Identity, Liberal Learning, Democracy: Reflections

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Identity is a curious notion. Suggesting a kind of unity within ourselves, it nonetheless reveals difference at the very core of our being. Reflecting further on that initially odd observation, we can realize that coming to know ourselves involves not so much discovery as creativity, and that we do not undertake the quest alone. That a human being needs to and can ask “Who am I?” is related to the reasons we need to be and can be educated; need to and can develop moral consciences; can and do flourish in democracy. These human projects are differentiated, but they need not be divided, in opposition, or sequential. On the contrary: given the chance to be in communication with each other, these projects can serve and significantly enhance each other.

Opening the Gap

The moment we ask, “Who am I?” a gap opens between self as subject and self as object. I becomes not only conscious, but self-conscious, reflexively seeking to become more self-aware. I wants to know me. What Socrates called “the two-in-one” of soundless dialogue we experience as thinking is reawakened. When we are in our own company as subject and object simultaneously, we encounter our inherent non-unity most intimately.

To be sure, self-consciousness is not always a pleasant state in which to be. We are caught up in self-consciousness when we are socially embarrassed, feeling awkward or ashamed. Turning our mind’s eye inward, self-consciousness makes us stumble in the world. We can dwell so intensely with ourselves that we shut out others, at the risk of becoming limited within ourselves and perhaps even dangerous to others.

Nonetheless, consciousness, for good as for ill, opens space for us to become aware, to become attentive, to think both within and beyond ourselves. The gap that opens when we become self-conscious by asking “Who am I?” enables us to practice our ability to think with as well as about others, and to do so imaginatively even when others are absent. The two-in-one can become the robust “I” that contains multitudes, as that poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, so eloquently called us to remember.

Identity in Relation

Humans are creatures of consciousness, and consciousness is relational. When we are not conscious, we are aware of nothing, learn nothing, do nothing. “She’s not responding at all” is virtually synonymous with. “She’s unconscious.” Both the gap of difference and our being-in-relation are right there in the word consciousness, whose roots remind us that we know (sci) together (con). Or, as Whitehead said, we comprehend: we com ([bring] together) prehend (grasp, take in) (1967). At a basic level, consciousness is how we come into and can become aware that we are in relation.
The New York Times recently ran a story on the declining popularity of the late J. D. Salinger’s beloved and bemoaned antihero, Holden Caulfield (Schuessler 2009). According to the article, many of today’s youth find Salinger’s protagonist “grating” and self-absorbed—characteristics to which they don’t relate and can’t condone. This criticism may be well deserved. But the article suggests a telling possibility: that students’ discontent arises from a contemporary “impatience with the idea of a lifelong quest for identity and meaning that Holden [arguably] represents.” One has to wonder at the implications of such a shift in zeitgeist.

“Identity and meaning” are not disposable incidentals on the path toward more tangible outcomes: grades, credentials, financial success. Rather, they are key questions at the heart of liberal learning. In teaching content, educators must also teach students to question how content is used: whether to the credit or detriment of humankind, whether or not to public benefit. In making these connections, educators will inevitably raise questions about students’ place in their future professions and, by extension, their current place in the world at large. Educators should encourage students to pursue these questions, in part through self-reflection that carries with it the sense of “being-in-relation” that Elizabeth Minnich describes in this issue of Diversity & Democracy.

This issue explores the many ways in which higher education can encourage its students to reflect on their own “being-in-relation” to diverse others. It examines how students’ intersecting identities (race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, disability, and many others) are lenses through which they see the world, sometimes without even knowing that their views are filtered by their positions and perspectives. Our authors suggest the benefits of drawing students’ attention to their backgrounds and how they influence their views of the world around them. Authors in this issue point to the complex connections between self and others that, in subtle and salient ways, inflect our experiences within a diverse democracy—the very experiences that American higher education and liberal education in particular are supposed to enhance.

In contrast to Holden’s world, where a liberal education was a privilege available primarily to the young white male elite, our current globally interconnected society requires that such opportunities be available to all. Holden Caulfield may have sought the space to define himself outside his prep school’s walls, but today’s students can and should find these opportunities within their classrooms, campuses, and communities. Higher education must assist its students in “the lifelong quest for identity and meaning,” whoever they are and wherever they enroll.

—Kathryn Peltier Campbell, editor

REFERENCE

As conscious beings, we are more than creatures of necessity. Even when subject to a natural law (gravity, for example), we respond to and eventually are able to think about our experience (of falling or dropping something). Within the most intense experiences, we can find ourselves observing what is happening—opening the gap, the space of consciousness. More important still: We are capable of reflexivity—the thinking that arcs over the gap—so that still: We are capable of reflexivity—the space of consciousness. More important

Freedom and Responsibility
The inner space of consciousness prefigures freedom just as it enables us to comprehend and to practice it. As Michel Foucault observed, “Thought… is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it

The more richly, diversely, and equitably populated the spaces within and without ourselves, the more articulated and capacious the self that can respond when we ask again, “Who am I?”

that need of freedom comes also our capacity for conscience, which emerges from consciousness as we practice our reflexive abilities to comprehend, and then presses us to ask, “But how am I to know what is right, what wrong?”

A being incapable of consciousness is not aware of its identity. Such a being needs no education, no morality, no laws and political systems. It just is what it is, without choice or action. There is then no question of freedom, as freedom is literally inconceivable. In contrast, conscious, reflexive, thinking beings try very hard to create satisfying responses to questions such as “Who am I? Who are you? What should we do? What is true?”—because we need to. And we need to because, while we are conscious and able to think and reflect, the space within as well as among us inserts difference, keeping us unsure, unsettled, unstable—free.

With freedom comes responsibility. Because we can think reflexively about who we are, what we do, alone and with others, we are also capable of evaluating ourselves. Responsibility, like self-consciousness, can be uncomfortable. We can choose to turn down our awareness: to try not to reflect, to question, or to think. The same gap of consciousness, the same space of freedom, that allows me to ask “Who am I?” allows me to refuse to reflect.

A very common way of doing so is by compartmentalizing: dividing and walling off our minds, our identities, our consciences, and our knowledge. We compartmentalize when we do not reflect at home on what we did at work, as if the

Continued from page 1

“Who am I?” Each interesting difference, each similarity, each startling novelty, each fresh perspective of which we become aware, on which we can reflect, with and about which we can think, adds its brush strokes to both knower and known. Through such multiple relations, we can come to comprehend how our samenesses and differences interweave in our own uniqueness and that of others. As Zora Neale Hurston said, we live by comparison.

The inner space of consciousness is just as it enables us to come into the particular relation with myself that we speak of as “having an identity.” Were I never aware of myself as both subject and object, the issue of having an identity could hardly surface. Self arises along with not-self, and with definition and limits comes relation: there has to be difference for there to be relation at all. We know this experientially. Think of being lost in a daydream and abruptly coming to when you bump into someone. Self, other, and world return together.

Crucially, had I no experience and awareness of my self in relation with multiple differing others, my identity would be severely limited. Significantly, the basic experience of difference and being-in-relation we have when we ask “Who am I?” corresponds with the experiences we have among differing others in the public spaces of our social, cultural, and political worlds. The more richly, diversely, and equitably populated the spaces within and without ourselves, the more articulated and capacious the self that can respond when we ask again, “Who am I?”

To oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, its goals. Thought is freedom…” (1984, 388). The outer spaces of public life can and should correspond with the inner space of freedom. When they do, our thinking, questioning, acting, and coming to know ourselves as we do so are both liberated and enhanced.

There is a curious necessity to this freedom. We have it precisely because we are not self-sufficient. Because we are not entire unto ourselves, but are able to be consciously in relation with our selves and with others, we need to think, to learn, to choose, to act. To become—to create—most fully who we can be, we need democracy just as we need liberal education: to bring us into the fullest possible communication with ourselves and others, within which we can seek knowledge and find guidance. From that need of freedom comes also our capacity for conscience, which emerges from consciousness as we practice our reflexive abilities to comprehend, and then presses us to ask, “But how am I to know what is right, what wrong?”

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boss is not the me who believes in treating people respectfully. We can live with such contradictions for a long time, but it takes a lot of work to keep the walls standing. We can always be startled back into the reflexive thinking that arcs over the walls. We can realize that we are compartmentalizing, and can reflect on the consequences of doing so. We remain responsible.

Clearly, thinking (reflexive or not) does not make chains fall off our bodies, release us from poverty or jail, confer citizenship rights that have been denied, or overcome the systemic compartmentalizing that unjustly ranks and divides us. But it does allow us to step back from unmediated experiences just as we step outside of ourselves in asking, “Who am I?” We can become aware that we are fettered or unfettered, divided, exploited, oppressed, or privileged. We can ask how and why, what it means, and what can be done.

