

Assessing Diversity Courses

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The guiding principles for assessment of a diversity course are, in general, the same principles that should guide assessment of any course. It is important to consider before the first day of class how one will know, at the end of the term, whether the goals for student learning have been met. All the efforts of the teacher and the students in a diversity course will count for little--even if the students attend regularly, complete their assignments, say that they like the course, and receive good grades--if the goals for student learning have not been met. If the course goals have not been attained, then one should want to know why not and what might be done better the next time. Even if the goals have been met successfully, it will be important in teaching the course again to know what readings or discussion topics or classroom activities were most helpful towards reaching the goals, so that these are not inadvertently dropped in a modest revision of the course.

Articulating Learning Goals

Before beginning to teach a course on diversity, one should record the goals for student learning, expressing these in a form so that later assessment of student progress towards these goals is possible. At the least, this record will serve as a reminder to keep the teacher on track over several weeks of teaching, and as a point of comparison when new goals emerge as a result of interactions with students in the course. Furthermore, if the goals for student learning cannot be expressed in a measurable form, then it is likely that they have not yet been articulated sufficiently clearly in the mind of the teacher to be an adequate guide in the selection of course texts and readings, classroom activities, and discussion topics or in the evaluation of students. It is good practice to list goals for student learning on the course syllabus that is distributed to students. It clarifies the expectations for student learning in the course and serves as a reminder for both students and the teacher to stay focused on course-relevant topics in their discussions throughout the term. Goals for student learning should be limited in scope as well as appropriate for the students' learning, not the teacher's. Some of the teachers of the American Pluralism course at SUNY at Buffalo have adopted goals for student learning such as to understand ourselves and others in ways other than stereotyped groups or categories; to develop an awareness of the causes and effects of structured inequalities and prejudicial exclusion; and to develop an increased self-awareness of what it means in our culture to be a person of the student's own gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion as well as an understanding of how these categories affect those who are different. At the most general level, many of these teachers believe that the goal of a course on diversity is for students to learn what the American experience is like for different groups of people and to understand that if they were in the situations of others they might feel similarly.

Assessing Before the Course Ends

The usual procedure for course assessment is for a questionnaire to be administered to students towards the end of the term. Typically, however, the teacher does not receive the results until several weeks following the last class. Waiting until the end of the term to solicit feedback from students can leave the teacher uninformed about what students are really thinking in a diversity course. Most classes include both students who frequently participate in class discussions and others who sit silently or participate only infrequently. In some courses one can assume that the vocal students are representative of the viewpoints of the silent students, but this might not be the case for many contemporary, controversial issues that can arise in a diversity course. Those

students who are not speaking might be in sharp disagreement with those students who are speaking, yet perhaps concerned that if they speak they will be drawn into an argument; or they might be following the discussion closely and strongly engaged and perhaps even deeply moved by what is being said; or there might be students representing both of these positions. The issues in a diversity course can touch students very personally, for dimensions such as race, gender, ethnicity, and religion are among those at the core of the identities that traditional college-age students are constructing.

It can be a mistake for a teacher in a diversity course to assume that the vocal students are representative of the opinions and feelings of the less vocal students. Instead, it is good practice to assess informally how the course is going at least once and perhaps several times as the course is progressing, especially for those who are teaching a diversity course for the first or second time, and then if necessary to make appropriate changes in readings, classroom activities, or course requirements right away. A simple assessment procedure is to bring the class to a close a few minutes early and ask the students to write anonymously what might be changed to make the class better and to leave these suggestions as they exit the classroom. Not only can good suggestions emerge, but the procedure itself reinforces an important lesson for many diversity courses, namely, that each person's opinion will be listened to and respected. Such informal yet frequent assessment and minor course corrections can make the difference between a disastrous course and one that is now back on track.

Much can be learned about how a diversity course is progressing by asking students to keep journals in which they record their brief reactions, examples, questions, disagreements, or insights in response to each assigned reading, lecture, and class discussion. Typically such journal entries are regarded as confidential, and read by no one except the teacher. Journal entries can sometimes reveal that the class as a whole has reacted to assigned readings or issues quite differently than what the teacher might otherwise assume, given what had been said aloud during class. Often teachers find that they are able to construct discussion topics and questions for future classes from some of the journal entries. Another procedure for learning about the progress of a diversity course is to provide students with the opportunity to post messages and read what their peers have to say on an electronic-mail discussion list (Meacham, 1994).

Creating Appropriate Final Course Evaluations for Diversity Classes

The process of teaching a course on diversity should not conclude until the course itself has been evaluated against the goals for student learning that were recorded prior to teaching the course. Most standard course-evaluation questionnaires will not be adequate for the particular assessment needs of diversity courses, and so teachers must plan in advance to find or construct questionnaires that are appropriate given the particular goals they hold for student learning. One easy yet very informative assessment procedure is to ask students to list three aspects that they liked about the course and three things that they disliked. Another easy and informative question is to ask students to list three things that they learned in the course. If the goals for student learning are being met, then more than a few students should list information and concepts that relate to the teacher's previously-recorded goals for the course. For example, a student in SUNY at Buffalo's American Pluralism course wrote at the end of the term, "There are more ways of looking at things than the one I came to class with." This comment is evidence that the student learning goal of the course, to learn about the experiences and perspectives of others, was met for this student.

