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Diversity and Dialogue in Reforming the Academic Community

Cover Page Footnote

Associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, Buley-Meissner has also taught at the University of Washington, at Seijo University (Tokyo), and in the People s Republic of China.

Diversity and Dialogue in Reforming the Academic Community

Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

How would you define multiculturalism? I like the definition given by James Banks (1992), director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington. He believes: "Multiculturalism ultimately is a way of thinking. It's thinking about concepts from different people's vantage points. It's recognizing other perspectives, but it's more than recognition. It's caring and taking action to make our society more just and humane" (p. 22). In my view, taking action must include respectful, careful consideration of students' spiritual values, especially because such values influence their self-expectations, social interactions, and life commitments. Consider, for example, the rich, volatile mix of students in my recent basic writing classes—all second-generation to fifth-generation Americans: Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics, Mexican Baptists and evangelical Christians, Pakistani, African, and Albanian Muslims, East European Jews and Lutherans, Korean and Cambodian Buddhists.¹ To make multiculturalism a reality, we need to affirm the importance of diversity and dialogue in creating our academic community. And I do mean creating. For in our classrooms everyday, through our interactions with students, we give the academy whatever vitality it has.

How can we promote cultural exchange that allows students to learn from each other? I would like to suggest guidelines based on my experience with basic, intermediate, and advanced composition students during the past eight years. At whatever level I teach, we write our own guidelines as we investigate cross-cultural views of the self. Figures 1 and 2 below show effective communication strategies resulting from student discussions. Consistently across different courses, my students and I have found that our world views change as we understand what it means to listen and learn.

Quaker educator Parker Palmer (1983) has observed that "[t]he shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living. . . . The way we interact with the world in knowing it becomes the way we interact with the world as we live in it. . . . our epistemology is transformed into our ethic. . ." (p. 21). This is what I see happening when students work toward a deeper understanding of each other's lives. Instead of defending our own views or criticizing what others think, we offer each other *cooperative consent*: I will listen to you—empathically, intent on understanding rather than judging—if you will listen to me. Furthermore, we

¹Nearly 90 percent of college freshmen indicate a religious preference (Fact File, 1992).

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offer each other *provisional acceptance* of differing, even conflicting viewpoints. That is, we try to practice what Palmer calls "the discipline of displacement" (p. 116), imagining what the world looks like from perspectives other than our own.

Common ground: Respect for individual identity and the integrity of every student; emphasis on writing as provisional, open to interpretation, partial in its grasp of truth; emphasis on writing as communication leading to mutual understanding; acceptance of truth claims as valid within context.

Common goals: Description and analysis of experience; appreciation of others' beliefs as compelling and consequential; constructive discussion of sources, forms, and implications of beliefs that shape self-expectations, social interactions, and political commitments; development of broader, deeper understanding of truth as informed by diversity and dialogue.

Figure 1. Common ground and common goals for class discussion.

How is this possible? As Figure 1 indicates, our *common ground* includes respect for the individual identity and integrity of each class member. During our first meetings, for example, we establish this through student introductions and group profiles. We approach writing itself as provisional, open to interpretation, and always incomplete in its claims. Our *common goals* include talking through our experiences so that together we may examine the beliefs that influence us. Figure 2 also presents guidelines that students have helped articulate: first, the *recognition of resemblance* means everyone is considered alike in intellectual capability and moral integrity; second, *openness to difference* means we are aware that everyone brings distinct histories, traditions, and values to class; next, *attention to context* means recognizing that all claims of truth are conditional, subject to qualification; and finally, our *focus on commitments and consequences* means that we accept the force of those claims in our lives.

How do these guidelines take form as specific classroom practices? When students address each other, they are encouraged to emphasize shared values and knowledge as bridges to understanding, an approach advocated by Rogerian rhetoricians (Teich, 1992). At the same time, students are expected to clarify, complicate, or widen the world view being developed by the group, a fundamental principle of "methodological believing" in Peter Elbow's *Embracing Contraries* (1986).