**Liberal Education for the Examined Life**

To realize, as Augustine wrote of himself, that “I have become a question for myself” allows, even presses, us to ask more than “Who am I?” Indeed, it can evoke the weightiest of questions: “Why are we here? What can we believe? What ought we to do?” In time, the realization that we not only ask but are questions helps us make sense of the call to lead an examined life, in which questioning is more than a means to an end. We cannot fill up and close the gap of freedom that is our consciousness by tossing ever more answers into it.

If we cannot, or will not, always think about, question, reflect on, and evaluate afresh what we think we know or can do, we risk failing in attentiveness to others and to novel situations and experiences. Without reflection, when we choose to act, we may fail in judgment, in practical wisdom, and in moral response. As John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*, “Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest” (1997, 360; emphasis added).

As educators, we should reflect together on the dangers of education that focuses on content and technique but does not also and always provide practice in the arts of thinking freely as the conscious, relational beings we are. Such an education not only fails to prepare our students (and us as educators) to lead the examined life, but may lessen our chances of moving toward the moral ideal of democracy.

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Campus Diversity and Ethnic Identity Development

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Colleges and universities increasingly embrace diversity in its multiple forms, and many have established diversity as an important institutional value. But definitions of diversity vary across campuses, and diversity goals range from increasing access for underrepresented students to infusing diverse perspectives in the curriculum to building democratic campus climates that promote social justice. Each of these is a noble objective. Some are more difficult than others to achieve. But all are essential to the work of building institutions that fully realize the promise of diversity.

Mitchell Chang, Sylvia Hurtado, and their colleagues have published widely on the educational benefits of diversity (see for example Hurtado 2007; Chang, Denson, and Saenz 2006). Their work suggests many positive outcomes associated with diverse student populations and curricular and cocurricular activities that address the topics of race, ethnicity, and gender. Relying primarily on data generated through large research programs, their work gives a macroscopic picture of the role of diversity in higher education. Our work, summarized in our recent book *Ethnicity in College*, builds on this research by taking a closer look at how diverse college campuses (where students of color outnumber white students) affect students and, in particular, their sense of identity (Ortiz and Santos 2009).

**Studying Students’ Experiences**

Identity formation has long been established as an important developmental goal of the college years. In the 1960s, Chickering’s groundbreaking work in this area delineated the multiple components of identity and how typical developmental tasks during the college years contributed to its formation (1969). For the past few decades, research on students’ identity formation has expanded to focus on social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. To adequately support students’ strong psychological need to explore and affirm their different social identities, it is important to understand how those identities develop and intersect.

Our study of 120 students at two highly diverse universities in Southern California focused on ethnic identity. We defined ethnic identity as that which students construct based on group membership, salience of or commitment to ethnic identification, participation in behaviors associated with ethnic groups, and external affirmation in response to ethnic group membership. While recognizing the two as inextricably intertwined, we distinguished ethnic identity from racial identity, which we defined in relation to students’ experiences of race-based discrimination and stereotyping (Ortiz and Santos 2009).

We found that the diverse campus environments exerted both positive and negative effects on students’ ethnic identity formation. Because ours was a qualitative study with in-depth interviews at its center, we were able to learn from students about the nuanced ways in which peers, courses, and activities challenge—and ultimately help students make sense of—their ethnic identities and their place in a multicultural society.

**Peer Influences**

The presence of coethnic peers on campus had multiple influences on students. Students felt comforted by the company of people who came from similar backgrounds. Coethnic peers not only helped students feel like they belonged, but also served as role models, showing students that people from their ethnic group could succeed in college. They also encouraged students to become involved in ethnic student organizations and take ethnic studies classes. Students often reported evaluating themselves in relation to their coethnic peer group. When this self-evaluation was positive, it encouraged students to learn more about group history or language. When it was negative, students expressed feelings of ethnic inadequacy.

Students from other ethnic groups also had positive effects on students’ ethnic identity formation and served as role models in the ethnic identity development process. Many students reported that they felt encouraged to explore their own cultures when other-ethnic friends attended ethnic student organization meetings, spoke in their “native” languages, or took courses to learn more about their respective cultures. Through their example, students saw that they could commit more deeply to their own ethnic groups without jeopardizing relationships with other-ethnic peers. Other-ethnic peers also modeled selective acculturation for immigrant and nonimmigrant students, demonstrating ways to integrate aspects of mainstream and other cultures into one’s ethnic identity. Our findings clearly indicate that an increased commitment to one’s ethnic identity in no way prevented students from connecting with, learning from, and valuing people from other ethnic groups. Thus participants’ experiences departed significantly from the current discourse claiming ethnic balkanization on America’s campuses.
By engaging in significant ways with other-ethnic peers, students developed multicultural competence and confidence in their abilities to successfully negotiate cross-ethnic relationships. Through these interactions students challenged and changed their beliefs about difference, prejudice, and discrimination. While some students (particularly white students) found these interactions challenging, students expressed an overall sense of having benefited from encountering diverse peers daily in and out of the classroom. Students connected campus diversity experiences with their goals for the future, voicing intentions to act politically on behalf of other ethnic groups and to challenge prejudice in their families. Their experiences led us to conclude that campus diversity helped prepare them for “effective social and civic engagement in a diverse and complex democracy” (265).

**Organizations, Activities, and Courses**

Ethnic student organizations were critical to students’ exploration of and commitment to ethnic identity. These structures helped students build friendships within and across ethnic groups and conferred institutional support for personal development around ethnic identity. They were places where students could learn while being protected from the prejudice and discrimination they often experienced elsewhere. Many students customized their learning by engaging on different levels with a variety of organizations (for example, by taking part in a range of activities focused on language, dance, or religion sponsored by various ethnic or cultural Greek-letter associations). The organizations also provided spaces where students could connect with other ethnic groups, especially through activities hosted by multicultural centers.

Ethnic studies and language courses extended similar effects. As Jean Phinney has argued, ethnic knowledge, behaviors, and practices are important components of ethnic identity (1992). Students took courses to learn or improve their abilities in their or their families’ “native” languages or to learn more about their families’ countries of origin. Thus programs such as Asian, Latin American, or European Studies were important supplements to ethnic studies programs that focused on groups’ experiences in the United States. Through these courses students learned more about the content of their ethnic identities (their groups’ histories, cultures, and languages).

Ethnic studies and language courses strengthened two additional components of ethnic identity: ethnic pride and affiliation. One Japanese American student described how learning about Japan’s history instilled pride and helped him see commonalities with others of Japanese origin. Similarly, an African American student indicated that his African American studies courses helped him develop pride in his ethnicity as he learned about group members’ accomplishments and ability to overcome obstacles. One woman related how her Chicano studies course taught her about social stratification in public transportation, spurring her to change the way she behaves in these venues.

Intergroup learning was evident as well. When students took courses that emphasized the histories and experiences of groups other than their own, they experienced dramatic learning that contributed to their multicultural competence and ethnic understanding. Even white students, who often felt discomfort in courses that focused on other-ethnic groups, realized that their worldviews changed substantially as a result. White students experienced a process of disintegration—where new material or experiences challenged their previous understanding of race and ethnicity (Helms 1990). White students began to think about whiteness as a racial construct, but also to consider their own ethnicities, including the heritage and historical trajectories of their particular groups (such as Irish or Jewish Americans) in U.S. society. As in the process outlined in Multicultural Education Framework (Ortiz and Rhoads 2000), students’ deconstruction of whiteness relied on an understanding of other cultures, one’s own culture, and racial dynamics in society.

**Differential Experiences with Ethnic Identity**

Although many students had positive and enriching experiences with campus diversity, diverse campus environments posed challenges to some students. For example, students reported that coethnics often acted as arbiters of group membership, instituting “qualifications” for membership such as competence in the native language, a concentration of coethnic friends, or knowledge of history and culture. This left some students feeling a sense of ethnic inadequacy, as though they weren’t...
“Latino enough” or “black enough.”

White students also felt a sense of ethnic inadequacy. Because many saw themselves as having no ethnicity, they felt excluded from the campus diversity that was so often celebrated. They felt out of sync with their other-ethnic peers and struggled to negotiate being white in the diverse campus context. White students told us that when they studied other-ethnic groups, they seldom spoke because they were afraid of offending classmates. In addition, white students’ concerns over “reverse discrimination” often impeded their progress in expanding their multicultural competence.

