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Difficult Conversations We're NOT Having: Mixed-Group Perspective Taking and Diversity Education at a Small College

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This article examines a novel approach to faculty development aimed at addressing often-avoided difficult conversations about diversity in and out of the classroom. We propose a workshop model that uses Theatre of the Oppressed methods and a mixed-group approach (faculty, staff, and students) to uncover tensions around diversity issues on campus and to practice perspective taking among the three groups. Our approach responds to the challenges of engaging in dialogues related to diversity across groups at small colleges.

Near the end of class, Miriam¹ responds to her professor's query on the day's topic, violence in America: "Well my neighborhood was all white. We didn't have much violence. And by the way [turning to Todd, an African-American student beside her], you need to take that hoodie off. You're scaring me." The professor pauses, glances at the clock, then dismisses class. Two doors down, students have been discussing the prevalence of sexual assault in prisons. Dylan blurts out, "I'd rather kill myself than be gay." Katelyn, a gay student near him, tries to explain why the comment is offensive. Dylan hears nothing and leaves angry.

Diversity education remains a top priority for many colleges. It is reflected in the increasingly common general education goals of multi-

cultural understanding, civic engagement, and ethical reasoning and is consistent with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) (2012) calls to put more focus on students' personal and social responsibility. To respond to this call, faculty have developed "diversity designated" courses. These courses, in addition to delivering specific content, build essential skills related to living in a diverse society. Substantial evidence demonstrates the positive impact of diversity initiatives both in and out of the classroom on students' cognitive and socio-cognitive skills and on their democratic sensibilities (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Faculty members from nearly every discipline are expected to participate in these initiatives, even if they have little training on how to deal effectively with controversial issues in the classroom (Roderick, 2011). Faculty developers face a daunting challenge—not only to provide pedagogical resources to help faculty diversify their courses, but also to build their perspective-taking skills so they are better equipped to respond to and teach about diversity issues in and out of the classroom.

Persuaded by findings that the involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as students and staff, can strengthen development activities (Cook-Sather, 2011; Stanley, 2010), we discuss a novel approach to faculty development aimed at addressing the often-avoided difficult conversations about diversity in and out of the classroom. Our approach uses Theatre of the Oppressed methods and a mixed-group approach (faculty, staff, and students) to uncover tensions around diversity issues on campus and to practice perspective taking for all parties. A mixed-model approach to faculty development (engaging faculty, students, and staff simultaneously) modifies the sequential approach whereby faculty are trained first and then students are taught, and replaces it with opportunities for perspective taking between and among faculty, students, and staff. Rather than simply having faculty discuss difficult situations, such as the ones posed by the article's opening vignettes, this model encourages faculty, staff, and students to act out various responses and observe outcomes from multiple perspectives.

Perspective Taking in Faculty Development

According to a 2007 survey conducted on behalf of AAC&U, the belief that personal and social responsibility outcomes *should* be a major focus of college was held by more than 90% of undergraduate students and more than 90% of faculty and staff. Results were less promising, however, when students were asked whether this area was a priority at their institution or whether they personally developed competency in

the area while enrolled (AAC&U, 2012; Dey & Associates, 2008). These results helped catalyze the AAC&U's call for colleges and universities to become more purposeful in how they enhance students' competencies in personal and social responsibility (AAC&U, 2012; Dey, Ott, Antonaros, Barnhardt, & Holsapple, 2010; Hersh & Schneider, 2005). Perspective taking, "the ability to engage and learn from perspectives and experiences different from one's own" (Dey et al., 2010, p. ix), appears to be among the top educational practices influencing students' advancement in terms of personal and social responsibility outcomes (O'Neill, 2012). Moreover, perspective taking, as a practice, may distinguish a liberal education from narrow training in a particular field. As Dey and colleagues (2010) contend, capacities associated with perspective taking are essential to the sustainability of a diverse democracy.

