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Teaching for Inclusion: The Challenges and Opportunities of Diversity in the Classroom

Extracted from the Keynote Workshop
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One of the greatest challenges we currently face as teachers is the way we use the opportunities presented by increasing diversity in our institutions to enhance the quality of teaching and learning so that every student in our classrooms has an equal opportunity to succeed. It's the challenge of teaching for inclusion. This paper will explore some of the specific challenges raised by diversity and suggest answers to three common pedagogical questions that the context of diversity requires us to rethink. Our first challenge is understanding the concept of diversity.

What is diversity?

My preferred definition of diversity is one taken from Taylor Cox Jr (1993:6) who defines diversity as:

"a mix of people in one social system who have distinctly different, socially relevant group affiliations".

A **social system** may, of course, be defined on many levels, e.g. countries, cities, organizations, work teams, etc. Similarly, there are many kinds of group affiliations such as those based on gender, nationality, age cohort, degrees of physical challenge or ability, race, ethnic identity, and religion. But a **socially relevant group affiliation** is one to which some meaning is often attached when people interact. For example, people differ in shoe size but this has limited social significance when compared to other differences such as occupation or political party. When group affiliations are not only socially relevant, but also of cultural significance, that is, when they differentiate groups on the basis of behavioural norms, values, language, goal priorities, and tendencies towards certain ways of thinking or certain ways of viewing the world, then we speak of **cultural** diversity. Thus, although I recognize that people can be diverse on an almost infinite number of dimensions, I am primarily interested in cultural diversity, with culture referring to the sum total of the way people live. So, when it comes to classroom diversity, I am referring to a mix of people in the classroom with distinctly different socially relevant group affiliations or "**social identities**".

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The Concept of Social Identity

The concept of social identity allows us to understand how membership in various groups may shape our perspectives and experiences in the classroom. According to social identity theory, we define ourselves in terms of our classification in different groups. This classification enables us to understand who we are based on personal characteristics as well as on our perception of belonging or **not** belonging to particular social groups. Thus, our definition of ourselves involves accentuating the similarities of people belonging to the same group and the differences of people belonging to different social groups. For example, our self-identification as belonging to the classification "old" only becomes meaningful in relation to our definition of others as belonging to the category "young". This is one reason why students tend to gravitate toward other students whom they perceive as belonging to the same social group as they do. It's one way of answering that familiar question - "why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" It is also why a white, able-bodied instructor may unconsciously identify with and pay more attention to the white or able-bodied students in his or her class while the students of colour or those with disabilities may go unnoticed even though they may be more visible.

Moreover, people attach values to each group to which they belong so that positive, negative or ambivalent feelings are aroused by the knowledge of each group membership (e.g. most of us have positive feelings associated with being Canadian). Whether we like the groups to which we belong or not, we perceive ourselves as psychologically intertwined with their fates. Just consider our response to the teams representing us at the Olympics. We cheer for them and feel their joy at success and their disappointment in defeat, regardless of how little we may know them as individuals. Most African-Canadians, especially Canadians of Jamaican ancestry, will attest to the pain (and shame) they felt when Ben Johnson tested positive for the use of steroids at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Only the day before, all Canadians were singing the praises of this Canadian athlete, but overnight he became a Jamaican athlete who happened to represent Canada.

Our social identity also influences how others view us. Even if an individual doesn't place much value or emotional significance on membership in a particular group, others will still attribute what they perceive to be typical characteristics of that group to him/her and interact with him/her on that basis. For example, membership in the female social group may be the primary basis on which her male colleagues interact with a female professor, even if **she** perceives her identity as a professor as a more salient social identity than her gender.

In short, our group affiliations or social identity structures influence our concept of self, our value systems, our conception of our institutions, our behaviour, and our interpersonal relations with others, regardless of their social identity structures. If we are to understand the dynamics of diversity in our classrooms, we need to understand the social identity structures that influence those interactions. This means that we must understand our students' social identities. But we can't separate the need to understand students from the need to understand ourselves. We need to begin by understanding the many dimensions of our own social identity and how it may influence our interactions with others, especially with our students. This, then, is our second challenge: understanding ourselves.

In seeking to understand ourselves, we will realize that human diversity is very

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Peggy McIntosh

complex and that we all have multiple social identities with numerous intersections among them. Our classrooms are no different. Not only do our students identify themselves as members of different social groups, but these groups also change over the course of a lifetime. Our various life experiences influence us in such a way that we perceive ourselves differently as we negotiate different challenges and changing world views. In actuality, we all have many layers of identity which run into and overlap each other like the sauce, cheese, and other ingredients in a pizza.

