

Module #6

Diversity

It is our uniqueness that we share as common ground



The aim of this module is to help you:

- Develop an understanding and awareness of diversity that is deeper than the traditional notions of race, gender and nationality
- Take that awareness into the classroom, with practical suggestions on how to encourage diversity in your SAGES seminar

A well-known story from the classroom...

It is the fourth week of the semester and you notice that some students are speaking considerably more than others. Furthermore, you notice that those doing the talking are white, male students majoring in science. While you tend to agree with most of their arguments and you are pleased that there is a lively discussion, you are concerned about the relative quietness of the other students. What can you do to make the conversation more inclusive? You know that diversity of opinion is so important, but how do you bring the others into the conversation? You wonder if you are contributing to this dynamic in some way...

Overview of this Module

This module will help you as a SAGES instructor address the topic of diversity. It will assist you in creating a class environment in which all students feel welcome and encouraged and heard. When students see the seminar as a space where diversity is respected, they can focus on the primary task of learning.

The first part of the module describes some core theoretical ideas about diversity. The second half of the module provides you with practical ways in which to encourage diversity in the classroom.

Diversity is a complex and multidimensional concept, extending beyond race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation. These are indeed the most commonly cited aspects of diversity, but it is helpful to think about diversity in a different way. Diversity is not about “other” people’s differences, but rather about everyone’s uniqueness. In fact, it is our uniqueness that is our common ground.

Consider the following picture:



How can culturally diverse people fairly and respectfully learn well together? As teachers, to reply honestly, we have to engage students on a deeper level than is usual in conventional educational practices. Being able to encourage diverse people to actively learn is not just a matter of pragmatism or of professional survival, but also the means by which we personally thrive and find precious value in our work.”

~Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995), p. 1

The apparent elements of diversity in the picture include:

- Gender
- Race
- Nationality
- Age

Below the surface, however, there may be other significant aspects of diversity:

- Learning style
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Beliefs and philosophies
- Life experience
- Dreams for the future
- Strengths and weaknesses

One of the goals of SAGES is to value diversity and make it a basis for rich, meaningful discussions.

There are two key “players” in the SAGES seminar to be considered as you think about diversity – you and the students.

1) Understanding YOUR Own Diversity

Diversity awareness is not only about understanding others; it is also about understanding ourselves. What are your beliefs, orientations, assumptions, ideologies? What is your cultural history, and how does it affect the way you teach? What do you consider to be normal? What are some of your preferences and biases?

As a SAGES instructor, you bring your individual perspective into the classroom.

Robin M. Williams Jr., a sociologist, compiled a list of 15 themes and orientations that are generally characteristic of American culture. A selection of these themes is presented below. As you read through the list, reflect on your approach to each theme and ask yourself: **Do I agree with these characterizations? Do particular themes reflect my own way of thinking and acting, or do I have an alternative view? How do my views affect my approach to teaching?**¹

1. **Achievement and success:** There is an emphasis on the rags-to-riches story.
2. **Activity and work:** This is a land of busy people who regard disciplined and productive activity as a worthy end in itself.
3. **Moral orientation:** Life events and situations are judged in terms of right and wrong.
4. **Efficiency and practicality:** There is an emphasis on the practical value of getting things done.
5. **Progress:** There is an optimistic view that things will get better.
6. **Material comfort:** Emphasis is placed on the good life. Many people are conspicuous consumers.
7. **Freedom:** The belief in individual freedom takes on an almost religious connotation.
8. **Science and secular rationality:** There is esteem for the sciences as a means of asserting mastery over the environment.
9. **Individual responsibility:** Every individual should be independent, responsible, and self-respecting. The group should not take precedence over the individual.

¹ Williams, R. M. (1970). *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation*. New York: Knopf.

To each of these themes, there are clearly alternative views that are equally valid and supported by data, beliefs, assumptions, and cultural norms. You and many of your students will hold those alternative views. Later in this module, we will look at how to elicit those views in ways that are supportive and non-threatening.

2) Understanding STUDENTS' Diversity

Different Belief Systems
Societies throughout the world differ in their belief systems.

“When we clarify our own cultural values and biases, we are better able to consider how they might subtly, but profoundly, influence the degree to which learners in our classrooms feel included, respected, at ease and generally motivated to learn. The range of considerations that are found in Williams’ cultural themes can be helpful as we think of questions to ask ourselves about our own assumptions and as we construct reflective questions that can enhance the learning experiences we are creating with our students.”

~Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995), p. 15

Ideas about social roles, codes of behavior, and what is considered to be true can vary remarkably among a group of diverse learners, especially when international students are present. The status of teachers may be much higher in one society than in another. Some students may believe that important and knowledgeable remarks can come only from the teacher and not from other students. The roles of men and women may be rigidly defined. Being aware of these cultural differences can help you understand your students better and help provide a basis for exploring cultural assumptions during the seminar.

Different Generational Experiences

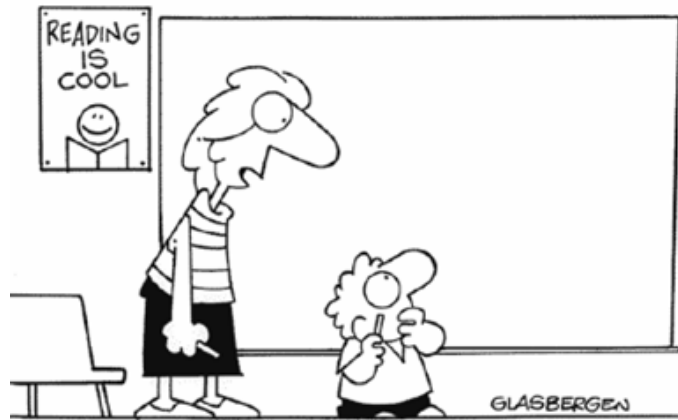
The students sitting in your seminars have not experienced the same generational milestones that you have. Most were born in the mid 1980s, over 15 years after Neil Armstrong made his famous moon walk, and were only toddlers when the Berlin Wall came crashing down. In order to relate to them, it is helpful to understand the world in which your students grew up.

