

Getting to the Core of Diversity: Administration, Design, and Practice

Teresa Winterhalter, Associate Professor of English
Mark Finlay, Associate Professor of History
Ed Wheeler, Department Chair of Mathematics
Armstrong Atlantic State University

We borrowed the title, “Getting to the Core of Diversity,” from a paper by Clayton-Pederson (2002) because it clearly summarizes two convictions Armstrong Atlantic State University (AASU) holds about the value of diversity in higher education:

1. As we focus on diversity education, we want to focus on the core curriculum, on that set of courses that all students at our institution are required to take. Otherwise we fail to connect with many students who move from the core curriculum to focus on studies in health sciences, education, computing, and engineering.
2. A major challenge in addressing diversity education is the existence of a uniform core curriculum shared by 34 institutions in the University System of Georgia. Although serious thinking about diversity education at our institution is a fairly recent development, we believe our self-observations as beginning learners can offer a mirror that is useful for self-reflection by others at the same point in their learning trajectory. To this end, we will recount tentative things we have learned as an institution and as individuals about the task of educating students for a diverse world.

Our subtitle, “Administration, Design, and Practice,” supplies a method for

organizing our thoughts. In the process of reviewing our evolution, we recognized that we have promoted diversity education from three perspectives: (a) a dean who assumes responsibility for the overall configuration of a core curriculum, (b) an assistant dean who addresses diversity educational goals in dual roles as chair of the college curriculum committee and teacher of history, and (c) a director of a Women’s Studies program who suggests that classroom practices should take full advantage of curriculum reform. Our story begins with several happy discoveries we made when we compared the core curriculum at Armstrong Atlanta to diversity education requirements throughout the core curriculum of the University System of Georgia.

Administration

The University System of Georgia mandates that each institution's core curriculum shall consist of 60 semester hours. Table 1 shows components of the University System of Georgia’s core curriculum. The specific courses contained in areas A through E of an institution's core curriculum are approved by the Council on General Education of the University System of Georgia. There are three points to note about the core curriculum: a) the core is uniform across the system, which makes local innovation difficult, b) approval of changes occurs at the System level, and c) each institution has the opportunity to make local choices in Area B (Institutional Options section).

Table 1
Components of the University System of Georgia Core Curriculum.

Area	Courses Composing the Area	Total Number of Hours
Area A: Essential Skills	Specific courses in English composition and mathematics	9 semester hours
Area B: Institutional Options	Courses that address institution-wide general education outcomes of the institution's choosing	4-5 semester hours
Area C: Humanities and Fine Arts	Courses that address humanities and fine arts	6 semester hours
Area D: Science, Mathematics, and Technology	Courses that address learning outcomes in the sciences, mathematics, and technology	10-11 semester hours
Area E: Social Sciences	Courses that address learning outcomes in the social sciences	10-11 semester hours
Area F: Courses Related to the Program of Study	Lower division courses related to the discipline(s) of the program of study and courses that are prerequisite to major courses at higher levels.	18 semester hours

Our thinking about education for a diverse world provided the context within which we worked. In the initial phases of our reflection, we were pleasantly surprised with what we discovered when we looked at our Institutional Options section. All institutions in the University System of Georgia had the opportunity to fine-tune the core curriculum in 1998, when we suffered through conversion from the quarter system to the semester system. At that time, many schools in the system used the institutional options section of the Core to address a number of important objectives. Communication skills, foreign language requirements, economic literacy, and computer literacy appear multiple times in the Institutional Options requirements of various system institutions. At Armstrong, however, a faculty committee insisted that the Armstrong requirement for this area include a course in "Global Perspectives" and a course in "Ethics and Values."