Supporting Ethnic Identity on Campus

As we summarized in our book, numerous studies show many positive outcomes associated with strong and stable ethnic identities, including increased self-esteem, improved mental health, decreased self-destructive behaviors, and greater academic achievement (Ortiz and Santos 2009). To support these outcomes, colleges and universities should strive to take advantage of all the benefits a diverse learning community has to offer.

Institutions that do not offer a diverse range of courses or programs where students can learn about their countries or cultures of origin should find ways to build these opportunities into the curriculum and cocurriculum. Student activities personnel can examine the range of organizations and activities on their campuses to determine whether these attend to important within-group needs and differences. (For example, due to significant intragroup diversity, a college may need more than one student association for Asian Americans to create adequate opportunities for Asian American students to explore their ethnic identities.) Academic advisers should encourage students (particularly those who might be struggling with ethnic identity) to enroll in ethnic studies courses and engage in related student activities. Faculty need to realize that infusing diverse perspectives into their courses can serve to validate students’ experiences and support their personal development. Administrators should ensure that faculty have the tools they need to do this and that support staff are prepared to help students with any challenges that might arise so their learning is not impeded but enriched.

As diversity increases throughout the country, higher education will play a key role in building the diverse democracy of the twenty-first century. Colleges and universities should encourage students to engage intelligently with ethnic identity so they can best contribute to our shared world.

Student Reflections on Intergroup Exchange

Students from all ethnic groups expressed an appreciation for the role of cross-ethnic interaction in their understanding of ethnic identity. Their comments reflect how on-campus diversity encouraged them to explore ethnicity’s role in their lives and the lives of others.

—Anna M. Ortiz and Silvia J. Santos

Most of my study group knows more [than I do] about their cultural background[s] and traditions. It has made me go and ask questions about my cultural background. They are always sharing with me, and I’m really a little ignorant. I’ve never really been taught, so I have to go to the library and check it out or ask aunts, uncles, mom, or dad. Then I can share that information, too. It’s helped me because when I was hanging around in high school with just my own culture, we never asked these questions. (Latino/a student)

Some of my friends, we’ve all pursued some kind of club or organization. They’ve gone to their [groups], like the Korean Student Association, Chicano, or Latino ones, Indian. When they all did that, it supported me. Like, “Oh, I can do this.” This is because I didn’t feel like they thought that I was abandoning them. In that way, we all kind of mutually supported each other, and we can all come together still. (Asian American student)

Before I started taking black history classes and learning about my true heritage, I was not very proud of being African American. But now that I’ve read a lot of history and do all this studying, I’m very proud to be African. . . . As I learned more about being black and [about] black history, I really changed. It’s really made me proud of being who I am. (African American student)

My ethnic identity? I never thought about ethnicity before coming here […] Now it means a lot more [to me]. (White student)
The Long Road to Truth: Haiti, Identity, and Knowledge in the Global Classroom

CELESTE FRASER DELGADO, associate professor of English and academic coordinator of arts and humanities at Barry University’s School of Adult and Continuing Education

“The first successful slave rebellion and the first black republic, Haiti boasts a heroic past that inspires oppressed people everywhere. Many Caribbean authors, including novelist Alejo Carpentier and playwright Derek Walcott, have dedicated works to the former French colony. Poet Langston Hughes translated Haitian poetry as part of the Harlem Renaissance movement’s embrace of African diasporic culture. It would be possible to teach an entire course on the way Haiti has been represented by artists across the Caribbean and around the world. Haiti has loomed large in the U.S. imagination as well, most notably in enduring myths surrounding the religious practice vodoun, popularly and distortedly known as “voodoo.” But it also appears in the works of choreographer Katherine Dunham and writer Zora Neale Hurston, and more recently in the songs of rapper Wyclef Jean. In the earthquake’s aftermath, media coverage is shaping new and often contradictory images of Haiti: Haiti is a tragic place, disorganized and dangerous; Haiti is a land where people endure, where people never stop singing.

Haiti is “over there,” yet it has always also been over here.

The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti hit Barry University, where I teach, hard. Located in the heart of South Florida’s Haitian community, Barry attracts Haitian and Haitian-American students, faculty, and staff. Those of us without blood ties still feel connected to the island, especially when we see those around us mourning. Many people on our campus experienced the tragedy personally.

I was not teaching when the quake occurred, having planned a research trip to the Haitian cultural capital of Jakmel during Carnival. Like the political capital, Port-au-Prince, Jakmel was devastated. There was no Carnival this year. My knowledge of Haitian poetry, music, and dance would be of little help in the immediate aftermath, so I postponed my trip. Feeling helpless and distant, I decided to redesign my upcoming course in Caribbean literature to reflect the reality of life on the island, drawing on Haiti’s complexity as a place, as an idea, and as a source of personal identity.

Here and There
Haiti has always loomed large in the Caribbean imagination, and not just among Haitians. As the site of the world’s first successful slave rebellion and the role the soldiers of Saint-Domingue played in the American Revolution. In between those two events, U.S. Marines have occupied the country, and several U.S. administrations have played a role in installing and removing Haitian leaders. Given this relationship, teaching about Haiti requires exploring global connections that collapse the notion of a distinct “here” and “there.” This is especially true at Barry, where some students or their families hail from the country, others have more cursory connections, and many have no knowledge of Haiti beyond what they’ve seen on CNN.

Challenging Enlightenment Thought
It is not difficult to see how personal identity shapes our emotions. Yet it is often more difficult to see how personal identity shapes what we know and how we know it. It is one of the most enduring tenets of the Enlightenment that knowledge is universal and independent of the knower. Yet Haitian history stands as irrefutable evidence of the limits of Enlightenment thought. Over the past five years, I have had the pleasure of teaching a graduate course on the Enlightenment. Almost serendipitously, I included The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution by Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James (1963) along with the usual writings by Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant. Writing in the 1930s, James was not, strictly speaking, an Enlightenment thinker, but L’Ouverture was. The Haitian Revolution would not have happened, at least not in the same way, without L’Ouverture’s beliefs in liberté, égalité, and fraternité.

The first time I taught the course, we read The Black Jacobins last because the revolution culminated in 1803, at the end of the Enlightenment. But at the end of the semester, my students suggested that I move the book to the beginning next time, because the history
of Saint-Domingue demands reassessment of nearly every Enlightenment tenet. Indeed, scholars have argued that as the greatest producer of wealth in the Caribbean at a time when the region fed the coffers of the great European powers, Haiti made the Enlightenment possible. Yet the slave system that created that wealth is often treated as ancillary, if at all, in discussions of the Enlightenment. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of James’s history is the intensity of L’Ouverture’s belief in Enlightenment values, even as he and his nation were violently excluded from them.

Identity’s Role in Knowledge
As my graduate students discovered, the experiences of one man and one tiny nation raise questions about an entire epistemology. The same holds true, albeit in less dramatic form, for the experiences and identities of every one of our students, whatever the subject under study. This was clear the first time I taught Haitian poet and ethnologist Jacques Roumain’s “Guinee” (2003), translated as “Guinea” by Langston Hughes (2003), to a split section of Caribbean literature. Half the class met at Barry’s main campus in Miami Shores, while the other half met at a satellite campus in Orlando. Most, though not all, of the students recognized Guinea as a country in West Africa. The Orlando group, which included no Haitian students, thus read the poem as a meditation on African diasporic identity. In Miami Shores, where nearly half the class was Haitian, many students read the poem’s description of Guinea as representing not a geographical place, but a sacred space in the vodoun belief system: Ginen, the ancestral homeland to which the vodoun faithful return after death.

The Power of Partial Truths
Identity is in part a shorthand for the informal education we all receive from the moment we are born: what our parents tell us, what we hear at family gatherings, what we sing or pray in church (if we attend church at all). It is this informal education, in fact, that gives us our sense of identity, as our families and communities teach us that we are Haitian, we are Chicano, and/or we are American. Whenever students assert their identities in the classroom, they are testing that informal education against the formal education, which for the most part remains steeped in the belief that knowledge is impersonal.

To embrace diversity in education means more than simply accepting students of diverse cultural backgrounds into the institution. The death of universal knowledge takes us down the long road, if not to Ginen, then to the realm of partial truths. Here, each of us supplies the rest with what we have been privileged to learn through accidents of birth and life experience. In a world where so much cannot be known or controlled, sharing our partial truths—and helping students learn to share theirs as well—turns out to be our best chance for survival.

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Self-exploration is central to our growth as individuals, our relationships with others, and our ability to promote equity. Our various social identities—sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age, socioeconomic class, religion, and ability, among others—are important aspects of our selves that shape our attitudes, behaviors, worldviews, and experiences. As we work to create and participate in diverse and democratic environments, we need to understand how our own and others’ identities and related social locations affect our lives and our interactions with each other. Educators are likely to encounter resistance when asking students to undertake this kind of self-examination. But faculty can find ways to help students move beyond fear and defensiveness. The approaches described below can apply in a wide range of contexts, from diversity workshops to classes in different disciplines.

