Color in the Curriculum or in Ourselves? Why I Thought I Had to Choose

I used to be firmly of the opinion that diversity in the curriculum was far more important than diversity in the faculty. As far as I was concerned, it would not do students nearly as much good to have a rainbow of professors teaching them the same old Herodotus, Ruskin, and Michelangelo as having even a fairly homogenous faculty seamlessly working Guaman Poma de Ayala's Andean chronicle, Maya "codex style" ceramics, Indian and Chinese philosophy, and Chola and Benin bronzes into the curriculum. Conversely, if an institution were nestled in some isolated glen in the middle of the country where the local population was mostly Anglo-American, perhaps with a few dozen Native Americans and five or six African Americans on the whole campus, trying to make the student body or faculty more diverse was not as pressing a concern as making sure that the current students (monochromatic as they might be) learned some basics about African, Asia-Pacific, pre-Columbian, Native North American, Latin American, and Caribbean art, culture, and thought. But an experience in 2017 nuanced my position considerably.

At a City University of New York campus that will remain nameless, while teaching an introductory art history course as a sabbatical replacement for another faculty member, I was struck by how dynamic, responsive, and talkative the students were. They nearly rivaled my regular students of pre-Columbian, Caribbean, and Latin American art at City College, whom, until then, I had held up as uniquely energetic and interactive among all the different students I instructed as a tri-state-area adjunct. Even in a preliminary writing exercise that I sometimes assign in which I ask students to give their own definition of art, these students wrote refreshing and often surprisingly sophisticated answers for young people in their first week of an intro course.

So, imagine my surprise when, a few weeks into the semester, in various conversations with colleagues at this campus, I was warned (sometimes in apologetic terms) not to have overly high expectations of these students. This warning sometimes accompanied suggestions for supplemental online learning resources, which I knew to be somewhat remedial. I preferred to use the relatively inexpensive (and eminently word-searchable) electronic edition of a standard textbook, however imperfect, to pass on to students a healthy respect for the peer-reviewed, published word. We even critiqued the textbook in some sessions. By a month into the semester, my colleagues' various inveiglements to check my expectations and their recommendations on how to teach the students at this campus made me step back and evaluate my whole experience at this unfamiliar college.

I preface my evaluation by saying that, as an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, one of the most cosmopolitan societies in the world, I do not often notice when I am the only black or Brown person in a room, or even the only male person, for that matter—my family looks like a veritable United Nations and I was raised in a household full of female relatives, all of whom were my senior. But at this campus, it didn't take long to notice the stark cultural contrast between the largely African American and Afro-Caribbean student body and the almost entirely white art department. In the mostly informal confabs with colleagues about what I should expect in my single semester at this campus, I began to wonder if I had encountered an exceptional cohort of students (because they certainly didn't demonstrate the limitations I was being warned about), or if I myself had something to do with the positive way in which they were behaving and performing.

Let me also say that I do not go out of my way to win any "teacher of the year" awards. In some ways, I am an old-fashioned lecturer whose innovations lie in my course content rather than advanced pedagogical methods. That being said, I am a fairly dynamic lecturer with very informal rules about questions and comments. I do not teach from notes and respond to the interests (and disinterests) of "the room" in real time, with a view of what absolutely must be taught versus what might be omitted or added this time around. Students are encouraged to interrupt me as soon as they don't understand something—"quick, before you forget the question!" There is only one

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exception, "Not during story time," which in my courses is when I narrate the Buddha's life or recount episodes from the Popol Vuh, Mahabharata, the Anansi tales, or Taíno, Amazonian, and Andean lore. Everyone is free to chime in, and I bounce off what they say, drawing diagrams and listing important terms and "study objects" on the board, drawing analogies between ancient and contemporary life, not to mention dropping the occasional vulgarity in my vernacular way of explaining troublesome terms, concepts, and scenarios. Code-switching, however, is kept to a bare minimum because I do not want to confuse immigrant students, nor do I want my lectures to be misunderstood as mere ethnic perspective. Perhaps the students were more responsive because they had considerable freedom to speak, but I found it hard to believe that my fellow faculty members were shutting students up until some official Q&A session, at which point they would have forgotten many of their questions. Perhaps my plain talk in class made students feel less intimidated by the material, but again, it was difficult to picture that my mostly left-leaning colleagues in their comfortable clothes and sensible shoes were casting art history as some elite pursuit beyond the social reach of our students.

So, if these students' high level of engagement and dynamism wasn't a result of revolutionary pedagogical technique on my part, was it the unusual course content I offered? One of the most powerful aspects of a diverse curriculum is that students learn about cultures for which they might have always had an unsatisfied curiosity. But even more than that, students are gratified to learn about their own cultural backgrounds in an organized academic setting, which differs greatly from the haphazard way they might have picked things up from their families. Time and again, students thank me after class (or semesters later) for explaining to them some ritual or symbol from their culture that their parents never did.

