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Promoting Equity in the Classroom

University teachers routinely face the difficult question of how to promote equity in the classroom. In this issue of FOCUS, participants in a series of OI DT workshops on equity, Dr. Chris McCormick (presenter of the workshop Towards Equity in the Classroom), and OI DT staff offer their thoughts on the subject.*

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

If we want to eliminate inequity, we must consider not only those attitudes which stand in the way of justice and fairness, but also those structures and processes which are inequitable and discriminatory. As long as we think a change in attitude is enough to eliminate discrimination, we won't change the social context within which we interact. We need to ask questions such as: "What does inequity look like?" and "How does discrimination work in the curriculum and in classroom interaction?" Finally, we must not only identify inequitable practices but also formulate alternatives which move towards promoting equity.

Good intentions are not enough. We must

- **identify attitudes**
- **pinpoint practices**
- **formulate alternatives**

Inequity has many faces and we must be sensitive to its many manifestations, from the commonly-acknowledged sexism and racism to discrimination based on age, religion, ability, class, region, or even species. As teachers, we must also explore how these various forms of inequity are interconnected. For example, what about looking at the interactions among gender, ethnic origin, and social class, and considering how these relationships affect our students and how and what we teach them?

It is essential that we develop the habit of reflecting on how both the content and the process of teaching can be liberating or discriminatory. What we do in the classroom must reflect an ability to analyze

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injustice and a commitment to practising fair relationships between teachers and learners. A lecture on sexism makes little sense if the instructor treats female students as though they were inferior to their male counterparts. A thoughtful examination of a principle in physics contradicts itself if the teacher refuses any opportunity for questions or discussion.

Another way to consider the issue of inequity is to consider how our own privilege can be instrumental in the continuation of discriminatory social practices. Privilege and inequity are two sides of the same coin. Recognizing inequity does not simply mean figuring out how to make things better for other people, or enabling them to become "like us." Doing something about inequity might mean seeing how practices that benefit one group must be abandoned in order to achieve equity for all.

As educators, one of the best and yet most difficult places for us to start is with our own privileged world view. We must recognize that we are part of a group which has derived tremendous benefit from how society is organized. No matter what our origins as individuals, it is important that we resist the temptation to emphasize individual responsibility for success or failure ("If I did it, they can, too!"). Like our students, we are social products. Privilege can perpetuate and camouflage inequity, making it difficult for the beneficiaries of the status quo to recognize the existence of structural barriers based on discrimination. It is incumbent upon us to investigate the influences on our own belief systems and our own practices, in order to help students become just and reflective members of society.

Towards Equity in the Classroom

Participants at the Towards Equity workshop at Dalhousie represented disciplines as diverse as Law and Biology, Nursing and French. The workshop format allowed both small-group and general discussion of problems and an exchange of ideas on how to change classroom interaction in order to promote equity.

Problems

Discrimination pervades the curriculum. For example, gender touches all aspects of the law and should be incorporated as part of the discipline, not reserved for special Gender and Law courses.

It's not always easy to see how discrimination works. Racism is quite subtle, especially if there are strong incentives to ignore it. We might not see it because it benefits us, and it might benefit us not to see it.

Discrimination isn't funny. As a matter of teaching style and collegial interaction, jokes which might have drawn laughter in the past are no longer considered acceptable.

Solutions?

- **Demonstrate that discrimination exists.** We must dispel the myth that the world is essentially just.
- **Provide a positive model** for teaching students about the experience of others. Ask students to do a brief presentation from another person's point of view; this is an effective way to sensitize them to another's perspective.

- **Convince students** that it is in their self-interest to eschew discriminatory practices for personal, professional, and ethical reasons.
- **Encourage influential members of faculty** to address the issue of inequity in the classroom. Those who are in a position to perpetuate the status quo are also in a position to change it.
- **Explore ways to include everyone** in the analysis of inequity and the search for solutions. As educators, our role is to encourage the free exchange of ideas and to make the classroom a place where students feel they can openly express opposing points of view.

At the OI DT workshops, some participants suggested that people of influence would be more likely to address these issues if we used terminology which includes, rather than alienates, those who are seen to be "part of the problem." The purpose in doing so, they argued, would be to allow discussants to differentiate between the "unintended" effects of certain beliefs and "malicious" practices. Others disagreed, however. One participant said that people who have been discriminated against should not have to "make the words more palatable just to make the oppressors feel more comfortable." Another added that those who have suffered inequity often feel silenced and angry, and have a legitimate right to feel hurt and to express those feelings.

Whatever your opinion on this issue, remember that it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that classroom discussions, however heated, are conducted in a respectful manner. Students need to feel safe from personal attack when voicing opinions and stating beliefs, even when such beliefs are unpopular with others. Encourage students to challenge ideas, not to denigrate other students. Demonstrate through your own actions how to turn powerful disagreements during classroom discussions into learning experiences for all those involved.