**Challenges to Exploring One’s Privileged Identities**

In general, educating about issues of diversity and social justice can be challenging. Students are often resistant to reevaluating their beliefs about themselves, others, and the world. Questioning one’s assumptions can feel emotionally and intellectually threatening, and students can struggle with many barriers to examining their privileged identities.

Questioning one’s assumptions can feel emotionally and intellectually threatening, and students can struggle with many barriers to examining their privileged identities.

Most of us have identities that are part of both privileged groups (for example, male, white, heterosexual, middle or upper class) and oppressed groups (female, person of color, gay, poor or working class). Current theory and research focuses particularly on the intersectionality of our multiple social identities, which simultaneously interact within different contexts of societal inequality (see, for example, Dill and Zambrana 2009). While it is critical to understand the complexity of our whole selves, it can be useful to focus on individual aspects of identity as we develop greater awareness of our social positions.

While self-exploration can be difficult, exploring a privileged identity can be particularly hard for many people. Educators are likely to encounter resistance when asking students to undertake this kind of self-examination. But faculty can find ways to help students move beyond fear and defensiveness. The approaches described below can apply in a wide range of contexts, from diversity workshops to classes in different disciplines.

**Belief that “I’m just normal.”** When I ask students to name the social identity with which they most identify, they rarely choose a dominant identity (sometimes with the exception of identifying as male). This may be because people who are part of privileged groups seldom have to think about their privileged identities: they are usually surrounded by people like themselves and therefore see themselves as “just normal.” Because dominant cultural and societal norms are based on values and characteristics that they hold, they (and the dominant society) often construe people from oppressed or underrepresented groups as the ones who are “different.”

**Denial that differences make a difference.** When people are part of the norm, they find it easier to believe that social identities do not really matter. Therefore, they feel little need to examine how social identities impact their own and others’ lives. Students may maintain that they treat everyone equally and that they do not see differences. While often made with good intentions, this claim denies aspects of who others are and the realities of others’ lived experience. Students may also believe that systemic inequality is essentially a thing of the past, and that with today’s “level playing field,” there is no need to focus on identities and their significance.

**Guilt, shame, and discomfort about privilege.** An exploration of one’s privileged identities can engender discomfort. Students may equate being part of the dominant group with being an oppressor—that is, a “bad person”—and they may find it unsettling to acknowledge how they might be participating in and benefiting from systems that unfairly disadvantage others. Guilt and shame often arise as people explore their biases and their privileged group’s role in historical and contemporary oppression. Students may fear they will get stuck in these feelings or be subject to blame if they explore the privileged aspects of their identities.

**Focus on one’s oppressed group identities.** People are often much more inclined to reflect on their marginalized identities than they are to think about how they are privileged. Dominant society often makes people cognizant of their subordinated group identities, because they face obstacles and mistreatment that arise from these differences. In part to avoid feeling guilt and shame, many people prefer to focus on how...
they are oppressed rather than on how they are privileged. Sometimes students ultimately feel that being part of an oppressed group is preferable to being part of a dominant group and thus attempt to shift the spotlight from how they are advantaged in one area to how they are disadvantaged in another.

**Strategies for Helping Students Explore Privileged Identities**

As a foundation for helping students examine their dominant identities, faculty can follow some general principles for establishing effective contexts for learning. In order to create spaces that are respectful, supportive, and allow students to take emotional and intellectual risks, faculty can establish guidelines, conduct warm-up activities, and encourage gradual amounts of personal sharing. In this environment, faculty can address students' defensive feelings and help them develop their understanding of self and others.

**Affirm all identities.** As noted above, students are particularly apt to ignore aspects of their dominant group identities. Faculty should help students see that they are a mix of social identities, that all identities and cultures have positive qualities, and that no person is good or bad because of his or her social identities. One approach is to have students conduct a social identity inventory, noting aspects such as their race, sex, and ethnicity in writing, by drawing, or by sculpting with different materials. After creating their inventories, students can answer questions like, “Which identities are most central to who you are, and why? What do you like about or gain from particular identities? What do you wish people understood about a particular identity?”

**Examine how differences matter.** Once students acknowledge their various identities, faculty can help them see how different identities can lead to different perspectives, experiences, values, worldviews, and access to power and privilege. Faculty can ask students questions to help them think about their social identities’ impact: “Which identities are you most or least aware of, and why? How do you think your different identities affect who you are, your experiences, and how you see the world?” Through discussion, students can begin to see how people are systematically advantaged or disadvantaged based on group membership. Experiential activities like the popular Privilege Walk and guided imageries where students imagine a reversal of roles can help expose norms and privileges. Being “discrimination testers” (observing who gets followed in stores or waited on more quickly in restaurants, for example) helps reveal how differently people are often treated. Research studies, media reports, films, interview exercises, and speaker panels can also help students learn about others’ experiences. I find that personal stories tend to have the most effect on students, although a factual foundation is important to differentiate individual anecdote from systemic patterns. Students who are ready for more complex analysis can consider how one of their privileged identities (for example, their race) is affected by their other identities (such as sex, class, or religion), while being careful not to focus simply on how their subordinated identities diminish their privilege.

**Show that people receive privileges whether or not they recognize or want them.** When examining power and privilege, it is critical to highlight that people from privileged groups receive advantages regardless of whether they are aware of them or want them. People from privileged groups often do not realize that they are benefiting at someone else’s expense. Students need to realize that privilege is not about intent or about “being a good person,” but arises from a larger system where social identity affects access to resources and opportunities. Films and research studies that show how people from dominant groups have greater access to...
Students will find that their recollections of personal experiences (about gender-appropriate behavior, for example) can assist with this process. Activities that ask students to recount messages they heard while growing up can help students realize the value of exploring their privileged identities. Since different motivations may resonate with different students, it’s helpful to suggest a variety of benefits: development of self-knowledge and authenticity; increased comfort in dealing with diverse people and situations; avoidance of engaging in unintentionally hurtful actions; improved ability to work through feelings of anger, guilt, and shame; increased capacity to act in ways that are more consistent with one’s morals; and the skills to better address inequities. Faculty can remind students that discomfort is part of the growing process and that by becoming more aware, they can increase their effectiveness at working in and contributing to a diverse world. Moreover, faculty can reassure students that the goal of democracy and social justice is not to simply change who benefits from unequal systems, but to ensure that all people are treated with respect and have equal access to power and resources. Systems of oppression ultimately hurt everyone (though in different ways), and all individuals have something to gain from greater social justice (see Goodman 2001).

Final Thoughts

The process of examining ourselves, and particularly our privileged identities, is rarely simple. But its rewards are often great. By exploring their privileged identities, students can enhance their personal development, improve their relationships with others, and become better citizens of the world. This exploration is easier when faculty refuse to simply cast individuals from privileged groups in a negative light, instead seeking to foster awareness and action that supports diversity and equity.

For more on understanding and addressing resistance to social justice issues, see Goodman 2001, 2007. To contact Diane Goodman, e-mail dianejgood@aol.com.

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HELMS, J. 2008. A race is a nice thing to have, 2nd ed. Hanover, MA: Microtraining Associates.

Resources for Teaching about Privileged Identities

The following publications are useful resources for those seeking to teach students about privileged identity:


—Diane J. Goodman

jobs, housing, and medical treatment can demonstrate these dynamics.

Emphasize the systemic nature of oppression. By focusing on the systemic nature of oppression, faculty can avoid suggesting individual blame. This approach reduces defensiveness and resistance. Although each person plays a role in systems of inequality, all systems are larger than any one individual. Students may feel freer to examine their attitudes, behaviors, prejudices, and stereotypes if they understand how everyone has been socialized to develop distorted views and fill narrow roles. Activities that ask students to recount messages they heard while growing up (about gender-appropriate behavior, for example) can assist with this process. Students will find that their recollections are remarkably similar, which speaks to the pervasive nature of these messages and the power of the dominant ideology. These discussions can give students the opportunity to reevaluate the biased messages they have internalized.

Heighten investment. Faculty need to help students realize the value of exploring their privileged identities. Since different motivations may resonate with different students, it’s helpful to suggest a variety of benefits: development of self-knowledge and authenticity; increased comfort in dealing with diverse people and situations; avoidance of engaging in unintentionally hurtful actions; improved ability to work through feelings of anger, guilt, and shame; increased capacity to act in ways that are more consistent with one’s morals; and the skills to better address inequities. Faculty can remind students that discomfort is part of the growing process and that by becoming more aware, they can increase their effectiveness at working in and contributing to a diverse world. Moreover, faculty can reassure students that the goal of democracy and social justice is not to simply change who benefits from unequal systems, but to ensure that all people are treated with respect and have equal access to power and resources. Systems of oppression ultimately hurt everyone (though in different ways), and all individuals have something to gain from greater social justice (see Goodman 2001).

