

Teaching Assistant Perspectives on a Diversity and Social Justice Education Course for Collegiate Agriculture Students

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Abstract

In recent years the United States has been growing in diversity, resulting in changes throughout the cultural landscape of our nation. These changes reach across collegiate instructing capacities uniting them with a new diversity of workers in the agricultural sector. Due to the fact that the agriculture industry is continuing to become more diverse, the need for industry workers to effectively communicate and interact cross-culturally is rising. One response to this need has been to integrate diversity and social justice education at collegiate levels into existing agricultural training and education. Resistance often accompanies diversity and social justice education, causing both professors as well as graduate teaching assistants (TAs) to be faced with the task of working through challenging educational situations. TA's are increasingly responsible for teaching undergraduate courses yet their academic perspectives are underrepresented in current literature. This paper will present specific challenges experienced by TAs when teaching a diversity and social justice education course to agricultural students at a land grant university as well as outline solutions implemented through informal discussions.

Introduction

The Agricultural sector is immensely important to any nation's ability to survive and thrive. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse in racial and ethnic composition, an agricultural workforce well versed in ways to successfully navigate a variety of cultural backgrounds is instrumentally important. A positive working environment within the industry is vital for future industry sustainability as well as ensuring the United States maintains its global agricultural rank. As a result of this need diversity and social justice education courses within collegiate Agriculture Departments have become particularly important.

This article assesses a variety of challenges related to teaching diversity and social justice education courses in agriculture through perspectives and experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) as instructors. This study presents opportunities as well as strategies employed that resulted in the facilitation and creation of productive learning environments within the classroom. Highlighting perspectives of teaching assistants is immensely important as evidenced by the steady rise in numbers of TAs teaching undergraduate courses over the years (Shannon et al., 1998). Individual reflections provide discussions on how TA's approached matters such as student resistance, power struggles and student perception of privilege. While this article contributes knowledge to the development of diversity and social justice curriculums within agriculture, the primary purpose is to provide Teaching Assistants' perspectives specific to a diversity and social justice course in a College of Agriculture.

The Field of Agriculture: A Changing Cultural Landscape

The population and cultural profile of the US has been rapidly changing over the years. It is becoming increasingly evident that the country is moving in a direction that is more racially and ethnically diverse. The Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) compared data from the 2000 and 2010 census reporting that the overall US population grew by more than 27 million people, with the most dramatic population growth rates occurring in Hispanic and Asian ethnicities. It is reported that the US population will continue to diversify as younger generations become more heavily comprised of Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians and other races and ethnicities (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2011).

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These trends are being mimicked in a variety of U.S. industries, including agriculture. The US Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts a census every 5 years and the 2012 census revealed a 15% increase in the number of minority farmers since 2007. Asian American and Hispanic producers show the most growth, with increases of approximately 22% and 21%. These results, in conjunction with increases in the total number of Black, American Indian and Native Hawaiian farmers suggest that the cultural diversification of U.S. agriculture is occurring rather rapidly (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2014).

College students pursuing careers in agriculture must be cognizant that all aspects of the agricultural industry are becoming more diverse. This diversity requires a degree of sensitivity towards others in the industry from different cultural backgrounds and belief systems. Preparation of students through diversity and social justice education courses can assist students in becoming enlightened regarding their personal attitudes towards different cultures within a safe and unbiased classroom environment. However, efforts to educate students on issues regarding diversity and cultural sensitivity can be emotionally charged and have been met with some resistance by university officials as well as students.

Diversity and Social Justice Education in Agriculture

In recent years, universities have recognized the importance of producing globally competent students who possess the ability to behave responsibly in diverse settings and interact comfortably with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Universities have made strides in developing classroom curriculums that create safe and healthy learning environments for students to gain a better understanding of diversity and social justice issues.

