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On Teaching Diversity and Inclusion

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On Teaching Diversity and Inclusion

Introduction and Rationale The relationship between the political project of social justice and the institutional project of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) is often seen by university management as one of natural alignment, allyship, and mutual commitment. Add the letters “D” and “I” to a grant application, a meeting agenda, or a programme handbook, and you are seen to be doing serious work. To be sure, what Ahmed (2012) calls “diversity work” (p. 7) in her book *On Being Included* can provide a political, intellectual, and pedagogical lens through which we can shape the work of a department or institution, from curriculum development to pastoral care, community-building, staff wellbeing, and student admissions. But the “language of diversity” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 51) can also be wilfully misread as a set of tick boxes designed to congratulate the institution for merely intending to be “diverse” and “inclusive,” all while foreclosing real change. Even gestures such as mandatory unconscious bias training have been shown to sidestep vital critiques of systemic and structural racism, exposing, and promising to mitigate individual inadequacies but retaining organisational status quos (Applebaum, 2019).

Scholars such as Ahmed working across feminist, queer, and critical race studies have given us theoretical and methodological frameworks not simply for celebrating “diversity” but for exploring this term itself as a function of power. Nash (2019) writes in her book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* that in higher education, for instance, the “apolitical and often antipolitical” function of “diversity” is frequently to “selectively usher a few bodies into exclusive institutions” (p. 24). All too often, the visible celebration of “diversity” as “benign variation” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 193) attempts to erase material structures of power and inequality. In Banet-Weiser’s (2018) words, describing the mainstreaming of contemporary feminism, “visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end” (p. 23). The institutionalisation of supposedly polemical fields such as queer, feminist, and critical race studies (see Wiegman, 2012) ironically feeds (into) this politics of visibility: given a legitimate institutional platform, “diversity work” may become more visible, but the job of critique becomes harder (especially when your object of critique includes your own sector or organisation).

In 2020, I was tasked with designing a module called “Diversity and Inclusion in Practice” for a new online MA in Global Cultures, which is taught across the departments of Liberal Arts, Modern Languages, History, and Classics. On paper, this assignment made sense: as a Lecturer in Gender and Sexuality Studies, I research and teach on marginalised identities and communities and spent many years as my department’s “D&I Lead.” However, to design a module around this theme meant reckoning with a paradox, for the reasons outlined above. If citing the vocabulary of D&I makes me “strategic,” it also makes me complicit in an institutional performance about which I feel deeply ambivalent.

In the sections below, I chart my thought process in determining how to put this very ambivalence “in[to] practice” in my design and delivery of a module about D&I itself. I question how to avoid simply replicating instrumentalizing models of D&I training like unconscious bias training, the adoption of which all too neatly implies an endpoint: *having been satisfactorily trained*. Instead, I consider how to thoughtfully mobilise the relationship between the theory of D&I and the practice of it in an ongoing process of experiential learning. And I explore how the professional and personal experiences and contributions of students on this part-time, online MA shape the role of the classroom at the intersection of pedagogy and politics.

Learning Objectives

This module asks students to:

- Situate the language of “Diversity and Inclusion” in contemporary debates about identity, privilege, oppression, power, and inequality
- Critically evaluate the language of “Diversity and Inclusion” policies and initiatives from a range of professional and organisational settings
- Develop a meaningful practice of diversity and inclusion that intersects with theoretical claims
- Move with ease between and reflect on different genres of communication.

Explanation The Global Cultures MA programme that houses this module was launched in 2021. It was designed for distance learners based in different countries and time zones, with different ages, disciplinary backgrounds, levels of experience, responsibilities, motivations and means. In the first year of the programme, the average student was aged 38; the top five educational backgrounds were languages, business, social sciences, humanities, and education; and 20 countries were represented among the cohort. In order to maximise flexibility, all of the teaching materials on the programme’s six-week modules were made available in advance on the virtual learning environment, and students participated throughout the week through both targeted and general discussion forums, interactive activities, and a weekly one-hour webinar led either by myself or by colleagues on the programme teaching team.