Provide positive role models and options for action. Students need ways to channel their reactions to exploring their privileged identities so they do not become overwhelmed with feelings of guilt or powerlessness. They can gain inspiration for constructive action by reading about or hearing from people with privileged identities who have worked for social justice. These role models (past and present) offer examples of how people from dominant groups can act as allies and show students that they can be part of a larger history and community of change agents. Students can additionally benefit from reading about theories of social and racial identity development (for example, Hardiman and Jackson 1997; Helms 2008). These readings identify paths toward positive privileged identities. By emphasizing accountability and responsibility and developing options for action, faculty can help students feel empowered to create personal and social change.
Exploring Religious Identity through Intergroup Dialogue

On campuses across the country, religious diversity provides students with both challenges and opportunities (Lelwica 2008). The challenges are many: Students may resist learning about religious diversity, believing that affirming others’ religious identities will threaten their own. They may doubt that it is possible or even desirable to understand and appreciate others’ beliefs. They may have experienced religious oppression that can create conditions for interreligious conflict. In the face of these challenges, students need opportunities to explore religious identity and examine how family and social influences contribute to their beliefs. Such examination can promote understanding across religious differences and the desire for continued interreligious learning and reconciliation.

Religious discussions are often taboo in public university settings (Holden 2009), so it is particularly important for public institutions to provide safe opportunities for students to explore their beliefs and those of others. The Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan (U-M) offers students these opportunities through two-credit intergroup dialogue courses in psychology and sociology. Intergroup dialogue is a pedagogy that involves active classroom learning, structured interaction, and peer facilitation. It engages students in both cognitive and affective learning in order to increase intergroup understanding, form positive intergroup relationships, and spur intergroup action (Nagda et al. 2009).

Difficult Dialogues on Religion
The Ford Foundation’s recent Difficult Dialogues initiative emphasized avenues to “promote academic freedom and religious, cultural, and political pluralism on college and university campuses” (Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression 2006). U-M’s participation in this project was the impetus for creating opportunities within our already-vibrant intergroup dialogue program that would fulfill students’ strong desire to examine religious identity, faith, and meaning. Based on a critical-dialogic framework originally conceptualized by Nagda (2006) and expanded by Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, and Maxwell (2009), intergroup dialogues aim to develop students’ understanding of power and privilege. Nagda’s framework combines a critical analysis of inequality with a dialogic focus on the importance of working across differences to build commonalities and increase understanding.

U-M’s intergroup dialogues typically bring together two identity groups (for example, women and men) to explore issues relevant to both. Religious dialogues diverge from this model by convening students from diverse groups whose primary goal is to explore multiple religious identities. Students who enroll in intergroup dialogue courses rank their preferred dialogue topics and are placed in course sections through a randomized computer selection process that ensures diversity across identities. They meet for two hours weekly with two trained cofacilitators who guide them through a four-stage process that involves developing a shared understanding of dialogue, sharing personal narratives and exploring historical context, tackling hot topics, and collaborating on intergroup projects. As in U-M’s other intergroup dialogues, examining inequality is a central focus. Students analyze Christian privilege in the United States as well as gender privilege within religions, global religious dominance, and contemporary theocracies.

Student Outcomes
Preliminary investigation of interreligious dialogues suggests that the dialogic focus in particular resonates with students. Three important themes emerged from students’ final papers and facilitators’ observations, all pertaining to dialogic processes: learning across the spectrum of faith traditions, communication skills, and awareness of religious stereotypes.

Through class discussion, students cocreate a framework for understanding how personal narratives reflect identities (Sorensen et al. 2009); they then exchange personal stories about their religious and spiritual experiences. These exchanges allow students to solidify their own beliefs while also learning about and coming to appreciate the breadth and diversity of religious identities and practices. As a Catholic woman wrote in her final paper, “Every week I would leave class with a greater appreciation of different religions and realize how different other religious
perspectives are from my own, and that I still found them plausible.”

Students additionally gain the communication skills and confidence to address religious issues outside the classroom. They often report that improved interpersonal communication is one of the course’s strongest takeaways. A Muslim man wrote, “The vast amount of knowledge I have obtained on religion, culture, tradition, and social interactions has given me an immense toolbox in order to deal with diverse groups of people… I really feel like I can relate to anyone, whether they are atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish or any religious/cultural affiliation for that matter.” This student’s facility in “relating” to others of different religious identities opens the door for future interreligious interactions.

Students develop an increased awareness of religious stereotypes and discover new ways to challenge biases. An agnostic student wrote, “On the first day of class, I thought some people would make dialogue difficult. I thought the Christians would be devout and forceful, the Catholics would be condemning, and everyone would attack the atheist student and myself. Luckily, I was wrong… I learned that a person’s belief does not always govern a person’s character or intentions.” Realizations like these led to important conversations about privilege and power that dramatically decreased students’ reliance on stereotypes.

Key Elements for Interreligious Dialogues

Trained peer facilitators play a key role in intergroup dialogues’ success. At U-M, we select facilitators through an application and interview process. Facilitators take a one semester, three-credit training course and a subsequent three-credit practicum course taught by faculty and staff. Facilitators must be able to acknowledge the unique significance that religious identity holds for many people, to clearly explain the purpose of dialogue, and to create common goals so students feel confident that they will not be targeted for conversion or attacked for their beliefs.

Facilitating interreligious dialogue also requires an ability to balance religious similarities and differences. Initially, students find that learning about similarities creates common ground for discussion. But when hot topics arise, differences rise to the forefront. By reminding students of differences as well as commonalities, facilitators prepare students to understand views that are radically different from their own.

We have found that dialogues with maximal diversity across and within religious traditions are most effective. Inclusion of nonreligious participants, such as agnostics and atheists (who are marginalized on most college campuses), is critical. Readings and assignments should reflect multiple faith and nonreligious perspectives.

Building Commitment and Potential

In the process of exploring their religious and nonreligious identities through intergroup dialogue, students build relationships and commitment to intergroup understanding and fulfill a strong desire to learn about others’ religious beliefs and practices. By learning with others, building intergroup communication skills, and exploring religious stereotypes, students develop the potential to create more welcoming, integrated, and engaged campuses.

For information about the University of Michigan’s Intergroup Dialogue Institute, see page 23.

REFERENCES


My years at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in the late 1970s were life-defining. Classes with heavy-weight scholars and theologians, psychoanalysis with preeminent practitioners like Bryce Boyer, ordination by exiled Malawi bishop Patrick Kalilombe, the reading of important and mind-opening works while living communally in the expansive Berkeley atmosphere—it was all very exciting. But it turns out that the most helpful course I took was one that consisted simply of writing an autobiography.

The course seemed reminiscent of the best class I took in high school: study hall. In both, I had the freedom to explore a really transfixing topic—myself. While my self-exploration in secondary school was disguised in unrelated topics, at the GTU it took wide-ranging studies of seemingly unrelated topics, at the GTU it took shape through a much more difficult immersion in memory and interpretation. The course was by no means the first time I had examined my gay orientation, but it was, perhaps, the most liberating and consequential, leading some years later to my setting aside theological studies (which, until then, had appeared to be my vocation).

Since leaving the GTU, I have noticed a proliferation of LGBTQ autobiography in publishing and academia. I have found that the genre shares with post-colonial literature (my current academic interest) a sense of explosive self-affirmation, as if the authors’ shackles have finally been thrown off, their blinders tossed aside. Perhaps those who do not share similar histories now feel themselves to be the oppressed ones, living in a world in which their normalcy seems besieged by self-indulgent queers—but isn’t that always the case when a silenced group finally finds its voice?

Students sense the postcolonial undertones of LGBTQ autobiography when they read Chris Bull’s Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay and Lesbian Liberation (2001). The parallels between the struggle for LGBTQ rights and various ethnic struggles in the United States jump out at them. I always wonder how many students sitting in the classroom are rehearsing their own lives, their ongoing negotiations with their peers. I think of the great value pedagogical theorists have suggested expressive writing has in the classroom. In their free writing, in their notes in the margin of the syllabus, in their purposeless doodling—in short, in thinking outside the box—students momentarily escape the transactional writing they are so regularly called to produce, writing that sometimes alienates them from…well, from themselves. For LGBTQ students, the colonization of their minds by heterosexual norms is so omnipresent as to be mind-numbing. This state of affairs can silence students on many levels and maintain the social panopticon that Jeremy Bentham found charming.