One such course curriculum from a land grant university examines diversity awareness and sensitivity through a basic review of topics such as race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, ageism, classism, disability and religious orientation among other issues. Topics are covered in a classroom lecture setting and reinforced during weekly lab sessions facilitated by TAs. Student learning includes service-learning experiences, web-based curriculum and exercises, in-class discussions, research projects, demonstrations and simulations. Service-learning projects are often used by educators as a way of engaging students while encouraging them to become active participants in society and are one of the most crucial components of this course. Research shows that service-learning projects assist in the development of attitudes, policies and practices that help cultural competency (Flannery and Ward, 1999). As Woods (2004) imparts, through service-learning activities students "*are able to acquire*

an ethic of caring and community connectedness in an ever-growing cross-cultural society."

The structure of this specific diversity and social justice education course allows students to explore personal biases and become aware of their own sensitivities to cultural differences as well as how these traits may lead to maintaining oppressive conditions. This process can often be controversial as students struggle to articulate their perspectives and feelings, sometimes leading to discussions that are uncomfortable and hostile. Teaching Assistants for this course are well-trained in the Socratic Questioning method to help them guide discussions to manageable conclusions, but it still requires navigating an emotionally charged process.

Resistance to Diversity and Social Justice Education

A broad range of research exists relating to student resistance in learning environments, particularly in diversity education (Ahlquist, 1992; Shaw, 1993; Sleeter, 1994; Sleeter and Grant, 1994; Tatum, 1992). Yet, as scholars have noted, diversity courses do not automatically equate to inclusive environments (Tienda, 2013). Teachers and scholars continue to grapple with how to design and teach diversity and social justice courses in a way that is unbiased and transformational while getting to the root of privilege, oppression and other structural forms of inequality in society. A 2014 article by Dunn et al., outlines this process by reflecting on how many students operate under the false impression that we now live in a post-racial society. Largely as a result of Barack Obama's election as the nation's first African American President, many students believe that racism is now a thing of the past. The article walks through what might cause students to make callous, offensive remarks (knowingly and unknowingly), encouraging more concrete attention be given to how and why students offer resistance to diversity education. Additionally, Garrett and Segall (2013) encourage awareness of the distinction between ignorance and resistance related to multicultural education. Researchers point out that ignorance is often a defense mechanism against being unfamiliar with a subject and not necessarily resistance. Therefore, it is important for multicultural educators to realize that students might not be resisting, but instead attempting to work through a topic of which they have no basic understanding.

A study conducted in a predominately white and poor rural region of Central Appalachia by Asada et al. (2003), examined factors that contribute the most to resistance from students across disciplines. Findings showed that students were not usually fundamentally against multicultural education, or a diverse community, but they became less supportive if diversity education became mandatory. Additionally, students who were most resistant to multicultural education generally internalized negative racial stereotypes, ignored the presence of modern day forms of racism and believed

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that white students suffered as a result of more inclusive education programs.

Cockrell et al. (1998) explored the concept of resistance further by identifying and categorizing forms of student resistance found in diversity education. They found three primary kinds of resistance: 1) resistance based on individualism and monoculturalism (most often articulated by white males), 2) resistance due to self-doubt and being challenged by peers and 3) resistance to multiculturalism as a critique of prevailing social structures which impede the formation of a “true” multicultural society with citizens who have “multicultural thought processes.” Dividing resistance into these categories is important because it allows instructors to pinpoint an origin for student resistance and responding accordingly and effectively.

Another hindrance to diversity and social justice education can be a lack of support from the university. In some cases, if a university does not fully embrace diversity it can take steps to present the appearance of embracing diversity while being unwilling to support diversity initiatives financially (Clark, 2011). Diversity education has generally been taught utilizing one or two general approaches. One is a “focused” approach, which takes the form of seminars or a structured course dedicated to multicultural understanding. The other is an “integration” or “infusion” approach where the focus is “integration” diversity efforts—in curricular, co-curricular and workplace arenas.” (Clark, 2011) To achieve true multicultural education both approaches need to be employed, however, often only the “infusion” approach is used in order to avoid actually addressing diversity issues (Clark, 2011).

