the lives of others, which taught him “valuable life lessons.”

Students who selected the capstone project for their critical moment journal often described both the cognitive and affective benefits of collaborating with their peers on a formal, extended project. Zoe (fall 2009) explained how the collaborative aspect of the capstone assignment enabled her to develop an openness to diverse opinions and perspectives. After she described the capstone as an “opportunity to work with people I usually would not work with,” Zoe noted that, “this school is so much more diverse than my school I attended, so that is where I am coming from ... I had to learn to be more open to other opinions, and more willing to express my thoughts.” Zoe felt this this experience enhanced her writing ability, and she explained as follows.

I think having more than one opinion on something helps tons more when writing or explaining something later on. . . . Being able to write our thoughts about a specific subject, and have someone else break it down and revise it, helps me to write better. . . . When writing these papers for the capstone project I feel like three people’s ideas are better than one person because we all see the issues differently. . . .

Earlier, we noted that one theme in students’ reflections on the biographical object assignment was its impact on engendering a sense of rapport among classmates by promoting active listening and respect for others’ perspectives; it moved them beyond readily available assumptions or stereotypes about their peers. We noted that students who reflected on the capstone project often traced positive aspects of their collaboration back to that first biographical object assignment, thus describing a cumulative impact of those behaviors. Marty’s (fall 2010) reflection provided an example of students consciously applying knowledge gained throughout the FYI course, though her reflection describes an interaction that took place outside of class. In a conversation with a group of friends about different neighborhoods in the city in which they lived, Marty’s friend “made a prejudiced comment about the people that live in a certain region.” Marty confronted her friend by pointing out that “she did not have a real experience with the minority group she was referring to, and she did not have a reason for her comment beyond things she had heard.”

Marty attributed the FYI experience to increased cognitive and affective diversity knowledge and skills, which were supported by hearing classmates’ stories and understanding those personal experiences in the context of societal prejudice, “Before the class, I may have stood by and not spoken up when I thought that something someone said was very biased and unjust; however, now I felt more confident to speak up and share my opinion.” Marty underscored the personal and experiential nature of engaging diversity in the FYI class.

I understood that injustice happens frequently in our society; however, to hear personal stories from such a vast majority of the class really made the experience real for me. . . . there needs to be such a greater drive for equality in attitude, treatment, and representation. Therefore, when with my group of friends and a prejudiced comment is made, I can no longer say nothing.

Marty reflected that it was not merely the study of injustice as a theoretical construct that impacted her, but the intersections of formal study and experiential learning resulting from
first-person accounts that “made the class so real.” The class didn’t encourage stories for stories’ sake, but rather it located those narratives within a larger context in order to analyze their themes and significance. This sequence of learning moments culminated in Marty’s reflection on the importance of disrupting her friend’s “story” about the people she was disparaging:

This experience also illustrated for me how important it is to not only do the capstone project, but to take what we learn from it and work for action in the community. To hear about the racial, sexual, and other injustice in the classroom, and then to hear friends express their prejudiced remarks. ... If people can come together to understand each other and then work together to help develop safe, healthy communities, we will be able to work for less prejudice, and also better developed communities.

The capstone project enabled students to implement processes that had been modeled throughout the semester. In the critical reflections, students consistently noted that successful projects were associated with or supported by the following attributes: listening to and negotiating different approaches to the project, engaging in thoughtful critique with peers, and creating an inclusive climate. Overall, the students’ reflections emphasized the importance of context and implementation. Collaborative work that is grounded in the course content and goals and is guided by the instructor has more potential to support students’ development of skills necessary to engage in interactions with difference.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Students’ reflections demonstrate how the conduct of a class can intentionally engage diversity through the use of readily available instructional activities and content that facilitate intentional interactions with structural diversity, inclusive course content, and purposeful peer interactions. While not specified as a diversity course, the FYI course did address the three types of diversity by early promotion of student communication and interaction across diverse life experiences and social identity groups. Students’ opinions on the significance of these moments tend to identify a particular assignment as a catalyst and emphasize parts of the processes that facilitated their engagement with the assignment. In students’ journals three components emerged as essential to engaging diversity in the classroom: classroom climate, facilitated and frequent interaction across diversity, and reflection.

Classroom Climate

Whether students viewed peer interactions as relevant or beneficial to learning and their comfort level about sharing ideas has direct implications for their level of engagement with diversity and their development of both cognitive and affective diversity competencies. Students noted that the biographical-object assignment facilitated beneficial interactions with classmates whose experiences, identities, and points of view were different from their own, which both complicated and humanized their concepts of “difference” and “diversity.” They reported being listened to with respect and having a sense that they were able to influence how they were perceived. For some students, it was their first direct experience in a richly diverse environment. In essence, the assignment primed students to begin to think of issues in a more complex, non-dualistic manner. While it is difficult to say—or for that matter for students to articulate—how and when their changing attitudes, awareness, and
mindfulness began to increase comfort and decrease anxiety and uncertainty in interacting with diverse others, the findings indicate that the biographical assignment propelled and supported this process.

These findings suggest that initial activities which facilitate reciprocity and respect, model openness and effective communication skills, and provide an explicit and integrated purpose for peer interactions can lessen students’ anxiety and uncertainty about engaging diversity. They also support subsequent, beneficial collaborative learning.

Interactions with Diverse Content and Peers

Interaction among diverse peers is essential for the development of cognitive and affective skills. Yet, as noted in the diversity and intercultural literature, just putting students together in a class or in groups does not guarantee this kind of further development (Hurtado 2001; Tershova et al. 2000). In the FYI, such interactions were required both in and outside of class. Student explained that in many cases they would not have engaged with diverse others if they had not been purposefully placed in working groups and given clear goals that related to the course’s learning objectives.

Overall, facilitated and required interactions in and outside of the classroom, both low- and high-stakes, gave students opportunities to listen to and engage multiple perspectives and experiential knowledge which, in turn, increased their openness to engaging diversity and their confidence in effectively communicating with diverse individuals.

Formal, Structured Reflection

Students consistently described the value of formal reflection, specifically in-class opportunities to step back and make sense of their interactions with peers and encounters with course content. As they contemplated this process, it was apparent that such occasions are a critical component, together with course content, in supporting their growth and development. This suggests the importance of faculty members giving thought not only to core content but to how that content is used through intentional design and sequencing.

Conclusion and Future Research

Our study focused on the nature and quality of students self-reported interactions with structural and curricular diversity over one semester, with the goal of identifying patterns that emerged regarding pedagogical frameworks and elements that might inform faculty members about the process of engaging the diversity capital present in their classrooms. Future research investigating students’ self-reported experiences of dissonance and resistance would be beneficial; in particular, examining the distinction between moments of disequilibrium that are essential to and facilitate cognitive and affective development from moments that represent disengagement and culminate in resistance or closure rather than empathy or openness. Further studies could also explore how to develop faculty capacity to engage students’ feelings of frustration and challenge. Future research might also correlate responses according to academic cohort data and demographics in order to identify if particular assignments or activities resonated more or differently for particular student groups. If this case study presents a first-year, early initiation into a diverse environment, subsequent research is needed that develops and tests models for staging continued opportunities across the curriculum to increase students’ diversity-related competencies.
References