Our core evolved to honor this commitment. Over the past six years, we developed a collection of courses that offer

students the opportunity to satisfy the Global Perspectives requirement and includes courses such as "Anthropology: People of the World Global," "Economic Problems", and "Foundations of International Relations." As we began to discuss diversity education at Armstrong more explicitly, we made two discoveries about our collection of Global Perspectives courses:

1. Each of the courses in the list is a course that either clearly contributes to education for diversity or is a so-called "topics" course in which such a contribution can be easily integrated into the presentation.
2. Institutions that had restructured their curriculums for diversity had collections of courses similar to ours. A recent survey of institutions with a diversity education requirement reports that 58% of these institutions require a single course from a list of approved courses, while 42% require two such courses (Humphreys, 2000). By virtue of the good work of the faculty committee, we are in a

relatively strong position to fulfill our commitment to education for diversity at the level of the core curriculum, which is where we understand its potential impact to be the greatest.

We had two other felicitous discoveries when we examined the core as it is taught at Armstrong. The first discovery relates to the Ethics and Values portion of the Institutional Options section of the Core. Although the courses that populate these requirements may not be as clearly related to education for diversity as the Global Perspectives courses, several of the courses did contain significant units related to diversity education. Examples of such courses include “History: Ethics and Values in History” and “Women’s Studies: Ethics, Values, and Gender.” The second discovery revealed that some of the courses required in the Social Science section of the core could also serve the purpose of education for diversity. In the Social Sciences section, we require a World Civilization course in addition to the American History course mandated of all system institutions, and the History Department works hard to address the issues pertinent to diversity in these core classes.

With this mild success in mind, Armstrong encountered one more opportunity to expose all students to the principle of diversity in the core. As shown in Table 1, the University System of Georgia mandates that Area C (Humanities and Fine Arts section) of the Core shall expose students to courses in literature and humanities. One of the most commonly offered choices in Area C, Music Appreciation, Art Appreciation, and Theatre Appreciation demonstrates a strong emphasis on western interpretations with relatively little attention offered to issues of diversity.

Among the Armstrong music faculty in particular, the western vs. world music debate is only in its nascent stages. Some members of the Music Department expressed their reluctance to change their

curriculum, arguing that change for the sake of change is often counterproductive. They objected that adding courses that focused on nonwestern music would be impossible because there is no room to cut important material from the current curriculum. The familiar argument in this line of thinking is that students need to learn their “own” heritage before learning that of others. Adding diversity to the core requirements detracts, they maintained, from the adequate training of music majors. Nevertheless, a few members of the department noticed the changing demographics of their classrooms. Some noticed how students responded when Music Appreciation moved away from the traditional emphasis on the Baroque, Romantic, and other historic eras, and into the lessons of folk, regional, urban, and non-Western forms of musical expression. The debate in the Music department barely began when a national accrediting agency offered another nudge toward integrating diversity into the curriculum. Beginning in Fall 2004, the Music faculty committed itself to increasing its curricular offerings in non-Western music, particularly at the core level.

Design

Partly as a result of thoughtful planning, partly by sheer accident, Armstrong designed a core curriculum that results in all students taking two and often three or four courses that contribute to the goals of diversity education. However, equally important to the discussion at hand are two questions: (a) once the lists of approved courses are established and syllabi designed, how do we ensure that the courses are actually taught effectively to advance the goals of diversity education?, and (b) what progress can be made to ensure that the goals of diversity are advanced in all courses of the core curriculum in which that advancement is appropriate? A case study may help illustrate how to arrive at possible answers to each of these important questions.

The case study is drawn from Armstrong's History Department. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many history departments across the nation fought an important chapter in the so-called "cultural wars," wherein philosophical differences often drew lines between those who favored teaching world civilization vs. those who preferred western civilization. The History Department at Armstrong, however, had already fought its skirmish in this war and moved forward. With relatively little animosity, the department dropped the western civilization paradigm 15 years before many schools even considered this possibility. World civilization courses in those days often meant little more than textbook chapters and lectures that were tacked on to the traditional western civilization framework. Some faculty members showed little interest in truly embracing the ideals of diversity education. It took some time for the History Department at Armstrong Atlantic to move beyond changing the name of the course and to really become engaged with the core of diversity.