TA Perspectives in Diversity and Social Justice Education

Despite research conducted regarding student resistance in diversity and social justice education, very little exploration has been done that offers insight into perspectives of teaching assistants. Previous inquiries have focused on how to provide TAs with skills needed to be successful future professors, overlooking learning experiences that aided them on their journey. Although a study by Embrey and McGuire (2011) provides insight into TA comprehension related to diversity education along with implementation into teaching techniques, the void in TA perspectives remains significant. Additionally, large gaps in research persist when examining varying challenges faced as a result of teaching specific topics within diversity and social justice education courses. It is probable that more and more institutions will utilize TAs in capacities that were historically filled by professors as a way of controlling rising university costs, growing research in this area. In order to increase understanding of the TA perspectives offered in this paper, a general outline of the diversity and social justice education course and simple student demographics are included below.

The basic structure of the course can be divided into two main parts. The first section of the course teaches about the basics of culture, diversity, communications and conflict. This serves to lay a fundamental foundation for the course. For the remainder of the semester, subjects are focused on specific types of oppression. Topics discussed include oppression and discrimination based on appearance and size, race and privilege, immigration, religion, abilities and disabilities, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. Workplace discrimination and affirmative action are also discussed.

This course was developed at a Midwestern Land Grant University, specifically for the Agricultural Department by a professor directly involved with the Office of Multicultural Programs in the College of Agriculture. Although there are students from a variety of backgrounds enrolled in the course, the majority consists of white, middle-to-upper class young adults from very small, homogenous, Midwestern towns.

Key topics from the course have been chosen for discussion in this article as a way of reflecting on perspectives and experiences TAs have had while teaching this specific diversity and social justice course design. The course was designed as a lecture taught by the Professor, with eight breakout labs facilitated by individual TAs. Some of the challenges faced, as well as strategies used to solve these challenges, are discussed from three individual TA perspectives. Each of the TAs taught for at least a full year, or 2 semesters. While the three TAs who wrote for this article all identify as African American, they are each from different social, class and regional backgrounds and are at varying stages of their graduate career.

Reflections on Gender/Sexuality and Immigration by a PhD Candidate – American Studies

Barack Obama’s election as the first African American President of the United States ushered in a critical moment that led many to proclaim that we are now living in a post-racial society. This belief in post-racialism—the idea that racism is largely a thing of the past and that we live in a colorblind society—means that many also fail to see the ways certain policies and social institutions function to maintain systems of unequal access and opportunity. It is within this post-racial illusion that I instructed over 50 students to engage in weekly critical discussions about issues facing the changing, multicultural landscape of the U.S. Since topics dealing with race and privilege often can be met with resistance from students, I found it beneficial to decenter discussions about privilege and instead encourage students to see how they each have life narratives that are actually more similar than different. This technique became most salient and effective during class topics that did not focus exclusively on race. While race is often centralized in research regarding effective pedagogical practices for teaching a diversity and social justice course, less attention seems to be given to other

structural and institutional forces that enact forms of systemic oppression and lead to the marginalization of other identities. In what follows, I outline how I navigated discussion and encouraged my students to think more broadly about how issues such as gender and immigration are all intimately intertwined to the incorrect belief that we now live in a post-racial society.

In 2013, the red equal sign symbolizing marriage equality quickly became popular on Facebook. Many people changed their Facebook profile pictures as a way of showing solidarity and making a political statement about overturning the Proposition 8 resolution that barred same-sex marriage. The prevalence of this icon suggested that the idea of post-racialism also brought with it a wider acceptance of gender equality, but this wasn't necessarily the case in my classroom, which consisted of students raised in a primarily conservative state. For instance, after reading a short article on how Indiana has one of the largest gender pay gaps, one student remarked that a man being paid more is justified because women don't usually have to devote the same amount of time and rigor to their jobs as men. During the class discussion, another student stated that she believed more women don't go for graduate degrees in the hard-sciences because they are more concerned with getting married and starting a family. Like the idea of post-racialism which suggests that any person of color can become successful if only they work hard enough, many students also seem to believe that if only women do the same thing as men, they'll reap the same rewards as men. In doing so, students disregard how other factors may impair women's ability to perform "like a man," particularly if she is a mother or caretaker. I explained that studies show that many women don't leave the workforce by choice, but that many felt pushed out due to the inflexibility and incompatibility of the workforce with caretaking needs (Stone 2007). Students often came in oblivious to how many jobs in the workforce continues to privilege men while disadvantaging women.

