

Diversity & Democracy

CIVIC LEARNING FOR SHARED FUTURES

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FEATURED TOPIC

By incorporating diverse content, perspectives, and approaches into the curriculum, faculty of all disciplines have found both pedagogical and curricular routes that strengthen scholarship and prepare students for engagement with today's complex world. This issue of *Diversity & Democracy* explores the various ways that faculty are engaging with **diversity across the disciplines** to support student learning and improve achievement of important liberal learning outcomes.

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

- 04 | Infusing Diversity in the Sciences and Professional Disciplines
- 07 | Creating Interdisciplinary and Global Perspectives through Community-Based Research
- 10 | Literature, Literacy, and Multiculturalism in the Expanded Classroom
- 12 | Diversity Content as a Gateway to Deeper Learning

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Teaching Diversity and Democracy across the Disciplines: Who, What, and How

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Several years ago, as a Fulbright scholar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I assisted high school teachers and university professors in constructing a curriculum to teach students about democracy. I was far from an expert on the topic, but within weeks of my arrival, I had addressed a national conference and spoken at several educational and religious institutions about the need for democratic engagement with diversity—far from an abstraction in a country disengaging from a devastating war that inflamed ethnic differences. In preparing for these events, I found myself struggling to reflect deeply on decades of experience living in the world's best-known pluralist democracy. I felt less than prepared to share my perspectives on diversity and democracy with my colleagues in my host country.

I imagine that this feeling is familiar to many professors in America's colleges and universities. Today's students expect faculty to engage in meaningful conversations about democracy's promise and reality. Knowing that the landscape on which they will construct their adult lives is unstable, they see faculty as models for how they can influence the conversation about democracy's role in America's diverse society and in the world at large. Faculty, particularly those whose disciplinary work seems less connected to these issues, may not feel prepared to engage these questions. Yet all faculty can bring issues of diversity and democracy into their teaching. The challenge is finding a way how.

A Cross-Disciplinary Task

The learning outcomes associated with diversity education and with liberal education more generally—civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action—are not the exclusive domain of any single discipline. Indeed, strengthening our students' skills and knowledge in these areas will require advances and insights from many academic fields, as contributors to this issue of *Diversity & Democracy* affirm. At the same time, the breadth of these learning outcomes can obscure their close connections with focused disciplinary endeavors, leaving some faculty to imagine that better-prepared colleagues in other departments are engaging students with these important learning goals. This is a formula for institutional failure.

Success in attaining these outcomes requires students to engage with questions of diversity and democracy throughout their educations, strengthening their skills as they apply what they have learned to increasingly complex problems. For this to happen, *all* faculty in *all* disciplines must commit to teaching toward these outcomes. In some cases, this means highlighting disciplinary content that attends to diverse perspectives—for example, including narratives that reflect Americans'

CONTENTS

Diversity across the Disciplines

- 04 | Infusing Diversity in the Sciences and Professional Disciplines
- 07 | Creating Interdisciplinary and Global Perspectives through Community-Based Research
- 10 | Literature, Literacy, and Multiculturalism in the Expanded Classroom
- 12 | Diversity Content as a Gateway to Deeper Learning
- 14 | Preparing Globally Competitive, Collaborative, and Compassionate Students

Perspectives

- 15 | Education in a Mash-up Culture

Campus Practice

- 16 | Envisioning Interdisciplinarity
- 18 | Global Design Studio

Research Report

- 20 | Surveys Suggest Positive Trends Related to Diversity and Civic Education

For More...

- 22 | In Print
- 23 | Resources
- 23 | Opportunities



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Universities

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Higher education has made great efforts to incorporate diverse content, perspectives, and approaches in the classroom. By questioning canons, considering civic commitments, and following the lure of interdisciplinarity, faculty have shifted pedagogies in promising ways. Yet some faculty members continue to ask, "How can I incorporate diversity into my teaching? How can I globalize my students' learning? And how can I help my students engage with the multiple communities that constitute their world?"

This issue of *Diversity & Democracy* continues this legacy and addresses these challenges by showcasing new ideas for integrating diversity work across multiple disciplines. With creative approaches to persistent questions related to U.S. pluralism, global diversity, and civic engagement, this issue's authors are exploring new ways to prepare students to live in the modern world. Through novel methods of teaching, faculty are encouraging students to develop skills that are essential in a diverse democracy while simultaneously strengthening students' disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning. Their work suggests pathways toward pedagogies that support student engagement with diversity and learning in all subject areas.

diverse backgrounds and experiences, as some humanities scholars have done. I transformed a traditional course in developmental psychology by including autobiographies reflecting diverse experiences of growing up in America (Meacham 1997). Faculty can also teach toward these outcomes by drawing on content from multiple disciplines. In teaching World Civilizations, a general education course for first-year students, I emphasized themes of religion, race, democracy, and gender by drawing on content from art history, classics, economics, history, philosophy, and political science.