Assessing Diversity Learning Goals for Students

Often simple, ad hoc assessment questions that relate directly to the teacher's goals for the course are much more useful than the general questions that appear on standard course-evaluation questionnaires. Here are some examples of questions that could be asked at the end of the term in order to assess whether the teacher's goals for student learning have been met in the course. Of course, there are many possible goals for student learning and so there are many possible questions that could be constructed for use on an assessment questionnaire.

1. This course has helped me to understand myself and others in ways other than stereotyped groups and categories.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
2. I now have an increased awareness of the causes and effects of structured inequalities and prejudicial exclusions.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
3. This course has helped me to ask questions, analyze arguments, make connections, and be a better thinker.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
4. This course has helped me to become more confident in stating my views and expressing myself orally.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
5. As a result of taking this course, I am more likely to examine what I read closely and assess its usefulness before drawing conclusions.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
6. I find myself talking with other students outside of class about the material covered in this course.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
7. This course has inspired excitement in new topics, and I have considered taking additional courses related to the topics in this course.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
8. This course has stimulated me to read related books and articles, and I have begun to read and listen to the news differently.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
9. This course introduced ideas I had not previously encountered.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
10. I have been able to see connections between the material in this course and real-life situations I might face on the job, in my family, and as a citizen.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
11. I feel more confident about my ability to work with others as a result of this course.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree
12. I am now more convinced of the importance of the material in this course than when I began the course.
A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

Assessing Classroom Atmosphere and Process

In a course on diversity the classroom atmosphere and the interactions of the students with each other and with the teacher are critical to the success of the course. Thus it is important in assessing the course to ask questions regarding classroom atmosphere and process. Did students feel they could bring up issues in the classroom? Did students feel there was an atmosphere of respect and trust? Did the teacher allow students to express their point of view? Did the teacher respect students' opinions? These questions might appear on an assessment questionnaire in a format such as the following:

13. In this course there have been opportunities for students to bring up or discuss issues related to the course.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

14. In this course the teacher allowed students to express their point of view and respected their opinion.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

15. The format for this course has been primarily lecture.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

16. The format for this course has been primarily discussion, with students learning from each other and constructing our own understanding of the issues.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

17. In this course classroom discussions were managed so that they were a useful part of my learning experience.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

18. The instructor in this course asked questions that challenged me to think.

A. strongly agree; B. agree; C. neutral; D. disagree; E. strongly disagree

Typically teachers receive summary data from questions such as these only after the conclusion of the course. However, a better diagnostic procedure for teachers who are new to teaching about diversity is to make assessment of the course a project for the class itself. The course goals can be shared with the students, who can then decide how to assess the course and what questions to ask. After some data have been gathered and summarized, the students can discuss the extent to which various goals were met and why, what readings or class activities were critical towards meeting those goals, and how the course might be improved for the next group of students. There is much that teachers can learn from listening to students' views and reflections on how the course progressed and what was learned and their suggestions on how the course can be strengthened.

Traditional Assessment Questions

Next, here are a few examples of traditional assessment questions regarding materials and assignments and how much has been learned,. These questions are provided here to illustrate the contrast with the earlier questions that are derived directly from the goals for student learning or that inquire about classroom atmosphere and interactions among the students and with the teacher. Of course, a few questions from each of these three categories can be mixed together in constructing a brief assessment questionnaire of half a dozen to a dozen items.

19. The workload for this course is:

A. one of the lightest; B. lighter than average; C. about average; D. heavier than average; E. one of the heaviest

20. The pace in this course is:

A. too slow and sometimes boring; B. slower than average; C. about average; D. faster than average; E. too fast for me to keep up

21. The texts and readings used in this course are:

A. among the very best; B. better than average; C. about average; D. worse than average; E. among the worst

22. Overall, how much do you feel you have learned in this course?

A. an exceptional amount; B. more than usual; C. about as much as usual; D. less than usual; E. almost nothing

23. The instructor is punctual in meeting class and office hour responsibilities.
A. almost always; B. more than half the time; C. about half the time; D. less than half the time; E. almost never
24. The difficulty level of the course activities and materials is:
A. extremely easy; B. easier than average; C. about average; D. more difficult than average; E. extremely difficult
25. What is your overall rating of the instructor's teaching effectiveness compared with other college instructors you have had?
A. one of the most effective; B. more effective than average; C. about average; D. less effective than average; E. one of the least effective
26. What is your overall rating of this course?
A. one of the best; B. better than average; C. about average; D. worse than average; E. one of the worst

Although the literature about assessing diversity courses is just emerging, many practices used by student-centered assessment can easily be adapted. Two fine resources with excellent advice about assessment procedures as well as many examples of assessment questions are the recent books by Angelo and Cross (1993) and by Musil (1992). The important thing to remember, however, is that every teacher has resources for gathering immediate feedback about what students are learning in diversity courses. That information is essential for improving what is offered to students and for increasing our confidence that the learning goals we have articulated are being met by the course. The more we practitioners invent and share teacher- and student-friendly methods of gathering information about student learning, the more they can know about how to prepare students to be active, engaged participants in shaping the multicultural worlds they will and already do inhabit.

References:

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