As a black, female teacher, I recognize that my own positionality is unique within these conversations. Students see someone who is marginalized by both her race and gender and thus immediately assume that my position is to advocate for groups with whom I identify. What I have found most helpful when instructing a group of largely Caucasian, male, students from farming backgrounds is that it is important to highlight other voices and perspectives as often as possible. I show video clips in class while assigning groups to bring in videos related to gender equality that they found helped them to form a more enlightened viewpoint. In this way, I get to decenter my experiences and move from being the "spokesperson" for black people and/or women, forcing students to seek out varied explanations as to how many different kinds of women are affected by gender inequality.

Furthermore, student participation in the semester-long cultural immersion projects provided many "teachable moments" for students to actually begin to

experience what gender inequality looks like. One group mentioned that as one of their preparation activities for partnering with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) Resource Center for their service-learning project, they were first going to visit mall stores and have one of the guys in the group dress as a transgendered woman. They were then going to record his interactions with sales associates in this role versus when he interacted with them as a cisgendered male. Before they carried out this project however, they were required to visit the community service organization they partnered with. After meeting with the director of the LGBTQ Resource Center on campus, he informed them that this wasn't a good idea because essentially they were mocking the experiences of transgendered individuals and it could come off as insensitive, particularly to someone who is transgendered. After revealing this to the class, one of the students in the group explained that she never realized how pretending to be someone she wasn't could be so insensitive, particularly after learning of the kinds of violence that transgender individuals face daily doing normal, everyday activities like shopping or walking down the street. Thus, the cultural immersion projects provided critical moments of awareness and self-reflection, helping them to form more nuanced perspectives about diversity and social justice issues, particularly as it involved developing a concrete understanding of sexual and gender inequality.

Since many students understand the idea of post-racial America as promoting a place of racial inclusion, discussing immigration often becomes a very tricky subject. Currently, Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States; however, obtaining the "American Dream" is often an elusive goal for them as many Latinos are plagued by poverty, criminalization and high levels of unemployment. Although the week of instruction on immigration is designed specifically to highlight the forms of structural oppression that an overwhelming majority in the Latino community face, I found it much more effective to approach immigration from a more nuanced perspective in which students could self-identify with the immigrant experience.

For instance, in one activity, students were instructed to write on the board the first words that came to their minds when they heard the word "immigrant." An overwhelming majority of them wrote words related to someone with a Latino identity. I used this exercise to ask students why they saw immigration as being so heavily related to a Hispanic person even though we had previously discussed how America itself is essentially a nation of immigrants. This discussion was held in light of the fact that each of them completed an Ethnic Roots essay at the beginning of the course describing their ancestry, which nearly all of them proudly traced back to various European countries. Even having done this a couple weeks before, many conceived of immigrants as non-European and largely Hispanic. After I drew attention to this, I noticed students began to ask more complex questions about immigration policies

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because they were able to see their own familial past as part of an immigration story.

Towards the end of a class discussion, one student remarked that he had changed his mind about the Dream Act. He stated that he now supported it because he believed that everyone should have a chance to become an American citizen if they so desire, especially those who could implement beneficial social and political change in America if only they were able to receive a college education. In explaining this, he used his own immigrant grandparents and his own career goals as an example. Furthermore, students were given an impromptu quiz from the naturalization test.