Reflecting on Michel Foucault’s valorization of writing rooted in an author’s care for him or herself, autobiography theorist Leigh Gilmore suggests that such work “makes it possible for one to become other than what one is” (2001, 145). For the repressed student, life writing can play an ethical role, allowing him or her to engage in a private celebration of self before the public expression that marks personal maturity. One must first be one’s own audience, and expressive writing helps students fill that role.

Reading autobiographies, of course, can demonstrate what one’s life might be: Jennifer Finney Boylan’s She’s Not There, Edmund White’s My Lives: A Memoir, Esera Tuaolo’s Alone in the Trenches, Samuel Delany’s The Motion of Light in Water, May Sarton’s The House by the Sea, Margarethe Cammermeyer’s Serving in Silence, Melissa Etheridge’s The Truth Is…My Life in Love and Music, and Deirdre McCloskey’s Crossing: A Memoir. By connecting students with organizations like the Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC) in San Francisco (www.lyric.org), faculty can further help them act on newfound understandings in communities that cross races and economic classes. As a first step toward action, engagement with autobiography can ultimately encourage students to fashion a world that is more just.

As a first step toward action, engagement with autobiography can ultimately encourage students to fashion a world that is more just.

**REFERENCES**


Critical Service Learning as a Tool for Identity Exploration

DAVID M. DONAHUE, associate professor of education, Mills College; and TANIA D. MITCHELL, director of service learning and associate director of the undergraduate program in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, Stanford University

Service learning is widely understood as a way for students to learn about others. But it also provides opportunities for students to learn about their own identities, which shape their service-learning experiences. At the food pantry, for example, students may choose to greet and discuss favorite recipes with community members as they pick up groceries. These students may wish to connect with people whose identities feel familiar, or they may want to learn about those whose lives are unfamiliar so they can become better advocates. Other students may choose to stock the shelves alone, and their motivations may be similarly varied: they may be afraid to face their privilege or reluctant to connect with their own painful history of poverty. Students choose roles that are steeped in their personal identities, although their identities do not dictate the roles they choose.

The role of identity in service learning raises an important question: Can students truly understand poverty if they do not also understand their own race, class, and gender identities in the context of systemic inequity? Service-learning practitioners should create spaces for students to explore how personal identity interacts with systems of wealth distribution, gentrification, living wages, and government policy to privilege some and marginalize others. Just as stocking shelves is easier than having conversations, focusing on service learning as a way to help others or develop empathy is easier—and, we believe, less effective—than using service learning to raise critical questions about why inequalities exist and who benefits from them. Social identity is at the heart of these questions; an exploration of identity is necessary to critical service-learning pedagogy.

Defining Critical Service Learning

The pedagogy we have been describing is known as "critical service learning." Critical service-learning practitioners interrogate systems and structures of inequality, question the distribution of power, and seek to develop authentic relationships among students, faculty, and community partners (Mitchell 2008).

As suggested by the food pantry example, the ability to interrogate systems and structures of inequality is related to identity. While texts and lectures provide students with windows through which to view inequality, lived experiences also shape students’ understandings. Students with racially privileged identities might have little personal experience with institutional racism and might see racism only in egregious acts of prejudice rather than in structures that confer racial privilege. By contrast, students whose racial identities are marginalized are more likely to have experienced institutional racism and thus to see its effects. Regardless of their lived experiences, all students need the opportunity to reflect on and interrogate systemic inequity.

Understanding one’s relationship to power and privilege is an important step in questioning and redistributing power within inequitable systems. For example, some students with privileged identities (including that of “student”) may believe they have a right or even a responsibility to advise individuals or community partners. Consciously or unconsciously, they assume the power to tell others what to do. When students instead see service learning as an opportunity to change their own lives, they begin to reframe how they see themselves and their identities, particularly their privileged ones. They come to reconstruct their identities, challenge their assumptions, and reframe what the distribution of power means both for them and for those they meet through service.

Service-learning practitioners who are aware of the implications of identity are better able to form authentic relationships characterized by mutuality, trust, respect, and open acknowledgment of differences. Students engaged in service learning sometimes overlook obvious differences in circumstances as they develop well-intentioned beliefs that others are “just like me” (Varlotta 1997). Students who focus on similarities alone tend to minimize the implications of systemic inequities and may even blame individuals for their circumstances. Framing service as an opportunity for reciprocal learning about differences as well as similarities promotes more authentic relationships and urges students to consider their own identities and contexts as well as those of community members.

Implications for Practice

To create service-learning experiences that draw on students’ identities and facilitate self-exploration, faculty need to know what their students’ backgrounds mean to them and how they connect their backgrounds to course content. Learning about students’ identities is not easy: identity includes multiple intersecting dimensions that may affect how students make sense of service. Moreover, nothing about students’ identities predicts or determines their service-learning experience. By listening to students’ small-group conversations, assigning an autobiographical essay early in the semester, or requiring short reflective writings before lectures or after discussions, instructors can check their assumptions...
about students and seek to understand what motivates their engagement.

Service-learning instructors should familiarize themselves with identity development theories (see sidebar). These theories remind us that identity is constructed through developmental processes in which students are active agents who make meaning from their backgrounds and experiences. Many developmental theories describe students’ evolution in stages, but the boundaries between stages are fluid and change depending on context. Rather than focus on identifying each student’s developmental stage, faculty should provide service options, texts, and opportunities for reflection that can spur the developmental process at multiple stages.

Faculty should create safe (but not necessarily comfortable) spaces for students to reflect. Examining identity can create disequilibrium and therefore discomfort, particularly for young people invested in newly constructed identities and for students from privileged backgrounds who are questioning the normative nature of their privilege. Students are better able to engage in such questioning in an environment where people respect others’ integrity, refrain from assumptions, and aim for understanding rather than agreement. A safe environment allows faculty to recognize and name students’ discomfort, thus challenging students to break through their barriers.

Faculty should explicitly communicate course goals related to identity exploration with students and community partners. In doing so, faculty can help students challenge positivist notions of knowledge while engaging community partners in contributing to students’ sense of self. By stating these goals, faculty can be more proactive in facilitating dialogue, including uncomfortable conversations.

Finally, faculty need to attend to their own self-knowledge. Just as students’ identities are constructed through developmental processes, so are faculty identities. Through self-reflection, faculty can see how their identities shape how they frame service, what texts they select, and how they make sense of what happens in their classes. Faculty can interrogate how their identities allow them to connect with certain students and elevate particular perspectives. They can use this knowledge to escape their limitations by working to understand students’ different perspectives, selecting texts that represent multiple points of view, and framing service learning using multiple lenses. Knowledge of their own identities allows faculty to model for students how to interrogate the connections between identity, perspective, and service learning.

Service learning can push students and faculty to explore their own identities along with those of others. Service can be the spark for examining identities, and the classroom can be a place for sharing and interrogating them.

**REFERENCES**


### Resources for Critical Service-Learning Practitioners

Critical service-learning practitioners may benefit from consulting the following texts on identity development:


—David M. Donahue and Tania D. Mitchell
Arts and Humanities: For the Common Good

JOHNELLA E. BUTLER, provost and vice president for academic affairs, Spelman College

If identification with the human condition is a fundamental learning outcome for students of the arts and humanities, these disciplines can act as wellsprings of empathy and thus of sustenance for our participatory democracy. Democracy requires engagement with others beyond one’s community. It thrives on feelings of connectedness to others, both individuals and groups. At the least, it requires one to accept respectfully the existence of narratives and experiences different from one’s own. This acceptance relies on empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Each person cannot know every historical or imagined fact, or perceive experience exactly as another does. But by developing the capacity for empathy, each of us can engage conflict and difference toward a shared understanding that we have commonalities and a common good for which to strive.

Participatory democracy becomes real when individuals, groups, and communities see the benefits of connecting their identities and experiences with those of others. The practice of making these connections has the potential to become a way of being, a way of continuously refashioning self-understanding toward a common good. Opportunities for civic engagement—the vehicle for democracy—can provide the space for thinking, dialogue, and participation toward this common good. So, too, can the arts and humanities.

Seeing through a “Different Mirror”
The connections between self and others are not inherent to humankind but require nurturing through exposure and experience. The arts and humanities provide this exposure, instilling the empathy that guards against misunderstandings, fear, essentialism, and hostility. Without empathy, we will not aspire toward a common good; and once we no longer aspire toward a common good, democracy is in trouble. Signs of this trouble are apparent in the contemporary United States, where aspirations and mechanisms for civic engagement, as well as a sense of the common good, have been seriously eroded. Given the modern condition of American democracy, we need the arts and humanities more than ever.