Still, for faculty accustomed to the narrow subdisciplinary focus of current doctoral training, teaching toward these outcomes through course content can be challenging. For these faculty members, it may be productive to ask not *what* they will teach, but *how* their method of teaching can encourage democratic outcomes and engagement with diversity.

Critical Thinking and Diversity

The lessons of civic engagement and diversity have significant implications for teaching. Our classrooms should

be models of democracy in action. The search for better modes of deliberation across difference occurs not just in the town hall, but in the classroom, where our students can learn and practice the value of listening with respect to others. The skills students need to form better understandings are very similar to those they need to become engaged citizens in a pluralistic democracy: written and oral communication, teamwork, inquiry and analysis, intercultural competence, and critical thinking. We should thus seek opportunities to model these skills through discussion and debate, presenting evidence on both sides of historical and contemporary issues and encouraging students to draw their own conclusions while engaging deeply with multiple viewpoints.

Too many students (and perhaps too many faculty) understand the goal of debate in the classroom (and in a democracy) to be to convince other students (and fellow citizens) of their views. In short, they see inquiry, analysis, and critical thinking as ways to prove that they are right, and assume that those who disagree with them are simply failing to engage in these activities. Yet I believe

that the essence of critical thinking is not criticism of others' ideas but reflection on one's own ideas and assumptions that are developed in dialogue with others. This seems especially true in the context of preparing students to be citizens in a democracy. I now tell my students that evidence of critical thinking can include reflecting on and critiquing one's own paper, criticizing one's own thesis, and discussing both sides of an issue. Critical thinking should be a tool not merely for exposing flaws in others' arguments, but for reflecting on one's own assumptions and—most importantly—strengthening one's own understanding.

What does this conception of critical thinking imply for how we engage students around issues of diversity and civic knowledge? For many years, my overarching goal in my diversity courses was for students to know about the histories and experiences of people who are different from themselves. In retrospect, I suspect that this approach led students to focus too much on learning about "the other" and too little on reflecting on their own beliefs and attitudes. Engaging with civic knowledge and diversity should mean applying critical thinking to learn about "the other" and to learn about oneself. Students should understand how gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion affect those who are different from themselves, but they should also understand how these forces affect them. Just as in a democracy, students should analyze and critique the other's and their own positions.

In this context, the parallels between interdisciplinary and intercultural engagement abound, with deep implications for the way we teach and learn. Like diverse groups in society, each academic discipline (and each person within each discipline) provides unique perspectives on significant questions. Likewise, the boundaries of each discipline support faculty identities. Faculty who succeed in interdisciplinary

teaching are able to stretch beyond their disciplinary training, taking delight with others in the mutual enrichment of their disciplines and encouraging students to appreciate connections among diverse approaches to knowledge. Interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship provide an opportunity to reflect on, test, and strengthen one's own ideas and assumptions while working with colleagues from diverse disciplines

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toward mutual understanding and achievement. These benefits are very similar to the benefits of engagement with diversity in a pluralist democracy.

A Democratic Approach

Given the connections between diversity, democracy, and interdisciplinarity, it's not surprising that faculty who are invested in their disciplinary identities might claim that the content of their work doesn't touch on topics related to race, gender, ethnicity, social class, or religion. But any classroom should exemplify respect for others' voices and perspectives. It's thus important for faculty to model for their students how to listen with respect and learn from those with divergent voices.

How can faculty best approach this task? In teaching toward the outcomes of civic engagement and diversity, and so sometimes stretching beyond the bounds of our disciplinary training, we should be honest with our students and ourselves about the limits of our knowledge. Effective teaching in a democratic classroom requires a willingness to shift from what one knows (and the authority that a disciplinary grounding implies) to what one doesn't know—or what one still needs to learn (and the lack of authority that this implies). Teaching a general education course, World Civilizations, after being trained as a

psychologist, I learned to cast myself in the role of a student as I learned about the history of the human adventure together with the students in my course.

In doing so, I came to understand better the limitations of my own perspective on historical and current events. I tried to model for my students how to be a naïve learner, admitting that there are gaps in my understanding of Islam, for example. (I describe my

experience teaching Islam in World Civilizations in a 2009 article in *Peer Review*.) In learning about Islam, I found an opportunity not merely to learn about "the other" but also to critique my own beliefs and attitudes about religion and society. And I believe my students found this opportunity as well.

The intellectual gain for my students came less, I would argue, from any specific content—the *what*—that I taught, and more from the give-and-take among the students, the respect with which we engaged with others' beliefs in the classroom, and the students' sense that the true focus of our lessons wasn't Islam, per se, but was their own beliefs, attitudes, and values. Specific content on civic engagement and diversity does make a difference. But *how* we incorporate this content—by modeling the democratic process of discussion, debate, and the search for more informed judgments—is the key to empowering our students to be better citizens in our pluralist American democracy. ☐

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