

Report: Curriculum and Research Committee

April 25, 2008

The Research and Curriculum Committee of the WCU Faculty Senate is currently working on a report addressing ways of incorporating multicultural and diversity into the classroom. Realizing this is both one of the mandates of the university as well as a politically sensitive topic, the committee will proceed carefully so as to complement the university's mission.

In addition to traditional benchmarks of learning (i.e., mastery of content and skill acquisition), there are new values of the 21st century classroom experience, namely the need for intercultural cooperation and recognition of diverse heritages and different learning styles. The model classroom can no longer afford to teach in one particular mode or to one particular set of students. Assessment and evaluation practices now require that all students be reached and that all students demonstrate that they have mastered what is being taught.

For a discipline such as history, this can take two forms—creating space for the historical narratives of groups and individuals who have been ignored from the canon of the past as well as incorporating a hybrid of teaching methods (discussions and simulations in addition to lectures) and evaluative tools (group projects and service learning in addition to traditional examinations). For disciplines in the natural sciences, working in multiculturalism can be a greater challenge. This might be less so for disciplines in the life sciences, such as biology, where research was often manipulated to serve political and social ends. Here, historical context might be an appropriate addition to the curriculum. For subject matter in chemistry and physics, the focus might be more on devising ways to address different learners and individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

Some possible approaches to diversity in the classroom include:

- 1.) The **human relations approach**, which is a methodological path, involving (according to educator Peter Appelbaum, “cooperative and collaborative learning; direct curricular attention to attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes; personal feelings and values clarification; individual uniqueness and worth through lessons that foster pride in one’s own accomplishments; and cross-group communication.”
- 2.) The **single-group studies** approach, which is more content-driven and probably more appropriate for disciplines in the humanities. It is also the more controversial approach because it involves singling out a particular out-group and giving it special attention, which can invoke the ire of the out-group (if the exercise is seen as mere tokenism) or many from the in-group who might reject the activity as “special interest advocacy.” Adapting a single-group experience to traditional curriculum might actually end up marginalizing the out-group even further.

- 3.) The **multicultural** approach, which is perhaps the most radical of the three options in that it seeks a re-evaluation of the entire learning process—questioning not only delivery mechanisms but also the content taught. In this approach, curriculum materials would reflect multiple and divergent perspectives and hold less to one particular canon. Yet what would be the basis for determining these perspectives? The common parlance in multicultural educational theory is that they would have to include historical out-groups of race, gender, and class. Again, in a discipline such as history, this has merit (although I personally could not see giving equal weight in my Holocaust classes to antisemites or Holocaust deniers). In the sciences, this would be particularly problematic and could open the door to ideas that are not scientifically valid. There is also the danger of excluding groups that do not fit under the rubric of race, gender, or class (i.e., where do we make room for ethnicity, age, ability, political leanings, or religion?) Do we also assume a binary narrative of victims and perpetrators? Of the powerful and the powerless? Would we be potentially substituting one problematic narrative for another? Advocates of multicultural education are more on track when they speak of laying bare “essentialist hierarchies” and emphasizing fluidity and uncertainty, i.e., asking more questions than determining answers. Yet the potential problems of distortion, loss of important content and methods, and replacing one authoritarian model for another nevertheless exists.

Patrick Bruch and Walter Jacobs, et al, argue that college courses should move away from “traditional assimilation-based developmental education models” and “establish a pluralistic and discursive framework instead of one the focuses on assessment of standardized ‘deficits’ and remediation.”¹

...the goal is to make room for flexible, customizable content, assignments, and activities that are accessible and applicable to students with a variety of backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities. An awareness of what students bring to academic spaces and an active engagement grounded in the multicultural not only facilitates students’ successful negotiation of academic careers; it enhances their ability to succeed in nonacademic endeavors.²

Bruch and Jacobs suggest that a college curriculum should enable students in the 21st century to:

1. Develop academic skills and successfully apply them to college-level coursework
2. Build and use a framework of general knowledge to identify, analyze, and solve issues and problems

¹ Patrick Bruch, Walter Jacobs, and Rashne Jehangir, “Enabling Access: Toward Multicultural Developmental Curricula,” *Journal of Developmental Education*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring 2004): 12-41.

² Bruch and Jacobs, “Enabling Access,” and the same article as cited on http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results_single_ftPES.jhtml, 4, accessed 20 March 2008.