When one basic writing class discussed news coverage of international religious violence, they agreed that such violence is fueled by ignorance and fear. They also concluded that in the collective consciousness shaped by popular American media, to be religious often means to be a blind follower of a dangerous faith. In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, Pakistani American student Shabana and African American Fahad told us how they had felt "hated and suspected" because of their Muslim faith. "I get angry," said Shabana, "when I think about how people jumped to the conclusion that terrorists from the Middle East planned the bombing. And I get more angry when I think about how people equate terrorism and Islam. But I know they get their ideas from distorted

- 1) *Recognition of resemblance:* Everyone is alike in intellectual capability and moral integrity.
- 2) *Openness to difference:* Everyone brings different histories, traditions, and values to class.
- 3) *Attention to context:* All truth claims are conditional, subject to qualification.
- 4) *Focus on commitments and consequences:* The force of truth claims may be seen in all our lives.

Special considerations in addressing others: Try to discover shared values, knowledge, and other bridges to understanding. Be aware of and acknowledge your personal perspective rather than assume an unqualified authority. Take responsibility for your claims on others. What do you expect other to believe? On what basis? Why? Expect to be questioned. Consider classmates' inquiries to be signs of engagement and interest in your views. Try to clarify, complicate, or enlarge your classmates' understanding of the reality that you inhabit. Be prepared to review that reality in light of their questions.

Special considerations in responding to others: Listen with full attention. Listen to understand rather than agree or disagree. Listen to learn what it is like to see the world as others do. Ask in order to understand, imagine and participate in the realities of others' lives. Try to move from an outsider's to an insider's perspective through your questions. Describe the scenes and situations which come to mind as you listen. Ask questions to make those images more clear, complete, and vivid.

Figure 2. Guidelines for addressing and responding to classmates.

[news] coverage about who we are and what we believe.” Fahad agreed, adding his own perspective: “If you’re a Black Muslim like I am, people think you’re a troublemaker. They don’t know that Islam teaches brotherhood. Holy books [the Qur’an, the Bible, and the Torah] teach godliness, upright living, and responsibility. . . . We don’t need to be afraid of each other, do we?”

As students respond to each other, they ask questions that promote entering into and understanding the realities of others. How did you become a Muslim? [Shabana was born into a devout family. Fahad converted in his late twenties.] Where do you worship? [At mosques, at home, in the mind and heart.] How has your faith changed your life? [Shabana: “It is woven into every part of my life. It means that I have to do my best at everything—being a daughter, being a student.” Fahad: “I have to stay on the right path because a higher power is directing my steps.”] Students report that they are intellectually and personally intrigued by their peers’ life stories. Most are intensely interested in explorations of identity, difference, and cross-cultural values in American society. Perhaps this is more true of basic writers, who are often acutely aware of their status as ethnic, racial, socio-economic, or cultural minorities.

Our sense of truth often changes as we evaluate our beliefs in the context of the convictions of others. In their class evaluations, evangelical and fundamentalist students comment that my class has made their world a more complicated place, as do mainline Protestants, liberal Catholics, and my most zealous students, the atheists. Intellectually and personally it is risky to address the convic-

tions that give us a sense of individuality and belonging in the world. But we have much to learn from each other, and as educator Maria Harris (1991) emphasized, "Ignorance is never neutral" (p. 100). At the very least, it jeopardizes any possibility that our society will become more just and humane.

Perhaps I saw this most clearly during and after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. At a time when racial prejudice, economic tensions, and class antagonisms were tearing America apart, I watched my students turn to each other incredulously. As I listened to them, one of the central questions that emerged was: How are we going to rebuild belief in this country?

These were basic writing students in Milwaukee, one of America's most segregated cities, as indicated by patterns of housing, employment, and education. Only 10% of the students at my university are people of color; 65% of those students are required to enroll in basic writing; only 13% complete degrees. They are typically considered at risk. However, in the spring of 1992, they proved to be exceptionally insightful cultural commentators as they discussed the causes and consequences of the riots. Most of all, they were concerned with this question: What do we do now? And answers were influenced by students' spiritual values.

In *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (1993), Stephen Carter argued that "religion at its best will tend to strengthen, not weaken, the values most Americans hold dear" (p. 268). Academic intellectuals might disagree (Battenhouse, 1987; Culler, 1986), but many of my students would support Carter's view. Listen, for example, to African American student Kevin as he explains why Milwaukee did not disintegrate like Los Angeles:

The media predicted riots in Milwaukee. The media predicted hatred and violence. But it stayed quiet. People were anxious; people were waiting. But it stayed quiet. Why? I know one big reason was that our leaders in our churches preached peace. They said we had to live peace.