Reflections

Peter Edwards, President of the Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students, has taught part-time in the university's French Department. Peter attended the OI DT's workshops on equity; he contributed the following reflections on the topic.

We do not discuss ideas in a vacuum; ideas are about human beings, and *we* are the human beings we are discussing. I have seen students and teachers talk *about* traditionally under-represented groups without recognizing that persons from those groups are present. We can recognize the necessary subjectivity of what we say; be aware of our point-of-view baggage. We can realize that *we* are the people of colour; *we* are the gifted people of many kinds of abilities; *we* are the gays, bisexuals, and lesbians; *we* are even the straight white males that we are talking about. It is helpful if the ideas we discuss, rather than contribute to the separation, bring us back to ourselves.

With one class or workshop, we may not change the world, but we can help conscious thought begin. It is even doubtful if one can teach others not to be discriminatory. We can, however, help others find ways to overcome instilled discriminatory ideologies.

**Approaching Discriminatory Statements
as
Teaching Moments**

What do you do when a student makes a sexist comment? Or when a student presentation is based on subtle, discriminatory assumptions about race?

Reflecting on unexamined assumptions is an important aim of creating a teachable moment when a potentially oppressive expression is offered by a student. . . . The classroom envisioned here is an arena for open communication, where one can be embarrassed yet will survive because of an accepting atmosphere. Confrontation is possible because separating the utterance from the person is possible; otherwise the self may be placed at excessive risk. The issue here is trust – not the trust that everyone will be “nice” to one another, but an attitude that an utterance is like an experiment: How do we know what it means until it is spoken and then reflected upon? The focus of attention is on the utterance, not the person. . . .

On the lookout for moments for teaching, the instructor can help transform even the most dreadful remark into an unexamined assumption, or better, an utterance presented to the group as an experiment, some data waiting to be examined, a teachable moment.

(Hugh T. Miller. 1993. “The Objectionable Utterance: A Moment for Teaching.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 23(2): 233-34.)

The Office of Instructional Development and Technology's Resource Centre has numerous books and articles on the topic of promoting equity in the classroom. Please feel free to drop by and consult our extensive bibliography and perhaps borrow several publications to read at your leisure.

We welcome your comments on this issue.

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TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

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Teaching Controversial Issues

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The massive, much-talked-about 1992 study, commissioned by the AAUW Educational Foundation, coined the term the "evaded curriculum" to refer to matters central to the lives of students, but touched on only briefly, if at all, in most schools. Evaded topics include sexism, race and ethnic discrimination, class stratification, homophobia, and reproductive rights. At the university level, many courses address these issues, and, in some disciplines like sociology, political science, ethics and so on, these issues are the courses.

There is no question that these topics are relevant to students' lives, affect students personally, and frequently produce emotional responses in the classroom. Yet those very qualities can cause students and faculty alike to shy away from an honest confrontation of the issues. An important outcome in teaching about such controversial material would be a classroom atmosphere in which students engage in interesting dialogues, free to express their opinions and relate their experiences, yet remaining respectful of both other students and other opinions.

Achieving this combination of "freedom within structure" is not easy, and discomfort can result if the balance between the two is disrupted. The disruption can come from a too-tightly-controlled classroom in which students are afraid to speak or a too-loosely-controlled classroom in which unchecked personal opinion monopolizes class time. The first situation, in which there is little opportunity for discussion and/or a lack of tolerance for dissenting opinions, can discourage active, engaged learning. It can ultimately lead to frustration and

resentment by students which will be communicated on the course evaluations. If the balance tips the other way and students are encouraged to say anything and everything, blatant sexist, racist, homophobic or other biased remarks can embarrass and alienate other students in class and seriously impair learning. This paper offers some ways of moderating discussion to achieve this balance.

Begin by framing the social and moral issues

Many, though not all, instructors and authors of texts have abandoned a commitment to strict neutrality in favor of a model which contends that one has the obligation to guide thinking in a responsible fashion. This perspective holds that sexism, racism, classism, and other similar isms are wrong because they violate the values of equality, justice, and human decency (Singh, 1989). Framing a guiding principle of this type early in the course is particularly useful for teaching controversial issues because it establishes a non-negotiable foundation from which to build. Some go beyond this to recommend a student-teacher contract, designed to reduce controversy by systematically summarizing and agreeing to shared assumptions.

The first class period is the proper time to communicate the guiding perspective of the course, and to ask for cooperation in implementing its parameters. An example of this framework comes from Women's Studies, where students learn that they will be using a feminist perspective, a value system which favors change toward equality in society. The idea of equality, therefore, is not up for debate. What equality means and how best to achieve it are the controversial issues which require thought and discussion.

