

Teaching in a Diverse Environment:
How to educate Students from a world different from your own
John Zibluk, 2018

“Everyone in every culture accepts certain implicit, basic assumptions about people, their human nature, the nature of human relationships, the nature of human activity, and the nature of the relationships between people and their physical and social environments. These assumptions are called basic assumptions because they give rise to our beliefs and values and, ultimately, the way we behave towards others. (Schein, 1985)” (Owens, 2007)

It’s easy to argue about our point of view with another adult, to tell someone they’re wrong when we believe it to be so, to fight tooth and nail and to belittle opinions we think are wrong. Technologies and social media programs such as Facebook give us enormous outlets with which we can express our opinions and spend hours of time arguing about them to other people. Ever since we were children, we have been developing our beliefs. As individuals in an ever-changing world with different backgrounds, life experiences, and personal abilities, we all hold our own opinions and morals for how we are supposed to interact with the environment around us. As adults, we choose our world leaders, we hold opinions on foreign wars and nations across the seas from us, we debate and fight over what belief is right, even if we actually have no stake or risk in the events being fought over.

As with all social interactions, there is a time and place for everything, and when living in the world of educators and mentors for the next generation, personal opinions and morals may come into conflict with those of the students you are charged with. This begs the question, however, of how does a Teacher handle a belief of a student (either taught to them by their parents or come up with on their own) that conflicts with the education they are receiving? How should they handle this situation? Is there any actual

guide for what to do? Are there any rules for this sort of conduct? Is it appropriate for a Teacher to tell a student their belief system is wrong if it does not match up with the curriculum? The answer to these questions lays in the understanding of three aspects; Knowing what Diversity is, knowing what to expect when entering the classroom, and knowing how to respect one's belief of something, even if you do not agree with it.

“Teachers should have deep subject knowledge but they also need to develop a “rich repertoire of teaching strategies” which included direct instruction to the whole class, guided discovery, group work, supporting self-study and individual enquiry. This range of approaches can be adapted to suit local circumstances and pupils’ needs. Teachers needed to reflect on their practices, collaborate with other individuals, develop supportive networks and acquire strong skills in the use of technology for effective teaching and tracking student learning.” (Downs, 2012)

Becoming a teacher in the modern world is entering an environment that is essentially a gigantic melding pot of individuality and ever-changing rules. No one student is the same as another, whether it's because of their race, religion, birthplace or any number of differences, the vast variety of individuals that one will interact with in their classroom is substantial. In a world where we have people of all nations going to new homes and places and bringing their cultures with them, the flow of new ideas and concepts is ever ongoing. While differences and individuality are a beautiful thing, demonstrating the rich and elaborate histories of both the individuals and families they come from, it can lead to difficulties in a classroom, especially when the lifestyle of that student may come in to conflict with what is considered to be standard education or even

just youth culture in general. An example of this was shown in Connecticut in 2015, when Halloween was banned and had its parade cancelled by the town to due fear of excluding children whose parents did not believe in the holiday.

“Growing up in America there are certain traditions and celebrations we have become accustomed to celebrating at home and during school! Saying the pledge of allegiance, Halloween parades, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukkah celebrations, New Years, Valentines day parties and dances and Easter. These are our American customs and traditions and we should not have to give them up because others find them offensive!” (Daily Mail, 2015)

There is a saying that, when in Rome, one should make like the Romans. The same could be said of the United States; if you decided to come here, then you need to conform to our way of life. This is a very common opinion that may give way to (understandable in some contexts) anger when confronted with potential change. Of course, to those children who the town was catering towards, the anger towards them would come off as frightening and cruel. After all, it is just them expressing their right to believe in what they wish and to reject what they do not accept; isn't that the point of being an American, to have the freedom to make such choices without persecution? Of course, but where is the line drawn between who actually gets to have their way?

To solve the problem on how to keep everyone happy while not creating more problems, one must first understand what Diversity is. Diversity, on the surface, can be a bit intimidating. It sounds similar to Adversity, which of course means a struggle or negative force in one's life. Diversity, however, is nothing of the sort, and is a helpful tool; both because understanding it when you begin teaching is what will you allow to be

successful, and because it is an ever evolving learning tool. According to Diversity.com, the textbook definition of Diversity would be;

“Definitions regarding “what is diversity” are often described in relationship with work cultures and environments. The term “workforce diversity” is commonly known as it relates to “what is diversity” in an employer’s business location. Similarities and differences among employees in terms of age, cultural background, physical abilities, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.”

