Diversity: Making Sense of It Through Critical Thinking

Within any given group of students, one can expect to find differences along all, or most, of the following parameters: preferred learning styles (including concrete vs. abstract, sequential vs. random, introverted versus extroverted, etc.), race, gender, ethnicity, intellectual skill level (including reading, writing, speaking and listening skills), culture, family history and level of functioning, emotional development, physical or mental disability, personality, intellectual characteristics, self-esteem, knowledge, motivation, creativity, social adjustment, genetic intellectual inclinations, and maturity -- to name some of the most commonly considered candidates. To put this another way, each and every student who comes to us is unique, and, what is more, unique in a variety of ways.

We are living in an age where calls for an emphasis on diversity have become the norm. Multiple interest groups have emerged demanding special consideration and/or "equality" in the classroom. Political pressures on teachers to bear in mind this or that diversity issue has never been greater.

In one sense, it seems apparent that we should take into account individual differences of students, and that we should consider those differences when designing instruction. Yet, in another sense, given the multiplicity of differences within and among students, it seems obviously impossible to simultaneously teach to all of those differences.

No teacher is capable of taking into account or teaching to every form of diversity. At the very essence of teaching lies the dilemma of what to teach and what to leave out, what issues to place in the foreground and what issues to place in the background. As teachers, for example, we must choose between extensive coverage and deep learning.

In like manner, we cannot at one and the same time focus on gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and culture. If we place special focus on developing the musical and artistic talents of students, we cannot simultaneously place special emphasis on logical-mathematical reasoning and the development of communication skills. If we place special focus on fostering social abilities and ethical traits, we cannot also place special focus on teaching to the multiple learning preferences of students. If we put special focus on academic content (biology, geography, arithmetic, reading skills, writing skills, speaking skills, spelling, grammar...), we cannot put special focus on issues of family, personal development, and personal interests. In short, we cannot have it all in education. We cannot possibly place special emphasis on every dimension of diversity.

What can be done about this dilemma? The solution, I shall argue, is critical thinking. If we teach students to reason well through any issue, and, through this emphasis, help students become life-long learners, then, of necessity, students will acquire the tools of

mind they need to deal with issues of diversity. When students become skilled and insightful evaluators of their thinking and thereby take command of their learning, they can judge how and when to take into account the variety of issues encompassed under the term "diversity." In this paper, I lay the foundation for understanding how to prepare students to deal with issues arising out of human diversity by learning how to thinking critically through such issues. But before I do, I must first dispel a few common myths about critical thinking.

The most common myth is that most teachers have a good understanding of critical thinking, that they think critically themselves, and that they know how to teach for it.

Yet in a study of 38 public universities and 28 private colleges in California (conducted for the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing), it was found that prospective teachers were neither being taught how to think critically nor how to cultivate critical thinking in their students. The study revealed that most professors of education:

- are unable to give an elaborated articulation of their concept of critical thinking
- cannot provide plausible examples of how they foster critical thinking in the classroom

- are not able to name specific critical thinking skills they think are important for students to learn

- are not able to plausibly explain how to reconcile covering content with fostering critical thinking

- do not consider reasoning as a significant focus of critical thinking

- do not think of reasoning within disciplines as a major focus of instruction

- cannot specify basic structures essential to the analysis of reasoning

- cannot give an intelligible explanation of basic abilities either in critical thinking or in reasoning

- do not understand the connection of critical thinking to intellectual standards

- are not able to clarify major intellectual criteria and standards

- inadvertently confuse the active involvement of students in classroom activities with critical thinking in those activities

- do not distinguish the psychological dimension of thought from the intellectual dimension

- have had no involvement in research into critical thinking and have not attended any conferences on the subject

- are unable to name a particular theory or theorist that has shaped their concept of critical thinking.

The study concluded that most teachers today share misconceptions about critical thinking similar to those of their professors. There is no simple, short-term method for displacing these misconceptions. The solution I am suggesting requires long-term committed staff development, and hence is no quick-fix panacea.

All of us face a world that is becoming increasingly more complex, a world in which the decisions we make can well have significant long-term implications both for ourselves and for those who follow us. If we can successfully prepare students for that world, we will, by implication, prepare them for the diversities intrinsic to it. How can we do this? How can we teach in such a way that students learn to reason well through issues embodied in change, complexity, interdependence, and "diversity?"

