
Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning

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A Symposium on Ethnic Diversity

Given that we have had our ethnic diversity requirement for over a year, it is a good time to reflect on the experience in the classroom with teaching ethnic diversity. We asked four teachers of qualifying courses open to introductory students to comment on their experience for the newsletter. We devote this issue to their responses.
Editor.

Teaching Ethnic Diversity Through Film

by Bob Eberwein

One of my goals in Cinema Studies 150, Introduction to Film, is to increase students' understanding of film's power as an ideological force in culture and the way its representations can influence, confirm or change our understanding of ethnic and racial uniqueness.

The last time I taught CIN 150, we watched *FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF*, a comedy about white teenagers living in an upper-middle class suburb of

Chicago, and followed this with *BOYZ 'N THE HOOD*, a seering drama about African-American teenagers living in a lower-middle class section of Los Angeles. Students responded powerfully to the striking contrast between the two worlds. In one scene in *BOYZ*, a young female student is doing her homework at a word processor; her study is interrupted by the sounds of gun shots outside and she jumps involuntarily. I believe that that one moment really affected our students. They could identify with the female's experience at a word processor, but were overwhelmed by the way in which the ordinary life of the student was so disturbed and threatened by the

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violence around her, a condition they do not face. Such moments provide

palpable evidence of film's powerful ability to depict and realize aspects of contemporary life.

In this case, the scene is a painful one. But the same power of the cinematic medium is at work when, at the joyous end of *THE COLOR PURPLE*, the heroines' children return, demonstrating in their language and robes the importance of their African heritage.

Diversity in the Classroom in Political Science

by Susan L. Thomas

It is imperative that inclusion of diverse forms of knowledge be taken seriously, especially in the field of political science which resists and disqualifies alternative accounts of social reality. In my classes I strive to do more than add women and people of color into existing frameworks of knowledge and research. Instead I attempt to express a fully race-centered and gendered world view. In my

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lecture on federalism [Introduction to American Government], for example, I go beyond a recitation of the structural characteristics of a federal form of

government to examinations of how the European framers modeled our federal structure after the Native American's federal form of government under the League of the Iroquois--the first known federal form of government--to how and why this knowledge has generally been suppressed. Students seem to relish this lesson which draws together issues and debates which are dispersed in journals and textbooks or which are relatively inaccessible to the student reader. Pointing out to students that the European founders did not "invent" federalism (as they are normally taught) but rather that they merely "patented" it, enables a reconceptualization of familiar issues and encourages an understanding of "other" contributions to the sociopolitical order.

The Diversity Experience in the Teaching of Health Care Dimensions HBS 200

By Carl R. Vann

When the requirement in diversity was announced we immediately saw the relevance of our course. We used this opportunity to take issues basic to our course content and make an effort to formally classify them in a manner that would present the students with an analytical focus that might otherwise have escaped their way of thinking about things.

Our students have found the text by educator and anthropologist Mary-Ann Galanti, *Caring for Patients from Different Cultures*, to be among their most interesting and motivating course materials. In addition to this text and with materials supplemented by contemporary articles and data from

such sources as *Harpers*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, we have had diversity teaching materials developed by Dr. Philip Singer, a Medical and Visual Anthropologist, whose many documentaries, used nationally in health, medical and social science education, deal with cross-cultural and diversity health themes. The material presented here often serves as the basis for student questions and discussion, involving for many a totally new experience and perspective. The academic perspective is also enhanced by the fact that the course has two instructors, both medical behavioral scientists, and representing the disciplines of anthropology and political science as well. Students tell us that the textbook and the visual materials provide an enjoyable as well as practical learning environment for them.

In a prior year we had used data and materials from the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. While these materials were excellent, the students found them dry and had difficulty focusing on the implications. The Galanti book, supplemented by Dr. Singer's materials, lectures and discussions, have made for a natural way to meet the course's past objectives along with the special focus on diversity. Our visual bibliography is available.

Teaching Ethnic Diversity in English 112

by Joan G. Rosen

The English Department developed English 112, Literatures of Ethnic America, in anticipation of the

University's instituting a cultural diversity requirement. I taught the course for the first time in the fall of 1993. Professor Susan Hawkins taught the course in 1994 and is teaching it again this term. Professor Hawkins presented a paper at the Gender Conference at Lewis and Clark University in the Spring of 1994 in which she discusses her experiences teaching the course. I am sure she would be happy to share that paper with interested colleagues.

She and I agree that English 112 is an extremely difficult course to teach for a number of reasons: 1) because we are middle-class, white, totally assimilated 4th and 5th generation Americans, 2) because we have recently discovered the richness of culturally diverse text in American literature and our experience is limited, 3) because our students are primarily white Americans from working-class backgrounds who have traveled very little, are parochial in outlook, and convinced that this requirement is just another hurdle we put in their way as they speed to the degree which will allow them to get a "good" job and live a "good" life.

I almost gave up on the first day of class when I asked students to tell each other something of their ethnic background. Several identified themselves as "Detroiters". When I asked that they be more specific, most answered that they had either no sense or some vague sense of a heritage other than "American" or "Midwestern." Only one first generation Arabic student and two African-American students had a feeling for ethnic identity.

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As an English teacher I often speak in analogies; in the case of English 112, my analogy compares the course to the DPT shots we give our children when they are very young: there is a risk of brain damage with a minute percentage, the majority will forget they ever had the shot, and the protection to the public health is overrated.

My purpose in the course was to introduce students to the richness of American culture: a culture which resembles a patchwork quilt. In it there are individual pieces each with a special vitality, color, design, and meaning. By themselves the patches do not give off warmth or create a whole: when sewn together with artistry they create a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts - richer and brighter. To this end we read short works from immigrant literature, native American literature, African American literature. We talked about the problem with labels or categories in relationship to the reading. I tried to fill in many blanks for them: for example, cultural differences which are partially a result of geographical circumstances, historical and political events which generate a need for response, identification of sub-groups with categories such as Asian or Latino. Such background is necessary before one can even consider the works

intelligently. Perhaps students should be required to take a course in American social, political, cultural history before they are allowed to embark on the study of Literatures of Ethnic America. They need a context.

Preparing for the course enabled me to read works I had not read before, to hear new voices and gain new insights. My hope was that students would have similar results. I was disappointed when I read the evaluations in that students did not look at this course as new or different or consciousness-raising because they have no context and they do not see relevance in the study of this literature to their lives.

If I sound cynical, I suppose I am betrayed. I would rather define myself not as a cynic but as a cynical idealist in that I am ever hopeful for my students: as was the case with their experience of the DPT shot, they won't remember the painful prick, but they may lead healthier lives.

Editorial Information:

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—Sherman Folland, Editor