

Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning

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Teaching and Learning Committee

Spring 1998 Special Issue

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Ed. Note: It is our pleasure to present this special issue of the TLC newsletter. Ms. Jackie Wiggins and Mr. Eric Follo report on the conference on diversity held on February 6th this year. We have another involving article on evaluating teachers from a student's viewpoint by Ms. Diana Chamberlain. Both articles will greatly contribute to enhancing teaching and learning.

Integrating Diversity into the Curriculum

by Jackie Wiggins
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& Dance, Oakland University)

and

Eric Follo
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The issues underlying and surrounding diversity were considered by Oakland students, faculty, and administrators when they gathered on February 6th to engage in a dialog. Susan Awbrey, Assistant Vice President for

Academic Affairs, who coordinated the conference stated that: "Our goals are to foster a learning environment that helps students develop the skills needed to succeed in today's global society and to build a sense of community that respects and acknowledges pluralism on our campus."

Sixty-five participants were divided into eight discussion groups focusing on the questions of:

Group 1:

What do we mean by diversity?
What are the goals of OU's ethnic diversity requirement?

Group 2:

How does a diverse campus benefit OU students?
What do we value in diversity? How can OU become a "comfortable" environment for minorities?

Group 3:

Should the diversity requirement focus on race and racism rather than diversity?
Should the OU diversity requirement continue to focus on US or should it address global diversity?

Group 4:

What do we believe that students are gaining from the diversity courses? How are we assessing the impact of the diversity requirement? How should we assess it?

Group 5:

What kinds of diversity knowledge do students need in the contemporary world?

Group 6:

How can we develop practical experiences with cross-cultural environments as well as theoretical knowledge? Should diversity be taught directly as a subject or through other means such as current events?

Group 7:

How do we engage students who may be resistant? Should there be alternative methods for students to meet the diversity requirement?

Group 8:

How can faculty continue to share what works? Who is responsible for ensuring that diversity is addressed in the curriculum?

Certain common themes emerged from the reports of the various discussion groups. First, many of the participants expressed a concern that the present criterion for our ethnic diversity courses (three weeks of one course devoted to American diversity issues) does not constitute enough time or focus to understand the nature and role of diversity

in our society.

Second, many of the participants stressed the importance of developing opportunities for all of us to learn more about issues related to diversity. It was generally agreed that we should have an expectation that all of the university community should be involved in this effort. This is not just an issue for students and faculty, but for all members of the OU community.

Third, many participants stated that we need to broaden our vision of what diversity is about--that it does not just pertain to racism, but rather to respecting and valuing world views different from one's own. They said that diversity is about understanding, respecting and valuing other perspectives--recognizing that there are many ways of viewing the world and that each of us, depending upon our prior experiences, may see things a bit differently. Diversity is about celebrating these differences and seeking connections among a profusion of visions and viewpoints. Understanding multiple perspectives can enrich our experiences and our lives. Seeking commonalities enables us to find and understand how we are alike. The richness in society lies in this combination of commonality and difference. Participants felt that the university's diversity efforts need to teach us to live "in a global world." One participant maintained that: "Our cultural heritage is interconnected with the rest of the world."

If the above beliefs are essentially the heart of the matter, then it is not surprising that many of the other ideas that emerged from the group discussions relate to this broader vision of diversity. One group

suggested an expansion of the university's definition of ethnic diversity to include issues related to differences in culture, race, gender, religion, economic status, age, language, sexual orientation, handicaps, mode of dress and so on. Another group, that was asked to consider whether or not they felt that diversity concerned more than matters of race and racism, stated that our first steps need to be more inclusive, but that eventually we need to "break the comfort zone" and "get out of denial" to deal with racism. One spokesperson summed it as: "We need to understand the interconnectedness among people."

