

Embracing Differences: Experiential Exercises for Teaching Diversity in Undergraduate Business Programs

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Abstract. When discussing the subject of diversity, many instructors of undergraduate business courses – especially principles of international business and management – may wish to engage students in a more experiential manner with the topic. This paper provides an instructional resource for discussing diversity with undergraduate students. Presented are five activities that offer a safe, effective way to engage students with the subject. One exercise explores the meaning behind names, another ties diversity to the four functions of management, a third uses a series of questions to enable students to understand how diverse their class is, a fourth facilitates an understanding of the breadth of the word diversity, and finally one exercise uses cultural immersion to foster an understanding of diversity.

Keywords: activities, cultural immersion, diversity education, four functions of management.

1. Introduction

The use of experiential activities in classrooms is not new. Case studies, role plays, and group exercises are common in undergraduate management courses. However, we have found that activities centered on diversity are either infrequently utilized or run the risk of alienating certain students while also failing to address important concepts such as privilege. Safe, effective methods of engaging the students are needed to openly discuss, and discover more about, diversity in undergraduate business courses – especially those associated with international business. Diversity is critical for students who will work with a wide cultural variety of businesspeople and practices. This paper originated when one of the authors used the concept of left-handed individuals as the basis for understanding privilege and oppression when addressing a cohort of new faculty at a university. Questions such as, “How many left-handed people are in the room right now?” and “What struggles do you think a left person has in daily life?” and “What accommodations have been made for left-handed individuals?” elucidated the concept that one could begin the discussion of diversity, privilege, and

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inclusion without putting students on the defensive. This prompted a discussion between the authors to sift through their collections of experiential activities and determine which exercises have had the greatest impact on helping participants truly grasp and appreciate diversity. Five activities were chosen and are presented in this paper.

The activities that were selected were ones that we have used time and again in both academic and corporate settings. Each activity is presented in such a way that the purpose of the exercise and the learning objectives are provided as well as how to implement the activity. Further suggestions are also given to modify or roll out the activity in an online setting or with larger or smaller groups.

2. Diversity Education & Experiential Activities

In international business courses and in management courses at the undergraduate level, diversity is typically a topic that is presented in a textbook as well as lecture. It is among a list of subjects that are to be covered such as mission statements and organizational structure, but because of the critical role diversity plays in many business practices and engagements that students will have in their career, diversity deserves focused attention. Looking ahead to the future careers of these students, effective diversity education facilitates a multicultural workforce and students' leadership capabilities in a global workplace environment (Hardy & Tolhurst 2014). One study (Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell 2012) reviewed 178 journal articles on diversity education and training on campuses and in workplaces. The research demonstrated that though there are a wide variety of such teaching programs, they can be impactful. For this reason, a mindful approach to designing a diversity-focused classroom experience is important. Instructors should show students that cultural differences exist and that these differences can lead to competitive advantage (Egan & Bendick 2008).

Understanding diversity as a concept is also vital for instructors. It is also one that is more than just "race" or "gender". Egan & Bendik (2008) emphasize the importance of both domestic and international diversity. And Chavez & Weisinger (2008) include hidden identities such as beliefs, attitudes, and values. Diversity is more easily understood given a few caveats: privilege and social justice. First, privilege is benefits people from marginalized cultures do not have when compared to people with societal advantage (i.e. white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, etc.). Collins (2018) outlined the automatic defensiveness privileged people can face when confronted with this idea and suggested ensuring privilege does not mean never struggled, rather it is a societal "built-in advantage" (p. 39). For example, white skin is seen as the default, white people are given the benefit of the doubt over People of the Global Majority, and white people have had these advantages for generations (Collins 2018, Sue 2006). Privilege matters in the discussion of diversity training in management education, because one must

understand their own power and privilege before they can begin to change the system from which they benefit (Collins 2018, Sue 2006).

Second, diversity cannot be the end goal. Rather, social justice needs to be the focus of any diversity training initiative. Social justice is defined by the National Education Association as, “a concept in which equity or justice is achieved in every aspect of society rather than in only some aspects or for some people” (2018, para. 1). Diversity allows more people into the game; social justice allows a fair playing field for everyone by working to alleviate oppression and marginalization. Therefore, diversity acknowledges privilege and power by working to create an inclusive environment that fosters social justice.

Many instructors realize that diversity education is more than a required “module” in a syllabus. A firm understanding of the importance of diversity fosters a greater acceptance and encouragement of diversity in future managers. In addition, it is vital for preparing students who enter a workforce that is more multicultural than ever before (Amoroso, Loyd, & Hoobler 2010). That is why it is critical to give the subject more than a cursory discussion during the academic term. If students comprehend the concepts of diversity and inclusion, they can break various fault lines of demography and that education becomes a tool to inform students on the unique realities and the commonalities that exist between groups (Thomas, Tran, & Dawson 2010). Therefore, treating the topic as more than a “definition” or “concept” will give diversity more gravitas and prepare students for a career that embraces differences in others.

Diversity education is a must and today’s students entering the workforce expect to experience diversity (Holt 2017). But this isn’t just with those entering the working environment after graduation. It can start as soon as they finish high school. Depending upon where they originate from, the college years may be the first time some students experience *any* form of diversity. If they come from a predominately white, rural background, higher education can suddenly expose them to different languages, different attires, and different cultures. Facilitating the understanding of that exposure is where diversity education can be of most benefit. In other cases, some students may arrive to college already knowing about diversity and are eager to discover more.

Of course, a strong diversity education program is one that not only teaches what diversity is, but also imparts how to deal with that very diversity and the understanding of power, privilege, and oppression. It does not matter if diversity education is imparted in a classroom environment or in corporate training, the objectives of these efforts are to enhance diversity knowledge, improve diversity attitudes, and develop skills associated with diversity (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Simply being aware of diversity is not as useful as skillfully putting that awareness in practice through cross-cultural interaction (Zhang, Xia, Fan, & Zhu 2016). This means that as instructors, we must take classroom exercises to the next step – beyond a superficial discussion of diversity to one that shows students *how* to apply their diversity knowledge. It is the instructor in an undergraduate