Using Experiential Learning Theory and Learning Styles in Diversity Education

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Diversity education is an increasingly important priority for schools, the work place, and the community. Its purpose is to raise awareness and understanding of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, physical ability, culture, social and economic class, as well as in less visible differences of sexual orientation, education, personal style, and way of knowing. Diversity education promotes two fundamental democratic values ---- equal rights for all regardless of difference and the right to recognition of individual difference. The idea is that learning flourishes when learners have equal opportunity to develop and utilize their talents and perspectives to the fullest. Learning to value differences and to be receptive to diversity poses difficult educational challenges.

1. Diversity education requires not only acquisition of knowledge but also attitude change, appreciation of multiple perspectives, and willingness to bring about change. It must address emotional, perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral issues. The definition of prejudice, for example, includes not only ignorance of those who are different but also an emotional investment in maintaining that ignorance. Freire’s (1974) pedagogy of “critical conscientization” sought to enable the oppressed masses of Brazil to understand their plight as well as to change it.

2. Resources of diversity education must be organized to be maximally responsive to what each learner wants to learn and the manner in which that learning is to be achieved. An African American female may enter a diversity class seeking to understand the institutions of racism and sexism, a goal that may require her to read related concepts and theories. A white male, on the other hand, who wants to learn what it

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means to himself and others that he is white male, might engage in self
reflection and dialogue with his classroom peers. Such individualized
learning sometimes comes into conflict with the democratic value of
equality in education when individualized learning is interpreted as
proposing a politics of difference, and equality is perceived as espousing
a politics of sameness.

3. Perhaps, because diversity education addresses core feelings and
values, it requires a climate of psychological safety and trust. Learners
must feel empowered and in control of their own learning. When
learners feel threatened, they adopt defensive and conformist postures.
Teaching, then, is experienced as coercive and manipulative, and
learning becomes secondary.

Diversity education summons to the classroom social issues and the
act of learning in unique combination. Teaching about human differ-
ences compels a framework that is considerably broader than tradi-
tional classroom methodology — one that recognizes the relevancy of
education to the learner’s life situations. Theories of experiential learn-
ing provide educational strategies for responding to the challenges of
diversity education.

1. Experiential learning theory (ELT) describes learning as the
holistic engagement of affective, perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral
processes (Kolb, 1984). Learning results from the interplay of these pro-
cesses, which are positioned along two primary dimensions of knowl-
edge. Prehension, knowing by taking in data, involves the affect of
concrete experience and cognition of abstract conceptualization. Trans-
formation, knowing through modification of data, requires perception in
reflective observation and behavior in active experimentation. ELT is
an inclusive paradigm that allows for a range of responses to the
learning requirements of diversity education.

2. ELT in the concept of learning style offers a perspective for
addressing the dilemma between equality in education and
individualized learning. Learners are each unique in the way they
learn and equal in their contribution to a larger holistic learning
cycle that values, acknowledges, and includes all ways of knowing.
There is no one best way to learn. The assumption is equal worth in all
ways of knowing. ELT also provides guidelines for creating learning
environments that address the special learning needs of each learning
style.

3. ELT proposes that the foundation of learning resides not in
schools, books, or even teachers; rather, it rests in the experience of the
learner. This democratic approach to education emphasizes self-
directed learning and the role dialogue plays in the creation of a
psychologically safe climate of learning.
In this chapter, we apply the experiential learning theories of Kolb and Freire to formulate ideas about delivering effective diversity education. These ideas are in part shaped by findings from interviews with diversity educators about their successful and unsuccessful diversity education experiences. They were asked to describe their experiences concretely, to reflect on them, to conclude why the experiences were successful or unsuccessful, and to recommend actions that can improve diversity education as it is now practiced.

**HOLISTIC LEARNING**

ELT is distinct from traditional approaches to learning. Unlike the epistemology of behavioral theory or cognitive and other rationalist theories, experiential learning theory is based on the epistemology of radical empiricism — a knowledge theory that affords equal status to multiple ways of knowing. Its intellectual roots are traceable to the pragmatism of John Dewey, the Gestalt and action research perspectives of Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget’s structural dimensions of cognitive development. According to ELT, learning proceeds as a cycle and results from the integration of four learning modes — concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Learners must be able to fully and openly engage in new experiences; reflect on, observe, and consider these experiences from various perspectives; create concepts that assimilate these experiences into sound theories; and appropriately apply these theories to their life situations.