Two Social Identity Groups: Phenotype and Culture

In examining our social identities, we would probably find two basic types of social identity groups. Phenotype (or physical) identity groups are based on physical, visually observable differences from other groups (e.g. men, women, people of colour, Whites, People with physical disabilities, etc.). Culture identity groups are based on shared norms, values or a common socio-cultural heritage that distinguish one group from others (e.g. American, Canadian or Guyanese; engineer, accountant, or teacher; Dalhousie employee or UNB employee, etc.). Of course, some group identities have both physical (phenotype) and cultural significance (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender).

Because phenotype identities are visible, our initial impressions of and predispositions toward other people are greatly influenced by them. Reactions such as stereotyping and prejudice are typically activated on the basis of phenotype. Deviation in physical appearance from the majority norm can be perilous. Several studies provide clear evidence that students whose social identities, particularly their phenotype identities, differ from the majority norm perceive that their identities negatively affect their learning experience in the classroom and in their relationships with their teachers and classmates. We can learn a lot from these students' perceptions and experiences as well as from those of faculty of various social identities who acknowledge the diversity in their classrooms. Such studies illustrate that phenotype identities of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and language influence judgements about people and lead to either prejudice and discrimination or privilege.

Prejudice and Privilege

A prejudice is a negative attitudinal bias and when it is manifested in behavioural terms it is discrimination. But the flip-side of prejudice against one social identity group (whether phenotype or cultural) is privilege for another. As Peggy McIntosh (1995) says in her now famous personal account of coming to understand "White privilege and Male privilege",

> *"As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. .... I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks." (p.130)*

Of course, we have used examples of colour and race, but these are not the only bases of prejudice and privilege. Just as prejudice and privilege play out in the interactions among people of different social identities in society in

general, so too do they impact teaching-learning dynamics. This, then, is our third challenge – recognizing the prejudice and privilege within our classrooms.

Dr. E. Joy Mighty

Diversity in our classrooms is primarily a negative experience for some of our students while it is primarily a positive experience for others on account of their phenotype or cultural social identity. When this happens, inequity exists. Nonetheless, we can use classroom diversity as an opportunity to enrich the learning experience for all of our students and to enrich our own teaching. Diversity is good for everyone in the classroom. Once we begin to take our own identity and the diverse identities of our students into account, and once we become aware of the manifestations of prejudice and privilege within our classrooms, we are beginning to engage in culturally responsive teaching, or, teaching for inclusion. Teaching for inclusion requires that we address pedagogical questions about the 3 big Cs: Content, Conduct, and Context:

1. What should we include in our curricula? (Content)
2. What learning processes should we use? (Conduct)
3. What kind of learning environments should we foster? (Context)

Content (or, What should we include in our curricula?)

We usually choose the content we deem most relevant or most important for our students to explore within a given time frame such as a term, a semester, a quarter, or a year. Consciously or unconsciously, we often choose what's most comfortable for us without recognizing or acknowledging that our academic knowledge is derived from a particular social and political context and is therefore not immune to cultural bias. Typically, our curricula have been developed from the perspectives of white, middle/upper class, male, Euro-centric experiences in ways that suggest that these are the only experiences worth knowing or that theories derived from these experiences are THE objective, unbiased truth. But we need not elevate Euro-centred materials above all others, even if most of the information, materials, and our own education are all Euro-centred. Teaching for inclusion requires that we challenge existing paradigms. We need to question what cultural values we are propagating. Instead of always beginning with the Euro-centric or Western version of a topic and then talking about "the other people" as an aside, perhaps we can provide alternative perspectives from the very beginning. For example, what might a particular topic look like if we began examining it from First Nations, Afric-centric, Asia-centric or Feminist perspectives? I am not suggesting that we replace Euro-centrism with one of these as the dominant perspective. Rather, I am arguing for balance, for a sort of synthesis of perspectives where none is treated as the only valid one. Ideally, this means integrating diversity issues in the content of our courses.

