Abstracting The Concrete, Concretizing The Abstract: Reframing Diversity Education Through Experiential Learning Theory

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ABSTRACT

Framed by Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), this article proposes ways to enhance diversity education's effectiveness for all learners—regardless of identity group membership. It uses ELT to explain a faulty foundation upon which many diversity initiatives are built and to offer a solution to increase the learning outcomes of both majority and minority learners. The article offers propositions to guide future diversity education efforts.

Keywords: Diversity Education; Multicultural Education; Experiential Learning

INTRODUCTION

Most companies and universities offer (or are considering) diversity education. However, despite large investments, the initiatives often are not as successful as organizational leaders, practitioners, and scholars would like. Reasons for these mixed results include : 1) conflicting definitions of what the term “diversity” means (Cox & Beale, 1997; Day, 1995; Hayles and Russell, 1997; Gardenswartz and Rowe, 1998; Thomas 1999; Frost, 1999); 2) unclear distinction between diversity training and diversity education (Thomas, 1991; Cox & Beale, 1997; 3) unclear rationales for pursuing organizational diversity (Thomas & Ely, 1996), and organizational climates unable to sustain workshop participants’ growth.

While clearer definitions of diversity, holistic and rigorous views of diversity education, and clear linkages between organizational learning and diversity rationales (Thomas and Ely, 1996) should improve our efforts, a problem persists. Managers, consultants, and researchers often fall victim to a flaw in the reasoning underlying most of our diversity initiatives in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it elucidates a flaw underlying many U.S. diversity initiatives. Second, it proposes Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) as a framework to bolster diversity education and minimize this flaw. Third, it offers propositions to guide diversity education research and practice.

DIVERSITY EDUCATION’S ERRONEOUS ASSUMPTION

Diversity education in the U.S. emerged shortly after the Civil Rights era in the mid 1970s with the goal of remedying racial and gender injustices in organizations. Since the majority of the injustice was perpetrated by those in power upon those not in power, early initiatives sought to eliminate discriminatory behavior by those in power. In hopes of increasing participants’ knowledge, positive attitudes, and non-discriminatory behavioral patterns, early diversity curricula addressed understanding and appreciating “the other.” As society changed, the list of “others” grew. An examination of the topics studied in diversity education often reveals a unilateral, or one-sided, approach guiding diversity education.

While sex, gender, racioethnicity, ability, nationality, culture, religion, and age are important topics, our traditional coverage of them is one-sided. Table 1 lists these topics and their traditional curricular focus.

Table 1: Diversity Education Topics and Traditional Foci

Topic	Curricular focus
Sex and Gender	Differences between women and men; understanding women; LGBT populations
Racioethnicity	African Americans, Latinos/as, Asians, Native Americans
Socioeconomic Status	The urban underclass, blue collar workers, working poor, the impoverished
Physical/Mental ability	Physically disabled, mentally disabled
Nationality	Countries other than U.S. and Canada
Religion	Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, atheism
Age	Older workers

However, the curricular foci in Table 1 omit key aspects of each topic: those describing the dominant, non-marginalized, and/or social majority groups in the U.S. For example, only recently have “maleness studies” entered into sex and gender diversity curricula. Likewise “Whiteness studies” (Frankenberg, 1993; Jacobson, 1998; Green & Sonn, 2005) are only recently gaining popularity. As a result of diversity educators main focus upon marginalized U.S. groups, many now view these groups as synonymous with the term “diversity.”

Despite our best intentions as diversity educators we risk supporting a dynamic we’ve fought to eliminate: a non-inclusive “privilege-centric” perspective. This “privilege-centric” perspective is furthered when we view the diversity curriculum as educating Whites, males, the privileged, and Americans about females, people of color, the underprivileged, and people of other nationalities. If we’re not careful, we unwittingly make the word “diverse” synonymous with “deviant” (from the norm). We have changed the meaning of the term “diverse” from the innocuous “varied,” to the affect-laden “different.” Consider the different assumptions behind the following two statements, the second of which is commonly used in organizations. 1) We want to make our sales force more diverse, 2) We want to hire some diverse employees. In essence, many redefine “diverse” from meaning a variety to meaning “those” people (i.e., the people studied in typical diversity initiatives). In sum, a fair number of diversity initiatives primarily teach participants (who are often White, U.S. born, male, economically privileged, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, and/or educated members of the “establishment”) about “those people” (the non-White, non-U.S., female, poor, LGBT, non-Christian, and/or disabled disenfranchised).

As a result, trainees only get half of the story of diversity: the story of “the other.” This omission is problematic because the individuals we’re trying to reach may be deprived of the opportunity for deep self-reflection, egalitarian dialogue with other participants, and awareness of commonalities across experience when we only teach about “those folk.” Also, by keeping the focus external to one’s self, we enable diversity to become an abstract/impersonal, rather than an affectively embraced and personally owned, concept.

Alternately, for the groups described on the right side of Table 1, diversity is primarily a concrete (versus abstract) concept. This means that the focus is primarily internal to one’s self, making diversity a concrete and personal, rather than abstractly embraced, concept. Diversity educators with a diverse group of classroom participants the need to impact both groups. ELT (Kolb, 1984) provides a framework for making this widespread impact.