Having them take this quiz allowed them to not only refresh their knowledge about the American government, but it also served to better familiarize them with the process of gaining citizenship in this country. After taking the quiz, many students remarked that it was difficult because they hadn't been made to think about questions relating to civic identity for quite some time. While some students were genuinely upset and offended at the fact that they were made to take a naturalization quiz as an American citizen, this prompted some to state that they were embarrassed to realize they didn't know as much about the American political system as their immigrant counterparts who became naturalized.

The week of instruction on immigration proved one of the most insightful. This was evidenced in student's final class reflection papers, particularly when one wrote that his favorite moment in the class was during the lecture when Mexican immigrants came in to speak about the kinds of personal, harrowing experiences they encountered while attempting to lead a normal life in America. The speakers shared experiences ranging from facing constant blatant discrimination to the numerous issues they meet as a result of being undocumented. Likewise, another student wrote: *"I learned a lot about the hardships faced by immigrants to this country and the guest speaker made me realize that there are many difficulties that these people face that I had never thought of"* (VR, personal communication, 2014).

As a TA, I have found that creating an opportunity for students to self-empathize allows them to look beyond the post-racial myth and dismantle how systemic forces enact a kind of violence in the lives of other marginalized subjects. As one student wrote, *"I originally thought that minority groups only had to do with race. In reality, minority groups can encompass a wide variety of traits... When I talk about myself to other people now, I am more aware of the minority aspects of my identity."* In order to quell student resistance in diversity and social justice education courses, it is imperative that students are able to insert not only their voices into the conversations, but also engage their own varied intersectional identities and experiences.

Reflections on Affirmative Action by a PhD - Agricultural Economics

Serving in the role of TA opened my eyes to the fact that a great deal of students believe that we are indeed living in a post-racial era where all Americans, regardless of their gender or skin color, will be afforded similar opportunities in society and in particular, in the workplace. Teaching a subject such as Affirmative Action can be difficult when you do not believe that minorities are viewed and treated equally in the workplace or education institutions. Affirmative Action, which is also referred to as "positive discrimination," is centered on policies that help ensure that members of disadvantaged groups gain equal access to the same opportunities and resources given to the larger privileged group. From the beginning, I knew that there would be a strong misconception among the students that Affirmative Action was engineered to help only African-Americans. As an African-American male knowing these misconceptions, I felt that it was important that they understood the true scope of the policy and that all minority groups, including women, are protected under the Affirmative Action mandate.

During discussion, a number of students argued that Affirmative Action was nothing more than a form of reverse discrimination—discrimination against the majority in favor of historically disadvantaged groups. I found their arguments intriguing. Many of the students voiced that white men and women faced reverse discrimination in the job market. Even though the policy is structured so that Affirmative Action is only used in the decision process when candidates are equally qualified, their claim was that less qualified minorities are given jobs simply because of Affirmative Action. After deconstructing the true policy's definition, I was able to educate them on just how much the policy helps to level the playing field. Some of my white female students only saw Affirmative Action as something harmful to one's professional career. Their opinions swiftly changed as I explained that the policy was to their benefit as well, offering protection for all minorities including women.

To demonstrate, I presented the example of the Fisher vs. University of Texas U.S. Supreme Court case. The case involved Abigail Fisher and Rachel Michaelwicz, two University of Texas at Austin applicants who were denied entrance in 2008. Both women filed a lawsuit against the university claiming that they were denied admission based on them being Caucasian—and was therefore a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment. They believed that the school's Affirmative Action policy prevented "qualified" students like themselves from being admitted, while accepting what they considered "less-qualified" individuals from various underrepresented groups (Santoro and Wirth 2012). I provided them with this example as a way of helping them realize that Affirmative Action goes beyond the common workplace and as a way of prompting a discussion regarding whether they believed the women had a strong case. As expected, many of them felt that race and ethnicity played a major role in minorities being admitted into