In addition to the use of the committed perspective, social and moral issues can be framed in yet another way designed to reduce conflict and promote respect in the classroom. This is achieved by making a humanitarian appeal to students to remember prejudicial remarks made in class may offend or embarrass their classmates. Most students do not want intentionally to hurt others, and, with this reminder, they may strive to couch their remarks in less inflammatory language.

Establishing ground rules for disagreement before biases and factions have formed not only will prevent future problems, but will provide a model of critical discourse which will help students develop as adults. As an example, requiring that before one can state an opposing opinion, an individual must be able to state the position of the other person in a way which will satisfy that person encourages careful listening. Students who know they must follow such "fair fighting" rules are less likely to respond thoughtlessly or carelessly.

Whereas these ground rules help to structure and control student interaction when teaching controversial issues, instructors will still have to respond to student discussions. The next set of recommendations focuses on classroom dynamics.

Proceed by controlling classroom dynamics

Setting the Tone: Although one can find descriptions of ways to teach controversial issues through student exercises, role playing, and formally structured debate (Sargent, 1985; Bredehoft, 1991), many courses rely on lecture and classroom participation as the staple day-to-day instructional method. Because lecture usually precedes discussion, the manner in which information is presented is of vital importance in setting the tone for student interest and subsequent discussion.

(Continued on back)

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The best overall recommendation here is forethought and planning. Instructors regularly should review their ideas alone or with a colleague. Does the lecture convey the desired messages and impressions? Is the vocabulary properly sensitive and respectful when referring to members of disadvantaged groups (i.e., using "woman" not "girl" to refer to an adult female)? Does the lecture present controversial issues in such a way that students will be inspired to explore them further rather than reinforcing existing biases?

In women's studies courses, for example, a lecture might review the current theoretical views and relevant studies, then discuss cultural myths and stereotypes surrounding an issue. These myths and stereotypes are familiar to students, providing a good place to ask for student input and to make the transition from lecture to discussion.

Encouraging Initial Participation: Active student involvement is a crucial element for success in teaching controversial issues. This is also the least predictable aspect of teaching, for no matter what precautions have been taken, student comments cannot be predicted. We do know students like to be active parts of the learning process, and that they learn better when encouraged to verbalize their thoughts. Furthermore, classes which have lively exchanges and diversity of opinions are more interesting for everyone.

Therefore, the first order of business is to promote discussion. There are several good strategies for conducting discussion (Welty, 1989), each having advantages and disadvantages. Formal, prepared-in-advance questions are desirable when considering complex or abstract ideas and serve to reduce conflict by allowing students to think about and censor an idea before displaying their thoughts publicly. The disadvantage is that structured questions may bypass students' real concerns. By simply asking: "What are your opinions? What has been your experience?" students are given the opportunity to be involved in the exploration of controversial issues from their own frame of reference. These more informal, extemporaneous methods also energize a class. However, this type of discussion is the one most likely to spawn prejudiced or stereotypical comments which must then be countered.

Tempering conflict and bias: Although there is no one perfect method for dealing with biased remarks, the following suggestions should help to guide policy

when teaching controversial issues.

- The foremost principle is to respond to all students, regardless of what they say, with respect and dignity. This is essential in setting the tone for all class instruction. Showing respect for a student does not mean sanctioning or rubber stamping the statement. It does model separating the person from the idea. Separating the individual from the remark keeps the focus on ideas rather than personalities and can allow the student to retreat gracefully from a position which later proves untenable.

- It may be appropriate to remind students of the original first day guidelines, both principles and discussion rules and to enforce those guidelines when conflicts flare.

- When necessary, point out how statements being proposed are related to cultural myths or fallacies which have already been discussed and discredited.

- Occasionally, when the situation and the subject matter permit, humor can effectively diffuse tension. Acknowledge that the discussion has become heated. Pause, let out a deep breath, and perhaps say, "It's really hot in here."

- Insert a pause for reflection to allow tempers to subside. Stop the discussion and have everyone write a sentence or two in reaction to what has just transpired.

- One of the best outcomes of a controversial dialogue occurs when it is possible to use the ideas being bandied about to provide academic information. It is satisfying indeed to be able to say, "In fact, there was a study done on that particular issue and..." or to challenge the students to provide such information.

- Challenge students to consider the implications of their comments. For example: what value underlies a statement? Therefore, what type of resolution would it suggest?

In conclusion

Controversial issues should not be evaded in university classes. Indeed they are the stuff of academic discourse. If students cannot learn to think clearly about these issues while at our institutions, when will they? Instructors have a responsibility to provide both a forum and a format for learning how to engage controversy and work through it. While this article makes broad recommendations about achieving a successful combination of freedom and structure in discussing these topics, there are no guar-

anteed outcomes. It is the attempt that makes both teaching and learning so exciting.

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