Of significance in this knowledge theory is that the four learning modes constitute two primary dimensions of knowing. The first dimension, prehension, represents concrete experience and abstract conceptualization. Knowledge acquired through concrete experience — affective, immediate, and intuitive — is called apprehension. Knowledge gained through abstract conceptualization — cognitive, rational, and symbolic — is referred to as comprehension. The second dimension of knowing, transformation, represents reflective observation and active experimentation. Knowing through reflective observation — perceptual, appreciative, and diffuse — is intentional. Knowing through active experimentation — behavioral, focused, and goal directed — is extensional. The synthesis of these four forms of knowing results in higher levels of learning.

Research and theory illustrate distinctions of apprehensive and comprehensive knowledge and suggest that these distinctions could be gender related. Females are associated with a “diffused awareness” that emphasizes acceptance and wholeness, and males are depicted as having a “focused consciousness” that is characterized by separation and change (de Castillejo, 1973). Related research contends that females rely on intuition, personal meaning, and self understanding,
which is at odds with the more socially accepted way of knowing that establishes truth in a rational and dispassionate manner (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The voice of females is subjective, holistic, and contextualized in contrast to the objective, rational, structured voice of males (Gilligan, 1982). More than half (59 percent) of 801 females emphasized concrete experience over abstract conceptualization, while 638 males (59 percent) preferred the reverse, abstract conceptualization over concrete experience (Smith & Kolb, 1986).

The transformation dimension of knowing is well illustrated in the two primary psychological dimensions of introversion (intention) and extraversion (extension) in dialectic relationship (Jung, 1971). The radical pedagogical concept of praxis — “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” — depicts the interplay between intentional knowing and extensional knowing (Freire, 1974, p.36).

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

“The scientific study of human individuality poses some fundamental dilemmas. The human sciences, unlike the physical sciences, place an equal emphasis on the discovery of general laws that apply to all human beings and on the understanding of the functioning of the individual case” (Kolb, 1984, p. 62).

Educational institutions continue to search for ways to deliver effectiveness in diversity education. The challenge of teaching to a diverse group of students is the ability to respond to the unique qualities and peculiar needs that each brings to the classroom. Compounding the situation is the delicate nature of the topic of individualized education.

The democratic principle of equality has propelled to the forefront the current demand for recognition by females, persons of color, and other subaltern groups (Taylor, 1992). Equality for these individuals is far from being realized in the political, social, and economic realms, as well as in the educational domain. At issue is a politics of sameness that espouses equality in education versus a politics of difference that proposes individualized instruction. Opponents of recognition of difference in education question its value. They proceed from a vantage point of difference blind that is the appropriation of neutrality in response to diversity education — treat and consider all students the same. Separatism invites prejudice and ill will, the consequence of which is increased racial and ethnic conflict over inequality in education that serves little purpose (Schlesinger, 1992). Alternatively, difference blind suppresses identity and is discriminatory (Taylor, 1992). Diversity education faces the classic dilemma of total system versus subsystem optimization. Will it be sameness or difference, universalism or peculiarism, individuality at the sacrifice of equality?
Learning Style

Educators have yet to fully discern what equality looks like in diversity education. They do know it is unequal when Native Americans, for instance, are excluded or portrayed in an unbalanced way in textbooks, even though they and others are taught from the same textbooks (Minnich, 1990). Educators are also beginning to realize the extent to which cultural, ethnic, and gender differences influence learning and achievement.

Students from various areas of American subculture — African American, Chinese American, Greek American, and Mexican American — have different patterns of preferred learning strategies (Dunn, Gemake, Jalali, & Zenhausern, 1990). Statistical differences were found in the learning styles of Asian students at a Singapore college and Caucasian students at a U.S. university (Lam-Phoon, 1986). Studies suggest that Native Americans possess strong spatial ability and visual memory (Kleinfeld & Nelson, 1991). As stated earlier, females have a slightly higher preference than males for concrete experience over abstract conceptualization and vice versa (Smith & Kolb, 1986).

