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Diversity: Do You Really Want *IT* ?

Angela Mae Kupenda*

Introduction

Diversity. Do you really want *it*?

In many of the diversity workshops I have attended, the facilitators assume that the answer is yes and set out to help the educational institution acquire more diversity. But given continuing fears and prejudices in our society, this is a mistaken, and perhaps premature assumption. Yet, when you are asked, as an educator or administrator, whether you want students of different races and colors, from varying socio-economic backgrounds, and with different perspectives, your response may be that “wanting” is irrelevant. You “need” diversity given our country’s changing demographics, your institution’s need to generate tuition revenues to support its educational missions, etc.

But while you may “need” the benefits of diversity, do you really want *it*? Many educators proceed from the assumption that diversity is desired and that the only problem is determining how to legitimately and properly achieve it. But on the contrary, before diversity can be rigorously sought and achieved in your educational context, you must honestly examine whether you really want *it*. *It* can mean an increase in conflict, a need to restructure goals and teaching methods, and a real change in yourselves, at least as you know and define yourself.

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Consider the following: you are cooking a wonderful southern stew with lots of meats and vegetables. The ingredients that you put in the stew pot are separate, independent, and well defined units. Once the stew is done, the ingredients will be blended, sometimes beyond independent recognition, into a delicious dish desired by all. But, while the stew is cooking, if you look inside the pot, you will see the ingredients bouncing up against each other and bubbling, as if a struggle is ensuing. (If you do not get the picture, make a stew yourself and observe.)

My point is: achieving diversity is much like making the stew. You may want the delicious result. But do you really want the necessary bubbling, bouncing against each other, and the conflict that must occur first?

The goal of this participatory essay/exercise is to help you examine the question: Do I really want diversity in my educational context? Do I want *it* enough to go through the necessary process of change before the delicious result?

I have used the following exercises while conducting diversity workshops for several educational institutions. I invite you to participate in evaluating for yourself, first, and for your institution, second, whether *it* is worth the trouble. My theory is that once we can decide that we really do want *it* (and not just the result of it or the benefits of it), then the proof and truth is in the cooking.

Exercise #1: What does *it* involve?

Please take out a sheet of paper. You do not have to number it. I am going to ask you a series of questions. Write down a "Y" for every yes answer, and an "N" for every no. Be as *honest* as you can be with yourself. You can throw away your paper when we finish. No one is going to look at your paper to evaluate whether you are "politically correct." Honesty is the first step in achieving true diversity. Here we go:

- *Do you want "conflict"? Do you?*
- *Do you want to have to re-analyze and re-scrutinize the way you teach and relate to students?*
- *Do you want to be forced into addressing and maybe even taking affirmative actions?*
- *Do you want to have to think about whether a student can afford to purchase certain materials that you want to require with short notice to your class?*
- *Do you want to have to learn about different groups/cultural norms?*

- *Do you want to have to deal with any authority and anger issues of different groups?*
- *Do you want to have to reevaluate gender roles and preconceptions?*
- *Do you want to have to face any anger or rage of a black woman?*
- *Do you want to have to confront any sexism of a foreign born man?*
- *Do you want to have to smile at any family pictures of a gay couple?*
- *Do you want to have to discuss race where you would rather not?*
- *Do you want to have to rethink and rewrite the mission of your school and departments in light of diversity concerns?*

Were you able to answer yes to all of these questions? If not, then maybe you really do not want diversity, and not wanting it could affect all of your attempts to achieve true diversity.

A personal story may help here, especially for those of you who do not want conflict, but still want the benefits of diversity.

A number of years ago when I was in professional school, I was invited to be a staff member in a prestigious student organization because of my academic achievement. The following year, the outgoing officers were to select new officers from the staff members. All interested staff members filed applications indicating the positions wanted. I applied for several specific positions, then in the alternative requested "any" position. Many students and faculty members were positive that I would receive a major position: my grades were excellent, I was the only minority staff member, and I had done good work. But when the new officers were announced, my name was not included.

The outgoing officers explained that they did not pass over me because I was black, poorer than the others, and from a different cultural background. Rather, they said that they selected the new officers the way they did because all the new officers had so much in common. Primarily, the new major officers were white, female, and from similar social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The outgoing officers explained they wanted a board of new officers who would get along well, who were alike, and who saw things the same way. They felt such a board would be better than a diverse group. Well, to make a long story short, ultimately my name was added to the group of officers, but only after public

and private controversy at the school. I stayed out of the controversy and trusted some faculty and more senior students to address the concerns. Ultimately, I was offered a position of the lowest rank, which I shared with a white male. Out of deference to those who had spoken up on my behalf, I accepted the position.

