

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Leading Culturally Sensitive Classroom Discussions Following September 11

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Since the events of September 11, 2001, much has been written about its impact on global politics, the global economy, and international communication. Educators continue to focus on the importance of addressing these issues with our students in the classroom environment. Edward Zlotkowski in his keynote address at the 2002 AAHE Faculty Roles and Rewards Conference noted, "Our job as educators today and tomorrow and for quite some time to come is to help our students as best we can to make sense of the events of September 11th, and for every discipline surely, there are connections that can and should be made between the tragedy our students are living through and the subjects we teach."

As faculty developers we are being faced with two questions from campus faculty: (1) how do we integrate the events of September 11th into our course curricula and (2) how do we manage classroom discussion around these issues so that the educational experience is powerful, positive, relevant, and edifying for all students in the course. This essay will address both issues based on pedagogical practices that exist on campuses across the country.

Integrating Content into Course Curricula

The Obvious Course Fit for September 11 Issues

As faculty consider integrating issues around September 11 into their course curricula, there are obvious "easy fits", and there are more difficult fits. Courses that are marked as "diversity courses" within the campus curriculum are obvious homes for September 11 issues. These courses, and innumerable others, teach students skills they will need to communicate competently within an increasingly diverse world. Two examples of this type of course are as follow.

University of Michigan: "Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community." This course teaches students how to address conflicts that arise among and within different groups and explores the possibility for building community across racial and ethnic boundaries.

Portland State University: "Oregon Leadership Institute." This yearlong course is designed for students who mentor Latino students. Through exploration of issues concerning self-identify, understanding one's cultural beliefs, and cultural and racial stereotyping, this course provides students strategies and skills to become community and national leaders.

The Not-So-Obvious Course Fit for September 11 Issues

When the issue of September 11 is raised in courses that are traditional, canonical courses, a common faculty response is that this topic is either an uncomfortable "add-on" to the course or that there really is no place or no time where this fits into the course curriculum. With an open mind, creativity, and additional thought, course content related to September 11 could be an "easy fit" and a beneficial addition to almost any course.

For Example:

An American literature course that includes traditional texts by authors such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne might also include contemporary U.S. writers

who have focused their writing on issues around September 11. Comparing and contrasting topics such as "cultural stereotyping" in the traditional text and the more recent text could be modules within the course.

Courses on rhetoric and public speaking might choose speeches given after national tragedies (e.g., September 11) comparing the types of oratory and orators. The student analysis would focus on the events of September 11 and how these specific events influenced both the content of the presentation and audience interpretation.

Courses in professional schools (e.g., business, law, medicine) could include components on how the events of September 11 help shape the professional direction of these applied fields. For example, schools of social work across the country are incorporating counseling approaches that are specific to the needs of people affected by September 11.

The Effect on Graduate Studies

Another topic of great importance and relevance in this area is graduate courses, graduate students, and sensitive subjects. Peter Magrath, President of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) stated, "Students come to our universities because they want to study certain subjects or undertake research, particularly if they are graduate students. The Bush Administration is determined to screen out from admission to graduate and research programs a small number of visa applicants interested in pursuing study or research in sensitive subjects uniquely available in the United States, and that might have application for terrorist activity, as for example, with biological toxic agents."

As issues around course content and student enrollment arise, it is critical that campuses and faculty have campus-wide discussions around the ethics, the intent, and the outcomes of this thinking. Administrators, teaching and learning centers, international education offices, and student affairs offices need to lead these discussions on campuses across the country. Unless faculty have input on these issues, however, student enrollment policies will be

determined by a few but will affect all.

Leading Sensitive Discussions

It is nearly a year after 9/11, but faculty continue to seek effective pedagogical practices for addressing these issues, while also maintaining a course climate that is inclusive and encourages continuing discussion and learning. The University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) created guidelines that have been adopted by educators across the country (see <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/resmain.html>). The following recommendations are an expanded version of these original guidelines:

Introduction. When introducing these topics, the instructor could note that the issues surrounding September 11 may be more sensitive for some than others. Modeling a constructivist approach, the instructor might explain how the September 11 events specifically affected herself and how she made sense of these events during the event, right after the event, and currently. This would allow the students to understand how the instructor made sense of the 9/11 events and how these events have since shaped the instructor's worldview.

Code of Conduct. The instructor should help the class establish a code of conduct that respects diverse views and avoids inflammatory language and then should model and help maintain the code himself. If someone violates the code, the instructor needs to gently remind the students and paraphrase in such a way that keeps the classroom discussion focussed and the student who violated the rules included. Before responding directly to another student's comment, students should paraphrase the comment. Once the first student confirms that the second student's paraphrase is accurate, then the second student can posit her own personal opinion. As a result students feel that their opinions have been heard and understood before the conversation moves on.

Sharing Personal Stories. Connecting students' own personal experience with the course content and learning objectives is important. The more students share personal stories that are relevant

both to September 11 and to the particular module introduced in the course, the deeper the learning intended by the instructor.

Students in Target Ethnic Groups. It is important that class members hear the voices of students who are members of ethnic groups or constituencies directly associated with the events of September 11 and that they avoid stereotyping. These students are an integral and beneficial part of the classroom environment, and students who are not part of these groups and constituencies should understand this from the outset of the term.

Frameworks and Strategies for Discussion. Well thought-through discussion frameworks can help shape the direction of the module and further student learning outcomes. When the discussion is underway, the following strategies may help create a comfortable and inclusive climate: use "rounds" in which each student responds to a guiding question followed by open discussion; divide students into discussion groups; and have students write before speaking.

Other Thoughts. Other ways to engage students in the post 9/11 events and course curriculum include:

- Speak with the teaching and learning center on your campus to explore other suggestions for managing classroom discussion;
- Combine some course sessions with another instructor who may be covering the same issue in her course.
- Create an on-line environment to enhance discussion and encourage all students to participate.
- Design community-based, service-learning activities to integrate 9/11 events more closely into the course curriculum.

Conclusion

As higher education enters the 2002-2003 academic year we are living in a different world than we did a year ago. We need to reflect continuously on the events surrounding September 11, how to integrate them most effectively in our curricula, and how to most effectively manage the sensitive discussions that arise around these issues.

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