I would like to think that my course content is what engages students, that what drives good class attendance is learning about, say, the iconography of the owl in Taíno art and culture (which survives partially in West Indian folklore as the prophetic "jumbie bird" today), and realizing that the irregular but perfectly-fitted stone masonry of the Inka empire was part of a greater aesthetic of achieving harmony and structural stability from carefully negotiated diversities. However, unfamiliar course material involves more than fascinating classroom discussions. It requires reading, note taking, studying. And no matter how interesting a student finds this information, it is more work than simply recalling contrapposto and chiaroscuro from one's AP art history course or reviving one's pre-existing knowledge of Christian iconography. Embracing diversity in the curriculum requires a great commitment, and while some students eagerly rise to the challenge, others balk at all that attentive study.

My midterms are infamous for scaring those balking students straight (and occasionally scaring them away). They collect their graded exams with the usual refrain, "I didn't know he wanted me to be so specific!" despite all my admonishments on the test prep materials. Most of them return, however, to prevail on the final exam once they realize that the study and discussion of art is not about fuzzy subjectivities. The students at the campus where I taught for that single semester were no different: they struggled on the midterm and fared better on the final exam. Term papers were thoughtful and on par with those of my City College students, with only one failure and nearly half the class receiving B's. In short, these were not the underperformers I was warned about at the beginning of the semester.

Were my white colleagues just dead wrong about the students, whom they were more used to teaching than I? Had they failed to identify interests, abilities, talents because of their cultural difference from the students? Was this cohort of students effectively rehabilitated and rendered normal by my plain-talk style and the global content of my course? That explanation would have been enough for me. Yet I suspected that other, less theoretical factors were in play.

Time and again, my classroom interactions with students suggested what these other factors might be. Slowly, I warmed to the possibility that they were more comfortable with me than their other instructors because I came from somewhere within their demographic. Like some of the students of Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, Eastern European, and Russian descent, I was an immigrant, making reference to that fact when it was germane to class discussion. Like the African American students in the room, I was Black, sometimes making direct reference to myself as such when it was instructive. The Anglo-American students were noteworthy in that despite being vastly outnumbered in the classroom, most of them took particular pleasure in interacting with me and their classmates in discussions. Far from being intimidated in this mostly minority environment, they thrived. But we should keep in

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mind that these are white students attending a largely Black and immigrant school, so they were already comfortable with diversity before they took my course.

My theoretical position that diversity was more important in the curriculum was being challenged by an unexpected and, for me, somewhat embarrassing situation on the ground—that many students respond better to a teacher who is more like them. They were not only seeing themselves reflected in the course content (and gaining an understanding of the cultures of their friends and neighbors), they were seeing themselves in the instructor as well. I struggled with this. Was the ethnicity (and even nationality) of the professor really such an important factor in changing the tone, frequency, and quality of student-faculty interactions? Were the professors who warned me to lower my expectations experiencing a social disjuncture with the students, and as a result, unwittingly contributing to the apathy and low performance they were experiencing and expecting?

There is an ever-growing body of literature exploring the lack of diversity in academia and the ways in which the problem could or should be tackled.[1] This literature was for me easy to come across. But I, Dr. Waldron, wasn't studying it. By the early years of the twenty-first century, there was already considerable research systematically studying the effects on students of faculty diversity.[2] But I had not encountered it as I busied myself instead learning the art of the whole world east of Suez and south of the Nile's First Cataract.

As I emerged from the self-imposed blinders that kept me focused primarily on expanding the curriculum, I discovered that there was ample support for my tardy, anecdotal revelation that a professor's demographic affiliations can positively affect student outcomes. I have only just begun to study this dynamic and its pedagogical possibilities. My semester-long experience (and my new reading list) has caused me to reconsider many things, not least of which is how my origins in a Caribbean country where I am *not* a member of a minority group left me with some typically majority attitudes toward race issues in the workplace and the academy in general. It seems I had been too blithely disregarding the effects of the teacher's race and nationality on the sense of belonging that students of all backgrounds feel on campus, and their understanding of their own (and others') possibilities.

In my defense, I had many reasons for weighting a diverse curriculum over diverse bodies on campus. My experiences at US colleges had convinced me that academia's attempts at achieving faculty diversity were at best a geologically slow process not unlike that which turns fallen trees to petrified wood (that is, the replacement of one cell at a time), and at worst a cosmetic patch on an inherently structural imbalance. In the former case, it takes decades for the old hires to age out, and they are not necessarily replaced from the massive store of ethnically diverse young scholars.[3] In the latter case, carefully selected promotional photographs and self-congratulatory reporting in internal and external publications enables the institution to present itself as employing faculty from "diverse backgrounds." The photos more than subtly command: "Look at the African American professor emoting in front of his classroom! Look at the Asian American professor attending closely to her student in front of an open textbook or laptop! See? We're diverse!" If a discerning parent or prospective student should inquire about the percentages of these colorful professors, however, the recruitment officer might find himself "in tight pants," as we say in the Caribbean.

