

Diversity Statement

I can remember the exact minute that I realized I was not free from the racism that is a cornerstone of our past and a part of our current society. We were considering a move from Minneapolis, MN, which is one of the least diverse states, to San Diego, CA, one of the most diverse states in the United States. We went to San Diego for a few days to visit the school my son would join for Kindergarten that fall. The tour stopped at the door of the Kindergarten classrooms and I looked in to see a sea of little brown and black faces. 'I hope they are nice' was my first thought.

A split second later my self-awareness had caught up and I was shocked! I always saw myself as a progressive supporter of equal rights for all and as a person looking out for those who have endured injustice. But in that moment I was a protective mother concerned about something that looked so very different from what I was used to. Even with all of my progressive thoughts and commitment to supporting the marginalized youth of our society, I still had some racially based narratives written into my DNA. For me it was a call to be even more reflective about my unconscious responses and habitual actions.

Per the story above, reflexivity has become one of the foundations in my effort to fight systemic bias in the communities where I work. It enables me to see the unique brilliance that is in each individual and allows me to build equity of opportunity, justice and inclusivity for all students no matter their sexual orientation, country of origin, ability, color, race, age or social-economic status. When working with people, I know that each person in the room comes with their own intersectionality which shapes how they think and will add richness to all that we do together in the classroom. I work to open up the context of the classroom so issues can be explored from diverse perspectives, build skills in listening to the thoughts of others, and gain new insights into complex interpersonal issues. I model this and inspire my students to also come to class with a reflexive mindset which will enhance learning for us all.

In the classroom I use pedagogies that enable me to balance participation in the class, ensuring all student voices gain attention and time for consideration and understanding. Students will learn and grow through listening as much as they will through speaking and presenting their perspectives. But it is in the listening and reflecting on the perspectives of others in the room that will allow students to gain an understanding of new cultures, different perspectives, and empathy for those whose lives are very different from their own.

When teaching, I implement the philosophies of universal design learning to make space for the diverse needs of each student. This has been a cornerstone for my professional life, beginning in my early years of teaching children, as I worked to enable full classroom participation for students with down syndrome and cerebral palsy. I encourage a creative response to assignments to allow learners to take the class content in their own unique directions. Much of the foundational content I teach is based upon research completed by white males and a handful of white females. When asking students for a creative response to this material, I encourage them to look to other cultures and other ways of knowing so we can expand the conversation to include the voices of deep thinkers from a wide mix of diverse communities.

I highlight the need for students to be a part of breaking down the biases of our culture by building social action into assignments. This allows students to take on a little piece of justice work while at the same time, watching the impact of these new ideas in action, realizing the systemic challenges that can come with implementation, and doing good work for the communities with which they choose to engage. Some past projects have been connecting students to nursing home residents to share content and hear their stories, building project groups that intentionally increased student exposures to those from other cultures, and creating volunteer opportunities for students to better understand the needs of marginalized members of our society.

I employ multiple modalities in my assignments and assessments to ensure I am attending to the learning needs of a diverse mix of students as well as giving students an opportunity to make these assignments their own. This includes opportunities for creative reflections of the material, multimedia based exploration of the content, and student lead or peer reviewed assignments. The goal of these multiple modalities is to ensure the course allows students to find a portion that speaks directly to them and their diverse interests and expressions of the course content. When doing these types of assignments I pair them up with a class presentation so that by sharing this work with fellow classmates, we can see the concept through the diverse lenses of each student, expanding everyone's world view.

Circling back to my opening story; my son did go to the school we visited and the children there were wonderful. He continued to one of the more diverse inner-city high schools in our area and I knew an education rich with cultures from all walks of life had been the right choice when he came back to me in his 2nd year of college and thanked me for sending him to schools where he had friends who were from so many different backgrounds. He could already see the benefits of a life filled with diverse friends, perspectives and cultures.

I hope to provide this same opportunity to my students and those I work with in my professional life. Diversity celebrated in the classroom will enrich the learning process and allows us to continue to break down the cultural biases that still hold some back and propel others forward. I make the most of diverse learning communities for everyone by creating a safe and courageous classroom environment which allows for learning through one another's differences, mutual understanding and a lived model of social equity all students can take with them into the future.