Diversifying the faculty was the first step we had to take in this direction. For various reasons, this was easier said than done. Many institutions that do make minority hires do so at the expense of another school (Cole & Barber, 2003). In the case of Armstrong Atlantic, the university made important minority hires in the specialty areas of African American and East Asian history. However, minority hires were lacking in other specialty areas. The expert on India is from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the expert on southern Africa is from Oxford, England, and the expert on Latin America is from the Philadelphia suburbs. All three are white males. We realized that the lack of a substantial number of faculty of color in key specialty areas of the discipline could limit us in some ways.

Nevertheless, these three white professors are strong promoters of the mission of enhancing student learning in

global issues. Moreover, they have helped us meet our commitment to diversity education by seizing new ground within standard syllabi and offering innovative courses in other branches of the core curriculum. They have created new core courses such as "Cultural Geography," the "African Diaspora," and "History and Ethics of United States-Latin American Relations."

The department, as a whole, has done other things that have signaled its embrace of diversity in the core:

1. Department members regularly review world civilization textbooks on the market and elect textbooks that have a global perspective.
2. The department is very active on the national-level in Quality in the Undergraduate Education (QUE) project. This initiative, which involves the collaboration of 10 universities with the help of various funding agencies, is an outcomes-based means of assessing the quality of our core courses. Statements concerning our commitment to the concept of diversity in our core classes are prominently posted in the official, but largely unread, documents that accompany this grant. More significant, though, is that the QUE grant has fostered monthly luncheons and funded annual workshops in which our members address issues of what is really happening in the classroom. Further, we also discuss how to assess student learning in the courses in which diversity is a central theme.
3. For several years, the department has sponsored an occasional, informal teaching roundtable entitled "Whither Civilization." In these sessions, department members, part-timers, and visiting scholars regularly share ideas on what the World Civilization course is all about, particularly its increasing mission to address diversity issues.

4. Some members of the department also actively seek to help one another capitalize on diversity in the classroom. For example, one of our master teachers offered a tip that has been useful to many other instructors in our department. At one of our group meetings, the teacher pointed out that she understands that teaching religious principles is always difficult, especially when the words come from the mouth of some one who does not practice those principles. She also noted that the awkwardness is compounded when there are students in the room who know far more about non-western religions than the professor. One solution she found, however, was to ask such students to publicly share their experiences on the topics of weddings, funerals, and holidays. Discussions that emerge get at issues of religion, theology, history, sociology, and culture in non-threatening ways, and in ways that are more engaging and more memorable than simply repeating the theological principles as written in ancient text. The aim here, of course, is that these discussions will contribute to mutual respect of various religious traditions (Greene, 1995).

In all, the History Department at AASU does little that actually defines the cutting edge of the goals of diversity education. Such things generally are hashed out in elite institutions, and a survey of the recent literature suggests that these debates are still raging (Nelson & Associates, 2000). As a teaching institution, we work on a different level. However, the requirement that all Armstrong students take at least one of these World Civilization courses in the Social Sciences section, plus the aforementioned Global Perspectives course in the Institutional options section, should guarantee that all students are exposed to

some diverse perspectives. Perhaps our experience shows that steady and gentle pressure on increasing the breadth of our global perspective in the history curriculum can work. And because of our shared commitment to diversity and open discussion of how best to make it a vital part of our work, perhaps we can arrive at diversity in the core without the antagonisms that have marked cultural wars in some places.

In retrospect, these experiences with designing diversity offerings offer three concluding lessons:

1. The mere fact that, even in the year 2003, institutions such as Kennesaw State University have hosted conferences on the topic of diversity instruction suggests that debates on this issue are far from over. Faculty and administrators need to be aware that the debates over diversity move through various disciplines and departments at inconsistent paces. Changes in one department do not imply changes in another, and administrators need to seize opportunities for building stronger collaboration across the disciplines.
2. The core curriculum includes several opportunities for expanding diversity instruction. Students' awareness of these themes can be embedded throughout the core. It need not be limited to merely one or two selections on a laundry list, as is common at many universities.
3. Including diversity education in core curriculum classes may create opportunities that *both* train future majors, *and* expose all students to a lifelong love of learning.