After briefly summarizing ELT, I demonstrate how using it to inform pedagogy can enhance learning for all participants- regardless of majority and minority identity group membership.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a model of individual learning. According to this model (Kolb, 1984), individuals recursively resolve two dialectic processes: the process of taking in information (prehension) and the process of using that information (transformation). The first dialectic dimension, “prehension,” involves learners navigating two epistemological extremes: absorbing information empirically through Concrete Experience (CE) or absorbing information cognitively through Abstract Conceptualization (AC). The second dialectic dimension, “transformation,” involves learners navigating two extremes as they decide what to do with the prehended (internalized) knowledge: do they reflect upon alternate meanings and perspectives (Reflective Observation (RO)) or do they take action based upon the prehended knowledge (Active Experimentation (AE))?

For broader and deeper treatments of ELT, please see Kolb (1984), Kolb and Kolb (2005), and the vast bibliography of ELT research at <http://www.learningfromexperience.com/>.

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle

While Abstract Conceptualization (AC) is a critical aspect of diversity education, it alone is not an effective mode of information intake especially given the psychological, affective, and mental shifts we as diversity educators often require of our students. However, in the absence of concrete experience (as is the case for many of our students), AC skills are less than helpful in cross-cultural learning (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2006). In a study of U.S. White and Black students in a master's level diversity course (Smith, 2002), White students cognitively engaged many course topics and Black students affectively engaged many topics—with one notable exception. When White students had prior meaningful (to them) direct apriori experiences with dimensions of diversity, they, too, engaged the topics affectively. Below are three quotes from White and Black students enrolled in the diversity course. Three students, two White, one Black reflected upon watching the video "A Class Divided: Blue Eyes Brown Eyes." Consider the similarity in the reflections of the Black student and the first White student. Note the difference between these two reflections and that of the second White student.

Black student with direct concrete apriori experience:

The second video [Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes] ...was about an experiment that a third grade teacher conducted...The piece was very powerful because being a minority (Black) I could feel the pain watching it and thinking back to certain instances when I was growing up! (Smith, 2002)

White student with direct concrete apriori experience:

Today's class almost put me in tears. The video on the "Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes" exercise really rang true with me. I can't believe the paradox that a similar teaching/learning experience I had was documented [in another paper I wrote]...During the second semester of [eighth grade] I had an experience that began to open my eyes to some of the injustices of the world. I was still working hard in [teacher's] class...For one day, part of each class would wear a dot on their foreheads. We were told to treat people differently on the day they wore the dot– don't talk to them, treat them like second class citizens. We were told the teachers would do the same thing...It was horrible. No teacher would call on me– devastating for someone who spoke in every class...I was upset to the point of tears, then I got angry! I was the same person yesterday – this wasn't fair at all...As I sat in [the present diversity] class this week, I heard people laugh at the video...I know my own experience made me more acutely aware of what was happening in the film and made me want to stand up and shout, "IT'S NOT FUNNY" when people laughed. (Smith, 2002)

White student with little apriori concrete experience:

We saw the black/white film [ABC "True Colors"] today...The movie was the same as one I saw a few years ago with a woman and a man. Nothing new, just sad. At the end of class, I stumbled into a conversation and volunteered to do the study locally with a really diverse group. (Smith, 2002).

Clearly, prior concrete experience with dimensions of diversity affects students' reflective observations during diversity education. Thus, I propose that:

Proposition 1: Diversity education that enables learners to have concrete diversity-related experiences during the course will result in more learning than traditional diversity initiatives.

Proposition 2: Diversity education with curricula that cause learners to reflect upon prior concrete diversity-related experiences will result in more learning than traditional diversity initiatives.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE

The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is a four-stage recursive cycle in which individuals learn by engaging in Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). In the first stage of this cycle, individuals engage in a Concrete Experience (CE) that activates their senses, awareness, and attention. Next, individuals enter a stage of Reflective Observation (RO). In this RO stage, individuals consider alternate interpretations of the CE along with their relevant personal experience to value the CE. In the third stage of the ELC, Abstract Conceptualization (AC), individuals access or search for concepts to aid their sense making of the CE. In this stage, the learner engages the concrete experience cognitively or abstractly. Once the learner has reached a tentative explanation of the concrete experience, he or she moves to the fourth stage of the ELC, Active Experimentation (AE). During the AE stage, The learner decides upon and/or takes action with respect to recent sense making (AC) and reflections (RO) regarding the original Concrete Experience (CE). Taking such action, however, alters reality and creates a new concrete experience, thus re-starting this recursive Experiential Learning Cycle.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND CONCRETE EXPERIENCE (CE)

As stated earlier, the content-focus of many diversity initiatives is upon non-majority group members. This means that learners belonging to the majority group(s) are going to prehend (Kolb, 1984) diversity material primarily through Abstract Conceptualization (AC). Their connection to the material will be more cognitive because it is not about themselves or their experiences; it is about understanding, accepting, and appreciating the realities, vantage points, histories, attitudes, and behaviors of others. Consider this reflection by a White student enrolled in a diversity course:

