

Gaining Awareness in a Culturally Diverse America

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I thought I was somewhat competent in the area of multiculturalism before enrolling in the Diversity in America course at SPU this winter. My company hosted a diversity training workshop in early the 2000's; I traveled and lived abroad for several years, and taught English to English Language Learners from all over the world. I have engaged in various cultural events, and tried to learn as much as possible through different cultural experiences. Regardless of these experiences, this course has opened my eyes, or *re-opened* them in some cases, to forgotten issues as I have gotten caught up in my daily "privileged" life. To date the Diversity in America course has brought new awareness and knowledge, as well as, provided strategies for dealing with multiculturalism in the classroom.

Reviewing Hofstede's maps and explanations gave me an overview of global intercultural dimensions and how these dimensions relate to each other. The websites and class discussions provided insight and further awareness about cultural views, and how they differ from one another around the world. According to Hofstede, Power Distance relates to the degree of equality/inequality between people in a particular society. Individualism focuses on the degree to which a society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. Not surprisingly, the United States scored high in the area of individualism. Uncertainty Avoidance concerns the level of acceptance for uncertainty and ambiguity within a society. Countries with high Uncertainty Avoidance scores are generally societies that are more rule-orientated and not as acceptable to change and risk-taking, such as Japan, Russia, and Portugal.

The dimension of Masculinity pertains to the degree societies reinforce, or do not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. While most of the class was not surprised by the high score in Japan, it was a little more

surprising that Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt scored in the mid-range (52). The various dimensions and scoring method allows us as future teachers to consider where our students are from, the culture they were born into and how this may affect their learning and social style in the classroom. It is also apparent that the future scores of the United States may change considerably based on the continued growth of our multicultural society. This type of information provides insight to consider as educators develop lesson plans, classroom management, and assessment techniques for a diverse student body.

As I delve into my role as educator in an increasingly diverse society, being aware of the “luxury of ignorance” that I have had the benefit of as a member of the dominant group allows me to view the world through someone else’s eyes. The diversity training workshop I attended through my company opened my eyes to several aspects of prejudice that I was unaware still occurred in today’s society. I honestly thought so many of these behaviors existed only in the past or possibly in the South, but not in liberal-minded Seattle. I was a privileged White American woman incognizant of what those from other cultures dealt with on a daily basis. McIntosh (1988) supports these existing prejudices as they relate to the privilege of skin-color. As she (1988) unpacks her “invisible knapsack” she identifies some of the daily effects of white privilege. Reading through her list (pp. 1-2) that includes everything from how she is treated when applying for a bank loan to the “flesh” color of her bandages, I am reminded of the privileges I enjoy in my life that others are not necessarily accustomed to in theirs.

Howard (1996) points out that the luxury of remaining ignorant of other cultures is uniquely available to members of any dominant group (p. 326). Therefore, our students may possess their own levels of ignorance of the various cultures within their set of peers. Howard (1996) states that denial, hostility, and fear are emotions often adopted by those in the dominant

group. These emotions result from the lack of understanding and compassion for other groups (p. 328). In order for White Americans to move beyond those negative responses to diversity we need to engage in positive contributions. As educators, Howard (1996) suggests becoming “supportive of new historical research aimed at providing a more inclusive and multidimensional view of our nation’s past” (p. 329). Much of what our schools have been teaching in the past is flawed, inaccurate or biased and excludes the perspectives and influences of non-Europeans (p. 329). Roche (1996) describes the work of Carter G. Woodson and his development of transformative knowledge. It was Woodson’s opinion that knowledge about their past would help African American students aspire to positions of leadership and instill pride in their culture (p. 98). While Woodson’s work was focused on the African American community, his theories of transformative knowledge apply to all cultures that have been marginalized, and yet, have played a significant role in the development of our country. The idea of transformative knowledge is still a controversial one as it challenges the American mainstream academic knowledge. Not everyone agrees with introducing non-European perspectives, nor do they want their children’s history education to be different than their own. This attitude, unfortunately, perpetuates the “luxury of ignorance” which prevents the growth and fluidity of knowledge, and the ability to understand our neighbors and co-workers. As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, it becomes more important than ever that we educators ensure that our young people are able to live and work with people of different cultures, lifestyles and beliefs in order to have a productive and successful society. As a future teacher of English Language Learners, ideally, I intend to give equal focus on various cultures through classroom materials and discussions so that each student feels validated and heard.

Along with a multicultural society comes a vast array of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The issue of religion in schools continues to be increasingly controversial as our American population becomes more diverse in nature. The “establishment” or “religion” clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment or religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This clause has been the root of the debate over religion in schools since its inception (“Religion in Schools,” 2004). Given our pluralistic society, it is more important than ever to have a better understanding of our neighbors, co-workers, community members, and fellow students in order to live in peace and harmony. “When you don’t know about something, you fear it--and when you fear something, you become more likely to strike out against it,” said teacher Yvonne Taylor (Kilman, 2007, p. 16).

Probably one of the biggest roadblocks to teaching about religion in schools is the lack of teacher training. As educators we should be including lessons about religion and spirituality in the classroom as they naturally fit into the curriculum. Discussions of world religions would be beneficial, but they should not promote or indoctrinate any particular religion or spiritual belief; they should be educational discussions *about* religions. Subedi’s (2006) research supports that the majority of teachers are White, middle-class, and disconnected from the lives of communities of color or religious diversity (p. 228). In addition, he (2006) found that many teachers indicated a hesitancy to teach about religions, as it was a topic they felt less qualified to address (p. 232). To be fully equipped and prepared to teach about most religions requires a great deal of continuing education and funding. Not everyone agrees that the investment is necessary in order to teach children how to live together, respect each other’s beliefs, and build stronger relations. Alas, the debate continues.

Regardless of whether teaching specifically about religion in the classroom or conducting general discussions within a multicultural environment, teachers need to be sensitive to a variety of factors:

- **Students are susceptible to peer pressure** –Take all beliefs of the students into consideration during discussions about religion and cultural practices.
- **Give equal consideration**-If religion is discussed, equal care should be taken to discuss the minority as well as majority religions.
- **Do not single out anyone**--Students should never be put on the spot to discuss or explain their religious or cultural beliefs.
- **Be informed**--Every effort should be made to obtain accurate information about different religions or cultures. Do not call upon the students to do the teaching.
- **All religions or none**--Discussion of religion may alienate those students with no religious background or spiritual belief system.
- **Be sensitive**--Discussion of religion may alienate students raised with orthodox religious faiths. (Religion in Public Schools, 2004).

Creating an open and safe venue for children to be themselves, be accepted by their peers and build the confidence necessary to succeed in school is paramount in promoting individuals who will be successful in society.

Strategies used to teach in a multicultural environment, e.g. teacher training, material selections, lesson planning or assessment techniques need to be fluid as we continue to grow more diverse as a nation and learn new information about the variety of cultures that inhabit our communities.

Continued awareness of multicultural issues and the diverse communities that make up our nation is important for educators in order to become the best at honoring student diversity, development, and their right to learn.

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