

# **Essays on Teaching Excellence**

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# **Teaching in Action: Multicultural Education as the Highest Form of Understanding**

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When we think about and discuss multicultural teaching and the infusion of new content, it is not uncommon for professors to ask, "What do you mean? My course is culturally neutral" or "That's more applicable in teaching history, but how can I do this in my biology class?" Clearly higher education needs to serve an increasingly socially and culturally diverse student body—a population divided by race, class, culture, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, and learning and physical abilities. However, we are not yet thinking deeply enough about how these changes will affect what we teach in the classroom and how we teach it.

Our traditional approaches and structures are challenged to keep up with changing demands and expectations. Teaching from a multicultural perspective is more than a classroom of students who vary according to their social and cultural characteristics. It involves a critical analysis of the overall goals of the scholarship in our disciplines as they relate to multicultural education. Guiding questions might be: Is it a goal of my course to help students value diversity and equity? To help students acquire a more comprehensive knowledge of the course content? To prepare all students to work in a global society? Answering these questions

necessitates an examination of course content including course materials, textbooks, handouts, activities, assignments, learning style differences, and the sources of knowledge that we tend to emphasize.

Multicultural scholars argue that knowledge reflects the social and cultural positions of people of power and that it is valid only when we acknowledge the sources of knowledge in any context, one that is defined by gender or class (Tetreault, 1993). Multicultural feminists argue that knowledge is both subjective and objective and that the subjective aspects need to be better defined (Hooks, 1990; King & Mitchell, 1990). Multicultural theorists also posit that by claiming knowledge as objective and neutral we are influenced to present particular interests and ideologies as universal ways of thought and knowing (Asante, 1991; Hilliard et al., 1990). In working to arrive at a conceptualization of how to teach from a multicultural perspective, researchers offer several approaches to curriculum reform (Banks, 1993; Green, 1989; Schoem, et al. 1993; Ognibene, 1989; Jackson & Holvino, 1988).

Many describe such change in terms of levels rather than a static outcome, and reviewing the curricular change process can help us achieve a greater degree of understanding and practice of multicultural teaching. Let's look at an adaptation of Banks (1993) as an example. While these levels are not ranked hierarchically, nor do they necessarily follow a linear progression, they do reflect ever deepening multicultural understanding.

**The "Contributions Approach"** Courses tend to focus on the contributions of people of color, holidays, and cultural elements to the discipline. When these contributions are presented in courses, it tends to be in stereotypical ways. For example, the contributions of African Americans to history are celebrated only in February, Black History Month, and the contributions of Hispanic Americans are celebrated only in May, Cinco de Mayo.

**The "Additive Approach"** Courses tend to add the contributions of scholars of color without changing the structure of the curriculum. For example, an English Literature course might add Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* or Shakespeare's *Othello* to the class reading list without changing the course structure. These works are rarely

presented so as to offer alternative conceptualizations.

A reconceptualization of course content not only offers students from socially and culturally diverse communities an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging in the subject of study. It enables all students the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and ways of knowing about the course content.

**The "Transformation Approach"** Courses and curricula are changed so students' thinking is stretched to view contributions, events, issues, and course concepts from the perspective of members of targeted groups. For example, a lecture on World War II might describe the contributions and the meaning of the war to African Americans and the role played by the Tuskegee Airmen. A general biology or zoology course might address AIDS and discuss the impact and effect of the disease on various communities such as women; gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals; African Americans; and other populations and regions.

**The "Social Action Approach"** Students are empowered to make decisions on important personal, social, and civic problems and take action to help solve them. For example, a class in Higher Education Law might ask students to study the effect of institutional discrimination practices and develop an action plan to improve practices at their institution. A curriculum is reviewed to incorporate new scholarship, methodologies, ways of thinking, and ways of thinking and learning in the discipline.

**Multicultural Teaching in Action** There is no doubt that the transformation and social action approaches achieve a high level of multicultural understanding and teaching practice. If our goal is to prepare students to live and work in a global society, then the social action approach affords the opportunity to move courses beyond structural changes. Students practice the decision-making skills necessary to function as effective and informed change agents.

Stretching our current practice requires considerable planning, experimentation, and risk-taking. This is an ongoing, learning process. It might be easier to implement the "Additive Approach", but this approach puts students and instructors at a disadvantage.

While students receive an understanding of some nontraditional ways of thinking about the course content, they are perceived as "add-ons," not as important as other course material. Also, this is often the content that gets eliminated when an instructor is pressed for time. The action oriented approach challenges traditional assumptions about the construction of knowledge in our disciplines, and it encourages new ways of thinking. We are restructuring the classroom so that the teaching and learning process is reciprocal, within, of course, the limits of responsibility and reality.

It is often argued that the action oriented approach applies more readily to disciplines in which the knowledge is socially constructed, where experts select the content, generally based on tradition, politics, and power, e.g., history, literature, sociology, education, psychology, and the arts. However, in the sciences, instructors can stretch even further to look at course content from a social-action perspective. There are many appropriate unresolved issues in the sciences in which students can be involved and exert an influence - such as health and environmental areas.

Even if we succeed in transforming only a small part of our courses and curricula, we cannot help but instill in our students the value of diversity in teaching and learning and of the contributions made by societies and cultures similar to and different from our own. Teaching from a multicultural perspective does not imply dilution of course content, nor does it require a critical analysis of every topic from a multitude of perspectives. Rather, it may take the form of a discussion or lecture that critically examines a theme or a particular issue from multiple points of view, meaningfully incorporated into the course. Our students are untapped wells of information in this area. Those who grew up in other cultures and other countries, for example, can share their experiences and perspectives when ideas, concepts, and paradigms are presented.

Typically, many faculty teach the way that they were taught. Multicultural teaching affords us an opportunity to broaden our assumptions about teaching and learning. We can work to develop a repertoire of diverse teaching strategies to expand our traditional approaches.

For those of us who are getting started in multicultural teaching or are building on our knowledge in this area, one of the greatest challenges is finding resources and individuals to guide us in our work in this endeavor.

Many faculty are relying on teaching and learning centers to help them with course and curriculum design and the identification of resource materials. Some centers have a multicultural teaching and learning mission. Institutional centers such as those at The Ohio State University, The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor are well prepared to assist faculty in preparing students to work in a diverse society.

**Conclusion** Multicultural teaching is excellence in teaching. It is not so much a dialogue of whether we can get there or not, but rather a willingness to learn more about ourselves as instructors, our students, what we teach, and how we teach it so that we can provide the highest form of education possible for all students.

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