The remainder of the discussion dealt with finding ways to improve the situation at OU. There was discussion regarding the current nature of the required ethnic diversity courses and their potential to meet the needs identified by the participants. John Bello-Obdu, from the Department of Rhetoric, Communication and Journalism, indicated that his discussion group felt that in order to be effective, diversity issues need to be addressed throughout the curriculum, not just in ethnic diversity courses. He explained: "All curriculum must be culturally inclusive to respect the society of our times." He also spoke strongly in support of an institutional commitment to faculty in-service, emphasizing that faculty need opportunities to learn in order to be able to accomplish these goals. Further, he suggested that what we need is university supported workshops for faculty, staff, and administration. Another group spoke to this issue as well, suggesting that, in particular, we need to expand the knowledge base of those who are teaching the ethnic diversity courses.

Several groups mentioned the value

of engaging in open discussion during classes. Students in courses designed to meet the ethnic diversity requirement and students in all courses need opportunities to talk about and confront these issues, to learn how others feel and think. Out of such experiences comes appreciation, tolerance, acceptance, and valuing of the perspective of others. These are conversations that foster communication among communities.

Some of the groups emphasized the importance of moving toward these kinds of changes in order to make OU a more comfortable place for minority students. They encouraged increased interaction among minority groups and between minority groups and faculty. Another group emphasized the importance of working toward increasing the diversity of the OU student body, faculty, staff, and administration.

One group pointed out that we have very little information concerning whether or not the present ethnic diversity requirement successfully meets the needs of the OU community. One informal survey conducted by students in Shea Howell's COM 303 course (a survey of 167 students) indicated that 80% said that the courses were not valuable, primarily because they did not provide adequate opportunity for student discussion. Most students characterized their courses as "history classes." This discussion group suggested the following changes in the way that ethnic diversity courses are taught: (a) small class size to encourage student interaction, (b) requirement that a discussion component be part of the approved syllabus for any of these courses, (c) inclusion of real life experiences into the course. Some even suggested that it might be better for students

to have opportunities to meet the requirement in ways other than taking a course, such as through workshops, symposia, or fieldwork with support seminars for discussion of the field experience.

Other suggested strategies for improvement included: (a) finding mentors for students from under represented groups of students in each school or department, (b) bringing "reality" (in the form of current events) into the classroom, (c) interaction with diverse groups both on and off campus, (d) interactive discussions with guest speakers, (e) student cultural presentations with small group discussions, (f) encouraging students to do field research in communities and then share that information in class, (g) the development of cross-cultural summer workshops in diverse environmental context in Michigan, other parts of the US, and other parts of the world. One group suggested that we might throw a more positive light on our intentions by changing the phrase "ethnic diversity requirement" to "ethnic diversity experience."

When the group reports were completed, the participants moved to a luncheon where lively discussions on diversity issues continued. The Human Relations Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee, University Committee for Undergraduate Instruction, and the Academic Affairs Office are now planning workshops and events for the next academic year to integrate diversity into the curriculum.

The "Mentoring" Challenge at Oakland University

by Diana Chamberlain
(Senior S.B. Adm., Oakland University)

In the Fall 1997 issue of the TLC newsletter, Professor Nakao beautifully illustrated the Japanese mentor-student relationship which naturally occurs when the components of time, respect, and effort are carefully blended. Both student and teacher benefit from this one-on-one lifetime relationship. The student achieves success through the careful leadership of the instructor, and the teacher, through a continued relationship with the student, is able to see the long-term results of his instruction.

This one-on-one teaching methodology prevalent in Japan is a strong dichotomy to what you and I are familiar with here at Oakland University. Ours is not a one-on-one method. We often fill huge halls with students for our classes! Instructors have the students' attention (or what is left of it after a full day's work) for just a few hours a week, for at most, thirteen weeks. Students balance full-time jobs with full-time studies, often having to prioritize between the two. How seemingly impossible it is for an instructor to develop a relationship with each student given constraints such as these! As I am sure you can relate, it is difficult enough to remember each student's name by mid-semester, let alone create mentor relationships.

However, there is hope. In some of my largest and most difficult classes I have received incredible direction, motivation, and encouragement from instructors. No, I did not sit down and fill out a mentor requisition form--it was much easier than that. Leadership and motivation "magically"

appear from those who love to teach. I would like to share a few of my favorite examples.

My statistics professor made a large production of presenting an old textbook to whoever scored the highest on the exam. It is amazing what motivation a little recognition would give! That textbook is a favorite, as it represents achievement in a course I struggled with.