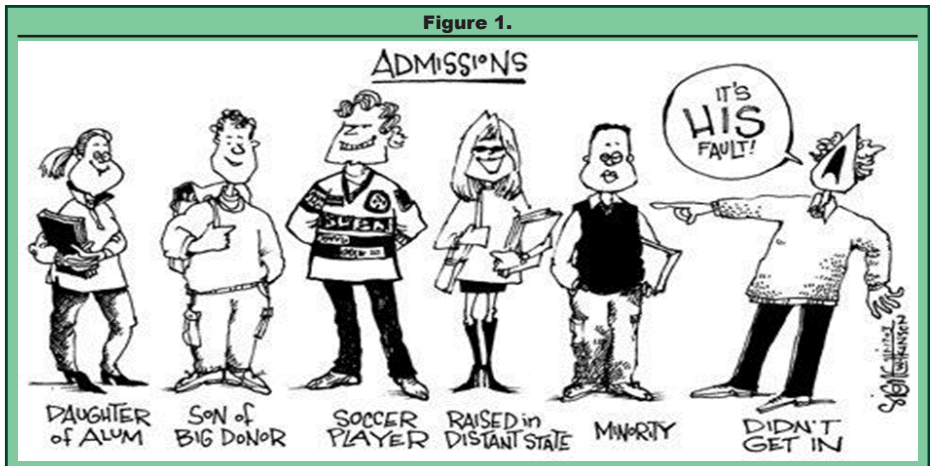
college. In fact, many of them felt that skin-color was weighted heavier in the college admission process than a potential student's academic record. One student spoke on his personal experiences with being denied from a university despite his stellar academic record in high school. His friend, who happened to be African-American, was admitted into the same university. He argued race had to have played a factor in his acceptance since they were involved in the same extracurricular activities and his friends' grades were not as strong as his. I looked at this as an opportunity to present an alternative viewpoint.

(<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-d4w62hsPf1o/T4MF95C-mK9I/AAAAAAAAABJQ/nTHgQ6ijT9s/s1600/p-admi-large.gif>)

I showed the above picture to my class to illustrate that various factors beyond the obvious can play into college admittance. For instance, universities with athletic programs often accept a large number of athletes who are not as strong academically as other applicants and a family's legacy and/or financial contributions to the school can influence eligibility. Situations such as these lead to a number of qualified students being overlooked. It was important that I clearly explained that race and ethnicity was only one of many factors that can influence admission decisions. After understanding this, they were then able to consider other reasons why the two white females might have not been accepted into the University of Texas at Austin.

I ended the class with a discussion on feasible alternatives to the Affirmative Action policy by asking how universities and employers could ensure equal opportunities for all possible candidates. We listed each of the alternatives one-by-one on the whiteboard. One suggestion was to have a blind selection. Employers and schools would review applications without knowledge of race and/or ethnicity. This way, they would be judging candidates simply based on their credentials and nothing else. Another popular suggestion was to not only ignore an applicant's race and ethnicity when reviewing their applications, but to also ignore their first and last name, since names can serve as an indicator of one's racial and cultural background. Again, ignoring such characteristics help to make the review process more fair.

Serving as a TA for a diversity and social justice education course revealed to me the importance of diversity education. A number of students have many misconceptions regarding topics like Affirmative Action. Educating them on such topics helps to ensure their post-graduate success and helps to combat forms of discrimination. Holding critical discussions for each topic covered in the course allows students to present their own viewpoints, where others are able to challenge them in a safe learning environment. I made it my duty to



facilitate healthy discussions that could be enlightening for everyone, including myself. With diversity education courses you never quite know how much you have impacted the opinions of your students. You can only hope that some walk away with a greater sensitivity towards others who may come from different cultural backgrounds.

Reflections on Teaching about Race, Privilege, and Classism by a Masters Student – (Animal Sciences)

I found the race and privilege section to be one of the most challenging topics to teach in diversity and social justice education for a number of reasons. Two challenges can be illustrated using responses I have received in my course evaluations over the past 6 semesters I have taught the course: *“Do not sit a large group of white farmers in front of a faculty [sic] of Blacks and tell us not to be racist.”* This quote demonstrates the sometimes perceived, but sometimes accurate notion that students see me as less credible to teach them about racism and privilege because I am an African American woman. The fact that throughout my tenure of teaching the course there has never been an entirely black teaching staff further reinforces my idea that student perceptions have a major influence on how they see me. For a black woman to state that racism is still very prevalent and that male privilege exists, is viewed as no more than a personal complaint born out of frustration from a perceived, but non-existent disadvantage.