My cynicism about this commonly superficial gloss on a systemic personnel problem caused me to gravitate to the relatively easy but wide-reaching solution of diversifying the curriculum first. After all, a properly proposed, shepherded, and approved course in art beyond the Western canon can get "on the books" at many colleges without too

1. See Penny A. Pasque, Noe Ortega, John C. Burkhardt, and Marie P. Ting, eds., *Transforming Understandings of Diversity in Higher Education: Demography, Democracy, and Discourse* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2016); Abigail J. Stewart and Virginia Valian, *An Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Orlando Taylor, Cheryl Burgan Apprey, George Hill, Loretta McGrann, and Jianping Wang, "Diversifying the Faculty," *Peer Review* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2010): https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/diversifying-faculty.

2. For example see Mitchell J. Chang, Daria Witt, James Jones, and Kenji Hakuta, *Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Colleges and Universities* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mark Chesler and Alford A. Young, eds., *Faculty Identities and the Challenge of Diversity: Reflections on Teaching in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Patricia Gurin, Eric L. Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin, "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Educational Outcomes," *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 3 (2002): 330–67; Linda Serra Hagedorn, Winny YanFang Chi, Rita M. Cepeda, and Melissa McLain, "An Investigation of Critical Mass: The Role of Latino Representation in the Success of Urban Community College Students," *Research in Higher Education* 48, no. 1 (2007): 73–91.

3. José F. Moreno, Daryl G. Smith, Alma R. Clayton-Pedersen, Sharon Parker, and Daniel Hiroyuki Teraguchi, *The Revolving Door for Underrepresented Minority Faculty in Higher Education: An Analysis from the Campus Diversity Initiative* (San Francisco: James Irving Foundation, 2006).

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much difficulty, especially at CUNY, and it can actually run regularly if there is a professor around to ensure its promotion and consistent enrollment.[4] Of course, this raises the question of whether the university is willing to retain such a professor full time.[5]

In my experience, institutions have complex and sometimes peculiar clusters of interests when hiring, many of them having little to do with diversity-related issues. I myself have been hired full time on three separate occasions but never primarily for my expertise in art history beyond the West—my stated teaching mission. Instead, past employers have made it clear in my conversations with them after my hire that I was retained either for my teaching efficacy, high enrollment numbers in the courses I had already taught, or, in an interesting case, my combination of art history training and practical knowledge of studio art. Primarily as an instructor of African, Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, Native American, and/or pre-Columbian art, however, I have only ever been hired as an adjunct professor, effectively to put a little spice in the curriculum on a semester-by-semester basis. It turns out that what I thought was the dish, the university considered merely a condiment.

I had given priority to diversity in the curriculum because I was relatively powerless to change the institution except in the course content. In that area, I had some modicum of control. Now, even after realizing that my cultural background impacted my student-instructor interactions more forcefully than I had imagined, I still feel I can effect more change in the curriculum than anywhere else in the structure of the academy. After all, I cannot control my ethnicity or place of origin, although now I realize I can *deploy* these more effectively. It is unnatural that in the twenty-first century we should have to weigh which kind of diversity to push first, like battlefield surgeons prioritizing care. There is no reason that diversity in the student body, the professoriate, *and* the curriculum should not be strived for in a coordinated strategy to make the university reflect the world for which it purports to prepare its students.

The false choice of "curriculum above all else" might not have even occurred to me if college administrators had achieved even moderate diversification among their own ranks in the two decades that I have been teaching. The ethnic and gender diversity percentages among college administrators today is even more worrying than the faculty ratios, with the number of minority administrators (from admissions officers to university presidents) hovering around 15 percent for a student population that is more than 40 percent nonwhite.[6] Many colleges now have a diversity officer, but such a person, even with a dedicated staff, in the midst of an almost monochromatic administration, is probably as effective (and overworked) as a singular minority professor in charge of all matters of "color" in her department. In the end, the inclusion of underrepresented minorities ought to be effected in the bodies and minds of staff, faculty, and students alike so that diversity in the curriculum would be a natural development rather than a desperate triage.

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4. And even if the lengthy course-approval process failed, a professor could still hijack, say, an introduction to art course and make it global or even African, Asian, or Latin American and Caribbean if she thought she could get away with it. Colleges are also often amenable to a one-off special topics course in which diversity can be introduced, even though such wily tactics leave no long-lasting effect on the curriculum.

5. Moreno et al., *The Revolving Door for Underrepresented Minority Faculty in Higher Education*, 2006.

6. David Hawkins and Tara Nicola, "Diversity among Higher Education Admission Professionals Is More Important Than Ever," *Higher Education Today*, August 16, 2017, https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/08/16/diversity-among-higher-education-admission-professionals-important-ever/; Thomas D. Snyder, Cristobal de Brey, and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics 2015* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2016), 567–68.

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