**Teaching about diversity is hard, especially when you’re in the majority…**

**Abstract**

Creating an inclusive learning and constructive environment on divisive topics such as race, sexuality, or gender is challenging for faculty. Last year, a dialogue on diversity was initiated in the #Oopsism session, yet the challenges faculty face teaching such topics were not addressed. Socially sensitive topics can turn a classroom into an emotionally-charged and destructive environment if faculty do not carefully consider their pedagogical approach. In this interactive session, we share teaching strategies that can be utilized before, during, and after a class session to promote civil discourse and create a safe and constructive environment for the instructor and students.

**Introduction**

Last year a rich conversation was initiated in the session entitled #Oopsism: Communicating effectively across cultures. An oopsism, as defined by the presenter, is an unintentional blunder that can be misconstrued as a negative “ism” such as ageism, sexism, racism, homophobism, eliteism, etc. The session focused on a method to teach diversity that was inclusive of all individuals since most people commit oopsisms. However, what was not demonstrated was the preparation faculty need to create a safe and constructive learning environment for teaching diversity topics. Topics on race, gender, sexual orientation, politics, and religion can become a ticking time bomb for emotional eruptions in the classroom thus disintegrating into classroom dialogue that may leave some students feeling alienated and distressed.

*“Faculty members are challenged for bringing gender, religion, science or politics into their classrooms. Students find themselves marginalized or even attacked for their world views or religious beliefs. Outbursts that aren’t managed effectively can leave students feeling threatened and faculty feeling out of control, turning class discussions into emotionally or spiritually destructive experiences instead of learning experiences they are meant to be” (Landis, 2008 (p. i).*

Moreover, faculty themselves may find such topics uncomfortable and therefore shy away from or sanitize the topic in a way that may do little to raise sufficient awareness or promote behavioral change. There are many reasons for this discomfort and in addition to increasing self-awareness, we suggest that faculty increase their skills in utilizing civil discourse to create a learning environment that is comfortable for faculty and respectful and inclusive of all students. Civil discourse is our ability to have a conversation about topics which we disagree, and our ability to listen to each other’s perspectives (Choby, 2011) with respect and a desire to gain knowledge and understanding that is underpinned with empathy. And, given the dominant role social media plays in our lives, this is becoming increasingly difficult (Junco & Chickering, 2010). Being able to facilitate civil discourse—a process of learning that is inclusive and takes “into account the needs of all learners…” (Law, Phillips & Turney, 2004, p. 100) requires preparation—both cognitive and emotional—before, during, and after the session is taught.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Creating an inclusive learning environment on divisive topics such as race, sexuality, gender, religion, etc. is challenging for all faculty but possibly more so when the faculty is a member of a dominant group. Charbeneau (2015) contend that teaching socially sensitive topics on diversity in an inclusive, safe environment is almost exclusively assumed the responsibility of faculty of color or other minority faculty. Indeed, one of the presenters, who is a woman of color, has been informed by her students on multiple occasions that Caucasian professors would not be effective at teaching race and ethnicity diversity topics. Can the same be said for teaching gender diversity? Would male professors be less effective since they are the dominant group? And what about sexual orientation…..would heterosexual professors be less effective?

Creating an inclusive space in the classroom for student’s learning experience should not depend on a faculty member’s race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. (Law, Phillips & Turney, 2004, p. 100), yet a faculty member’s culture and gender may implicitly be a factor that can impact the learning environment. However, creating an inclusive space in the classroom by disrupting normative white pedagogical practices is a task that is almost exclusively assumed the responsibility of faculty of color (Charbeneau, 2015). This assumed barrier may require a mental leap for professors who find themselves a member of a dominant group.

Civil discourse—which relies on critical thinking, inclusiveness, tolerance, and respect to create new knowledge and reframe old tenets (Landis, 2008)—is a viable approach because it involves committing to an informed, frank exchange of ideas, along with an understanding of complexity and ambiguity (Leskes, 2013). It is a standard practice that can challenge students’ assumptions, questions what students know, and lead them to new knowledge rather than them rigidly defending beliefs that they may hold (Landis, 2008). By facilitating civil discourse, faculty create a safe learning environment which encourages students to express their thoughts and opinions and be listened to, therein creating a productive dialogue with regard to differences (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) among students and between students and instructors.

We propose that success in doing so requires instructors to take steps before (i.e., preparing the students and themselves before the class session), during, and after the class session. The teaching strategies that we will share in this session will allow instructors to teach and promote civil discourse and create a learning environment that is safe and welcoming for the instructor and students.

**Learning Objectives and Exercise Overview**

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In this session, which features a professor of color and a Caucasian professor, faculty will have an opportunity to:

* Reflect on their fear or hesitation about teaching about diversity, including issues arising from, for example:
  + Membership (or lack thereof) in a particular group
  + Uncertainty about how to deal with divisiveness in the classroom
  + Preference for maintaining control in the classroom
  + Beliefs that the classroom is a place for learning theories and not an outlet for emotional conflict
  + Past unsuccessful attempts to teach about diversity
* Be exposed to various strategies and tactics—implemented before, during, and after a class discussion on diversity—that may increase faculty members’ comfort and competence. For example:
  + Before: The importance of managing expectations, e.g., explaining what will happening next session, including a promise of confidentiality and the banning of video or audio recording; the assignment of a reflective question (e.g., think about a time you felt you were treated differently from others who were taller, richer, thinner, more attractive, smarter)
  + During: Clarification of ground rules at the start of the session, including permission to leave the room (without penalty) at any time anyone is feeling uncomfortable
  + After: Assigning a reflective essay or journal entry where students write about the experience, its impact on thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and lessons learned going forward; in a following class, reading unidentified excerpts from different students’ essays to demonstrate similarity (you’re not the only one who feels that way)
* Share their own strategies and tactics, including any lessons learned
* Engage in peer mentoring among session participants to identify support for developing their diversity “muscles”

In so doing, we endeavor to create a learning community—both within the conference and beyond—for faculty who want and need to facilitate student learning on divisive topics, such as diversity.

**Session Description**:

We request 90 minutes for the session, and suggest the following plan:

5 min) Participants start with guided reflection on experiences with diversity

10 min) Introduction of topic including key learnings from the 2017 #Oopsism session

15 min) Participants reflect on their experiences with Oopsism (featuring some new and some recycled examples from last year’s session)

15 min) Presentation of several strategies to be utilized before/during/after a diversity session or module within an e.g., OB, HR, Intro to Management course

30 min) Small group practice with strategies, abbreviated report out

15 min) Paired peer mentoring plans and summary

**References**

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