

Singled Out

Student Stories of the Diversity Challenges and Opportunities in the Classroom

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During the 2008 University of Denver's annual Diversity Summit, Joel Portman, AUSA Student Senator, organized a student-led workshop focusing on student experiences in the classroom. More specifically, the students wanted to explore and share with workshop participants (many of whom were faculty) both positive and negative incidents that they have experienced in the classroom related to diversity. On the positive side, the students shared some great stories about instructors who handled issues of diversity in a proactive and positive manner. On the negative side, the students also shared examples of when they were singled-out in the classroom (and sometimes outside the classroom) by faculty and students because of one of their group identities (e.g., Jewish, Gay, Latino/a, African American, female).

"Singling a student out" is when a faculty member or student calls on a fellow student to represent a group or educate the rest of the class about a group to which the student belongs. An example of this would be when an instructor is discussing Affirmative Action and asks the only African American in the class to share her thoughts regarding the opinions of African Americans about the topic. The assumption is that the student knows the opinions of every African American in the U.S. and that the student knows about and can comment on Affirmative Action. Another example is constantly asking the only "out" gay student in the class to comment on issues facing the GLBTIQ community.

The workshop participants agreed that, while there are some good instructors at DU who are aware of and deal successfully with issues of diversity in the classroom, singling students out continues to be a problem in DU classrooms and must be addressed.

The following are some of the stories that students shared in the workshop. It also includes the stories of students who were not in the workshop, but were asked to contribute their experiences. The stories are intended to create awareness of singling out students with the hope that instructors will become aware of the issue and improve the classroom climate for a diversity of groups. It is important to note that some of the details related by the students have been changed to maintain anonymity of the students, faculty, and departments.

The first sets of stories are in response to the question: Can you give me an example of when a faculty member positively handled an issue in class related to diversity? The second set are a response to the question: Can you tell me about a time when you were singled-out in the classroom and asked to represent a group to which you belong?

Opportunities in the Classroom

Can you give me an example of when a faculty member positively handled an issue in class related to diversity?

Story One

"During one of my first classes at DU, we were learning about the Nazis, their rise to power, and the Holocaust. Being Jewish, I am often assumed to be an expert on these topics and often get odd looks from students during discussions. As a way to allow myself and another Jewish student to share our thoughts and experiences (we had both visited death camps in Poland) without the assumptions and questioning looks from classmates, my professor talked to us both outside of the class one day. She asked if we would be interested in sharing our experiences with the class and if we would be comfortable answering their questions as part of our presentation. We both agreed and I and the other student put together a PowerPoint presentation with pictures from the death camps. We shared our personal stories, experiences, and feelings with the class in a respectful and understanding atmosphere. My Professor facilitated a discussion that was a positive experience for all members of the class."

Story Two

"For me my queer identity is mostly invisible unless I "out" myself in the class room. Being one of the few out queer students on campus, I usually out myself in class and speak on behalf of queer issues. But every once in a while I don't have the energy to talk on behalf of queer issues or the Queer Movement. Once in class, we were talking about the Queer Movement when a student started talking about how gays just want special rights that they already have. This is where my professor stepped in and corrected the student stating that gay identified people actually have fewer rights than their heterosexual counterparts. It was a really great experience for me."

Story Three

"One of the best ways to open-mindedly familiarize yourself with new ideas or perceptions is to allow yourself to be surrounded by others who are both knowledgeable about the subject and have a passion for sharing that knowledge. This was the case for me when it came to one of my first diversity-based classes, including topics ranging from ethnicity discrimination to sexual orientation. Before this class, I was never really submerged in diversity-related issues and the information I had been introduced to was usually whispered or masked in a sense, meaning that I was informed with very sugar-coated and childlike examples. In this college diversity class, my professor walked into the classroom and before even stating her name, introduced herself as a lesbian Caucasian woman. She began speaking of her role as both a minority and as a person of privilege, two topics of which I had no prior knowledge. Although her introduction may have shocked me at first, it was very truthful and forward information that has since allowed me to become more comfortable, open-minded, and accepting as a person."

