

HOW TO:

Incorporate diversity into the curriculum

With Rebecca Mark, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English

Understanding diversity

Diversity is about embracing one another's differences. And that goes far beyond skin tone and gender.

Rebecca Mark, Ph.D., describes diversity as a continuum. There are obvious, visual differences, such as a person's race, gender, how they walk and talk and what they wear. Then there are the less obvious, "hidden" differences that affect students on a day-to-day basis, such as learning styles, body image, and how a person grapples with a problem.

"**Compassionate** teachers are teaching to a **community of diverse people**," Mark says.

Diversity is not an add on. Building curriculum that incorporates diversity enhances learning and research **and deepens** in-class discussions, Mark says. Teaching through the lens of diversity develops intellectual sophistication. Professors can build diversity into their content as well as taking advantage of students' diverse viewpoints to help achieve this goal.

"In the classroom, those differences become very exciting," she says.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

My lectures are already packed with content. How can I find the time to also discuss diversity?

Mark suggests that the first question professors ask themselves is this: How can diversity change or enrich the subject matter I am already researching or teaching?

"For me to talk about American literature and not talk about it as a diverse experience isn't intellectually sound. It doesn't reflect what's actually going on," she says. For professors in other disciplines the connections might be less obvious but not less intellectually stimulating.

Where do I begin?

Opportunities to discuss diversity exist in classroom lectures on a day-to-day basis, Mark says. For instance, if a student raises a question in the middle of a discussion, that question can spark a moment of theoretical discussion of diversity.

"It really takes making that moment part of the discussion." And sometimes, that means not getting back to what you had planned for the day. "You have to stop at that very moment and have a discussion about the topic at hand," Mark says.

Often, professors will find that they don't even have to do the work to incorporate diversity, Mark says. Simply by letting the students **speak**, the students introduce issues of diversity. And in a class of 30 students, those individuals can enrich the quality of the lecture.

"When you've got 30 ways of looking at something, the discussion is going to be more complex."

Promoting diversity: What's in it for me?

By incorporating diversity into lectures and research, professors can expect improved outcomes in both areas. Studies have shown that going about a research topic from a position of multiple identities will actually produce better research, Mark says.

Where does diversity fit in?

Diversity isn't something we can just pick up, buy, **and tack on to a syllabus**, Mark says. **Diversity calls for** careful consideration into how to weave the subject into the curriculum. Professors **can** examine what they are teaching, what they themselves bring in terms of diversity and what's going on in the classroom.

"Make diversity part of the daily conversation," Mark says. "Use the word. Own it. Enjoy it. See how it changes your class." Think about the difference between a "uni"-versity and a diverse classroom.

STRATEGIES

Mark believes that the way to bring diversity into the classroom is to move away from the top-down model of teaching.

"If we have a notion of a professor standing in front of the class and imparting information, then we've missed the boat," she says.

By sharing this information in an inclusive manner, the classroom becomes a community.

"Teaching is not my imparting information to these hollow heads. Teaching is being able to engage in a conversation with a group of people," Mark says.

In her English classes, Mark relies on performance techniques and other classroom engagement strategies to foster diversity. "Many of us are engaged in these techniques, but many people are afraid they will give up authority," she says. "These techniques actually enhance the experience in the classroom."

When teaching a graphic novel, novels that are created in both image and word, Mark provides texts from different perspectives, including gay writers, African writers and female writers. "By teaching this, I'm enabling students to engage with those visible differences. So I'm purposely bringing out what I teach."

Another strategy is to have students share a story related to the discussion topic.

Mark also relies on site visits. She has taken her students to a plantation and asked them to reach down and pick up cotton. "They can only do it for 15 minutes because they get too tired. I told them there were people who did this for 12 to 15 hours per day."

Using performance techniques to create a diverse classroom

Mark shares four of her strategies:

- **Creating a graphic novel:** Mark gives students the option of writing a traditional paper or creating a graphic novel. "Several students actually drew graphic novels, and the level of sophistication was amazing. They brought something that I never could have provided," Mark says.

- **Masking:** In a class Mark taught on masking, she asked students come to class every two weeks completely masked. "That allowed me to discuss identity in a way that would have been impossible if I would have taught in a more traditional manner."

- **Delivering a stand-up routine:** As part of Mark's course on women in stand-up comedy, students have to do a stand-up comedy routine. Because students typically draw their material from their own lives, the routines help bring diversity into the classroom.
- **Preparing a lecture:** In her American literature and Southern literature classes, Mark requires students to prepare a mini lecture of their own and present it to the class. "You can do these things and get through the material," Mark says. "In fact, you get through the material faster. The students are more engaged."

Nine tips for incorporating diversity:

- 1) Let the students talk.
- 2) Make diversity part of your syllabus from the very beginning of the semester.
- 3) Each semester, challenge yourself to bring in a new text that addresses diversity in terms of your curriculum, and start teaching yourself. Keep it simple: Add one new topic. Even just one new article each semester is progress.
- 4) Avoid making the students who are the obvious carriers of cultural diversity carry the discussion. Involve the entire classroom.
- 5) A short video can do powerful work to bring up issues.
- 6) Understand that issues of diversity are part of our theoretical concerns in any discipline, not simply an add on.
- 7) Bring in a speaker. Go to a site. Find somebody on campus who does this work.
- 8) Don't be too hard on yourself with curriculum development. Don't try to change your leopard spots.
- 9) Educate yourself on the basic "isms" – such as sexism, racism, classism – so you can speak intelligently to the class.

ONLINE RESOURCES

"Creating Inclusive College Classrooms"

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan

http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p3_1

"Making Classroom Groups Inclusive"

University of California Berkeley, Division of Undergraduate Education

http://teaching.berkeley.edu/sites/teaching.berkeley.edu/files/making_groups.pdf

Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom

Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

About Rebecca Mark, Ph.D.

Diversity is not a side issue for Rebecca Mark, Ph.D. Rather, she sees it as a primary issue in everything she teaches.

In her nearly 25 years in academia, Mark has taught courses covering topics including the Holocaust, queer literature, civil rights, black female writers and lynching. "When you teach those kinds of courses, you're committed not only to the topics, but to the best way of teaching about these difficult subjects," she says.

Diversity is a personal issue for Mark as well. She brings to the classroom her identity as a Jewish, gay woman who grew up during the civil rights movement. And as Faculty Director for the Community Engagement Advocates Program at Tulane, and the CELT – CE Distinguished Teaching Fellow she aims to engage students and fellow teaching fellows in conversations on issues of diversity and inclusion.