

## Chapter 8

# All About the Classroom!

### Practices and Activities That Enhance Diversity Understanding

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Within the university setting, the classroom is the point of origin for many diversity narratives. Lessons may focus on topics such as cultural history, but students also learn from communication patterns that occur during the time of instruction, which may include subtle or overt acts of racial bias. It is therefore important to incorporate cultural competency in the classroom to model healthy interactive learning practices. This involves setting ground rules for diversity discussions and utilizing icebreakers, self-awareness exercises, and activities such as role plays to promote collaborative learning and change through social justice initiatives. This chapter explores practices and activities that enhance diversity understanding.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*When I think about diversity here in college, I can hear myself saying “What if? What if I could go back and talk to my undergrad professors and my graduate professors and sit them down in the times or moments where I felt I was not heard?” I would ask them to start the semester, start the course, or start every class including people’s personal narratives. Sometimes, I wish that some of my professors would’ve just asked “What does this mean for this group of people? We talked about this impact, this strategy in the classroom, how would it impact this group compared to that group? . . . and make it a very open informal conversation. I’d like to go back and I’d like to feel confident enough to ask my teachers, “Can we talk about this more? Can we talk about this so that everybody feels included?” And even if [students] don’t speak up, they know there’s a space that allows for them to feel unique and safe and heard. ~Tamara*

The college classroom is the ultimate laboratory for exploring narratives. Students arrive ripe with knowledge and attitudes that stem from countless backstories. They still raise their hands to ask questions, pretend to laugh at the teacher’s jokes, and get nervous before taking tests, but now the stakes are higher. There is an emotional and intellectual fervor that wasn’t there in high school; and as such, pupils’ stories – like those of Lina, Darnell, Alice, Sheila, and Talia – are more potent. New environments open the door to cultural curiosity and as Tamara emphasized in her opening narrative, this should be actively explored in classroom exchanges.

Authentic discourse is crucial for promoting understanding and awareness of diversity in higher education settings (Tharp, 2015). The previous chapter focused on administrative practices including faculty and staff training, ongoing assessment, and institutional plans and goals for implementing successful diversity programs on campus. But the best laid plans mean little if they don’t translate effectively to the classroom. Unless students experience a genuine sense of cultural awareness as part of their instructional experience, mission statements and policies may come off as hollow and insincere. Comprehensive strategies and thoughtfully-designed activities offer potential for deeper insights and enhanced learning over the course of the semester.

So what’s the best place to start when seeking to enhance learning about diversity? Oftentimes, this depends on the instructor. Many years ago, I [Scott]

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