(Diversity)

Diversity is a complex term that changes meaning depending on the environment and context in which it is used. Ranging from describing the organisms one sees in their natural environment to the enormous amounts of people and their cultures in the world, diversity is constantly at play in our lives. The range of diversity also shifts depending on age groups. With age comes mental, physical and cultural progression into what diversifies the self from the other- as well as the desire to maintain one’s individuality and stand out amongst the crowd. Younger students are more impressionable and are also less rigid in terms of structure, while those who are older have already begun formulating complex relationships with one another and the environment around them. Teachers who are educating grade school children who have not yet truly formed strong, experience based opinions of the world would see a very different kind of individual when placed in a high school setting. Young adults who have experienced the world, whether it be through emotion, pain, joy, success or failure, these students have gained far more insight to their surroundings than those younger than them, and must be taught a different way. Luckily for Teachers who desire to work their way up the grade ladder or potentially shift

their teaching style, as stated above, while diversity does present its fair share of difficulties, with it comes opportunity, not only to enhance your capabilities as a teacher; but to learn from the very students you are there to teach.

“There are many school factors that affect the success of culturally diverse students; the school's atmosphere and overall attitudes toward diversity, involvement of the community, and culturally responsive curriculum, to name a few. Of all of these factors, the personal and academic relationships between teachers and their students may be the most influential. This relationship has been referred to as the "core relationship" of learning ~~and~~ the roles of teachers and students, the subject matter, and their interaction in the classroom.”

(TeacherVision.com)

Now that you understand just how far and wide your variables in a classroom can be, you need to prepare yourself for what to expect from them so that you can adapt to the situation and succeed. Being a teacher gives one the ability to have an outside look at the lives of many individuals. You will be working, not only with students, but also with their families, whether that means parents or extended family or caretakers, your relationship with them will not only grant you insight that others do not have, but dictate the entire course of your relationship with a student and the outcome of your time together as mentor and disciple. Positive interactions with your student and their world presents the opportunity to bond with both them and with those close to them, to form a connection that will positively affect your student's education and learning potential.

“Your relationships with others will keep you strong, and they might be the key to fueling your energy to persist through challenges. Build strong relationships with your colleagues and administrators and with your students and their parents. If you’re shy, now is the time to pick up some strategies for making connections with others. Ask questions, knock on doors, and invite people into your classroom. Your community will be a buoy when times get hard.” (Aguilar, 2016)

However, even in classrooms that have students from similar backgrounds, not all diversity one sees in a classroom is culturally related. Some children who come from the same place may have drastically different points of view on the world or personalities from their peers. You may also have to deal with those students who are struggling in areas that are not idea based, but experience formed. As sad a prospect as it may be, the reality is that some students live in scary or even outright hostile environments, and may bring aspects of those environments into your classroom, whether it be through their methods of communication with other students, interaction with you as a teacher, or their respect for the material in front of them.

“Grab 35 kids, put them in a room designed to seat 20, with only 15 desks, give them 10 books, 10 pencils, and 12 sheets of paper to share. Make all of them be quiet, still, and look at you for 50 minutes. Give them an assignment, even a simple one and be sure that 85% of them pass with a 70% of better. Just try that. Don’t worry about the students with disabilities or the kid that hasn’t eaten since lunch yesterday, or the one whose parent beat him last night or molested her, or had strangers doing drugs in the house all night, or the kid who had to sleep on the floor because his mom and her new boyfriend took his bed or those who are

depressed from their parents divorce or a parent who recently died. Just do the easy part. Just teach 50 minutes, 25 kids, in harmony.” – Author Unknown.

The above quote, written by an anonymous author during the recent Arizona Teacher Strike, was to illustrate the point of the struggle teachers with limited funds, both because of school funding and because of personal pay. While it is not the happiest scenario and does represent an extreme, it does present a feasible situation for what one may experience when attempting to teach a classroom. As stated before, you are going to be on the outside looking in at the lives of your students, and having to collaborate with them in order to ensure their success. With your role as a Teacher comes a responsibility, and sometimes your job will go far beyond just educating. You act as a mentor and confidant to your students, a safety net they can rely on. This can put a lot of pressure and stress on even experienced teachers. The fact of the matter is, when it comes to what to expect in a classroom, work your hardest, hope for the best and prepare for the worst. It is also imperative that you allow yourself to remain open minded, despite the hardships you may face, and acknowledge that your role is to guide and teach, not to judge and control. This mindset is what will lead into the proper handling of all of the hypothetical situations one might face, that being, how to properly influence those very worlds you've been an outsider looking in on.