Teaching students how to take seriously the perspectives of others and to consider it an obligation to inform one's own judgment by engaging competing perspectives falls largely (though not entirely) to faculty. Faculty developers can work tirelessly to provide instructors from across the curriculum with tools to help students learn the art and skill of perspective taking. Further complicating the matter, however, is that faculty members themselves are often not fully adept at perspective taking. Faculty are trained as content experts, with little preparation learning how to deal with controversy that arises from competing perspectives (Landis, 2008). Just as students need to engage in diversity and perspective taking experiences to expand their learning, so too do faculty.

Challenges for Faculty Diversity Education

One of the first steps for any faculty development initiative is need identification. At Goucher College, we had a unique opportunity to identify issues of concern related to diversity and student education with a grant, funded by the Teagle Foundation, aimed at examining the impact of diversity initiatives on student learning. As part of the grant, we participated in a consortium of five liberal arts colleges over a three-year period to investigate diversity initiatives and the diversity climate on our campuses. Each school created a visiting team, consisting of faculty, students, and staff, that traveled to other member schools (one per year) and conducted focus group interviews for two days with various faculty, student, and staff subpopulations. While there were themes and pre-approved lines of questioning for the visiting teams to consider, they were given considerable latitude to explore whatever concerns or problems arose organically during focus group sessions. Anonymity of sources was

ensured when results were reported to the home team.

On our campus, focus group results were largely positive, supporting the commonly held view that diversity was a priority of the College and that our learning environment was generally inclusive of differing perspectives. When probed further, however, the perceived “inviting” atmosphere was revealed to be a culture of politeness across the campus. Difficult conversations were averted to avoid appearing insensitive or worse yet, prejudiced. Consequently, though differing perspectives were invited, they were not always engaged. This was a serious red flag for us. As research attests, difficult conversations can often be a source for deep learning, particularly when the conversations challenge existing cognitive schema (Bain, 2004). As we discovered, however, these conversations do not happen as frequently or as thoughtfully on college campuses as we would hope.² Trosset’s (1998) ethnographic research at Grinnell College, a small, liberal arts institution revealed that an overwhelming majority of students ranked “feeling comfortable” over “learning how to deal with being uncomfortable” (p. 49). Students in Trosset’s study questioned the value of discussing issues with students with whom they disagree and often cited “finding an issue difficult” as a reason for avoiding discussion.

Avoiding difficult conversations was only part of a larger troubling pattern. Based on findings from our focus groups we discovered that when asked to name the most safe spaces on campus to learn about diversity, our students did not name the classroom. Moreover, focus group sessions with staff revealed that they viewed themselves as educators on campus (regardless of the division where they worked) but that they did not view faculty as partners in their educational efforts. In fact, some reported feelings of marginalization in relation to faculty. Among faculty there was considerable interest in learning new approaches and pedagogies for diversity education in the classroom, but untenured faculty, in some cases, reported unease with the notion of discussing classroom diversity concerns or questions with tenured faculty. Tenure-track faculty worried that asking too many questions created an unfavorable impression. Tenured faculty were not that interested in diversity training, evoking a “been there, done that” mentality.

In addition to focus groups, the consortium created common surveys across our campuses to explore further where perspectives of faculty, students, and staff converged and diverged. Similar to findings from the University of Michigan study on the campus climate for perspective taking (Dey et al., 2010), we found notable differences in perceptions across our three constituencies. For example, the aggregated data from all five campuses revealed that faculty members were significantly less

likely than staff or students to agree with the statement, “The institution has achieved its goal of attracting and/or retaining a diverse student body.” Staff were significantly more likely than faculty or students to agree with the statement, “Efforts to increase diversity lead to admission of less qualified students.” And, although the frequency of acts of intolerance on all of our campuses was quite small, a significantly larger percentage of students were more likely than faculty or staff to indicate that acts of intolerance happen frequently. These statistically significant group differences in perspective create the potential for serious misunderstandings. For example, if students believe acts of intolerance occur more frequently on campus than faculty and staff perceive, students may label the administration or faculty as unresponsive to student concerns. Likewise, if faculty are unaware of specific incidents of intolerance on campus, they may miss opportunities to link these incidents to relevant class discussions and content.

