

Discussing Differences in the Classroom

Why do instructors want to address people's differences in the classroom? The world is becoming increasingly diverse and we need to get beyond exterior differences to see our common humanity if we ever want to reduce discrimination and prejudice. If not in an academic setting, what other forum is there for helping people address this crucial issue for the benefit of humanity?

In addition, if not addressed, differences can create a barrier to communications, understanding and learning. It's analogous to a teacher coming back from lunch with spaghetti sauce on his or her cheek. If not mentioned, no one will listen to anything the educator says because everyone's eyes are focused on the smear of tomato paste. Differences can be just as distracting creating a "noise" through which learning must be filtered.

Talking about differences in the classroom can be a frightening adventure for teachers if they are not trained. Yet, out of frank and sometimes passionate discourse can evolve a greater understanding about diversity.

We must understand that we all fear people who are different. From the time we are born we instinctively gravitate towards the familiar such as family and avoid the unfamiliar such as strangers.

Almost everyone has been made to feel outcast at one time in their life. Unless you were one of the few popular kids growing up you were probably ridiculed because you were too tall or short, fat or skinny, wore glasses or had freckles, or any of a million other reasons people made fun of you so they'd feel better about themselves. Add to this mix people who are from diverse cultures, practice alternative lifestyles, or are physically challenged and you have another layer of pain.

During such a discussion it's crucial that every student be heard. It is those who are the quietest who have experienced the greatest pain and have the deepest insights if only given the opportunity to express them. Not that everyone has to speak if they do not wish to do so but the atmosphere must encourage them to do so if so moved.

Creating an environment where students feel safe enough to express their differences and the benefits and challenges requires patience and skill. It's crucial to establish rules that require mutual respect of everyone in the classroom. This means that not only should students respect each other's opinions as well as the instructor's but the instructor should value students' opinions as well. Gone are the days when we stood on pedestals with students at our feet absorbing every word of wisdom we would pontificate. We are more facilitators of knowledge recognizing that there is far more collective wisdom in a classroom than imbued in any one instructor. All we have to do is encourage it to spring forth in an atmosphere of openness. This means that instructors must have the confidence to allow students to teach each other at times while analyzing the textbook and hearing the teacher's interpretation of same.

Discussions of differences are guaranteed to generate controversy. Blacks may challenge Whites, those on the religious right may condemn gay students, minorities may complain about people of privilege, and more. While these discussions must be kept from getting confrontational they can enable students to look at both sides of each issue and hear perspectives with which they may not be familiar. Isn't this the purpose of education? These kinds of discussions also help to contextualize learning and make lessons more real whether in an accounting or sociology class.

Also, don't kid yourself. If you don't allow these discussions in your classroom from time to time as appropriate, they are still occurring outside the classroom but in a one-sided self-aggrandizing fashion without any counterpoint.

Again, the key to clearing the air is the confidence of the instructor. By allowing deeper and deeper discussion about differences you will see how badly students want to talk about their personal experiences and how much other students need to hear their story. You will also see that you can keep the discussion from getting out of hand. There will certainly be anger, frustration and sadness expressed but over time you will learn to allow them to be aired without going too far.

Perhaps if these kinds of discussion had been held at Columbine High in Colorado in 1999 some thirteen precious lives would not have been lost to gunfire at the hands of two students who did not feel heard or valued by their classmates.

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