Diversity educators must be mindful of learning differences among students and the methods used to assess these differences (Sims & Sims, 1993). It is through the concept of learning style that ELT provides a mediating perspective on the dilemma of equality and personalized education. Experiential learning theory allows for recognition without judgment of both common and unique characteristics of learning and in so doing destructures whatever hierarchical arrangement that exists between the politics of sameness and the politics of difference in education.

The Learning Style Inventory (LSI) evaluates the relative preference an individual holds for the four learning modes (Kolb, 1984). The LSI reveals four statistically prevalent learning styles — diverger, converger, assimilator, and accommodator. The diverger is imaginative, understands people, perceives relationships between situations, and is good at brainstorming. The converger, who is the opposite of the diverger, likes deductive reasoning and is good at decision making and problem solving. The assimilator develops models and theories, plans well, and is systematic. The accommodator, opposite of the assimilator, takes risks, gets things done, and is comfortable with assuming leadership.

Learning Environments

Individualized learning in diversity education must also be considered from the perspective of course design. Content, context, conduct, and character are key dimensions of designing a course on understanding and appreciating diversity (Schor, 1993), each dimension
having its own pedagogical consideration. What will be included in terms of course content? What is the appropriate context or learning environment to foster? What is the process or conduct to use? What is the character or role of the instructor?

Particular learning styles seem better suited for particular learning environments (Fry & Kolb, 1979). Students perform better in environments and with approaches that complement their learning styles than in environments or approaches that are inconsistent with their learning styles (Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavas, 1989). Mexican American students, to illustrate, are likely to achieve better in small groups than when working independently (Dunn & Dunn, 1978). In addition to conceptualizing individual learning styles, experiential learning theory provides a structure for the learning environment in a manner consistent with the learning cycle (Fry & Kolb, 1979) and appropriate for diversity education. Figure 8.1 depicts the relationship between learning modes, learning styles, and learning environments.

Four learning environments are identified and oriented toward the four learning modes — an affectively oriented environment corresponds to concrete experience, a perceptually oriented environment corresponds to reflective observation, a symbolically oriented environment (hereafter referred to as a cognitively oriented environment) corresponds to abstract conceptualization, and a behaviorally oriented environment corresponds to active experimentation. Each environment is measured by observing key variables: purpose, primary source, rules guiding learner behavior, nature of feedback, and teacher role. These variables, when considered, create four distinct components of a learning ecosystem. Table 8.1 structures each learning environment against the five variables with examples of activities for each.

**Affectively Oriented Learning Environment**

This learning setting focuses on attitudes, feelings, values, and opinions generated from “here and now” experiences. Tasks and activities often change from prior design and are more emergent as a result of learners’ immediate needs. Procedures and guidelines are geared toward free expression of personal feelings, values, and opinions. Feedback is personalized with regard to the personal needs and goals of the learner rather than comparative and comes from both teachers and peers. Teachers serve as role models and colleagues. Typical activities are exploring feelings with students at a particular time or asking the class what might be useful to do given the dynamics of the moment.

**Perceptually Oriented Learning Environment**

This learning setting emphasizes appreciation and understanding of relationships between events and concepts. Students are encouraged to view topics from multiple perspectives and in different ways in the service of clarifying their own position. Emphasis is on how things get
done, the process, rather than on solutions. Learners are evaluated on methodology of inquiry versus getting a particular answer. Teachers serve as process facilitators. Inviting students to step back and attempt to appreciate opposing viewpoints or engaging the class in a causal mapping of the concept of oppression are examples of activities.