What we must do is radically change how we understand "content" and what learning it entails. We must shift our paradigm of education to these key foundations:

1. All content must be "reasoned through" to be learned.

2. All reasoning involves predictable parts or elements.

3. All elements of high quality reasoning presuppose universal intellectual standards.

4. The primary barrier to good reasoning is our native egocentrism.

Let me explain. That which we typically consider "content" is, in fact, information that has been thought through and conceptualized, and hence requires thought to be understood. The content of history is historical thinking. The content of biology is biological thinking. The content of math is mathematical thinking. The content of multiculturalism is multicultural thinking. In any textbook we thus find the reasoning of someone who has thought through a set of issues or problems within a subject area.

Learning history is not to be understood as memorizing someone else's thinking. If students are studying history, for example, we should expect them to understand the goals and purposes of history, the problems historians think through, and the information and concepts they use to address those problems. We should expect them to understand the conclusions historians come to as they reason through issues.

We want them to see things from a historical point of view. When students have done so with skill and understanding, they have learned the content of history. For content to be meaningful and useful to them, they must reason it through themselves. They must learn, not merely to read and remember the ideas and thoughts of others, but to formulate questions within the subject themselves, reason through those questions themselves, and come up with logical answers to those questions themselves.

Why? Because every learner must learn for themselves, and to learn, one must think for themselves, and to think must reason. We cannot crawl into students' minds and learn for them. We cannot think for them or "give" them reasoning abilities. The only way for them to develop reasoning abilities is through routine engagement in challenging reasoning tasks. How, then, do we develop these powerful and universally essential skills of mind?

First, we must recognize universal structures of thought. Whenever we think (and whatever we are thinking about), we think for a purpose, within a point of view, based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use data, facts, and experiences to make inferences and judgments based on concepts and theories in attempting to answer a question, solve a problem, or resolve an issue. In other words, there are eight essential structures in reasoning. To the extent that students fail to use those structures in reasoning through our content, they fail to learn. For elaboration of the elements of reasoning, see the Miniature Guide to the Foundations of Analytic Thinking.

Second, we must recognize the universal standards for thought. Whenever we want to think well through some matter at hand (including "dimensions of diversity), we must not only "monitor" eight structures, we must also assess our use of them with key intellectual standards, as follows: "Am I being clear in my thinking? Am I being accurate? Do I need to be more precise? Am I sticking to the issue (relevance)? Am I dealing with the complexities inherent in the question (depth)? Do I need to consider another point of view (breadth)? Am I thinking logically? Am I thinking in a way that is justifiable or fair?

No matter what issue one is reasoning through, the parts of thinking embedded in the reasoning and the intellectual standards that determine the quality of that reasoning apply. They apply independent of whether one is thinking about culture, ethnicity, race, social class, gender, intellectual development, emotional development, special disabilities, special interests, personality, social adjustment, self-esteem, knowledge, maturity, motivation, degree of conformity to peer group, or creativity. They apply, in short, to all issues and questions involving diversity. They suggest a common approach not only to all such issues, but indeed to all human problems and concerns.

Egocentrism and Sociocentrism

Finally, and most importantly, the major barrier to our ability to reason well through diversity issues is our native egocentrism (and sociocentrism). We naturally operate within the world from our own perspective, and that perspective is often oriented toward self-serving interests. Thus, if to get what we want we must discriminate against other people, our egocentric viewpoint easily enables us to rationalize or justify our actions.

Due to our egocentric mode of thinking, which begins at birth, we come to believe that whatever we believe is true because we believe it. Moreover, we are creatures of mental habit and naturally defend what we already believe. These rigid habits of thought

keep us from seeing things from differing perspectives, leading to prejudice in favor of people or groups whose ideas are like our own and against those whose ideas are unlike our own (or who seem different from us in some way).

Thus, humans are not only naturally egocentric but sociocentric as well. We tend to be clannish, and to believe that the groups we belong to are right, privileged, special. Through systematic self-deception we maintain our rigid modes of thinking, avoid recognition of our biases, and treat people and groups without due consideration and respect, even when there is ready evidence to refute our point of view.

It is therefore my contention that any sound diversity curriculum must explicitly foster understanding of the human mind and its native prejudicial tendencies. In other words, if we are attempting to help students learn to treat people from groups different from their own as equals, we must teach them to be aware of, and to guard against, their native egocentric and sociocentric tendencies. Otherwise these very tendencies will keep students from reasoning well through diversity issues.
To illustrate the conception I am arguing for, let me take a couple of issues arising out of "diversity" and demonstrate how critical thinking lays the basis for a sound approach to those issues.

