

# **A Multidimensional Approach to Faculty Development: Understanding the Teaching-Learning Process**

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*The training many college faculty members received in graduate school has ill-prepared them for the social and cultural diversity of today's students. College classrooms today are populated by more women, students of color, older, part-time, international students, as well as students with various disabilities and a range of sexual orientations. The understandable difficulty for faculty socialized within another historical and cultural situation is to know how best to facilitate diverse student learning within an increasingly multicultural context.*

Faculty development opportunities are essential to aid faculty members in offering the best possible instruction for today's students. We present here a [model for faculty development](#) that is designed to help faculty members understand the multiple factors that influence teaching and learning in socially and culturally diverse college classrooms. This analysis is built on a model developed by B. W. Jackson in 1988.

The four dimensions of teaching and learning that have particular relevance to issues of social and cultural diversity (see Figure 1) are: 1) the students: knowing one's students and understanding the ways that students from various social and cultural backgrounds experience the college classroom; 2) the instructor: knowing oneself as a person with a prior history of academic socialization interacting with a social and cultural background and learned beliefs; 3) course content: creating a curriculum that incorporates diverse social and cultural perspectives; and 4) teaching methods: developing a broad repertoire of teaching methods to address learning styles of students from different social backgrounds more effectively.

## **Students: Know Who They Are**

In order to understand better the implications of the increased social and cultural diversity of our students, it helps to examine the ways in which students from different social and cultural groups experience the classroom environment. Mainstream students, often coming from homogeneous home and school communities, may experience a kind of culture shock as they encounter diverse populations and multicultural course content in some of their classes. Students from targeted social groups, in some cases also coming from fairly monocultural home or school communities, may also find their classroom experiences characterized by cultural isolation, tokenism, and potential alienation.

Recent inquiry into multicultural teaching and learning has focused on reframing the classroom environment as one that is not culture- or value-neutral. Traditionally sanctioned individual performance, reasoned argumentation, impersonal objectivity, and sports-like competitiveness represent a distinct set of cultural norms and values that, for many students, are at best culturally unfamiliar and at worst contradict the norms and values of their gender or of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. For example, Asian American students may find themselves in a bicultural dilemma if they have been socialized to affirm modesty, cooperation, and nonassertiveness in their family and community, but are expected to be assertive or competitive in the classroom.

Faculty can become more knowledgeable about and sensitive to the values and beliefs of students from diverse racial and cultural groups, while also not assuming that all students have experienced the same socialization in their homes or communities and taking care not to create or perpetuate new stereotypes.

Further, faculty members can guard against the effects of tokenism--increased visibility, scrutiny, and pressure to perform--on minority students who may feel socially targeted in the classroom. Faculty members also need to avoid sending subtle, but influential, messages by making negative assumptions about intellectual competence and qualifications or lowering standards or expressing surprise at good performance based upon group stereotypes. These messages can be internalized by students and contribute to a cycle of damaging self-fulfilling prophecies.

### **Instructor: Know Oneself**

This model also asks that faculty members focus thoughtful attention on their own beliefs and attitudes about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, immigrant status, as these attributes affect our interactions with our students. As faculty, we need to assess our comfort and skills in various cross-cultural situations, take responsibility for obtaining knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of our students, and become more aware of the impact of our socialization and learned beliefs on our interactions with students whose social and cultural backgrounds differ from our own.

The tendency of individuals from dominant cultural groups to see their norms and traditions as universally valued and preferred sends a powerful message and can contribute to negative assumptions and stereotypes toward those with other educational values and beliefs. Ultimately, this tendency simply reduces a faculty member's effectiveness with at least some of his or her students.

### **Curriculum: What We Teach**

The curriculum, or what we teach, is typically the major focus for discussion and debate by college faculty. The current movement toward diversity and multiculturalism has rekindled that debate with an intensity that has not been seen since the development of racial and ethnic studies and women's studies in the early 1970s. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an overview of recent developments in the area of curriculum transformation (see *Diversity Digest*, [Fall, 1998](#), and [Winter, 1997](#)).

It is essential to ask, however, what kinds of curricular change will be most effective for the increasingly diverse student populations and will reflect a range of social and cultural perspectives. Creating this curriculum of inclusion is, in fact, critical for educating all students to live in a socially diverse society and an increasingly interdependent world.

In this model, then, the curriculum is an inescapable area of attention as we engage in a developmental process from exclusion to inclusion. As faculty, we must ask ourselves about the perspectives we have previously used. We need to develop curricula so that course content, course materials, and our sources of knowledge reach beyond European traditions of thought and male authorities to include the contributions, experiences, and perspectives of the traditionally marginalized, but increasingly visible members of society.

### **Teaching Methods: How We Teach**

The fourth dimension of this model addresses a frequently overlooked component of the multicultural classroom--the complex interplay between social and cultural world view on the one hand and teaching or learning styles on the other. Typically, many college faculty teach the way they were taught and thereby replicate unexamined ideas about appropriate teaching practices. They may limit their methods to the acquisition of course content through out-of-classroom reading and in-classroom lectures. They may limit their evaluations to a measurement of achievement as demonstrated solely by individual performance.

Effective teaching in the multicultural classroom depends on the teacher's willingness and ability to develop a flexible repertoire of teaching strategies so as to maximize the match between his or her cultural and learning style and those of the students. A teacher's cultural flexibility also exemplifies for students the multicultural value of reciprocity rather than the monocultural expectation of assimilation. This in turn calls for information concerning the cultural orientation that students, understood both as individuals and as members of distinct social groups, may bring with them to the college classroom. (For resources and additional information on diversity and learning styles, see *Diversity Digest*, [Fall, 1997](#).)

Alternative teaching strategies might include collaborative and cooperative learning activities to balance traditions of individualistic competition; visual, auditory, or dramatic demonstrations as alternatives to the exclusive use of verbal explanation and written expression; group, peer and cross-age learning projects as well as individual questions and answers; study groups and group projects built on peer relationships instead of exclusively solo study; active learning projects, simulations, and role-plays to balance the passive learning of the lecture-and-listen note-taking mode.

As we enlarge our repertoire of curricular and teaching strategies, we increase the likelihood of academic success for a broader range of students and we enable more socially diverse college students to feel welcomed, included, and competent. The benefits of instructional flexibility, however, extend to the *traditional* student as well, because varied teaching is effective teaching in any event.

In conclusion, we believe this model of multicultural teaching and learning is useful to individual faculty members and can be used in faculty development programs. It can be used by the individual college teacher as a framework, organizer, and diagnostic tool for his or her own classroom experience. It can also serve as a framework for faculty development workshops or seminars. Finally, it can help to organize and manage the extensive new literature that is emerging from the dialogue about multiculturalism currently underway in American higher education.

*This is a shortened version of a longer article, "Dynamics of Diversity in the Teaching-Learning Process: A Faculty Development Model for Analysis and Action," Promoting Diversity in College Classrooms: Innovative Responses for the Curriculum, Faculty, and Institutions, ed. Maurianne Adams, Jossey-Bass, 1992.*

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