Six of the eighteen students in his basic writing class were African American; all six were Christian; four of them were youth leaders and/or members of community outreach groups. (Carter notes: "As a group, black Americans are significantly more devout than white Americans. By some measures. . . black Americans are 'the most religious people in the world'" (p. 60).

For some students spiritual as well as racial identities decisively shape their outlooks. As Chris told the class: "How do we respond to the riots? As an African American and a Christian, I believe [the] Los Angeles [riots] shows us how hard it is to build multi-ethnic neighborhoods and how crucial it is to do so. Was Los Angeles only about African Americans and Koreans? It was about all of us. We can't give up on each other."

Hearing Kevin and Chris, other students responded with proposals for making Milwaukee a "culturally diverse rather than culturally divided city" (a theme that I drew from students' initial reactions to the riots). Strikingly, many of their ideas came from involvement in the church, temple, mosque, or synagogue: edu-

cating public school students about differences in cultural heritage; supporting legislation for fair housing, employment, and health care; protesting biased media coverage and supporting alternative local and regional newspapers; encouraging high school and college students to work for their communities; lobbying the university for courses and programs promoting more comprehensive cultural studies. Clearly, their religious affiliations strengthened their commitments to social change—whether the students were Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim. Moreover, they were able to sustain an intercultural dialogue that all of us found enlightening. As Robert Coles has observed, a fundamental human need is a “grounding not only in factuality but in moral reflection” (“Celebrate Values!” 1992, p. 21).

At times, of course, students’ views do clash. Yet, I have found extraordinary potential in such situations which theologian Gabriel Moran has called “the redeeming, reconciling, and reuniting of the world” (1992–1993, p. 482). Teaching a senior-level advanced writing workshop, I asked two European American students with opposite views on abortion if they would work together in a small group. They agreed and subsequently discovered, much to their surprise, that they shared a longtime commitment to women’s welfare. On the initial basis of tentative mutual respect, they exchanged ideas; eventually they cooperated in investigating causes of and alternatives to abortion—without compromising their individual ethic. How did that happen?

Perhaps the two students each had an unusual capacity for the kind of empathy and compassion that the Buddhist priest Thich Nhat Hahn (1976, 1987, 1991) calls “mindfulness.” Perhaps they and their classmates developed sufficient trust in each other to undertake listening as “deep practice,” as an alternative to the violence of blaming and arguing (1993, p. 68). Here is an excerpt from students’ midterm review of changes in their thinking and writing:

Bill: At the start, as a fundamentalist, I only wanted to write against abortion for my church newsletter. But I’ve been listening to Sarah and I’ve been thinking that it’s very important to know more about why women seek abortions. She has told our small group very tragic stories about abused women. So I’ve been focusing more on how important it is for the abuse to end.

Sarah: It was hard for me to work with Bill at first, and it was even harder for him to work with me. [Sarah counseled women in a low-income family clinic, which sometimes made referrals for abortions.] At first, I thought, “He’s a fundamentalist, so we’ll never agree on anything.” However, he belongs to a church that strongly supports women and families through educational, social service, and job-training programs. I’m not a Christian. I’ve been studying Buddhism, but some of Bill’s basic beliefs—social and religious—are close to mine.

Bill and Sarah’s work together suggests an important starting point for “authentic conversation” (McCormick, 1992–93) about many subjects, especially those

we find hardest to discuss. I have frequently heard students of diverse backgrounds share commitments to social justice, to the human family. Contrary to warnings from colleagues, I have not found that, as they say, "Fundamentalists will take over the class if you let them talk about religion." Instead, guided by the principles outlined in this essay, students have shown remarkable willingness to establish common ground for open and earnest dialogue.

Intercultural discussion takes many forms and addresses many subjects. Religion itself is not at issue; that is, direct comparison and contrast of one set of beliefs with another is not the intention and would best be left to a theology or philosophy course. Instead, I am interested in the variously complex spiritual affinities that influence our sense of direction and purpose in life. Psychologist Robert Sollod (1992) has described "the hollow curriculum" which results when higher education separates mind from spirit. Healing that split, I believe, is essential to healing deeply painful societal divisions. Multiculturalism can become a reality only if we listen and learn along with the students we serve. ☹

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