**Cognitively Oriented Environment**

This environment is one characterized by skill mastery. Activities are directed toward problem solving based on “there and then” objective data. Learner output is evaluated as correct or incorrect using objective criteria. Teachers function as interpreters of a field of knowledge. Lecturing on identity development or asking students to create their personal theories about gender differences are typical activities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
<th>Affectively Oriented</th>
<th>Perceptually Oriented</th>
<th>Cognitively Oriented</th>
<th>Behaviorally Oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Develop personal awareness and insight</td>
<td>Appreciate and understand how and why things relate</td>
<td>Acquire and master knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Actively apply learning to real life situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information source</td>
<td>“Here and now” concrete experience</td>
<td>Multiple data sources viewed in different ways</td>
<td>“There and then” abstract concepts and facts</td>
<td>Activities directed toward requirements of task completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules of behavior</td>
<td>Free expression of feelings, values, and opinions</td>
<td>Emphasis on process and inquiry</td>
<td>Adherence to prescribed objective criteria</td>
<td>Minimal rules in support of learner autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of feedback</td>
<td>Personalized and immediate from teachers and peers</td>
<td>Non-evaluative suggestions rather than critiques</td>
<td>Evaluation of correct or incorrect learner output</td>
<td>Learner judges own performance based on established standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher role</td>
<td>Role model and colleague</td>
<td>Process facilitator</td>
<td>Interpreter of a field of knowledge</td>
<td>Coach and advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Check-in, guided imagery to create experience, or debate</td>
<td>Causal mapping, maintaining a diary, or brainstorming</td>
<td>Presenting concepts, developing personal theories, or traditional testing</td>
<td>Developing action plans, a simulation, or leaderless work teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Behaviorally Oriented Environment

This setting is geared toward application of knowledge and skills to solve real life situations. Activities are directed toward what is necessary to plan to complete a task. Learners are left to judge their own performance based on criteria they establish. Teachers serve as coaches who provide friendly advice and leave responsibility for outcome to the learner. Assigning students to develop strategies for using their learnings about differences in their everyday lives or developing role plays that demonstrate effective interaction in the workplace among the culturally different are illustrations of activities.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, DIALOGUE, AND DIVERSITY EDUCATION

"We have cast our own lot with learning, and learning will pull us through. But this learning must be imbued with the texture and feeling of human experiences shared and interpreted through dialogue with each other" (Kolb, 1984, p. 2). Diversity education requires attitude change — an unprecedented and daring undertaking for the classroom. Teaching and learning about human differences evoke high anxiety in their most seasoned citizens — teachers, learners, and administrators alike. As a subject matter, diversity education has few equals in terms of uncertainty of outcome. Awareness of the strong tone of emotion generated when social issues are discussed leads to expressions of dismay at a trend that focuses on course content in diversity education without attending to issues of process. “It is very difficult to talk about race, class, or gender in a meaningful way without also talking and learning about racism, classism, and sexism. The introduction of these and other issues of oppression often generates in students powerful emotional responses ranging from guilt and shame to anger and despair. These emotional responses, if not addressed, can result in student resistance” (Tatum, 1992, p. 19).

Feeling safe in the classroom takes on added significance in diversity education. Students must feel supported and believe that they can make choices about the process of learning as they venture into what for many is unchartered territory. New experience is the foundation of learning; however, a sense of security must be attained before learners can begin to consider the unfamiliar (Fry & Kolb, 1979). Trust is critical and enhanced by guidelines and group norms that encourage participation, risk taking, self disclosure, mutual support, and dialogue (Schor, 1993).

Diversity education without dialogue is programmed for failure. Providing a forum for dialogue is one of the most proactive gestures educators can do to enhance relationships among the culturally different (Tatum, 1992). Diversity is a source of learning and good conversation is
a means of acquiring learning from diversity. Ideal speech, ideal listening, discourse in relationship, and promotion of the different voice are necessary components of good conversation among those who are different (Baker & Kolb, 1993).

The merits of dialogue are its practicality, its ability to weaken totalitarianism, and its cathartic qualities (Simpson, 1994). Dialogue, however, must subscribe to what is termed “the new decorum,” which requires us to listen across boundaries of difference and engage in a moderate tone of conversation. Caution must be heeded against “conversation stoppers” from both the political left and right who engage in monologues, either by claiming to be victims of the system or who define identity on one source of human characteristic. Attention is quickly directed toward the fact that it is not the goal of the new decorum to suppress passion or promote a false congeniality, but, rather, it seeks to teach not one culture but human similarities, differences, and cross-connections (Simpson, 1994).

Dialogue plays a role in identity formation. Self awareness is facilitated by self disclosure and interaction with others (Jourard, 1971). When, in the process of dialogue, each party recognizes the identity of the other, both then will become able to understand better their individual identities. Through dialogue we create a broader horizon that serves as the backdrop against which we operate in the world. This broader horizon results from the “fusion of horizons” — situating one possibility, our usual standard, along side other possibilities, new and unfamiliar standards (Taylor, 1992).