Story Four

"I was in a class once where-- as in most of my classes, I was the only person of color. The professor was discussing an incident that had occurred in the previous class where I had engaged in a heated exchange with an Anglo student about culturally insensitive remarks that she made. The professor could see that my offense and experiences were not being heard, valued, or understood by the class or the individual who made the comment. My tone and emotion were diluting my message and the professor decided to intervene on my behalf and explain what I was trying to get across with a more effective tone and style. She helped the class to understand why I was offended and she helped me to understand how I could change the delivery of my message to be more effective in such situations. It was a great learning experience for the entire class. This was also the first time a professor ever defended me and truly seemed to understand me and where I come from."

Story Five

"In one of my classes, there were many discussions surrounding the US political system and the Presidents of this country. There were many times when my classmates would discuss why a certain President was great and the contributions he made to our country. I did not feel safe participating in the discussions because while I do believe that we have had good presidents, I also did not agree with the notion that they were all great. Some Presidents promoted certain policies that were hurtful to minorities. Nevertheless, I did not want to single myself out in the class so I just chose not to participate. One day, the professor asked me to talk after class and he basically wanted to know why I was not fully participating in the discussion. I explained to him that I felt that my views seemed really different and it was bad enough when other people singled me out that I did not want to do that to myself. He said that he understood but that he thought my classmates would greatly benefit from my perspective and it would be a good way to stimulate some discussion. At the next class I did participate more, my classmates and I did engage in discussions but the professor did a really good job of facilitating the discussion so it was educational for all of us"

Challenges in the Classroom

Can you tell me about a time when you were singled-out in the classroom and asked to represent a group to which you belong?

Story One

"By wearing a yarmulke around campus, I am easily identified as Jewish. I often end up being assumed to be an expert on all things about Judaism and about Israel. Some people also assume that I know Hebrew.

On the day the light rail station opened up on campus, I was dropping something off in an office where a number of students were talking to a professor. As I was turning to leave, he asked me: "Don't you have to hurry up?" I was rather confused (and at that point, didn't know who he was) and gave him a puzzled look. He responded "It's Friday night." In Judaism, the Sabbath begins on Friday night and in traditional Judaism, you don't do certain things on Shabbat (such as ride or use electricity - i.e. no light rail). My observance is not at that level, even though I wear a yarmulke. I was still confused at this point, as were the other students. He asked me to turn around and bend down so that they could see my head. Once he said that, I understood what he was hinting at, but he explained to the other students that I wear a yarmulke and don't go out on Friday night."

Story Two

"This year in a class I was taking, I had a Professor who liked to make comments about Judaism that he knew only I would understand. He would make quick statements in lectures about Jewish practices or texts. Eventually, he began dropping in Hebrew words or making comments under his breath in Hebrew. Sometimes I knew what he was talking about or saying. Sometimes I could figure part of it out. Other times I just didn't know. Whenever any of these incidents happened, the entire class would look at me. After class, it was often hard to explain to my classmates that I was the "all knowing" Jewish student who didn't have the slightest idea what my professor was saying."

Story Three

"What happens to me a lot in class is that the class will cover an issue that happens to have queer identified people involved. The problem is that many times professors overlook the Queer involvement or the fact that Queer people are affected by similar issues as the other groups involved. Many times professors expect me to speak on behalf of these queer people by asking me what do queer people think of this issue, or I am forced to speak out and say that there are queer people involved or affected by this class discussion."

Story Four

"My name is David. I was enrolled in a Literature class in which we were reading a story about a mulatto boy and his Caucasian friend. The author described the mulatto as not being much darker than his friend. The professor pointed this passage out to the rest of the class then proceeded to walk over to my table (I happened to be one of the only minorities in his class). He told the class, "so you can imagine that this mulatto boy from the story was about the same color as David [me]" and then pointing to a Caucasian girl sitting behind me he continued, "and Tiffany here as being the same color as the friend." I was very offended that he found it necessary to single me out because of the color of my skin. His actions were humiliating and superfluous."