Did you know that from your students’ vantage point²:

1. A Southerner has always been President of the United States.
2. Richard Burton, Ricky Nelson and Truman Capote have always been dead.
3. South Africa's official policy of apartheid has not existed during their lifetime.

² This list is taken from the Beloit College Mindset List <http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/>

4. Cars have always had eye-level rear stop lights, CD players, and air bags.
5. We have always been able to choose our long distance carriers.
6. Weather reports have always been available 24-hours a day on television.
7. The "evil empire" has moved from Moscow to a setting in some distant galaxy.
8. *Big Brother* is merely a television show.
9. Cyberspace has always existed.
10. Bruce Springsteen's new hit, *Born in the USA*, could have been played to celebrate their birth.
11. Barbie has always had a job.
12. Telephone bills have always been totally incomprehensible.
13. Prom dresses have always come in basic black.
14. A "Hair Band" is some sort of fashion accessory.
15. George Foreman has always been a barbecue grill salesman.
16. Afghanistan has always been a front page story.
17. There has always been an heir to the British throne.
18. They have no recollection of Connie Chung or Geraldo Rivera as serious journalists.
19. Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, and Tom Brokaw have always anchored the evening news.
20. China has always been a market-based reforming regime.
21. The United States has always been trying to put nuclear waste in Nevada.
22. The U.S. and the Soviets have always been partners in space.
23. Mrs. Fields' cookies and Swatch watches have always been favorites.
24. Nicolas Cage, Daryll Hannah, Eddie Murphy, and John Malkovich made their first major film impressions the year they were born.
25. The GM Saturn has always been on the road.
26. The "Fab Four" are not a male rock group, but four women enjoying Sex and the City.
27. Fox has always been a television network choice.
28. Males do not carry a handkerchief in a back pocket.
29. This generation has never wanted to "be a Pepper too."
30. Ozzy's lifestyle has nothing to do with the Nelson family.



“There aren’t any icons to click. It’s a chalk board.”

Reflections on Diversity

As you work to incorporate various aspects of diversity in your classroom consider the following:

1. Are **classroom norms** clear, so that if they are different from what students are used to at home or in their communities, they are able to understand and negotiate alternative ways of behaving?

It may be important to model behavior and provide visible examples of expectations. You could also ask your students the following questions:



- Do you prefer to work in small groups or individually?
- Would you describe yourself as a talker or a listener?

These two questions could generate some group discussion about the differences among the students and how they can support each other in the learning environment.

2. Have I examined the **values embedded in my discipline** that may confuse or disturb some students?



You can ask questions that encourage students to voice alternative perspectives, or appoint panels of students to discuss the topic from different perspectives.

3. Are the **examples I use to illustrate key points** meaningful and sensitive to my students?



To address this question, give one example from your own experience and then ask the students to give their own examples to illustrate the point under discussion.

4. Do I have **creative and effective ways to learn about my students'** lives and interests?



You could use photographs, cultural holidays, birthdays, check-in's, free time, etc., as ways to find out more about the students beyond their formal classroom role.



SPECIAL TOOLBOX:

A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching³

This framework will assist you in developing a culture of diversity in your seminar:

1. Establish inclusion

This refers to the norms, procedures, and structures that are woven together to form a learning context in which all learners and teachers feel respected by, and connected to, one another.

- Make collaboration an expected way of proceeding throughout the course
- Create a number of learning activities using cooperative learning groups
- Establish ground rules with the students for the discussion of sensitive and controversial material

2. Developing attitudes

This refers to the norms, procedures, and structures that create a favorable disposition among learners and teachers towards the learning experience or learning goal.

- Conduct the course in ways that encourage learners to make choices about class topics and assignments, based on their experiences, values, needs, and strengths
- Use problem-solving, goals, and learning contracts
- Create some learning activities suited to different profiles of multiple

³ Adapted from: Wlodkowski, R., & Ginsberg, M. (2003). *Diversity and motivation: Culturally responsive teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

intelligences.

3. Enhancing meaning

This refers to the norms, procedures, and structures that expand, refine, or increase the complexity of what is learned in a way that matters to learners, includes their values and purposes, and contributes to a critical consciousness.

- Create challenging experiences that critically address relevant, real-world issues essential to learning throughout the course
- Use critical questioning, the posing of problems, authentic research, and case studies for class work and assignments

3. Engendering competence

This refers to the norms, procedures, and structures that create an understanding for learners of how they are or can be effective in learning something of personal value.

- Make self-assessment a part of the overall assessment process.
- Use contracts for grading



?? Questions for Reflection

?? Questions for Reflection

Questions for personal reflection:

- How am I encouraging students to be aware of diversity in our discussions?
- How does my own diversity coming into the classroom affect how I teach?

Questions for reflection with colleagues:

- How do you bring out different kinds of diversity in your seminar discussions?
- Are there readings or activities that you have used to help increase students' awareness of diversity?