Although I disagreed with the outgoing officers' agenda, in many ways they were correct in their assumptions. A more diverse board did lead to differences of opinion and more issue discussion. Actually during the next year, my black female presence on the board saved a white male staff member from being wrongfully expelled.

The next year, a white male staff member angered one of the white female board members. She and several of the other white female board members were determined to expel him from the organization. In our board meeting, they expressed their concerns and called for a vote to immediately expel him. I did not know the staff member at all. All I knew was that we had a procedure for due process in place and what the board was about to do was a complete denial of the staff member's rights. I did not question why he had angered them, but merely argued that we had to follow our own rules, which meant that he should receive a warning and not expulsion. Well, a few others agreed and the staff member was not expelled.

Yet, I must admit that my presence on the board did result in conflict. Had I not been there, likely all the similarly thinking individuals would have quickly and easily agreed, expelling the staff member without proper process.

This is just one example of how diversity does lead to conflict, especially when the diverse members come from groups that have been historically deprived of due process, and consequently, may be quite protective of everyone's rights to proper procedure and fairness.

Exercise #2: Do you really want it?

The following are several classroom and educational scenarios for you to use in evaluating whether you really want diversity. After you read each scenario, evaluate whether each professor's plan is:

- *Necessary* (which means the Professor *absolutely should* or *must* undertake the plan);
- *Appropriate* (which means the Professor *may* *appropriately* undertake the plan, but action is not

absolutely necessary);

- *Unnecessary* (which means the Professor's plan is *not needful* or is wasteful of energies, but is not otherwise harmful); or,
- *Inappropriate* (which means the Professor *absolutely should not* undertake the plan, as the plan is harmful).

Do not overanalyze the scenarios. And, do not try to change the scenarios to cushion your responses. Give your honest and immediate reactions. After you have written your reaction, read the remarks that follow each scenario. These remarks are based on my own personal experiences and the remarks and discussions from other faculty and administrators who have participated in the workshops.

Scenario 1. *Professor A teaches at a school where about 30% of its students are students of color and about 1% of its faculty are faculty of color. The state where the school is located has a people of color population of about 30%. Each year, Prof. A invites speakers to her required class. She makes her best selections. She includes males and females and selects speakers who are intelligent, informed on the subject, available, entertaining, and friends of hers or known by her, to some degree. When Prof. A completes her list she realizes that all of the speakers are white. Prof. A shows her list to Prof. B. Prof. B is planning to suggest to Prof. A that she alters her list to include people of color. Is Prof. B's plan Necessary, Appropriate, Unnecessary, or Inappropriate? Write down your response before you continue reading.*

Faculty responses to this scenario were divided. Essentially, the differences in opinion mostly focused on whether the faculty member should place more emphasis on diversity or instead, on trusting the professional judgment of Prof. A. Some participants felt that Prof. B's plan was necessary or appropriate because Prof. A's sharing of the list was at least an indirect invitation for help. Yet some felt that if Prof. A was not inviting help, Prof. B should leave A alone and trust A's judgment. While others commented that Prof. B has an absolute academic obligation to make the suggestion, even if it makes Prof. A angry, arguing that B's responsibility to the diverse student body ought to be more important than protecting A's feelings.

Other faculty members thought that Prof. B's plan is highly appropriate because of the significant student of color population at the school and the faculty's responsibility to minority students

to expose them to appropriate professional role models. As a result, some urged that Prof. B's plan is appropriate only if A's class includes students of color who may benefit from seeing nonwhite professionals. Others disagreed, arguing that B's plan is necessary regardless of the racial composition of the class or institution. They urged that even white students benefit personally and professionally by seeing people of color in professional roles.

A personal story may also help here.

I was teaching at a law school located in a city with a significant black population and with a significantly large community of black judges, lawyers, and other legally trained professionals. The school itself had a black student population of under 10%.

A white male administrator asked to meet with me to discuss the school's future, and race relations. He told me that the school was searching for ways with minimal cost to further diversify the school until it managed to hire additional qualified black faculty members. I told him that there were many things the school could do that would take little time and no money. Each year, the school had a series of moot court classes where local lawyers and judges were invited in to serve as mock judges of students' exercises. At the time, few black lawyers and judges were invited to participate in these activities. As a matter of fact, a number of black legal professionals had asked me why more of them were not included in the school's various programs.