During the 1980s and 1990s, higher education, led by Campus Compact, began to recognize civic engagement pedagogies and initiatives as essential to the practice and health of democracy. At the same time, the Ford Foundation funded major projects to incorporate diversity into curricula and pedagogy. Like the civic engagement movement, the push for diverse curricula and pedagogy arose from and addressed the need for individuals and groups to find connection across historical and imagined narratives of community while aspiring toward common goals. Those leading these earlier reform efforts found motivation in the late Ronald Takaki’s recognition that we need “a different mirror” reflecting our connected histories and shared narratives—conflicting and complementary—in our schools, our homes, our communities, and our churches (1993). This mirror is essential for us to weigh, consider, analyze, and reconcile our relationships to each other.

Identities reflected in this mirror are complex, for identity is simultaneously based on individuality, group membership, and community. It is connected to, informed by, and shaped through experience—real, imagined, perceived, or passed from one to another. Like identity, democratic engagement is both individual and communal. It depends on each person’s identification with others, and on each person’s experiences with the local, regional, national, and global communities of which we are all a part. We identify with and embrace such connections not primarily because of shared language and common culture, but rather because human beings have a capacity for empathy that transcends boundaries of language, culture, skin color, religion, age, gender, and physical ability.

If faculty in the arts and humanities ground their work in exploring with students the cultural and social dimensions of human life, they can release their disciplines’ potential. With this grounding, they can encourage students to recognize and engage with others’ experiences, and thus to challenge or expand their views of the world. If faculty teach with the goal of helping students understand the human condition, using diverse content with comparative and interdisciplinary components, they can open students’ minds to the possibilities for responsible and ethical participation in democracy, and also to the policy- and decision-making democracy requires.
Realizing Great Potential

The arts and humanities can play a significant role in advancing democracy, but three stumbling blocks currently exist to realizing these disciplines’ full potential. First, in conversations about the potential of the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math), politicians and educators frequently forget the equally important and related role of the arts and humanities. The imagination and creativity that the arts and humanities promote can fuel scientific and technological discoveries. By combining STEM investigations with humanistic inquiry, we can emphasize the value of human life and guard against the isolation and alienation that threaten our culture in this technological age. Politicians and educators should recognize the complementary value of the arts and humanities, and administrators should emphasize this value by, for example, compensating teachers of those subjects as highly as those of science and technology.

Second, the disciplinary work of arts and humanities scholars has become increasingly invested in theory that ignores its subjects’ insights into the complexity of human life, identity, and identification. In Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles, Paula Moya details how experience influences identity, how identity is grounded in social location, and how mediated experience can confer knowledge of the world (2002). By more fully recognizing the arts and humanities’ roles in conferring these messages, theory can help promote understanding of the crucial relationship between democracy and identity.

Third, faculty and practitioners in the arts and humanities sometimes neglect to consider their roles in introducing students to the concept of the common good. These disciplines can help higher education recast the idea of civic engagement to include twenty-first century challenges, such as globalization, diversity, sustainability, water shortages, and the search for humanity in a technologically alienated world. By helping students identify with others in the past and present, and by connecting that identification with applied learning in the arts and humanities, we can help them reach toward common goals for the common good, and thus toward a truly democratic society. When we lose the ability to identify with others, we lose our sense of human experience and our ability to empathize, to see the homeless, to recognize and fight racism, and to advocate for the aged. The arts and humanities can help our students identify human needs and find the motivation to work for the betterment of the human condition.

Higher education is currently identifying numerous ways to help students integrate and apply their learning. But it has not yet called on the arts and humanities to lead the way. Integrated learning requires synergy between concepts and content, active connections between and among disciplines, and activities like service learning and leadership programs that connect these components. The arts and humanities’ fundamental outcome—identification with the human condition—is both a blueprint and a catalyst for developing critical thinking, analytical, verbal, written, and quantitative skills. It also provides the key ingredient for the synergy needed to produce integrated learning: empathy. Faculty in the arts and humanities have the potential to guide students as they develop the predispositions to engage the different voices and stories that shape human inequities and potentials. By utilizing the arts and humanities as wellsprings of empathy, they can contribute significantly to our students’ aspiration for the common good, the essence of democracy.

For more on how the arts and humanities contribute to the common good, see Butler, J. E. 2001. Ethnic studies as matrix for the humanities, the social sciences, and the common good. In Color-line to borderlands: The matrix of ethnic studies, 18–41, ed. J. E. Butler. Seattle: The University of Washington Press.

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Interdisciplinary Learning in the Sciences

AAC&U affiliate Project Kaleidoscope is a leading force in the movement to promote “what works” in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education—including interdisciplinary learning that integrates civic and humanistic goals into scientific inquiry. To learn more about Project Kaleidoscope, visit www.aacu.org/pkal.
A Call to Professors with Invisible Disabilities

LINDA KORNASKY, professor of English at Angelo State University

I spent ten years in university teaching before recognizing the unique benefits students with disabilities can garner from having mentors with disabilities. This long delay occurred even though I myself have an invisible disability (unilateral hearing impairment) and have always been committed to acknowledging other aspects of my students’ identities, including gender, sexual orientation, race, and class. Better late than never, I now know (some twenty years into my career)—since never is when most professors with invisible disabilities come out. Although passing as able-bodied is a protected choice under the Americans with Disabilities Act, as it should be, I advise my peers that the advantages of passing are one-sided: they benefit professors, while students with disabilities lose out.

My first tense disclosure to a classroom full of students was eye-opening. When I disclosed my disability to students on the first day of class, some had strained looks on their faces. As the period ended, I found myself doubting whether coming out was a good idea. But as students filed out, an English major who had taken a course with me the year before approached with a wide smile and a proud expression. He told me that he, like me, is mostly deaf in one ear. Following me to my office, he described how he struggled to arrange appropriate accommodations with other professors. Near the end of our talk, he wondered if he could become one of my advisees.

In the decade after that first disclosure, dozens of students, some with hearing impairments and others with a range of visible and invisible disabilities, have followed this young man, confidently informing me that they too are disabled and seeking me out for mentoring. I have found that when students with disabilities know about my disability, they are far more willing to request appropriate accommodations, to engage fully in classes, and to participate freely in class discussions than they did when I passed as nondisabled. Although nondisabled faculty can and should serve as allies to disabled students, many nondisabled professors offer accommodations begrudgingly, if at all. These students need the haven of understanding that professors with visible and invisible disabilities can offer.

Since faculty members whose disabilities are invisible vastly outnumber those with visible disabilities, our united effort to come out would mean a significant increase in mentoring opportunities for students with disabilities. In the English departments at the four universities where I have taught, for instance, at least 20 percent of the faculty have had various invisible disabilities—based in congenital or environmental causes, age-related or not—yet sadly, none have identified themselves as disabled to their students.

If instead of passing we opt to come out, we can gain personal authority as we teach students about the active disability political movement and the field of disability studies. We can share with them, for instance, Simi Linton’s Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity (1998), in which Linton aptly articulates the movement’s call to unite: “We are all bound together, not by [a] list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group” (4).

I urge my fellow professors with invisible disabilities who are currently living in the able-bodied closet to come out and magnify our presence in the academy. By sharing this part of our identities, we fulfill not only our moral responsibility to students with disabilities who need us as mentors, but our responsibility to nondisabled students as well. Both student groups need to recognize America’s diversity and to witness the disability community’s distinct identity, which surfaces when its members let themselves be known.

REFERENCE


Editor’s note: For a more in-depth discussion of Linda Kornasky’s experiences coming out as disabled, see her article “Identity Politics and Invisible Disability in the Classroom” in the March 27, 2009, issue of Inside Higher Ed.
Stereotypes, Student Identity, and Academic Success

Stereotypes run deep in American society, and they can have profound effects on students’ identity development and academic success. A selection of recent research suggests how some students negotiate their multiple identities to deflect the effects of negative stereotyping.

In The Black Box: How High-Achieving Blacks Resist Stereotypes about Black Americans, the authors explore how high-achieving black students negotiate their identities among their different peer groups (Fries-Britt and Griffin 2007). The nine participants in this qualitative study described pressures to disprove negative stereotypes based on race, sometimes at the expense of feeling connected to the black community (520). In addition to these psychological pressures, students experienced the stress of time lost to educating white peers (520). The authors suggest that better efforts to address race in the classroom might relieve the pressures high-achieving black students feel to advocate on behalf of their social groups.