Another student wrote that: *“Overall, I felt oppressed during the semester in an environment where middle-class, Christian white people were displayed in a light of only finding success only through “privilege,” and I was left extremely unimpressed with the course.”* This second response highlights the view that many of my students feel personally attacked in response to our discussions on privilege. Despite the fact that as instructors, we continually reiterate the fact that privilege is not inherently bad, or any one person's fault, but is rather a reality of society, many students remain adamantly opposed to acknowledging its existence because in order for privilege to exist, they must “give up the myth

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of meritocracy” (McIntosh, 1989). To deny meritocracy is to deny the American Dream that perpetuates the notion that anyone can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” because everyone in America has equal opportunities. When we begin to talk about racism and privilege, white students, especially white male students, feel as if they are being personally attacked and this becomes an obstacle to learning.

Adding to these challenges, the majority of current students are a part of the millennial generation where the myth of a post-racial society prevails. They have trouble seeing racism as a societal and institutional problem since most of them are in the majority and have never experienced it, nor do they personally know people who have. Furthermore, they fail to realize that racism is present in more than interpersonal interactions. Though most of them will admit that racism is still a problem even though race relations have improved since the sixties, many view the problem as being rare and occurring only in isolated incidences. Essentially, they agree that racism probably will never be completely eradicated, but because it is limited to a select few, it is not a significant issue and does not, for the most part, cause major problems today.

Strategies I have used to combat resistance to discussions on racism and privilege include the use of current events, the provision of a historical framework and the inclusion of outside opinions as well as personal testimonies. The use of current events provides students with a context for why we are discussing the issues of racism and privilege. It allows them to see that modern racism, although more subtle than in the past, still exists and is neither isolated nor rare. Providing students with a historical framework allows them to understand how actions of the past have shaped society today and reiterates that privilege is not due to the action of an individual. When discussing privilege, we include other types of privilege as well, such as the privilege of being able bodied, in order to help students understand that privilege is not linked to just race and gender, but to multiple social identities. Lastly, the inclusion of outside voices allows students to understand that I am not making a personal complaint. Students are assigned to read Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” which explains white privilege from the perspective of someone who has experienced it. We discuss their experiences and I share my own experiences of being privileged in some instances and disadvantaged in others in order to maintain an open and honest environment with the students. I have found that employing these strategies over the course of my time teaching this course has decreased some of the negative attitudes and resistance associated with these sections, as well as keep the students from feeling personally attacked.

In my opinion, classism is one of the most interesting units that we cover in the course. The major strategy that I have used for countering classist mindsets has been to question students on how they have come to their

conclusions. Most often, there have been assumptions made to which I will provide examples and scenarios that are counter to those assumptions. I do acknowledge that the assumptions that they have made may be true in some instances, but my goal is to get them to realize that those assumptions cannot be all encompassing. Statements such as the “homeless can budget very little towards higher education without outside aid,” suggests that some of my students cannot fathom what it means to have very little, or nothing at all. This phenomenon allows very little room for empathy and is compounded once again, with the idea that everyone has equal opportunity and therefore anyone should be able to pull themselves up from any situation. The most interesting thing I have found when teaching classism is that it is one form of oppression with which many seem to be content. If I were to infer that any of my students were being racist, there would be denial and quite possibly anger. However, with classism (also weightism and nativism), many students are willing to admit that they harbor negative biases and although some take this realization as a recognition that they should change, many do not see a need to change because they believe classism to be a justified form of oppression.