The Problem With Silos at Small Schools

Though the Teagle consortium allowed us to examine the campus climate, our initial reaction to the findings was entrenched in a silo mindset, whereby faculty needs were a matter for faculty development, student concerns belonged to the student life division, and general staff were left to self-advocate with their individual supervisors. The silo effect shaped not only our perceptions of campus culture, but also how we interacted with each other. The results from the Teagle grant suggested a need for follow-up with students, staff, and faculty. However, when it came time to respond to the findings, we struggled to find approaches that would address the needs of all three groups.

Faculty development at the College was the responsibility of a newly created Associate Dean position. Having participated in the consortium and knowing the focus group results, the Associate Dean began preparation for faculty workshops and soon realized the challenges. Although the challenges discussed below exist at schools of all sizes, they pose particular challenges at small schools because of faculty size. Each of the circumstances makes it particularly difficult for faculty developers to gather a critical mass of faculty who are well suited to work together on matters of diversity. Often, the same people are tapped to lead workshops and faculty familiar with their perspectives feel like they have heard it all before. In short, a faculty development silo makes even less sense at small schools than it might at other places. The mixed-group approach offers something different from traditional faculty development opportunities

and alleviates some of the problems that emerge with a limited pool of participants. Below, we discuss how a mixed-group method addresses these challenges.

Fatigue and Familiarity

Faculty at small schools have a broad set of responsibilities (often including high teaching loads, expectations for scholarship and creative work, administrative leadership and shared faculty governance, and the like). In this environment, faculty development efforts often can feel like “one more thing I am asked to do” and, thus, lead to resistance (Mooney & Reder, 2008). Also, when faculty development efforts are launched at such schools, faculty can quickly feel saturated with even a small number of workshops or other events, because nearly every faculty member is invited to every event. Summoning a critical mass for diversity training can be difficult.

Faculty at small colleges generally stay for many years and are very familiar with each other because the relatively small number of people are spread across many committees, ad hoc groups, social events, and collaborative efforts (for example, major fairs). For better or worse, the faculty members feel very familiar with and carry long-held assumptions about each other, based not only on personal experience but also on stories told by colleagues. As a result, there are built-in biases and a belief among teachers that they cannot learn anything new from each other. They may even feel they can predict how a given colleague will respond to any given prompt, which can dampen enrollment in a session on diversity and/or limit openness to learning from each other during the session.

Introducing staff and students into a training session or workshop shifts the dynamic by drawing new stakeholders into the conversation. Staff members consider student education and mentoring to be part of their responsibilities and a rewarding part of their work; hence, many staff are enthusiastic to participate in educational opportunities with students and faculty. Student Life staff, in particular, regularly invite faculty to participate in their events (and are often frustrated with the turnout); for such staff, being invited as equal participants with faculty and students in a diversity experience may be viewed as a special opportunity.

Students, like staff, bring new perspectives to the conversation. Though we often tout the intellectual maturity and abilities of our students—to do challenging work and to teach us something—real opportunities to engage with them are informal, ad hoc, and inconsistent. Students welcome the opportunity to interact with faculty outside of the classroom, and a mixed-

group approach assumes they are valuable co-teachers and co-learners rather than only learners. A mixed-group approach disrupts hierarchical relations among faculty, staff, and students. Staff and students become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with teacher” (Friere, 1993, p. 62). A workshop with faculty, students, and staff allows everyone to engage in the diversity learning experience directly, as both teacher and learner.

Levels of Awareness and Expertise

Similar to the students in our classes, faculty bring their own mental models about diversity pedagogies to faculty development workshops. These models, based on education and life experience, shape their reaction to professional development efforts focused on diversity and how much they learn as a result. At one end of the continuum are those who do not consider diversity to be relevant to their subject matter. Requests or requirements to address diversity in the classroom are perceived as a zero-sum game because it takes time and energy away from more “important” material. Faculty who need greater awareness, knowledge, and skill development often refuse to participate in workshops, and if they do, they react defensively (Kaplan, Cook, & Steiger, 2006). At the other end of the continuum are those faculty who consider diversity to be part and parcel with the material being taught and the learning process itself. They have experience engaging in diversity-related issues in and out of the classroom, are comfortable discussing it, and are looking for new ideas and deeper understanding.