The authors of American Indian College Students’ Ethnic Identity and Beliefs about Education use quantitative research to examine the relationship between orientation toward education and ethnic identity (Okagaki, Helling, and Bingham 2009). Their comparative study of 173 American Indian and European American students suggests that American Indian participants saw education as more instrumentally significant than did their white peers (171), and that this view correlated slightly to students’ perception of discrimination (172). The authors hypothesize that students who experienced discrimination saw education as a way to counter negative stereotypes (172). The research also suggests that students with greater “bicultural efficacy”—those who “believed that they can be true to their ethnic identity and participate effectively in the majority culture” (165)—showed greater orientation toward their student identities (167).

The Developmental Dimensions of Recognizing Racial Thoughts similarly illustrates students’ attempts to make sense of stereotypes—in this case, those applied to Latino/a students (Torres 2009). After examining negative stereotypes on a cognitive level, the Latino/a participants in this qualitative study came to critique racist assumptions they had previously credited or internalized, with various success in developing their own ethnic identities (518). Students responded to these realizations in varying ways according to whether they identified as privileged or oppressed, with privileged students more likely to begin by seeking new interpersonal relationships and oppressed students more likely to begin by seeking new intrapersonal understandings (518-19).

Finally, in Multiple Social Identities and Stereotype Threat: Imbalance, Accessibility, and Working Memory, the authors seek new remedies to the phenomenon of stereotype threat (Rydell, McConnell, and Beilock 2009). Stereotype threat theories suggest that when students are reminded of negative stereotypes associated with an aspect of their identity (for example, that women are bad at math), they will perform more poorly on related tests (949). Using tests with prompts that described gender-stereotypical beliefs about ability, the study supported the hypothesis that activation of stereotypes does affect performance, but also suggested that by activating competing positive identities (such as that of student), test writers can “can eliminate stereotype threat effects” (949).

Taken together, these studies suggest the deeply destructive impact negative stereotypes have on both students’ psychological well-being and their academic success. Yet they also suggest that students may be able to draw on their multiple identities to combat negative effects. This may be an effective short-term strategy, but it is surely not an acceptable long-term solution. As the studies underscore, more research is needed to determine how colleges and universities can support students’ multiple identities in both academic and social realms.

—Kathryn Peltier Campbell, editor

REFERENCES


ReducingStereotypeThreat.org provides an in-depth introduction to the concept of stereotype threat, along with an extensive bibliography of related publications. Created by Steven Strossnner and Catherine Good, the site is an informative introduction for faculty and students interested in the topic.
In Print

**Diversity’s Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work**, Daryl G. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, $50.00 hardcover)

Diversity & Democracy advisory board member Daryl Smith outlines a compelling rationale for making diversity work in and for higher education in this evidence-based, strategy-filled volume. Emphasizing that diversity is both an inevitability and a strength, Smith supplies context for modern diversity initiatives and critiques current efforts, ultimately suggesting how colleges and universities might better harness diversity’s power. With keen insight into both individuals and systems, she explores how a holistic approach to hiring, student success, assessment, and more can create the conditions that support diversity. This book is a much-needed roadmap toward the institutions the world needs in the twenty-first century.

**No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life**, Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford (Princeton University Press, 2009, $35.00 hardcover)

With this incisive new book, Espenshade and Walton Radford explore the dynamics of differential college access and success in extraordinary detail. Using data gathered from ten elite colleges, they trace racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences from application through admission, enrollment, and beyond. Illustrating elite colleges’ role in perpetuating America’s growing wealth gap, the volume outlines possible remedies and underscores the need for colleges to do more to support students’ interactions with diversity. But the book’s most significant contribution may be its persuasive, data-based analysis of affirmative action. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in higher education’s role in creating a more equitable society.


Celebrating two decades of Peggy McIntosh’s influential work on invisible privilege, editor Karen Weekes has compiled a collection of fascinating articles that draw inspiration from McIntosh’s work. Contributing authors apply the lens of invisible privilege to a wide range of topics, illuminating how recognition of oppression’s silent corollary (advantage) can shift the terms of analysis in multiple subject areas, from higher education to reproductive freedom to dance. With particularly strong chapters on the phenomenon of “colorblindness” and on race and gender privilege in faculty careers, this book is a strong addition to any social justice library.

**We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream**, William Perez (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2009, $22.50 hardcover)

With these profiles of twenty high-achieving undocumented students and graduates, William Perez makes palpable the critical challenges facing America’s undocumented youth. Focusing primarily on Mexican immigrants (many of whom learned of their legal status as late as high school), the book gives voice to students’ experiences of deep uncertainty and personal triumph as they pursue higher education. The book illustrates the personal tragedies that occur for students who, despite their talent and their primary identification as Americans, are barred from affordable higher education or employment. With the inclusion of several individuals who successfully obtained legal status, the collection underscores America’s interest in capitalizing on great talent and civic commitment that too often goes to waste.
Resources

The Source
Created by the nonprofit organization Diversity Works, The Source is an "online sortable database of diversity, anti-oppression, and community-building activities." Users can search for activities of varying lengths and for various audiences, from low elementary school through adult. Topics are organized by "isms" and themes (such as identity, ally work, and privilege), and users can access a wide range of resources fitting pedagogical contexts from icebreakers to teambuilding activities to writing exercises. This free resource is available at thesource.diversityworks.org.

College InSight
The Institute for College Access and Success created College InSight to make data on racial and economic diversity, as well as college cost, more widely available. The database allows users to access information by general topic or by specific school or state, and users can create customized tables and comparisons using preferred inputs. By presenting the data in an attractive and easily accessible form, the Web site makes important indicators of diversity more transparent. Access the database at www.college-insight.org.

Community-Engaged Scholarship for Health
CES4Health.info is a peer-reviewed online database for publications and products focused on health-related community-engaged scholarship. The Web site was created to broaden the possibilities for peer-reviewed publication on these topics. Access to many resources is free, and the database currently includes a particularly strong focus on public health. Visit www.ces4health.info for more information about submitting and accessing resources.

Opportunities

Diversity, Learning, and Pathways to Inclusive Excellence
AAC&U’s Network for Academic Renewal will host Facing the Divides: Diversity, Learning, and Pathways to Inclusive Excellence on October 21-23, 2010, in Houston, Texas. The conference will focus on ways to bridge the divides of ideology, belief, and access that are affecting democratic discourse and student success in college and beyond. For more information or to register, visit www.aacu.org/meetings/diversityandlearning/DL2010/index.cfm.

Intergroup Dialogue Institute
The University of Michigan will host its annual Intergroup Dialogue Institute from June 16-19, 2010, in Ann Arbor. Drawing on the university’s deep investments and expertise in intergroup dialogue, the institute is designed to help faculty and staff develop dialogue programs at their home institutions. For more information about the application (due on May 15), visit www.igr.umich.edu/about/institute.

Call for Proposals: AAC&U Annual Meeting 2011
AAC&U invites session proposals for its 2011 Annual Meeting, to be held from January 26-29 in San Francisco. Submissions that explore topics related to diversity, global learning, and civic engagement in a pluralistic democracy are particularly welcome. The call for proposals will be issued in May with a July deadline; for more information, visit www.aacu.org/meetings/annualmeeting/index.cfm.

Summer Institute of Civic Studies
Tisch College at Tufts University will host a two-week seminar on citizenship and the university’s deep investments and expertise in intergroup dialogue, the institute is designed to help faculty and staff develop dialogue programs at their home institutions. For more information about the application (due on May 15), visit www.igr.umich.edu/about/institute.

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Upcoming AAC&U Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEETING</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facing the Divides: Diversity, Learning, and Pathways to Inclusive Excellence</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
<td>OCTOBER 21-23, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity, Inquiry, and Discovery: Undergraduate Research In and Across the Disciplines</td>
<td>Durham, North Carolina</td>
<td>NOVEMBER 11-13, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Meeting</td>
<td>San Francisco, California</td>
<td>JANUARY 26-29, 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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AAC&U Associates
Enrollment in the Associate program provides an opportunity for individuals on AAC&U member campuses to advance core purposes and best practices in undergraduate education and to strengthen their collaboration with AAC&U’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives. Associates pay $60 per calendar year and receive the same benefits as AAC&U Campus Representatives, including subscriptions to our print publications, Liberal Education, Peer Review, and Diversity & Democracy, electronic copies of On Campus with Women, invitations to apply for grant-funded projects, and advance notice of calls for proposals for institutes and meetings. For more information, please visit www.aacu.org or call Renee Gamache at 202-884-0809.

About AAC&U
AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises 1,200 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.

From AAC&U Board Statement on Liberal Learning
AAC&U believes that by its nature… liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.