I have heard this justification echoed in a few of their semester-long project presentations. Throughout the semester, the students are assigned to groups and are supposed to pick a culture in which to immerse themselves and perform a service-learning project. Many of the groups that choose socioeconomic class do so because they assume it will be the easiest to perform a service. However, for some groups, rather than immersing themselves in the culture by actually getting to know the people in the lower class and learning their stories, they observe from a distance while performing their service. I can always tell from their presentations which groups actually immersed themselves and which groups did not. For the latter, their presentation usually contains some reference to how someone they encountered was not really in need of aid because they had a smartphone or some other item that the student decided was not befitting for a poor person. In the groups that have actually immersed themselves during their projects, there is usually a better understanding that everyone’s situation is different and that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity despite their class status.

Although teaching about racism, privilege and classism is never an easy task, I have found that shifting the students’ focus away from me or them as individuals and to trying to recognize and understand differing perspectives makes the conversation less hostile. Once they recognize that they are not being attacked or that we are not trying to force them to change their worldview, but rather we are trying to teach them that not everyone has the same views because of differing experiences and opportunities, the students begin to open their minds to the idea of plurality in society.

Discussion

The importance of developing effective instructional methods for educating diverse student populations continues to intensify as the diversity profiles of primary, secondary and post-secondary school systems grows ever more diverse. U.S. colleges and universities have recently begun to recognize that their students need to be able to interact and work with individuals who may not look like them and/or stem from different cultural backgrounds. The collegiate course outlined in this article focuses on a number of topics such as gender issues, weightism, race, ageism, as well as language and linguistics. Its sole purpose is to help develop students into more culturally competent individuals, while recognizing their own personal biases along with those of their peers. A select group of teaching assistants (TAs), which may be a combination of undergraduate students who have previously taken the course, graduate assistants and/or faculty, facilitate weekly lab sessions, spearheading class discussions on course topics and relying on a number of group activities and projects to help explore and reinforce ideas covered in the lecture component of class. Guiding discussions on diversity-related topics can be somewhat difficult for TAs despite any prior training and exposure to diversity and social justice education techniques. Literature providing insight into TA perspectives and experiences related to teaching diversity and social justice education courses is minimal at best and suggests that there is a large academic void to be filled.

TA perspectives for the diversity and social justice education class outlined in this paper attempt to fill a portion of this void by sharing personal challenges on teaching a selection of topics covered in the course. Each encounters hesitation by students when navigating class discussions. Through encouragement and the use of class projects as well as probing techniques such as the Socratic Method, all of the TAs have been effective in creating a safe environment where students could share freely and openly amongst one another. The TA from American Studies realized the importance of developing opportunities for students to “self-empathize” when discussing issues like post-racial America. The TA from Agricultural Economics discovered that a great deal of the misconceptions or biased opinions garnered by students on issues such as Affirmative Action was directly related to their lack of understanding of current initiatives. Only through supplying students with accurate and relatable information will they truly be able to form substantive opinions. The TA from Animal Sciences recalled that often students are not able to empathize with oppressed groups and/or individuals if they do not consider themselves to be a part of that group. One particular group project attempts to combat this issue by providing an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in unfamiliar cultures. Following the completion of the semester-long projects many students leave with heightened levels of compassion towards those in oppressed groups.

Conclusion

A common thread presented among TA perspectives was the heavy resistance faced when facilitating discussions about issues that made students uncomfortable while challenging their views. Each TA was responsible for developing a personal method of engaging students in these discussions. Although approaches seem to be different, each was successful in overcoming barriers that any instructor in diversity and social justice education courses will inevitably face.

This article presented viewpoints from teaching assistants of a diversity and social justice education course though the scope of an agricultural department at a Land Grant Midwestern University. While the perspectives may not be comprehensive in regard to subject matter addressed, they provide needed insight into challenges faced in this type of educational setting and offer viable strategies for addressing those challenges successfully. This information builds on a small body of research related to diversity and social justice education and challenges for teaching assistants, but provides a foundation on which to build for future quantifiable studies in these areas. Such studies might include those that explore specific factors that correlate with resistance in an agricultural context, as well as studies that explore levels of effectiveness for strategies TAs employ for overcoming resistance.

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