Many of our schools occasionally include elective courses on race relations, intercultural communication, or courses on other aspects of understanding diversity in our curricula. But these are often peripheral add-on courses, not integral parts of existing courses. Alternatively, we have sometimes included the work of a scholar who is a white woman, a person of colour, a person with a disability, or an individual from some other marginalized group, as a token, as THE

exception to the rule. But teaching for inclusion requires us to infuse our curricula with relevant multiple perspectives and materials so that students are continuously exposed to accurate and diverse content, what Dei calls the "multi-centric" curriculum (Dei, 1996:83). No student should ever feel marginalized by distortions, imbalance, and omissions in the content of our courses while others have their positions of privilege reinforced because their perspectives are treated as the only ones worthy of study. All students must feel welcome within our institutions and the curricula must, at some point, be relevant to their respective cultures. Listen to what an Aboriginal Canadian teacher, Darrell McLeod, a Cree, writes about the impact the content of his education had on him:

"I have spent all of my life living in a dominant society that never validated who I was as an Aboriginal person. My formal education took place in a setting where my truths and my world were never reflected in the learning environment. Neither my ways of thinking nor my ways of doing things were validated, even though I believe they were what got me through the system and afforded me whatever success I have experienced. In order to learn what I was being taught, I had to constantly deny the basic tenets of who I am and what I believe." (McLeod, 1996: 65)

Not only must we include different voices and perspectives in our content, we must also provide students with the analytical tools to deal with new or conflicting material. We must help them develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would enable them to identify for themselves the omissions, distortions, and imbalances in the new materials they will inevitably encounter both during and after our individual courses. They should be able to reconstruct their own knowledge and values based on their heightened awareness of the value and meaning of diversity. This leads to the second big C in teaching for inclusion: Conduct.

Conduct (or, What learning processes should we use?)

Changing **what** we teach means changing **how** we teach. We must adapt our teaching methodologies to our new inclusive curricula. Once again, as with content, we can learn from diverse pedagogical traditions. For example, the pedagogies of Black studies and Feminism, of Paulo Friere's critical and liberatory education, and of reflective and experiential processes, all have in common an emphasis on student agency and empowerment, on giving voice and validity to students' personal experiences and emotions, and on the transformative power of critical thinking and analysis. This suggests that we can facilitate students' understanding of others' perspectives and experiences by providing opportunities for them to: take turns relating their own cultural experiences, concerns, and attitudes; interact in a positive and constructive environment with people of other social identities; engage in self-reflection; and generate action strategies for the application of their learning to real life. Such inclusive methodologies, with their student-centred focus, reaffirm rather than deny students' social identities, yet still enable students to be open to receiving knowledge from other sources including the instructor, classmates, reading materials, and the interactions among these various sources.

To engage students in ways that encourage them to value a diversity of perspectives, we must shift their focus from competition to collaboration. For example, from an Afric-centric perspective, we could adopt the principle and spirit of UBUNTU.

UBUNTU is a Zulu word from South Africa. In its most fundamental sense, it stands for collective "personhood" and means literally "I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am". It is a concept of collective unity and it indicates that "A person can only be a person through others". It is a way of thinking, of living our lives that focuses not on the intellectual and the physical dimensions of our humanity, but rather on the emotional and the spiritual.

This is not a concept unique to South Africa. It's called by different names in other parts of Africa, and all marginalized and dispossessed peoples throughout the world have implicitly expressed or practised the concept of UBUNTU in order to survive colonization, displacement, and poverty. The aboriginal peoples of Canada have various words and phrases that mean "The honour of one is the honour of all and the honour of all is the honour of one." The national mottos of many Caribbean countries also reflect the philosophy of UBUNTU. For example, in Trinidad & Tobago, the motto is: "Together we aspire, together we achieve". In Guyana, it is: "One People, One Nation, One Destiny"; in Jamaica, it is: "Out of Many, One People". And there are numerous African proverbs that clearly explain the philosophy of UBUNTU. For example: Rain does not fall on one roof and neither does the sun shine on one house alone; one broomstick is easier to break than the bundle; one tree does not make a forest; one ant cannot build an anthill.

UBUNTU is not just an abstract concept. It permeates every aspect of African, Indian, and Asian life and of African-based, Indian-based, and Asian-based cultures, such as those in the Caribbean. If we were to adopt UBUNTU or a similar philosophy in our classrooms, we would be including the perspectives of students who have these cultures as part of their social identity structures and we would be teaching all students to value different perspectives. We would be teaching for inclusion.

But even as we promote collaborative and interactive pedagogies, we need to consciously model the value of diversity in our teaching. We must remember that our students are characterized not only by their socio-cultural diversity, but also by other forms of diversity, such as personality diversity, diversity in stages of cognitive development, diversity in learning styles, and diversity in social and life experiences. Teaching for inclusion therefore provides numerous opportunities for us to use diverse teaching strategies.

