

Using Conversational Learning to Enhance Teaching of Diversity

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ABSTRACT

To function in today's diverse and multicultural environment, workers must be properly prepared; yet teaching diversity is not an easy task. This article explores some of the challenges of diversity and proposes the use of conversational learning to make teaching more effective in preparing students and employees for the workplace. In addition, a model of conversational learning is discussed along with ways to facilitate its use in teaching diversity.

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Introduction

Globalization and increased diversity in our workforce have made it essential that we prepare workers for diverse and multicultural environments. Organizations are increasingly investing in diversity training; while many colleges and universities attempt to address this through developing courses on diversity or adding discussions of diversity to their existing courses (King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010). Whether it takes place in the classroom or in an organization, it is generally accepted that diversity skills and diversity management are necessary for effective organizational performance.

Johnson (2008) differentiates between diversity education and diversity training stating that diversity education focuses on mind-set shifts, concepts, principles and frameworks while diversity training focuses on skill building and conveying tactics. However, for the purposes of this article, teaching diversity is considered to include the aspects of both education and training. The goals for diversity education and training are to increase knowledge, improve attitudes, and develop diversity skills (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Similarly, Chrobot-Mason (2003) identifies the three stages of multicultural competence development as awareness, behavioral and coping skills, and action-planning or continuous development. While the need to develop students and employees who can function in a diverse workplace is widely acknowledged, the methods of reaching this goal are not as clear-cut and efforts to teach diversity are often met with considerable challenges.

Challenges of Diversity

Responses to diversity training can vary widely. Rynes & Rosen (1994, p. 67) review statements from participants in diversity training and describe comments ranging from "I see things in a different light. It was a great learning experience that I'll never forget." to "(White men were) . . . blamed for everything from slavery to glass ceilings . . . I became bitter and remain so." Naturally, those who teach diversity and those who hope such training will make a positive difference in interactions between employees in the workforce would like to see more of the former comments and none of the latter. However, it is not always easy.

By its very nature, diversity is challenging because it discusses the "undiscussable" (Lindsay, 1994) and questions the way that one views the world (Bezrukova et al., 2008). Kirk and Durant (2010, p. 824) note that teaching diversity presents additional challenges because, as instructors, "it requires us to give up some of the control in our classrooms to teach in a 'grey area' where discussions can be difficult and personal to all involved." Teaching diversity is also complicated due to the complexity of the topic itself and the lack of clear guidance in teaching the subject matter – for example, limited teaching materials and the lack of standard content (Bell & Kravitz, 2008).

While there isn't a clear cut, best method of teaching diversity, most courses tend to focus on some common themes and content areas and highlight nondominant group perspectives (Stewart, Crary, & Humberd, 2008).

Discussions are typically difficult as both students and faculty struggle to navigate around the politically correct mine field in attempts to address the topic. Diversity courses "may be perceived as threatening to some students' way of life by questioning the powers and privilege that society has conferred upon members of their group(s)" (Avery and Thomas, 2004, p. 382). As a result, some students may experience intense emotions, such as anger, resistance, guilt, confusion, and self-doubt (Marbley, Burley, Bonner, & Ross 2010) which, in some cases, will result in anger, silence, avoidance, or passivity (Jackson, 1999) instead of active engagement in discussions. As Stewart, et al (2008, p.378) observe, "an ongoing source of discontent for both faculty and students revolves around what gets talked about, spoken, or given voice to in the classroom and what remains unsaid." However, it is unlikely that diversity awareness will be increased through courses that mainly involve lecture with little student interaction or experiential involvement (Avery and Thomas 2004).

Having discussions of diversity issues can be even more difficult when many students, through their educational experience, have grown accustomed to a more passive style of learning and the expectation that the instructor will simply lecture and provide them with the "right answer." This may be due to what Stewart, et al. (2008) refer to as rigid dualism in which students perceive issues rigidly as being right or wrong. In such situations, students do not engage in discussion, exploration, and consideration of messages that are inconsistent with their current views which often results in students becoming frustrated, shutting down, and disengaging from discussions. However, these types of discussions would help in developing the skills needed to "reason critically and analyze situations from a variety of perspectives" and address weaknesses noted by HR managers that college graduates do not possess the critical skills needed to handle diversity (Day & Glick, 2000, p. 351). It is through a focus on individual and collective learning, growth, and development in which academics and students become co-creators of the teaching and learning content that diversity can truly be learned (Marbley et al, 2010). The "interplay of opposites and contradictions, although often not easy, enriches the mutuality of learning" (Baker 2004, p.695). Baker further explains that including and giving voice to people with differing ideas and experiences allows for conversational learning.