Story Five

"In my first language class at DU, I experienced something that had never really happened to me before. I do identify as a Latina woman, however, with this identity sometimes comes the erroneous implication that I am a fluent Spanish speaker. In this class in particular, I was looked at rudely and it was particularly hard to get someone to willingly want to speak to me. Again, assuming that I was fluent in Spanish, I also noticed that the professor was constantly asking me our daily practice questions, more so than the other students in the class. At the same time, I was treated very strangely when I responded with the wrong answers. One day after class, I was packing up my books and another student approached me with a smile. I greeted her and soon after that she asked me why I was taking the class. I didn't really understand what she meant or why she would ask me that so I didn't respond right away. Nevertheless, before I could answer she asked if I was trying to raise my GPA by taking an easy class to secure an "easy A." I responded by asking her what made her think that the class was easy for me when I didn't know

the language. In the end, she didn't believe me. Later in the class, the professor asked me if I spoke Spanish at home and, if so, that I should be using my skills to help the other students."

Story Six

"In the second week of one of my graduate classes we were talking about cultural competence and gender differences. The class was comprised of approximately 15 women and 1 man. The male in the class shared his belief that he did not feel women were oppressed anymore and claiming so would be inaccurate because in his own experience his wife made more money than he did and that would clearly be impossible if women were still oppressed in society. As a woman, and a woman of color at that, I wanted to further this discussion, share my experiences, and explain to him that his personal experience was real to him but not characteristic of all society. One other woman in class agreed with his belief using her ability to be in graduate school as an example of the complete impossibility of sexism existing in society. I was raising my hand to share my insights and the professor overlooked me and announced that the sexism discussion was not the focus of our class that day and we were moving forward to the next topic. This was extremely shocking to me that the professor would stop such an important conversation and it demonstrated to me that true cultural competence was not a priority to her."

Story Seven

"One of the most difficult things in my school experience has been that often I am the only student of color in class. Whenever we are discussing an issue, even when I don't want to be singled out, sometimes I feel my classmates expect me to do it and they will even give me looks to do it. For example, in one of the classes we were talking about community development and one of the professors said that when Lowry was being re-developed to accommodate new housing the neighbors were not happy about it and then he said "they did not want to be close to those riff raff on the other side". This statement was very offensive to me since I live in that area and I wanted to say something but I just couldn't. During the class, several of my classmates would turn to see if I would say anything. They knew his comment was offensive, but no one said anything."

Questions for Faculty

In thinking about the phenomenon of singling students out, the following are some questions for faculty members to consider in addressing this issue:

- What is the climate for diversity like in your classroom?
- How might you be inadvertently singling-out students?
- Are some of your students targeting other students?
- What will you do in situations where you or other students are tempted to or actually do single-out students?
- What can you do to make your classroom more inclusive for GLBTIQ students, students of color, International students, women, men, students from different religious backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students from other salient DU groups?
- Do students representing different backgrounds feel "safe" in your classroom?
- Are the exercises, assignments, examples, and syllabus inclusive?

As with all aspects of our teaching, a little extra forethought and in-the-moment attention can help us avoid/prevent the issue of singling-out students in our classrooms, and contribute to an inclusive classroom that maximizes learning for everyone.

Faculty Resources around Inclusive Excellence

- Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL): <http://otl.du.edu/inclusive-excellence-and-our-teaching>
- Office of Diversity & Inclusion (ODI) supports faculty and academic-related issues: www.du.edu/diversity-inclusion
- Inclusion & Equity education (IEE) provides students with information, skills and opportunities for constructive engagement across difference; faculty and staff are welcome to participate in most workshops and events: www.du.edu/studentlife/ie-education