Effective diversity education (or any effective education, for that matter) starts wherever the learners are. When the starting points in the group are so far from each other, finding similar starting places may be difficult. “Advanced” faculty may be bored or disappointed with “entry-level” training, and “novice” faculty may perceive sweeping generalizations and assertions are being made at the start that are unfamiliar to them and, therefore, are suspect. Given the wide experiential range and diverse disciplinary backgrounds of faculty, the challenge for faculty developers is how to create a workshop that creates a natural (and safe) context for testing faculty assumptions and practices. Just as our students need a learning environment that allows them to test their assumptions and knowledge, come up short, and try again, so do faculty. Though Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed works well for creating this kind of context, we contend that a mixed-group approach enhances the transformative potential of the Boalian method. Rather than offering the “same old, same old” (workshops on adding diversity content to your syllabus or the importance of

not asking students to represent an entire group) with the cast of usual characters (those who are part of the diversity choir), this approach asks faculty to engage in perspective taking and to practice, not preach, solutions. The techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed introduce an element of spontaneity and creativity, keeping the workshop material fresh, even for the most experienced participant.

As the saying goes, “necessity is the mother of invention,” and our work-around solution to traditional faculty training was a mixed-model approach to perspective taking using techniques inspired by Boal’s interactive Theatre of the Oppressed. Benefits of the mixed-model approach are detailed further below. The results surpassed all expectations, and faculty developers from schools of all sizes may find it worthy of serious consideration.

Learning Through Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed

Extensive research on learning (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010) suggests that in order to develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know when it is appropriate to apply them. Moreover, research shows that goal-directed practice along with feedback enhances the quality of learning (Ambrose et al., 2010). Students learn more deeply when they are afforded the opportunity to try their own thinking, make mistakes, receive feedback, and try again (Bain, 2004). Moreover, students need a safe space where they are willing (and encouraged) to take risks.

How do we apply these learning principles to our faculty development workshops? Too often, diversity training or workshops involve faculty talking about the experiences they have had with students or preparing for experiences they intend to create in the future. The emphasis of most workshops is on talking about *ideas* rather than actively engaging in *practice*. Moreover, as is frequently the case, faculty do not have many opportunities to practice various pedagogies without fear of evaluation or assessment before testing them in the classroom. Augusto Boal’s (1979) Theatre of the Oppressed draws on Friere’s (1993) idea that people learn through doing. Boal, a Brazilian dramatist and activist, used drama to examine social injustice and to rehearse social change. In one technique in the Theatre of the Oppressed, “Forum Theatre,” participants identify problems from their experiences and develop a scene to represent the problem and its inherent conflict. The scene is performed, and audience members reenact the scene to try out different strategies for resolving conflict.

Boal's Forum Theatre provides a model for rehearsing classroom approaches and responses to difficult situations. Unlike a "banking approach" (Friere, 1993), in which the faculty developer or colleague tells the workshop participant what to do in difficult situations and where knowledge is transferred from the expert to the novice, in the reenactment of the scene participants have the opportunity to replay the conflict and attempt to handle it differently. In our opening classroom scenarios, the audience would have an opportunity to play the professor and respond to students playing Miriam and / or Todd. Or using the mixed method approach, a staff or faculty member might elect to play Katelyn and offer a different account of the painful effects of homophobia. In Forum Theatre, the purpose of the exercise is neither to arrive at a solution nor to tell a participant how to respond to a difficult situation. Rather, the objective is to create the space where faculty, staff, and students can rehearse different responses and adopt different perspectives through role-playing. As Illeris (2007) points out, experiential pedagogy must be, at least to some extent, learner controlled and involve the learner's self, and it must occur in a social context that corresponds to a real environment. A mixed-group approach more closely approximates the actual learning environment, which comprises multiple sites, such as in the classroom and the residence hall, and with multiple "teachers," who include faculty, coaches, resident advisors, and laboratory assistants.