Practice

We have suggested that an institution can demonstrate its commitment to the goals of diversity education by facilitating curricular change that brings diversity into

the design of its core curriculum. We have also stressed that if an institution is to truly embrace the goals of diversity in education, it must ensure that those goals be treated as more than simply *pro forma* changes. Bringing diversity into the core of education is far more complicated than simply “adding on” requirements. Yet, we know we are still faced with an enormous challenge within our classrooms. It remains a difficult task to translate our understanding of the value of diversity at the core of an undergraduate education into our classroom practices and structures that encourage an exploration about these issues.

If we take the next difficult step, and are as honest with ourselves as possible, we must ask what we can do beyond merely changing our course offerings to promote a more open and just society. How do our teaching approaches and strategies influence our successes or failures in exploring issues of diversity, marginalization, and oppression? These questions leave us, of course, with the unsettling knowledge that even our best intentions may be met with uncertain results. To understand why it is so important, however, to move diversity objectives into the practice of education, we may be wise to remember, Mary Louise Pratt’s (1996) discussion of the classroom as “Contact Zone.” As Pratt points out, in the United States since the 1990s, our classrooms provide some of the rare social spaces where “diverse cultures actually meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power—relations of power that mirror those of the larger society” (Pratt, p. 530). According to Pratt, because teachers are the inheritors and supervisors of these unique spaces, we are charged with the responsibility to acknowledge their potential to serve as transformative forces in our society. In other words, because we determine the structure of a classroom, not only the curriculum, it is within our power to validate, reshape, and respond to the

culturally diverse character of contemporary society as a whole.

No doubt, that’s a tall order. Indeed over the last decade, many teachers report that they find themselves less and less prepared to respond to the changing demographics of their classrooms (Jackson, 1999). This is so, even though some of us were trained as teachers in universities where (what we came to call) “the hegemonic force” had begun to dissolve. We knew how to talk the talk, but to walk the walk was more difficult. Several of us at Armstrong had already responded to our theoretical understanding that cultural hegemony was imaginary, that there was not, and should not be, any grand master narrative of human experience that governed curriculum design and text book selection. We had already made changes to our syllabi and even to our universities’ curricular offerings, but sadly, when we entered our classroom, even with our post-enlightenment designs, we still encountered a group of students whose demands weren’t being fully met. To many of us, even our most “progressive” instructional designs felt flimsy.

But why, exactly, should this be so? Surely, as we have seen happen in our institutional history, the changing character of our society leads us to respond to diversity objectives in appropriate ways. We added additional books to our syllabi and courses to our curriculums. Classes in non-Western cultures, women’s studies, and ethnic literature offered some avenue to redress glaring absences our curriculum. But why weren’t these changes enough, especially since in many cases making these changes happen at all was not easy?

Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the fact that as we altered the content of our courses the topics for discussion in our courses also changed. As a result, the dialogues that began to emerge within our classrooms were also those that led us into what Mona C. S. Schatz (2003) has termed, the “murky waters” of “personal and

political convictions” (p. 118). We had come to a place where the texts we read stood in specific historical relationships to the students in the class. As a result, the range and variety of historical relationships in play were enormous. As a case in point, we offer these reflections from an English class that had been structured to promote diversity awareness. Because each student in the class had a stake in nearly everything that was read, the students became eager to discuss the material. In effect, the class’s curricular design for diversity at the core also requires “a liberatory pedagogy” in order for its objectives to be met. As a result, this class produced autonomous and engaged student learners, who were far more animated than those in a traditional classroom setting.