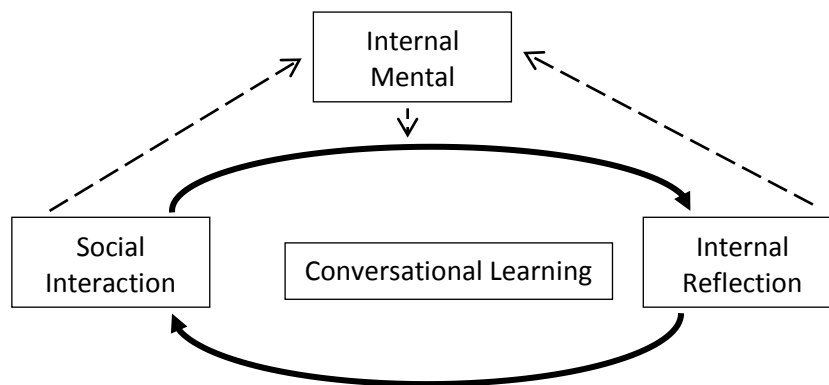
Conversational Learning

Conversational learning is a "process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005 p. 412). This concept has

enormous potential when applied to diversity because it actively engages students in the learning process requiring them to interact with others to listen to and reflect on their experiences. Coombs & Smith (1998) conceptualizes conversational learning as a two-level process – one involving internal reflection framed by the individual’s mental model and the other based on social interactions and relationships with others. Martin (1985, p. 10) describes conversation as being circular, cooperative, and constructive interchange of ideas among those who “come together to talk and listen and learn from one another.” The conversational learning process can be conceived as an iterative process of social interaction and internal reflection which is framed by the individual’s mental model; yet through the course of conversational learning, the mental model is being reshaped by both the social interaction and the internal reflection.

Figure 1:

Conversational Learning Process



So, instead of students relying on the instructor to provide the “right answer,” each participant brings their individual knowledge and experience, which collectively is much greater, finds meaning, and makes sense of the information. Instead of simply memorizing definitions and examples provided by the text or the instructor, students add their knowledge and personal experiences to the conversation. Through this exchange, students create and share their own interpretations and ideas which expand the knowledge and thoughts regarding the topic or as Neville (2008, p.105) suggests, “learners are constructing meaning among themselves as well as within themselves and that learners transform their collective experiences – both tacit and explicit – into knowledge.” Each participant not only becomes an active learner, but a contributor in the creation of knowledge. Although the conversation may challenge the way one views the world, it also allows participants to get an understanding of how others view and interpret the world and ultimately creates a broader view and better understanding. The key to making this a successful process lies in getting the participants to talk openly and

constructively about diversity, which is a difficult conversation which Stewart et al. (2008) acknowledges is challenging to facilitate.

Facilitating Conversational Learning

In conversational learning, the role of the instructor is critical and even more challenging than a traditional class. The instructor first has to create a safe environment in which students feel comfortable discussing the “undiscussable” and engaging in conversational learning. This requires a psychologically safe space that encourages participation, openness, risk taking, nonreactive and nonjudgmental behavior, self-disclosure, and mutual support (Baker, 2004; Sims, 2004). One tool that may assist in this process is the collaborative development of norms for acceptable behavior that faculty and students can use to monitor their own and each other’s interactions (Baker, 2004). Giving students reassurance that their comments, experiences, and ideas will be heard, valued, and most importantly that they will not be criticized, helps students feel more comfortable discussing even the most difficult of topics. It is important that students understand the necessity of sharing experiences and ideas as well as listening to and learning from each other. As Martin (1985, p.10) points out, “A good conversation is neither a fight nor a contest,” and participants should not view each other as adversaries. Even when ideas, experiences, and interpretations differ, we can listen, learn, and be informed by the perspectives of others without having to agree with their point of view. Having students participate in establishing and reinforcing class rules builds a more supportive atmosphere for conversational learning.