ELT insists that genuine learning only occurs when students are engaged in “praxis” — political action informed by reflection (Freire, 1973). A fundamental aspect of praxis is the process of “naming the world.” Naming the world is achieved through dialogue among equals, a dual process of inquiry and learning. Progressive education rejects the banking concept of teaching, where students are passive receptacles for deposits of fixed content from teachers. The idea is to instill “critical conscientiousness” in learners where the meaning of abstract concepts is explored through dialogue among peers. Dialogue is key to human emancipation of the oppressed (Freire, 1974).

Dialogue is good conversation. It must adhere to rules of the new decorum. Dialogue serves many purposes. It facilitates self-awareness and awareness of others, is a source of learning, is liberating, and lends to the creation of a climate of safety for teaching about human difference.

ELT supports knowledge in diversity educa-tion through the provision of a holistic model and process of learning, a structure and tool for assessing learning preferences, a framework for creating effective learning environments, and dialogue as a vehicle for creating psychological safety in the classroom. The significance of ELT in
diversity education extends beyond these factors. Diversity education typically focuses on visible human characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and gender. ELT offers learning style as an invisible yet significant human difference. It breaks the glass box of diversity education that focuses entirely on that which is observable. Learning style acknowledges diversity on the inside and highlights the relevancy of unobservable human characteristics in diversity education.

THE INTERVIEWS

A study was conducted to gain better understanding of factors contributing to effective diversity education and to validate the challenges it faces as advanced in this paper. Fifteen individuals participated in one on one interviews: four African Americans (two males), four Asian Americans (one male), six Caucasian Americans (three males), and one Latino male. These individuals were between 30 and 55 years of age and had from two to 16 years of experience as diversity educators. Each person described a peak and a nadir experience of diversity education by responding to the following protocol based on the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1971).

The question stated, “Think about a time when you were either a participant or trainer in a cultural diversity education session that was particularly (ineffective or effective) in terms of your learning and the learning of others.”

A. Concrete Experience
   Tell me about the experience — what happened, your thoughts, feelings, perceptions at the time of the experience?

B. Reflective Observation
   Since the time of the experience, what have been your key reflections — how do you make sense of the experience, now?

C. Abstract Conceptualization
   What are your conclusions as a result of the reflection and sense making?

D. Active Experimentation
   What rules of thumb and guidelines would you include in any future diversity education designs?

Data were analyzed for recurring comments or themes, which are listed in Table 8.2. Findings are presented without interpretation. Factors that contribute to effectiveness in teaching about differences are storytelling, trust and safety, dialogue, gaining personal insight, broadly defining diversity, teaching more than cognition, class lasting more than one day, clear expectations and goals, and a diverse group of students and teachers. Characteristics of ineffectiveness are negative perceptions of faculty, lack of closure of emotional issues, lack of trust,
race and gender as a sole focus, feeling helpless to make a difference, feeling personally attacked or blamed, and class lasting one day or less.

**TABLE 8.2**
Aspects of Effective and Ineffective Diversity Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Experiences</th>
<th>Ineffective Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Storytelling</td>
<td>1. Negative perceptions of faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Trust established</td>
<td>2. Lack of closure of emotional issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feeling safe</td>
<td>3. Lack of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dialogue among students</td>
<td>4. Race and gender as a sole focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gaining some personal insight</td>
<td>5. Feeling helpless to make a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Diversity broadly defined</td>
<td>6. Feeling personally attacked or blamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teaching more than cognition</td>
<td>7. Insufficient time (class one day or less)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Class more than one day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Clear expectation and goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Diverse group of faculty and students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Females and males were evenly split in identifying storytelling and dialogue as useful learning tools. The two activities are related. Storytelling, it seems, affects students in ways that arouse curiosity and a desire to engage in dialogue and often leads to personal insight. Females spoke about trust as a component of effective diversity education, while males associated feeling safe (from attack and blame) with a satisfying experience. Broadly defining diversity positively affects the experience of males more than females. Expanding the context of diversity creates the opportunity for students to personally relate to experience of difference and positions them for more receptivity to the more controversial aspects of diversity such as racism and sexism. This opinion is expressed across ethnic and gender boundaries of persons interviewed. A couple of individuals suggest gradual movement toward the discussion of race. Diversity education is less satisfying for many of the individuals in this study when limited to race and gender.