“Appreciate and accommodate the similarities and differences among the students' cultures. Effective teachers of culturally diverse students acknowledge both individual and cultural differences enthusiastically and identify these differences in a positive manner. This positive identification creates a basis for the development of effective communication and instructional strategies. Social

skills such as respect and cross-cultural understanding can be modeled, taught, prompted, and reinforced by the teacher.” (TeacherVision.com)

Having now reviewed just what Diversity is and how you may encounter it in your classroom, the proper answer for our initial questions can be given in full. In summarization; How to go about teaching correctly and correcting wrongs without insulting cultures and individuals. As adults who have reached a place in life with a fully formed understanding of the world based off personal experience, teachers, like any other regular individual, have their own judgments and opinions. Some of these opinions are just natural to have, such as being impressed by a student who comes to class well groomed, dressed and prepared for the day, and feeling more concerned with a student who shows up poorly dressed or unprepared. Then there are scenarios that are formed from our normal environments that may affect our level of comfort with our role as an educator. These can range in topic or difficulty; examples are teaching a different socio-economic class from what you grew up in or teaching to students who aren't as versed in your native language. You may have students who observe religions that have negative narratives about them, even if that student on their own is a perfectly normal and bright individual. This is why it is imperative that one remains open minded, and not allow personal bias or emotion to affect what goes on in your classroom- but to also remain grounded in what you are there to do; educate.

“As our nation grows increasingly diverse, there has never been a better opportunity for us to learn to live respectfully together and benefit from one another's wisdom and experiences. But sometimes fear, uncertainty, or discomfort prevent people from talking to each other. This is especially true when it comes to

the topics of race and racism, cultural differences, language and bilingualism, and the myriad questions that arise in a world where these issues have such a powerful place in children's lives. As professionals who partner with families to nurture young children, parents often regard us as a resource on a wide range of issues connected to diversity.” (Gonzales)

When it comes to teaching in classrooms, diversity will always provide both positive and negative aspects from your students. You will experience innocence, you will work to solve ignorance and you will struggle with defiance. There will be those who refuse to learn, or whose parents tell them that what you are teaching them is wrong. When dealing with this, remember theory vs. fact. Solve the problem in a way that can make both parties right, even if it is something you personally disagree with. Examples of this would be intelligent design vs. evolution; both are theories and can be presented as such and with respect for the other, regardless of how those two may interact. Focus on what could be accurate and could be wrong about either. If there is such large division in ideology, let your students decide for themselves which one they choose to believe in. In doing this, you teach them not only about the topics themselves, but how to consciously choose what to believe in.

Teach them that one plus one is two, which color is blue and how fast a cheetah can run. Teach them kindness and empathy and proper respect when dealing in public situations vs. discussions at home. Show them how to throw a ball or read a beautiful story. Teach them why baking soda and vinegar makes for a fun experiment; allow them to use their wildest imaginations and explore their faith with their families to discover how the universe was made, give them the courage and belief in themselves to go on that

journey, and the tools to explore the ideas of others through civil discourse to widen their world, whether it be during your time together or not.

“The children in your classroom will learn about other cultures through you, their parents, and other adults they are introduced to. As you develop close relationships with children, what you tell them will become more meaningful. Over time, your messages have deeper meaning to them because you, a most trusted adult in their lives, are the communicator. The relationships children have with you and with their peers set the stage for successfully exploring what's in the next county or in another country.” (Moore)

The truth of the matter is that, while the difficulty is there, these individuals will be entering the world one day, and cannot do so with only one mentality to go off of. Your role, as a teacher, is to have the courage and respect for that student to put in the effort to show them another way of thinking, without belittling or disrespecting their culture. This can be done in a number of ways. As a teacher, it is your job to communicate with your students and facilitate their connection to the world. If their belief system is different from your own, if their culture clashes with the classroom, the simple answer is to find a way to make it work. Search for a common ground or draw parallels between what they are learning at home and what they are learning at school. As you are an outsider looking into their world, you act as the doorway between them and the infinite worlds ahead.

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