During my sophomore year I became quite ill, and missed a majority of physics classes (including the mid-term exam). The professor gave an interesting challenge: if I could recall and diagram 50 different laws and/or experiments pertaining to the class, she would give a low (but passing!) grade. To this day, I appreciate her understanding and willingness to help me.

When mid-terms were returned, I realized that my grade, though not perfect, was the highest grade in the class. However, when the professor passed my test to me, he quietly said, "You did good ... real good ... but I know you could have done better." At first, I was quite upset. I thought to myself, "How can he criticize me when I did the best in the class!" Slowly, though, I realized the wisdom behind the seemingly harsh words. You see, he valued potential over performance. This instructor believed in me and cared enough to push me toward excellence. This, in turn, gave me confidence and drive. He was able to motivate me--to learn, to believe in myself, and to succeed.

If given room, I could continue with many more stories just as these. Though they are all very minor occurrences, they profoundly impacted my life and helped make me the person I am today. As we know, life-changing events come in all shapes and sizes. It does not always take a predetermined, preselected mentor to

influence and fashion the life of a student.

More than anything else, the most important message a teacher can convey to student is: "I believe in you." I am sure each faculty member can recall being the student and receiving that feeling at some time or another from his/her professors. Though it may seem as if at the college level we should possibly be "beyond" this, I believe no one can outgrow the need for reassurance and support.

If a teacher truly believes and cares for the students, it will be felt regardless of how large the class, or how short the semester. OU can be proud of its faculty--not just from an academic standpoint, but also from the openness and evident concern toward the student body. From my associate dean who sets aside whatever he is working on to spend an hour or two talking about my future, to the professor who will run across campus to the computer lab to help with a last minute project--I thank you all for making OU my mentor.

Corrections: In the Winter 1998 issue of the TLC newsletter, there were typographic mistakes in Ms. Toni S. Walters' and Mr. Austin Murphy's contributions. Below, such mistakes are indicated by the page and column numbers; the first parentheses indicate where they specifically appear. The typographic mistakes are underlined, and the corrections are **highlighted in bold** in the second parentheses. The Editor takes the full responsibility for all these mistakes.

I. "Introspection: Some Thoughts about Teaching and Learning" by Ms. Toni S. Walters

p. 1, 1st column (in "Ed. Note"): Mr. Toni Walters (Ms. Toni S. Walters).

- p. 1, 1st collum (in the title: "Introspection: Some Thoughts about Teaching and Learning" by Ms. S. Toni Walters): by Toni Walters (Toni S. Walters).
- p. 2, 2d collum: Alighted ... (Aligned).
- p. 3, 1st collum: ... practices mentally (practices to mentally); ... severs (serves).

 II. "The Outcome of the December 1 Meeting to Improve the Evaluation of Teaching" by Mr. Austin Murphy

p. 6, 1st collum, last paragraph: ... singed (signed).

Therefore, the whole sentence runs as follows: "A petition was also **signed** by most present at the luncheon requesting that some committee do a study on these issues and give its recommendations to the relevant CAPs and FRPC."

Announcement:

In the Winter 1998 issue of the TLC newsletter, Mr. Austin Murphy wrote on how we can improve the evaluation method of teaching in his article "The Outcome of the December 1 Meeting to Improve the Evaluation of Teaching." His article was written based on the outcome of the last December's TLC luncheon meeting, where "Better Methods of Evaluating Teaching" was discussed. As a follow-up to the same subject, he has an announcement:

Because the Teaching & Learning Committee did not feel it appropriate to discuss the issues further, I have sent the petition to the CAPs and the Senate Steering Committee, requesting that they evaluate the

suggested changes in the way teaching is evaluated and perhaps poll the faculty they represent on their opinions.

- Austin Murphy, TLC Chair

Editorial Information:

Insights & Ideas is published twice a year by the Oakland University faculty Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Academic Affairs, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4401. However, this year, having received more contributions than formerly, which are insightful and instructive, we have decided to publish this special issue. The newsletter is distributed free of charge to Oakland University faculty. Letters, news and requests for additional copies should be sent to the address given above.

- Seigo Nakao, Editor