Inclusive teaching provides us with new resources in the classroom in the form of the students themselves. It also helps us to realize that students are teachers too and that from them we can learn about ourselves and about the different perceptions of the world that they have constructed. But, a word of caution! Inclusive or culturally relevant teaching does not mean viewing students from under-represented social identity groups as experts who should speak for all other members of their group. If they choose to contribute to the learning process, their inputs should become resources that can be utilized by the entire class in the same way as contributions from non-minority persons become incorporated into the class discussion. This leads naturally to a discussion of the final big C: the pedagogical question about Context.

Context (or, What kind of learning environments should we foster?)

Teaching for inclusion means that we must foster non-threatening learning environments or contexts characterized by safety and trust that will allow students to heighten their awareness of "self", of their unique social identities, as well as of others who are culturally

different. Our learning environments must allow students to accept that diversity includes all identity groups and all people.

How can we foster an inclusive learning environment? I have a few suggestions and I am sure that you can identify others that are appropriate for and specific to your particular context.

1. Take some time at the beginning of the course to discuss and promote a common understanding of acceptable classroom behaviour. But note that it is not enough to establish a code without being prepared to monitor it and remind students of it as needed during the course.
2. Make a point to learn and pronounce students' names correctly.
3. Offer students a choice of ways of addressing you (e.g. first name/ surname; with/without a title, etc. Bear in mind that many cultures may demonstrate respect for teachers in ways that are unfamiliar to you.)
4. Get to know students as people. However be aware that disclosing personal information about themselves can be threatening for some students. That's why it is so important to create a climate of safety, comfort, and trust. In addition, find opportunities to talk with students outside of the classroom.
5. Use ice-breakers and other activities in class to help students get to know each other well and help overcome the tendency to form social identity cliques. Encourage them to recognize each other's multiple identities.
6. Be prepared for appropriate self-disclosure yourself. Be honest and open. Remember that the way you self-disclose provides a model for students' own self-disclosure in class.
7. Be aware of your own non-verbal behaviour in class. Do you pay more attention to one social identity group than to others? Are you consistently calling on students with a particular social identity more than you are calling on other students?
8. Find the right balance between a serious and a light classroom tone. Some activities can stimulate strong emotion. You need to be able to provide relief from such serious moments to relieve tension. Ice-breakers, games, and other light activities are useful here as well.
9. Ensure accessibility for students with disabilities so that they can participate equally and fully. Include a statement in your course outline that lets such students know that if they have special needs you'd be willing to accommodate them (e.g. by allowing them to write exams in a different room if necessary, etc.). In addition, your statement should direct them to the appropriate office on campus for assistance in case they choose not to come to you.
10. We may not always have control over the space we are assigned, but, if possible, reconfigure your space/ classroom from time to time using circular/semi-circular layouts to promote participation.
11. Use a variety of discussion formats e.g. whole class, small group, triads, and pairs. Smaller groups provide a sense of safety.
12. Discourage and challenge racist, sexist, homophobic or other bigoted remarks against any social identity group.

To summarize, teaching for inclusion means fostering a learning environment where every student can feel valued.

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Conclusion

The increase in diversity among the student population is one of the greatest challenges facing teachers. In this presentation I have discussed the concept of diversity as a mix of students and teachers in the classroom with distinctly different socially relevant group affiliations or social identities and I have explored how our different social identities influence what goes on in the classroom. I have argued that we face the challenges of understanding ourselves, the diversity in our classrooms, and how that diversity manifests itself in prejudice and privilege. I have suggested that to provide all students in such a context with opportunities to be successful learners, we need to teach for inclusion which entails paying attention to the choices we make about the content or what we teach, our conduct or how we teach, and the context or the environments we create for the teaching-learning dynamic. Ultimately, when we teach for inclusion, everybody benefits.

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Praise from Keynote Workshop Participants:

"I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Mighty's presentation – excellent speaker. A good mix of speaking, interaction and group activities."

"Dr. Mighty was an excellent keynote speaker! She exemplified the importance of examining diversity through her simple definition of what diversity is, its significance in terms of current demographics within our populations, its relevance to each of us, and how to foster diversity for inclusion in the content, conduct, and context within our learning environments!"

"I found it inspirational. She was an excellent speaker - relaxed, informative, skilful. A great presentation to start the conference."

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