First day of Diversity Class – what do I expect? ...The class is diverse– I can tell just by looking around me. Many of the International students are from [an Asian country]. This surprises me!...We have our first “experience,” adding our own cultural background information to an outline of a person [the “Who am I?” exercise]. What makes me unique? My mind goes blank...I know it’s a small thing, but when my friends think of me, they think of a “cat” lady. I love my cats – why weren’t they in my picture? (Smith, 2002)

Racial identity literature bears this out:

According to Carter and Helms:

Considerations of ethnicity, for the most part, have not included analyses of how White individuals’ racial heritage is related to their attitudes about other cultural or racial groups or themselves as racial/cultural beings...When White racial attitudes defined as Whites’ prejudice toward other racial/cultural groups have been considered, usually Blacks rather than Whites have been the focus of these discussions. That is, investigators have studied what Whites believe, feel, or think about Blacks, but not what they feel, think, or believe about Whites (1990, p. 105).

Conversely, learners belong to minority groups will have a more concrete or affective connection to the material since the course material is designed to teach others about their groups. Learners who are not White, and/or privileged, U.S. raised, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, and so on, usually have numerous prior experiences regarding diversity. This means they have more Concrete Experiences upon which to reflect. Consider a Black student reflecting upon the same night of class:

Things to do. Managing in Diverse Work Groups. I know this stuff, after all I’ve been working and living in diverse work groups my entire life. Apply what I already know about diverse work groups, add the management training and [voila] ...instant credit! Maybe I should have taken this as an audit course. (Smith, 2002).

In sum, White students’ understanding and appreciation for diversity education is primarily impersonal (akin to ELT’s Abstract Conceptualization) while minority group members’ grasp is primarily personal and affective (akin to ELT’s Concrete experience). Thus, I propose that

Proposition 3: Students from racial or cultural minority groups enrolled in diversity education courses that encourage them toprehend diversity more cognitively will learn more than they would in diversity education programs that allow them to maintain a primarily affective focus.

Proposition 4: Students from racial or cultural majority groups enrolled in diversity education courses that encourage them toprehend diversity more affectively will learn more than they would in diversity education programs that allow them to maintain a primarily affective focus.

RACIOETHNIC IDENTITY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

U.S. Whites seldom view themselves primarily through a racioethnic lens unless they are in the numeric minority or they actively identify with a White ethnic group (e.g., Italian, Polish, Irish). As a result, the concept of racioethnicity itself is often abstractly grasped by many majority group members. In other words, the more evident or salient parts of their self-concept often do not center upon racioethnicity. As diversity educators, we make a major gaffe when we cover every race except the one that largely comprises the U.S. power structure. By allowing the continued marginalization of the concept of “race,” we allow a significant portion of the U.S. population to continue believe that it does not have a race—at least not in the same sense as “others.” Consider one White student’s response to a diversity course session:

This week, we did an exercise called “Who am I?” which required each person to fit him or her self into a category and speak for that category. Actually, the sheet asked, “What is your cultural identity?” This might be an easy question for one of the foreign students, or even for someone with a strong ethnic background, but is irrelevant to me. Given that much of class discussion focused around this grouping, I really felt awkward in discussions. I felt I could identify those characteristics belonging to me and how I got them, but I don’t feel that cultural influences

played as large a part as family influences. Does the US have a culture? Could there be such a thing as a culture made up solely of other cultures? (Smith, 2002).

As the result of diversity education, many White students first fully grasp that they are White, or that they have benefited from White privilege. Many Black students, however, are already quite aware of this fact and of their own racioethnic identity prior to taking diversity courses. Additionally, White students often cannot distinguish the concept of their “Whiteness” from the concept of their “Americanness (Carter & Helms, 1990)”. Only recently has work in the area of diversity begun to analyze “Whiteness”.

Conversely, because members of many minority groups experience a visible minority status, their identity is constantly an issue in many of their life spheres: even when they themselves are not focusing upon it. Because of this increased awareness of their identity, their racioethnic identity (Phinney, 1996) is more of a consistent focus. Thus, I expect that:

Proposition 5: Members of racioethnic majority groups enrolled in diversity education courses that stress racioethnic identity self-discovery will learn more than they would if enrolled in traditional diversity education which focuses on the “other.”

CONCLUSION

Diversity education initiatives emerged from the need to educate the, initially, largely male and White U.S. workforce about new entrants (i.e., “others”) into the workforce. Since the majority of workshop attendees were male and White, diversity education operated under the unquestioned assumption that the curriculum should educate Whites and males about “non-Whites” and women. This was understandable since many early attendees of diversity education assumably had little concrete and direct experience and knowledge regarding those “others.” However, the workforce has become increasingly diverse. Now, as diversity education scholars and practitioners, we must directly question this assumption (and re-educate ourselves) if we are to effectively and meaningfully educate an increasingly diverse workforce. One way to strengthen and broaden the effectiveness of our diversity efforts is to use Experiential Learning Theory to design both concrete and abstract, active and reflective, learning opportunities for participants of diverse backgrounds.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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