

**Faculty Center for Teaching Panel**  
**WHAT YOUR STUDENTS MAY BE THINKING WHEN YOU TEACH ON DIVERSITY**  
(Questions? Contact Connie Wolfe)

**General assumptions:**

- Diversity = race; affirmative action = quotas
- Learning is a happy, comfortable process; discomfort is bad, and is YOUR fault.
- Most of these “soft” issues like culture & diversity all come down to matters of opinion, and all opinions must be respected.
  - If you say it in class, you are trying to *force* me to believe it.
  - Asking me to think about something differently implies that I’ve been thinking wrong all along.
- I’m not sure what I think, so tell me the “right” opinion and I’ll adopt that one.

**Diversity and my own sense of self:**

- I am NOT prejudiced.
- I don’t care what other people’s social identities are; I can see past all that to the “real” person.
  - My blindness to race solves all race-related issues.
  - That person doesn’t care that he is Black either; if he does, he is looking for race-problems where none exist.
- I know all about diversity because
  - I went to a diverse high school.
  - I have black/gay/Jewish/etc. friends.
  - I am Jewish/adopted/poor/red-headed
- I am not part of diversity because I’m white and/or male and/or straight (and therefore I have no race, sex or sexual orientation).

**I was taught (implicitly or explicitly):**

- Prejudice is
  - no longer an issue.
  - something that poor people deal with, not “educated” people.
  - always overt and obvious.
    - Members of stigmatized groups are just being over-sensitive when they claim subtle forms of bias.
- Social identity:
  - Social identity is the same thing as personal identity (personality, likes/dislikes).
  - People can decide if their social identity is personally important or not.
  - People can control which social identity the world sees and reacts to.
  - We all could get along if we just *ignore* social identity (Kum-Ba-Yah).
- All we need to do to get along is to learn what those other cultures eat and the music they listen to (celebratory multiculturalism vs. critical multiculturalism)

**What students are thinking during your class session about \_\_\_\_\_:**

- “I’m not saying anything because I might offend someone.”
- “I am NOT prejudiced. Like every other time people talk about X, you are trying to tell me to not be prejudiced; I do NOT need that lesson.”
- “Okay, I *get* that people who are different from me have different perceptions, duh. Why are you forcing me to ponder THAT topic again? Everyone is different and we have to respect everyone’s opinion all the time...”
- “Did she actually say the word black/gay/sex/poor....?”
- “Did he really just say that stereotype (“Black men are considered dangerous”) out loud?? I know he is talking about stereotypes, but aren’t you supposed to at least whisper that sort of thing?”
- “This professor is white/straight/male – what does he know about race/sexual orientation/gender?”
- “This professor is Black/Asian/gay/female – she’s just got a chip on her shoulder or a cause to promote.”

**What about students who have the social identity you are discussing?**

- They may feel these issues at a raw, *emotional* level, not just an intellectual one.
- They may feel that a spotlight has been turned on them during discussions of these issues.
  - Some want to participate because they feel they DO have unique insights.
  - Others do NOT want to participate because they do not want to “represent” their entire group.
  - Some do want to participate because they like talking in class.
  - Others don’t want to participate because they don’t like talking in class.
- They may appreciate having a professor call on them throughout the semester, not just when the unit on their social identity comes around.
- They may appreciate private “warnings” about upcoming topics
  - “Just wanted you to know that today we are going to be talking about stereotypes about blacks and we are going to be seeing some pretty ugly images...”
  - “The next few classes are going to be about prejudice toward blacks. I want to make sure there is room for your voice to be heard if you do have something to say. On the other hand, I promise I won’t be calling on you to ‘represent your race’ – let me know if that is okay.”

## GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

- Assess & consider students prior knowledge
- Do NOT oversimplify the topic
  - Explain the challenges of the course/topic
  - Explain your teaching strategy
  - Get plenty of feedback (each week, each class session)
    - respond to feedback pointing to a real need for change
    - try to explain/address misperceptions
- No matter what topic you are teaching, try to use inclusive language
  - e.g., remember that a “scientist” can be a “she” as well as a “he”
  - e.g., at least *mention* that another group might respond differently than how you are lecturing [e.g., in a unit on romantic love, point out that the readings you’ve assigned are largely from a heterosexual perspective...].
  - Helps to make students of different identities feel welcome but also helps keep issues of diversity “primed”
- Play the “racist” during class discussions to try to get students to think more critically about the issues without fear of taking the “wrong” side (you are already on the “wrong” side).
- Laugh at yourself, but only yourself (humor is tricky).
- Be prepared to be less “beloved” as an instructor.
  - Continually communicate your expectations and underlying reasons for those expectations to students.
  - Participate in campus discussions about how to “frame” what is going on in these challenging classes (e.g., what language can we share as a teaching community to explain potentially lower teaching evaluations, or student complaints of “discomfort” in the classroom?)
- Talk with & listen to as many people as possible, as often as possible.
  - explore your own identity
  - become comfortable talking directly about the topic

See: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/inclusive/>