By design, all students on the programme must study part-time, often alongside full-time jobs in sectors such as museums, education, business, charities, journalism, and publishing; many of them are sponsored to undertake the course by their workplaces. As such, in its promotional materials the MA promises the application of theoretical knowledge as part of a professional skillset. “Theoretical application” however implies a one-way street (theory → skills) and therefore a kind of strategic vocabulary-building. In designing “Diversity and Inclusion in Practice,” I certainly wanted to

emphasise how theory underpins, informs, and often invigorates practice – but also how an alignment with practice has been central to so many theoretical bodies of work, particularly those invested in social justice. In the words of feminist postcolonial scholar Mohanty (2003), theory at its best is what allows us to make that practice, and the experiences surrounding it, “communicable” (p. 191).

After an introductory week, I divided the module’s five remaining weeks into distinct frameworks or interventions: intersectionality and its challenge to “single-axis” identity politics (Crenshaw, 1989; Nash, 2019; Puar, 2012); queer theory and the critique it poses to normativity (Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Peers et al., 2012); human rights and the “paradoxes” that inevitably define them (Brown, 2000; Spade, 2011; Weeks, 2005); “unconscious bias” and its limitations (Gilroy, 2002 [1987]; Mohanty, 2003; Tate & Page, 2018); and the decolonisation of knowledge (Anzaldúa, 2019 [1992]; Lewis & Hemmings, 2019; Menon, 2018). Under the banner of these interventions / frameworks, each week further emphasised the relationship between theory and practice by combining a) theoretical readings containing key critiques of the language of D&I; b) short audio commentaries exploring the historical, geographical, and social contexts for these theoretical interventions; and c) queer, feminist, and anti-racist activist and/or artistic practices generated by and responding to these debates and ideas (see Figure 1).

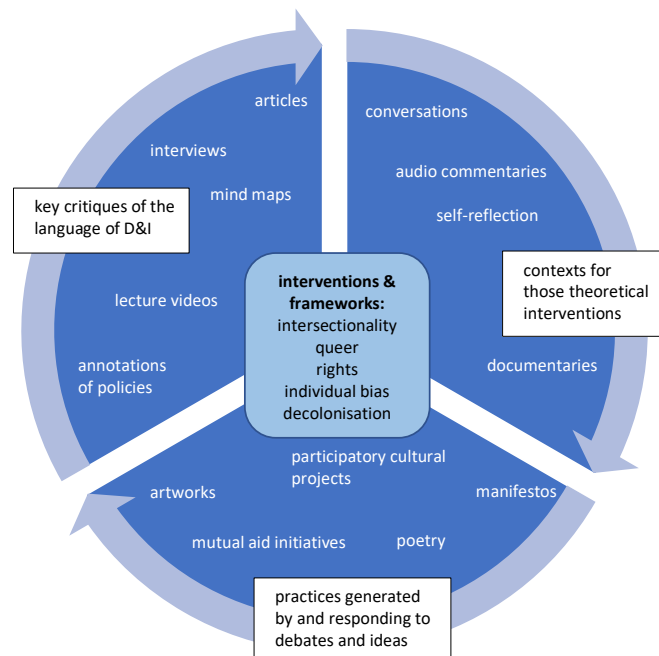


Figure 1. *The inner square lists the interventions and frameworks that structured each week’s materials; around it, the different resources for students to watch, listen, read, or engage with are grouped within the cycle of theory-practice.*

Exemplifying this approach, in the week on decolonising knowledge, for instance, we thought about different genres, methods, and ways of approaching academic knowledge, reading semi-autobiographical essays by Menon (2018) and Anzaldúa (2019 [1992]) and a wide-ranging conversation between Hemmings and Lewis (2019). Alongside these readings we watched a recorded performance by queer poet Keith Jarrett (Muddy Feet Poetry, 2016). We finished with an activity called “where do you know from” (Zuroski, 2020), which asks us individually and collectively to think about our own experiences of formal and informal education, the unexpected spaces of learning, the structures of citational practice, and the norms of knowledge production.