Other universities (for instance, The University of Michigan's CRLT players, the University of Missouri-Columbia's Interactive Theatre, and Portland Community College's Illumination Project) have used theatre as an effective method for examining controversial topics and engaging campuses in dialogue about these issues. Forum Theatre, in particular, has been adapted to a variety of different educational contexts including medical schools (Kumagai et al., 2007), professional development workshops with teachers and education faculty (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010), in middle school classes (Gourd & Gourd, 2011), and in university courses focused on ethics (Brown & Gillespie, 1997), to name a few. As part of its professional development efforts for faculty, The University of Michigan adopted Forum Theatre to demonstrate how underrepresented groups are disadvantaged as students and teachers (Bollag, 2005). As the faculty observe the scene and the characters, "they are drawn into making sense of the issues portrayed, relating them to personal experience, and strategizing about how to transform a difficult situation" (Kaplan et al., 2006, p. 34). Forum Theatre raises awareness of the problems faculty, staff, and students confront and provides a space for everyone to learn—to try out certain responses, to fail, to get feedback, and to try again.

Our Three-Series Workshop Design

At Goucher College, we devised a three-series diversity workshop for bringing faculty, students, and staff together. We conducted two 2.5 hour sessions, several weeks apart, with a group of 25 faculty, staff, and students (about eight from each constituency) followed by the third session, a dinner debriefing. The goals of the workshop were to increase awareness of how faculty, staff, and students perceive, experience, and react to diversity issues, to generate a greater dialogue about diversity from a variety of perspectives, and to offer strategies for addressing difficult diversity issues in and out of the classroom.

The first session began with several icebreakers designed to increase familiarity and reduce status differences. One of the activities included a mirroring exercise in which pairs of participants place their hands several inches apart and, while one partner moves his or her hands, the other partner mirrors the movement. The icebreakers were followed by a set of trust-building activities. For example, participants were asked to pair off and take turns leading their partners, whose eyes were closed, around the room. Participants were asked to reflect on whether they felt more comfortable as leaders or followers and to think about how their partner's intentional styles of leading (for example, moving slowly, guiding them by the elbow), made them feel more or less safe.

As participants began to become more comfortable with one another as a result of the icebreakers—each exercise was followed by a brief period of reflection—the first session exercises shifted to focus on issues of power and marginality. These exercises are designed to facilitate perspective taking. In the power shuffle, participants were asked to step forward or backwards in response to questions that explored privilege and difference. Following the power shuffle, another exercise, “Mattering and Marginality,” asked participants to reflect in writing about instances in which they felt validated or honored (felt as though they mattered) and instances in which they felt marginalized. Participants shared their reflections with their small group. Following the writing exercise, we asked participants to generate an image, or tableaux, using other participants' bodies, of a time they felt marginalized on campus. Participants silently walked around the room and observed the various sculpted bodies. These images can be used in the second session, if desired, to develop a script for Forum Theatre or facilitators can ask participants to share the connections they see among the images. (For more examples of games, see Boal, 1992; Rohd, 1998.)

Gehlback and Brinkworth (2012) discuss the different strategies used to teach perspective taking. In addition to the techniques used to put oneself

in another's shoes, inferential strategies ask the participant to think of a situation comparable or parallel to the one the "target" is experiencing. The "Mattering and Marginality" exercise uses an inferential strategy to build perspective taking. Participants may not relate directly to the experience described, but they can relate to the feelings of mattering or marginality. Following these exercises, participants are better prepared in the second session³ for another form of perspective taking, Forum Theatre, which entails vignettes such as those at the beginning this article.