Multiculturalism, Gender Issues, and Critical Thinking

Multiculturalism, for example, emphasizes the importance of respecting all cultures and their unique traditions. An emphasis on gender issues, on the other hand, focuses on the degree to which women have been exploited and oppressed. Of course, approaches to diversity sometimes conflict. For instance, the exploitation and oppression of women usually occurs with the blessing of this or that cultural tradition. What, then, are we to do when it is part of a cultural tradition to oppress some given group? To "respect" the culture seems irreconcilable with critiquing its "oppression. How are we to reconcile these contradictory emphases in two different "diversity" movements? This can only be done through critical thinking. A critical thinking approach reconciles appropriate multicultural thinking on the one hand with fair-minded feminist thinking on the other.

With critical thinking at the foundation of instruction, neither multiculturalism nor feminism are treated as exceptions to the evaluative force of critical thought. With respect to multiculturalism there is an emphasis on the critical assessment of cultural traditions (not all cultural traditions are to be respected simply because they are cultural traditions). With respect to gender issues, not all "feminist" thinking is on the same level of quality. There are contradictions between different brands of feminism-- radical feminism vs. traditional feminism for example. There are also different levels of understanding and insight among different feminist thinkers. In short, merely because one thinks within a feminist or a multicultural point of view does not guarantee that the reasoning one does is clear, accurate, precise, relevant, deep, open-minded, logical and fair.

In the approach I am recommending, students would learn to recognize when a multicultural or feminist perspective is relevant to the issue at hand. They might be assigned tasks requiring them to empathize with both cultural and feminist perspectives and to critically assess thinking within both perspectives. These ends not only integrate the emphasis on cultural and feminist perspectives with historical issues, social issues, ethical issues, political issues, and personal perspectives, they also introduce a necessary emphasis on reading, writing, and speaking skills essential to reasoning through these issues.

Race, Religion, Physical Disability and Critical Thinking

An emphasis on race, religious differences, or physical disabilities usually focuses on the importance of treating people who seem different from us equally and fairly. The basic idea is that every person has a right to be treated without prejudice, and that people should not be discriminated against because of race, religion, or physical disability.

Again, neither of these modes of thinking should be treated as an exception to the evaluative force of critical thought. Merely because one makes a demand based on the purported needs or rights of a certain race or religion or in speaking for persons with a particular physical disability does not guarantee that the reasoning one does is clear, accurate, precise, relevant, deep, open-minded, logical and fair. Moreover, the conflicting demands of multiple groups must be reasoned through and critically assessed.

It is important that students come to understand that, because we are all naturally prejudiced in favor of people who appear to be similar to us, and consequently against people who appear to be different from us, we must consistently guard against such prejudice. Put another way, students must learn to recognize when their natural tendency to prejudge stands in the way of their ability to empathize with someone from another race, religion, or with someone who has a particular disability.

Critical thinking helps students realize that just as "prejudice against" certain people or groups is problematic, "prejudice for" certain groups also creates problems. If we believe, for example, that our race is superior to other races, we fail to recognize that within "our groups" are people who by any reasonable standards would be considered "black-hearted villains," people who routinely manipulate and oppress other people, people who care only for themselves and who, consequently, have no concern for the manner in which their actions influence or harm others.

Through critical thinking, students learn that the reasoning of all groups, including that of our "own" groups, must be critically analyzed and assessed for soundness and justifiability.

Conclusion

The importance of teaching students to reason through complex issues of diversity cannot be underestimated. Yet the best approach to a well-thought-through diversity curriculum is not one that results in further fragmentation along the lines of multiple "diversities." The curriculum cannot successfully jump from race to multiculturalism to feminism to gender issues to learning styles to student preferences to musical and artistic talent to mathematical-logical skills to this and that and this and that and this.

Critical thinking makes an integrated approach to instruction possible. The focus is on developing reasoning abilities in general, on teaching students how to evaluate any form of reasoning, whether their own or someone else's, whether it is articulated verbally or expressed in written form. Students learn to think through complex issues in a complex way within any domain.

They become intellectually responsible in their approach to thinking through problems and issues, by learning, for example, to take into account all relevant viewpoints whether or not those viewpoints agree with their own or the viewpoints of the groups to which they belong. They realize when an intellectual task involves attention to diversity. They recognize when they are being prejudiced against a person or a group, and they actively work to eliminate their native prejudicial tendencies. Only then can students develop the intellectual integrity vital to reasoning well through issues of diversity.

In short, through critical thinking we place all instruction, including its diversity components, on firm foundation so that improving students' reasoning abilities, as well as their abilities to evaluate the reasoning of others, becomes the primary focus. Through this integrative approach to instruction, students develop the intellectual tools necessary for understanding and considering individual and group differences, for learning in any subject, for reasoning through any problem in any context, indeed for becoming life-long learners.

Elder, L. (2004).