Assessment The assessment strategy was key to the module aims of thinking across theory and practice. Formative assessments throughout the module asked students to engage their own current and past experiences as they researched and critiqued initiatives in their own regions (many of them were later inspired to get involved in local groups if they weren’t already); “mapped” terms like intersectionality using a digital collage or mood board; created a manifesto in prose or poetry for living life differently inspired by artist-activist projects; or compared “official solutions” for societal problems with “transformative approaches” based in grassroots movements, provoked by Bassichis, Spade, and Lee’s (2011) essay “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got” (pp. 17-19). In the summative assessment, I asked students to write a critical review incorporating four theoretical readings, developing their understanding of these interventions in order to critique an existing D&I policy from any sector: students ultimately chose case studies ranging from education and health to the arts, travel, and fashion. The assessment asked students to consider how the policy’s language shapes its parameters, asking such questions as: what it is called (does it use the words “diversity and inclusion” or others, for instance “equality” or “decolonisation”?) Who is it for: employers, students, customers, members of the public, applicants, community members, colleagues, service users, other stakeholders? Is it written in language that is clear or obtuse? Does it state particular action plans or general principles? Does it use words like “diversity” meaningfully? Does it name particular identity categories? Does it make any universal assumptions? What would you like to ask the person who wrote it? What would you change?

Debriefing Throughout the module, students were encouraged to “debrief” by thinking intentionally about how the five module frameworks and interventions (intersectionality, queer, rights, bias, and decolonisation) spoke to their professional and/or personal worlds. This intentional thinking was especially apparent in how some students approached their summative assessment. The D&I policy they were asked to choose and analyse could come from any field. Responding to this, some students chose policies from

organisations they had encountered as parents, patients, students, visitors, or carers; others chose policies from their own organisations and used their analysis later to promote new practices in the workplace. This latter emphasis on what universities like to call “employability” is often seen as being at odds with the necessarily inefficient process of humanities (and arguably all) research, which asks more questions than it answers. But, as Brim (2020) argues in *Poor Queer Studies*, those of us researching and teaching on marginalisation and social justice must also recognise the connections between education and profession (so-called “employability”) as central to acknowledging the classed, gendered, and racialised dynamics of academic attainment and progression (p. 105). Indeed, the successful branding of many institutions’ “diversity” as described in the introduction ironically serves to distract from the precarious working and learning conditions that disproportionately affect people of colour, disabled people, women, and LGBTQ+ people: students and staff alike. Brim sees such issues not just as material for the picket line but for the classroom, necessarily central to teaching feminist, queer, critical race or disability studies, or any other body of scholarship that is rooted in social justice movements.

To this end, I decided to make debriefing a central – and sustained – part of the module’s remit. I emphasised how theoretical work (reading, writing, thinking, talking, working through ideas) should not be regarded as distinct from work-work (vocation, earning money, paying the rent, finding a career, other forms of domestic or caring labour), and gave students the space to think through the relationship between the two. Brim’s polemic is framed carefully through his own institutional context: he teaches at a state university in the USA with far fewer resources than my own institution, and his book’s title foregrounds both the learning conditions and the experience of working-class students for whom paid work is not an afterthought but a central condition of (as in, prerequisite for) university attendance. My framing of social justice as the foundational ethic of “Diversity and Inclusion in Practice” was likewise shaped by the fact that many of our students were not only working full or part-time but were also likely to be full- or part-time carers or parents. The language of labour (and therefore of D&I) held a very different set of meanings for these mature students in comparison to the 18-year-olds typically studying on campus as undergraduates (though of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has also awoken many of us to the caring and other domestic responsibilities of *all* our students and the fallacy of assuming any “typical” student profile). For some students, the formative and summative assessments encouraged them to develop a “meaningful practice of diversity and inclusion” through the workplace or the community, with several of them launching or contributing to new initiatives. For others, this meaningful practice was shaped by a personal commitment to thinking, living, and relating otherwise.

As argued above, to put D&I into practice is to consider how it embeds and is embedded in the histories, norms, and structures of knowledge production, within and beyond the academy. Together with colleagues on the

teaching team leading webinars alongside mine, I therefore encouraged students on this module to relate critical theory to professional, social, cultural, and familial practices of work, including care work (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) and therefore to put theory into practice by making sense of – making “communicable” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 191) the alignment of their experiences as students, workers, readers, visitors, patients, parents, spectators, peers, customers, friends, colleagues, or carers. De-centring the “expertise” of academics in the classroom (Kinchin & Hay, 2007, p. 48), we invited students each week to reflect on how they situated themselves in relation to key readings, themes, and questions. They were asked to think about their own identity position(s) and to articulate feelings that might have arisen during the reading and discussions (they were invited to voluntarily share these reflections with me and the other students in webinars if they wished). Implicitly or explicitly, these reflections became the material of our very discussions as together we thought about the structures we work and learn within.

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