The opening classroom vignette of this article is based on real classroom experience. Todd, the African-American student who wore a "hoodie" to class, complained about the incident to the Dean of Students. This classroom example can be used to develop a scene by imagining that the Dean calls a meeting. The scene is enacted with participants playing the antagonist, Miriam, and the protagonists (the professor, Dean, and other students). Participants do not have a script, but enact the scene as they imagine it would actually happen. After the scene, the workshop facilitator, or "Joker," as Boal refers to him or her, asks the audience a series of questions: What do they see as the central conflict? Did the scene seem real? Is this how a professor or student would respond? Is there another way this situation could be addressed? The audience (referred to as "spect-actors") are then invited to watch the scene again, except this time, if someone in the audience has another idea or approach to the conflict, he or she yells, "STOP!" and takes the place of one of the protagonists. The person playing the role of the antagonist does not swap out with any of the spect-actors, but rather tries to bring the replayed scene to the same end, often intensifying the resistance to show the protagonists how difficult it is to bring about change. When one actor is unsuccessful at bringing about change, another spect-actor steps in and tries a different approach. As the participants try out different strategies, they get invaluable feedback from the audience. The purpose of enacting the script is not to find a solution to the dilemma, but to rehearse different options. Friere (1993) reminds us that knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention. By moving into different roles (e.g. students can play the role of faculty and faculty can take a turn at playing the role of student), faculty, staff, and students have an opportunity to engage in another form of perspective taking.

Assessment Results

The third session of the three-part series offered an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and to offer feedback. Feedback

from our workshop series was overwhelmingly positive. Following the first session, participants were sent a survey of their reactions, reflections, and recommendations. Respondents were unanimous in their positive assessment of the experience. Most notably, they were unanimous in their desire to go further into the difficult conversations they were not otherwise having on campus. In feedback forms completed after the second session, participants agreed that the perspective taking exercises were successful. Responding to the "Mattering and Marginality" exercise, participants replied, "This was very helpful because it took people out of their comfort zone." Another participant noted that the exercise created "a common thread in the group." Others acknowledged that the exercise started "some good conversation on personal feeling" and "was good for small group bonding." After these exercises, "people were more comfortable and ready to have difficult conversations." Many found the workshop beneficial because it "took people out of their comfort zone and moved people away from people you know." One byproduct of the mixed-group approach was our participants realized how much they "had in common with others, even though we are very different." None of the workshop participants expressed discomfort about addressing diversity issues in a mixed group, and several mentioned the importance of hearing student voices. One participant remarked that "what students and faculty perceive in the classroom varies drastically." Interestingly, in our workshop the students were the first to initiate the difficult conversations and to challenge the faculty and staff responses. Overall, 85% indicated the mixed group was an effective model for engaging diversity and promoting positive change, while 83% found Forum Theatre, in particular, to be an effective strategy.

One area for improvement revealed by participant feedback was the need for more time for Forum Theatre. As one respondent wrote, "The final exercise about the incident was very revealing, but it was cut off to leave time for the final exercise." Echoing this concern, another participant commented, "Started a good exchange about an incident on campus and its relevance for all of us as community members, but it was cut short by time." This year we plan to experiment with the pacing of the event to see if we can condense certain segments so that we can get to the Forum Theatre sooner, and we plan to try the method with different topics, such as LGBTQ issues, sexual consent, and bystander intervention.

Diversity education is an essential component of a liberal arts college, yet faculty and staff are not always experts on how to facilitate difficult conversations surrounding diversity issues. This workshop is a useful approach for schools to consider, because it reduces the lag time between

faculty training and curricular or co-curricular initiatives with students, and it relies on a pedagogical practice that emphasizes change and social justice. Mindful of how monologues can reinforce oppression, Boal's Forum Theatre engages multiple voices in a dialogue that enacts responses to real conflict. Major stakeholders participate in a joint endeavor aimed at creating a learning environment and campus climate beneficial to all.

In light of events across the country following the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Gardner in New York City, many colleges are having "difficult conversations," ready or not. If other schools are like ours, it has been students, most recently, who have educated faculty and staff about lived experiences of members of underrepresented groups, not the other way around. A mixed-group approach using Boal's methods may provide a framework for helping us have these difficult conversations.

Footnotes

¹Names and events have been slightly altered to protect the anonymity of the participants.

²In an effort to promote more dialogue about difficult political, religious, racial, and cultural issues, the Ford Foundation, in 2005, launched the Difficult Dialogue Initiative to help colleges create campus climates where challenging issues can be discussed respectfully and in the spirit of scholarly inquiry (<http://www.fordfoundation.org/newsroom/news-from-ford/151>).

³The second session also begins with a series of quick icebreakers to recreate the space as safe and comfortable.

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