Once a positive climate is established, Lee & Bertera (2007) suggest the use of technology in the form of an online discussion can be useful. This can allow students who may be self-conscious about talking in class or fearful of not phrasing their questions and comments in a politically correct way to take their time composing their comments before posting them on the online discussion; thus providing an opportunity for all students to contribute to the discussion and learning. In addition, an online discussion board allows for increased conversation and interaction among students outside of the normal class time.

Conversational learning also requires some shifts in the mindset and the role of the students who need to be actively engaged and take responsibility for the learning process which involves: listening with the intent of learning; reflecting to gain understanding; moving away from the assumption that there is one way of thinking and one right answer or approach; and avoiding reactive behavior by anticipating differences and finding ways to learn from differing perspectives (Sims 2004). In essence, students need to view learning as more of a “sense-making” process analogous to Karl Weick’s question – “How can I know what I think, until I see what I say?” (Weick 1995, p. 61). To assist in this process, students can be required to maintain a

journal in which they reflect on the class content as well as the discussion. Through this, students engage in an ongoing process of discussion and reflection to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to handle diversity and to be effective in a business environment characterized by speed, agility, and flexibility (Huber, 2003). In addition, students can be provided with time during class sessions to reflect on the topic and events. One way of doing this is to use a “think, pair, share” method in which students are given time to process their own thoughts first and then pair up with a classmate to share their thoughts about a topic. This provides for reflection and interaction. In addition, having processed and shared their thoughts with a classmate may enable students to share their insights with the class more freely.

This shift in the mindset and role of the students also requires a bit of a shift in faculty who will have to be willing to let go of control of the process and outcome to a certain extent (Baker, 2004). This casts faculty as less of a “sage on the stage” or a “guide on the side” role and more as a position of a “meddler in the middle” who is actively involved in co-creating value (McWilliam, 2005, p. 5). This may be somewhat uncomfortable for faculty members who are more commonly the expert and source of information. In a topic such as diversity where each person has experience from their own unique perspective that adds value to the collective knowledge, having the instructor in the role of a co-creator and co-learner is beneficial to all involved. However, it is not an easy role as the instructor carefully balances between monitoring conversation and being careful not to stifle the thoughts and contributions of students, while making sure inappropriate comments are reframed in a positive way that supports and encourages exploration of different views (Kirk & Durrant, 2010).

Practical Tips for Using Conversational Learning

- Create a safe environment for conversational learning. Collaboratively develop norms for acceptable behavior that can be used to monitor interactions. Encourage students to share in monitoring interactions and creating a positive environment.
- Encourage an environment of mutual respect where students understand that they can disagree without having to be confrontational.
- Encourage students to be open-minded and to listen and learn from the experiences of others.
- Provide opportunities for students to get to know each other through sharing information and trust-building exercises.
- Empower students to take responsibility for their own learning through preparation, sharing, and reflection. Hold students accountable for reading all materials prior to class and engaging in classroom discussions and exercises.

- Provide opportunities for reflection both inside and outside of the classroom. Use think, pair, share for in-class reflection and journals to encourage students to reflect on the material outside the classroom.
- Monitor interactions and reframe comments when necessary, being careful not to stifle thoughts and contributions of students.

Conclusion

Using conversational learning in teaching diversity has the potential to make a significant impact in the knowledge gained by students as well as their ability to deal with the diverse environments they will face. Self-reflection and hearing the input and experiences of others allows them to make sense of the diversity issues from multiple perspectives which will better inform their decision-making and interactions with others. In addition, conversational learning will facilitate the development of interpersonal and critical thinking skills as they process the information from different perspectives. This will provide them with a broader base of knowledge as well as the tools to handle the complexity of diversity issues where there are few clear-cut, black/white answers, but many shades of grey.

Integrating conversational learning into teaching diversity seems to be a natural fit, but also has its challenges as both faculty and student will have to adjust. Initially, students may have a difficult time becoming more active learners and taking responsibility for their own learning, while faculty will have to adjust to giving up a bit of control in the classroom and simultaneously taking on more of a role in managing the process. However, this combination may be just what is needed to prepare students for global and multicultural environments in the workplace.

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