I explained to the administrator that every panel of three mock judges could easily include at least one minority professional. This endeavor would benefit the minority students by introducing them to law professionals who look like them, and would also benefit the white students because many of them would ultimately encounter minority professionals when they practiced. Additionally, it would benefit the school and help it foster relationships with the large minority legal community, possibly leading to more mentoring possibilities, employment opportunities, and perhaps, private scholarships for our students.

The administrator said it was a great idea and asked me to compile a list of individuals. I spent a number of hours compiling a lengthy list with phone numbers and affiliations of minority legal professionals and quickly gave him the list.

Months later when the list of mock judges for the semester was released, I saw few minority names. As a matter of fact, the few listed were the same few that had been used in previous years.

I was quite hurt and puzzled. When we talked, the administrator explained that the student organizers only wanted to use people they knew personally or had used before. He said he agreed with the students that it would take too much time and energy trying to use new people. "Maybe next year," he added.

In the diversity workshops, some faculty responded to scenario 1 similarly to this administrator. They argued that it would be a drain on Prof. A's time to seek out nonwhite speakers since faculty are already overworked. Others, while agreeing that faculty have heavy workloads, felt that they could not afford to ignore the need for greater diversity. They argued that schools act unfairly and unethically when they actively recruit, admit, and accept tuition dollars from minority students, but do not take their needs into account. Some added that schools act unfairly and academically unethically when they fail to prepare white students for the very diverse world they will ultimately encounter.

Now, respond to the next scenario. Remember, be honest with yourself.

Scenario 2. *Professor C generally uses the Socratic questioning method to conduct his classes. He notices that some students seem to be more comfortable with his teaching method than others. Actually Prof. C's approach is effective for most students. Prof C plans to change his teaching style to try and reach the other students in his class. Is his plan Necessary, Appropriate, Unnecessary, or Inappropriate? Write down your response before you continue reading.*

Some professors contended that his plan was unnecessary and inappropriate. They felt that since his teaching method was effective for "most" students, he should be happy with that and do not try to fix what is not broken. They argued that his extra energies ought to be spent on his scholarship. Others pointed out that since only "some" students were comfortable with his method, perhaps all of the students could learn better if he explored other teaching methods.

While some urged that the professor's job should be to facilitate learning, they stressed that each professor should have an obligation to evaluate whether his or her teaching methodology is hostile or not conducive, especially for the discussion of sensitive issues related to race and gender, or if the school wants to foster and promote diversity. Now, respond to the next scenario.

Scenario 3. Professor D notices that white male students volunteer and participate in his class far more than others. His class is made up of 60% white males and 40% others. He plans to keep a careful record of class participation and plans to make sure that in every class meeting "others" participate. Is Prof. D's plan Necessary, Appropriate, Unnecessary, or Inappropriate? Write down your response before you continue reading.

Again, here there was much disagreement among faculty as to Prof. D's plan. Some argued that his plan is unnecessary because students learn in different ways and some are too shy to speak and should be allowed to be silent and let the talkers talk. Others vehemently disagreed by arguing that every student should be encouraged to speak and grow in self-confidence. While some were concerned that if Prof. D kept such a record, he would be engaging in affirmative action and they were not sure whether that was right to do.

Scenario 4. Professor F teaches a course with very controversial material – homosexuality, race, gender, poverty, you name it! The controversial material is highly relevant to the course. Every time she teaches the course, discussions are heated and students get upset. The minority students seem so angry. And, majority students do not want to discuss "minority" issues. The majority students tell her that the minorities should just bear the consequences of their actions or lives and stop talking about themselves. She plans to just lecture through any controversial material, or assign the material for outside reading and let the students do a reflection paper without any in class discussions to avoid any conflicts in class. She also confesses that she is concerned about the impact class disagreement will have on students' evaluations of her courses from the predominantly conservative and white student body. Is Prof. F's plan Necessary, Appropriate, Unnecessary, or Inappropriate? Write down your response before you continue reading.

For the above scenario and final scenario, I will not offer comments. I want you to think about the scenarios and discuss them with your colleagues. I hope you understand the point of all these exercises. Consider again the question: Do you really want diversity itself, and not just the benefits of it? We can only legitimately claim to want *it* if we are comfortable with conflict, are open to addressing our unconscious prejudices, and are willing

to adjust our systems to create a more welcoming place for diversity. If we do not honestly want *it*, then we will be unable to achieve *it*. We must first try to create within ourselves and our institutions a real desire for *it*.

Now for the final question, this diversity exercise/essay was Necessary, Appropriate, Unnecessary, or Inappropriate?

Think about *it*.