Because these altered dynamics may be daunting at first, it may be valuable to remember, as Henry Giroux points out, a viable critical pedagogy must “move beyond the concerns of curriculum and forms of school organization by analyzing how ideologies are actually taken up in the contradictory voices and lived experiences of students as they give meaning to the dreams, desires, and subject positions they inhabit” (Giroux, 1992, p.143). Giroux maintains that one of the surest ways to motivate students to move beyond the standard fare of education is to provide conditions for them “to speak differently.” He wants students to speak differently than they may have learned through the Socratic or traditionally structured classroom – so that their narratives can be affirmed and engaged critically along with the consistencies and contradictions that characterize such experiences. In other words, a class must do more than address the values of white middle-class students, and therefore, these students themselves may be asked to perceive their experience as part of the myth of the master narrative. But if we “provide the conditions” for all students to recognize their own faces in our course of study, to see their roots traced

back to legacies of both glory and shame, then they may experience, face-to-face, the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility of others (Yang, 2003).

To fully address the difficult issues that educating for diversity brings with it, it seems we must be willing to risk the sorts of tensions that may arise when we encourage our students to think about diversity as it pertains to their own lives. This is, of course, unsettling business to some. If we create a place where no one is excluded, then we create a space where no one is safe either. Consider this scene that occurred in the English composition class we mentioned above. While this class was reading Elie Wiesel’s (1960) *Night* and examining the traumatic events of the Holocaust that this novel portrays, a student quite assuredly claimed that the reason the Jews had been sent to the concentration camps was because “they had been stealing all of Europe’s money.” This student, much to his own disbelief, came under attack from numerous other students in the class. But, he was defended by other students who felt he was being unfairly criticized for simply restating what he had been taught to be true. No doubt this was a difficult moment for a teacher to navigate, but the class itself may not have been so successful had this moment not occurred. Diversity goals were not achieved simply by adding this text to the reading list. Adding this book also created the conditions for the members of the class to grapple with their attitudes about one another and their beliefs about historical truths. A classroom that facilitates such discussion will, no doubt, also facilitate difficult examinations of social attitudes and embedded belief systems. By so doing, this classroom gained the critical edge students needed to explore the kinds of marginalization many of them had once taken for granted. It was a classroom where preconceptions were compelled to come out into open air.

Furthermore, along with the anger, incomprehension, and pain that can emerge from such dynamics, there are also exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new insights—the joyful face of the contact zone. This may be especially apparent if we vary our learning approaches and strategies for covering material in the classroom. We must provide occasions for group work. We must facilitate student-led discussions. We must also encourage exploratory writing practices, and even risk moments of self-disclosure in the classroom (Schatz, 2003). The benefits of such restructuring can be enormous. In that same English class, for example, several students were reading Tomas Rivera's (1992) *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*, the story of a Mexican migrant worker's border crossings. Two students in the class—a Coast Guard Patrol officer and a Vietnamese refugee—ultimately had to produce a collaborative writing project. Their paper, "Dreams on Tattered Sails," was an extremely moving exploration of both states of consciousness. But because the classroom also provided occasions for collaborative work, the paper became more than a course requirement. It became the occasion for two otherwise isolated individuals to explore the parameters of their cultural influences, ethical imperatives, and social prejudices.

In all, these stories constitute the aftershocks, if you will, of encouraging one's class not only to study, but also to speak differently. Such decentered coming to grips with race, class, and gender struggles in the classroom may mean that there may be combat among our students in "the contact zone," just as their professors before them have had to battle through their ideological differences about curricular design. But we hope we have stressed that in addition to bringing diversity objectives into our pedagogical theory and institutional design, we must also bring them into our classroom design. For perhaps only then will we become fully engaged in the

transformative work that is perhaps the unspoken objective in all of this. Once we have facilitated the institutional reform required to give us access to the core of the issue, we are led into the space of the classroom itself, which is perhaps the truly central arena for engaging our students in the core issues of valuing a diverse society.

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