3. Perceive their own learning interests, skills, and weaknesses, in order to set attainable academic and nonacademic goals
4. Understand themselves as “social knowers” who influence and are influenced by larger communities
5. Engage the histories and perspectives of a wide range of social groups
6. Enrich the rules and rhythms of academic discourse with their own dialogues and voices
7. Learn to identify, negotiate, and transform the ubiquitous practices that promote inequality and privilege

In terms of language arts, students should develop “the vocabularies of a number of disciplines and create reading processes that will promote critical literacy of various subject areas.” In addition, students should “develop the ability to write to explain ideas to others, summarize knowledge, provide analysis, argue convincingly, and provide documentation of facts and the ideas of others.” Finally, they should be able to listen “critically with comprehension, raise questions, and phrase them with precision, analyze information, and evaluate content and structure, discuss concepts and issues with individuals and in small groups, construct arguments and develop evidence for their support, and create and oral discourse that is appropriate to varied audiences and situations.”³

With respect to math and science goals, “students should develop conceptual mathematical models and conceptual frameworks that support mathematical processing and problem solving in a variety of disciplines and contexts.” They should also familiarize themselves with tools—both electronic and print— that facilitate information transfer and acquisition. Possibilities here include courses which trace the social and historical construction of mathematics and the sciences as academic disciplines, emphasizing cultural context and instances of politicization. Linking abstract concepts to problem solving (in areas of civics like the federal budget or health care), might also lead to deeper retention and usage of knowledge and skills.⁴

While Bruch and Jacobs might be too dismissive of “traditional methods,” they seem to provide the space for a number of pedagogical options. (In fact, if they were to be truly consistent in their philosophical quest for diversity, they would have to make room for all modalities—even the traditional.) In the humanities, many of the goals which Bruch and Jacobs advance are beginning to be met, and a sizable number of courses and programs address issues of diversity. WCU’s Holocaust and Genocide Studies program, for instance, features PSY 540 Multicultural Psychology, EDF 589 Social Foundations of Education, and HIS 520, History of Racism, Bigotry, and Prejudice. These courses directly address the learning-style and content challenges posed by diversity education. From the standpoint of methodology, these classes tend to be more critical thinking and

³ Bruch and Jacobs, “Enabling Access,” and the same article as cited on http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results_single_ftPES.jhtml, 4, accessed 20 March 2008.

⁴ P.M. Appelbaum, “Teaching/Learning Mathematics in School,” in *Unauthorized Methods: Strategies for Critical Teaching*, ed., J.L. Kincheloe and S.R. Steinberg (New York: Routledge, 1998), 199-229, as cited in Bruch and Jacobs.

discussion-based, while they instruct students about issues of majority and minority group relations and social injustice, prompting students to reconsider their own assumptions, “recognize the validity of other perspectives, and embrace a more multicultural understanding of society.”⁵

The irony is that a discipline such as history, which has been forward-thinking in terms of content, is often less so when the issue is classroom management and addressing diverse learning styles. Here, Bruch and Jacobs might be on to something. The format in many history courses is often the same, i.e., lecture driven without much in the way of student engagement or exercises that reach out to non-traditional learners. It would be ideal for practitioners of the discipline to utilize a number of different techniques, while remaining true to their individual preferences and teaching styles.

As one of the goals of multicultural education is refinement of critical thinking faculties which question assumptions and power arrangements, instructors would benefit from hearing student voices, creating more decentered classrooms, and allowing equitable intellectual exchanges. Yet, according to Gowri Parameswaran, “traditional pedagogy reflects all of the power differentials present in the larger social world. In order to provide an environment where students can actually question existing structures of power in society the stratified hierarchical relationship between students and teachers needs to be re-examined.”⁶ Although some might find the proposal to allow students to design syllabi and modes of assessment to be unreasonable, professors should be willing to take in student ideas and offer differing tools for learning and evaluation.

It would be ideal if each department WCU began a discussion about ways to address diversity in terms of learning styles, course content, skills, and/or student and faculty make-up. Two forums that already exist for this purpose are the Curriculum Integration Seminar and the Multicultural Faculty Commission. New and existing faculty should take advantage of the services which they provide.

In the end, there are more benefits than risks in adopting multicultural education, but challenges remain, particularly in defining what constitutes diversity and what discourses and methods the movement accepts and rejects as valid. This becomes problematic when the model is one of “either/or” rather than a hybrid in which traditional and non-traditional modes can co-exist and blend into one another.

⁵ Bruch and Jacobs, “Enabling Access,” and the same article as cited on http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results_single_ftPES.jhtml, 6, accessed 20 March 2008

⁶ G. Parameswaran, “Enhancing Diversity Education,” *Multicultural Education*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring 2007): 51-55.

Web resources:

The Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education:

<http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/>

University of Colorado at Boulder report

<http://www.colorado.edu/journals/standards/V6N1/EDUCATION/gabriele.html>

Ithaca College webpage—This is a very comprehensive list of resources, curricula, lesson plans, etc., across disciplines.

<http://www.ithaca.edu/wise/topics/multicultural.htm>