Diversity educators in this study emphasized the importance of teaching more than cognition in a class on difference. Efficacy in diversity education is "unlike competency or skill building where you can be very objective and still do a good job. It touches everyone's feelings." Effectiveness also necessitates more time. Persons interviewed felt that a day and a half is the minimum time for teaching diversity. Less time often leaves students with unresolved issues. Lack of closure of emotional issues is an aspect of ineffective diversity experiences. One teacher provides individual counseling for students taking classes on differences.
Experiences of diversity education are more positive for persons interviewed when ground rules and goals are clarified, particularly when this occurs at the beginning of the semester. One educator is committed to what he refers to as community building, where objectives, ground rules, and roles are explicit and total group as well as subgroup is seen as important. Identifying personal goals for some individuals is just as critical as goal setting for the class in general.

Having a diverse team of faculty models the concept of diversity. A multicultural class of students provides richness of discussion and diminishes feelings of isolation and loneliness. Teacher skill was more a concern for males than females. Negative perception of faculty was a key aspect of ineffective diversity experience. Elements of this theme are perceptions of faculty as coercive, lacking in process skills, unclear about their own cultural identity, and when as a team working at cross purposes.

Themes from the interviews confirm the challenges confronting diversity education as presented in this paper. Persons interviewed underscore the need for dialogue, psychological safety, and learner-directed education. In singling out a requirement for more than cognition, the usefulness of a more comprehensive method of teaching is also highlighted.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY AND LEARNING STYLES IN DIVERSITY EDUCATION

If ELT offers diversity education a framework that integrates personal experience and practical application with perceptive appreciation and understanding of concepts, what then is required to deliver diversity education? We offer some suggestions based on interviews and ELT.

Position Diversity Education as a Holistic Process

It is useful to inform students that a diversity course based on experiential learning might belie some of their assumptions about the teaching process and their role in it. Unlike traditional approaches to learning, where teachers are experts and students are passive recipients of the information that is disseminated, here responsibility for learning will be shared by teacher and learner. In that a course on human differences is not merely a new content area, it summons all of who learners are — their intelligence, their perception, their practicality, and, most importantly, their emotions. The approach to learning must be guided by a holistic framework and include a range of activities including experiential exercises, discussions, readings, and role plays.
Clarify the Role of the Instructor

Generally, and particularly in diversity education, ELT requires a different role of the instructor from the one typically seen. That role needs to be clarified. As mentioned, the teacher's role is less one of purveyor of knowledge and more one of managing a classroom as a learning organization. We have stressed that, at any given time, the instructor could be a role model and colleague who supports awareness of human experience in the moment, process consultant who keeps on track an engaging discussion of sexual lifestyle, interpreter of knowledge who does a brief lecture on types of group identity, or coach who supports the planning of transfer of learnings.

Clarify the Role of the Student

Experiential learning is individualized and self-directed learning. Students who are unaccustomed to this approach may have difficulty with assuming responsibility for achieving their learning objectives. Instructors will need to work with students so that they see value in their own experiences and applying new knowledge, skills, and attitudes to their life situations.

Assess the Learning Styles of Students and Faculty

Learning style immediately creates an alternative view of difference. The LSI gives individuals data about which aspects of the learning process they prefer. It also has implications for classroom activities, faculty role, feedback, student engagement of material, and faculty to student dynamics. The LSI, when administered in class using the LSI grid, provides data about the learning community that is immediately available to everyone. It is intriguing to watch students act out their learning style during the discussions. Some struggle with feelings they have, others question the pragmatics of the model or challenge the theory behind it, and others just watch and take it all in (see Kolb, Rubin, & Osland, 1991, Chapter 3, for administration of the LSI as a classroom activity).

Establish a Psychological Contract

The importance of psychological safety and feelings of trust in diversity education is emphasized in the literature and interviews conducted for this chapter. The concepts of learning environments and dialogue have been presented as constructive mechanisms toward creating the ideal climate of learning. The act of negotiating a psychological contract is good for establishing trust and should take place
during the first class session. The Sherwood and Glidewell (1972) model captures the dynamic nature of psychological contracts and suggests strategies for renegotiation when pinches or disruption of shared expectations occur. It is designed to be a real agreement among members of the learning community — students and teachers alike — that guides their behavior for the entire term (see Kolb, Rubin, & Osland, 1991, Chapter 1, for a guide to establishing a psychological contract). Planning the progression of discussion of sensitive topics, particularly the "isms" — racism, ethnicism, sexism, ageism, nationalism, ableism — is another way of building trust (Schor, 1993). Gender issues are presented before issues of ethnicity; ethnic issues are discussed before racial issues, which are the most emotionally charged.

Identify Guidelines of Behavior

Guidelines complement the contracting process and, like the psychological contract, should be identified on the first day of class. Identifying guidelines, of course, is a joint activity between students and teachers. Ones to consider include honoring confidentiality, affording mutual respect, speaking from personal experience, and engaging in interpersonal conversation. Confidentiality creates a dilemma for students whose learning is supported by discussion outside the classroom, which we encourage and sometimes request. We ask students to refrain from attaching names to opinions or experiences shared by their classmates. Simply put, mutual respect is behavior consistent with the Golden Rule. It is the act of acknowledging that we all hold perspectives of the world that, even when they differ, are valid for each of us.

Encourage Dialogue

Design activities that allow for discussion and processing of experience. Dialogue itself begins with speaking from personal experience and owning experience through the use of first person language — "I," "my," "me," "mine." First person language is more engaging in dialogue than the more distant and abstract third person. It lends to "straight talk" — use of clean, clear, direct communication that fosters connections between two parties of equal status (Jamison, 1987). Good conversation requires both speaking and listening and in this regard is not monological. Gestalt principles emphasize calling the other by name as a first step toward good interpersonal contact. Calling someone by name serves to plant a seed for relationship building. Another Gestalt approach to good conversation is to find ways to engage, not two or a few, but all students in total classroom discussion.
Utilize a Variety of Group Structures

Mix groups based on the difference represented in the class, for example, race, gender, learning style, and organization type, and also in a variety of structures of pairs, trios, small groups, and total community. We find especially useful the small group structure we call “learning teams” that meet during the formal structure of the class as well as outside of class. Time constraints, class size, and other related factors do not allow for the appropriate and thorough processing of student experience within the classroom setting. Learning teams allow for continued processing of experience and serve as support groups for identification of goals and monitoring of progress toward goal achievement. They enrich the learning process, provide a stable reference group, and facilitate trust that spills over into the classroom.

The Personal Application Assignment

Readings, essays, term papers, thought pieces (a written stream of consciousness in reaction to readings or experiences), and group projects are mechanisms for teaching and learning about differences and evaluation in diversity education. We like the Personal Application Assignment (PAA) that is used for evaluation of student progress by the student and teacher. The PAA is a paper that corresponds to the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1971) as it is designed to indicate:

- a real situation (concrete experience),
- understanding of the situation (reflective observation),
- use of models and concepts to frame understanding of the situation (abstract conceptualization),
- behavioral plans for similar situations in the future (active experimentation), and
- integration of the four preceding perspectives (synthesis).

The PAA is typically used several times during the course of a semester and is similar to the interview guide of open-ended questions that students respond to as a way of monitoring their development over the course of the class (Tatum, 1992). Used in this manner, the PAA contributes to equalization of power between learner and teacher.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we submit ELT as a guiding framework for effectively responding to three key challenges facing diversity education — providing a holistic education, addressing the dilemma of individualism and equality in the classroom, and providing a safe climate for learning. The dual knowledge theory of ELT depicts learning as a
holistic and integrated process that attends to what learners think as well as what they feel, perceive, and do. Through the concepts of learning style, ELT responds to the dilemma of particularism and universalism in teaching. ELT provides some of the whats and hows of the psychologically safe environment through the concept of the learning environment and dialogue among peers of equal status. Based on popular and academic literature and the experiences of professionals in the field of diversity, we outlined several strategies for using ELT in teaching about human differences.

The efficacy of diversity education rests on the degree to which all participants are able to own who they are as individuals, as group members, as citizens of a global community, and as learners, seeking knowledge and appreciation of self and other. Experiential learning is a theory of life and learning that celebrates human potential. As a paradigm of diversity education, it appropriately prepares learners for life in an ever changing society.

REFERENCES


