

Kathleen Manning identifies seven philosophical positions in relation to the broad issue of difference. Recognizing and understanding where they stand in this matrix allows educators to work more effectively with students, faculty, and staff about the complex and sometimes contested issue of difference.

By Kathleen Manning

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK ON DIFFERENCE

EVERY EDUCATOR, whether a student affairs professional or an academic faculty member, has a perspective on diversity. Articulated or not, this perspective, way of knowing, or philosophy is the foundation that is used to view and conduct work in the academy. In some cases, such foundational values and perspectives are explicit (for example, student development theory, whole student philosophy). In other cases, the foundations of practice are implicit (for example, people grow and change; students will experiment). These beliefs guide work with students, the ways that educators make decisions, and how priorities for action are set. In this article, I discuss the beliefs and assumptions that guide educators' work in regard to diversity (which I refer to as *work about difference*). Interestingly, despite all their conversations about difference, educators have had limited discussions about the range of philosophi-

cal and foundational approaches that underlie their work in this area. This article proposes some possible approaches in the hope that those in the academy will be stimulated to think about their beliefs about difference.

I've brought together seven possible positions in regard to educational practice and difference: political correctness, historical analysis, color (or difference) blindness, diversity, cultural pluralism, anti-oppression, and social justice. Each of the seven perspectives is (1) illustrated with an opening vignette, (2) placed in the context of the major theorists articulating that position, and (3) discussed through potential positive and negative expressions of that approach. My goal is to flesh out these underlying philosophies in order to allow educators to identify their approach and more knowingly act on it.

Without a clear understanding of one's approach, difficulties and misunderstandings may arise when

philosophies clash or different points of view are acted upon but not made clear. Because of limited discussion of approaches to difference, student affairs professionals, classroom faculty, and others on campus may assume they are talking about the same concept when they are not. This misunderstanding can happen because similar words are often used to express distinctly different concepts. For example, and perhaps most important, activist students may be pursuing agendas that educators think they understand when they do not.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

John is a new resident assistant (RA) who just attended a week of RA training. Diversity is a strongly expressed value in residence life at his institution. As a result of the training, he realized that many of his commonly used words and phrases have meanings he was unaware of. With this new knowledge, he has made a commitment to discontinue using the old words, adopt the new ones, and consciously correct his residents whenever necessary.

The politically correct (PC) movement of the 1980s was a concerted attempt to change unequal systems (for example, in classrooms and campus life environments). The butt of many jokes, the PC movement changed behavior in regard to language but failed to adequately shift the underlying beliefs. When people change their language without reflecting on the underlying philosophy, they promote what Paulo Freire called “verbiage”—words absent any supporting action. Talking the talk without walking the walk means that systems that need to be changed are discussed—often bemoaned—but not transformed. Using *woman* rather than *girl* or *differently abled* rather than *disabled* falls short of the full effect desired if the speaker continues to act superior to underrepresented groups or renames those different from him or her without their consent. Some may see political correctness as the end goal and misapprehend the possibilities of more complete expressions of equity and justice.

In a positive expression, being politically correct can be a first step toward considering concepts such as power, racial or gender privilege, and difference. Using politically correct language may be a way for the young RA in the vignette to progress from lack of knowledge about difference to a sophisticated analysis of the issues. In a negative sense expression, political correctness can be used as a screen to mask true feelings of racism, sexism, homophobia, or another prejudice. Perhaps the most negative expression of political cor-

rectness is paternalism and judgment expressed when confronting non-PC others.

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HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

You have been engaged in a long running argument with a colleague who teaches history at your institution. As the director of student activities, you work with students every day. You are aware of the struggles they face as they journey through your institution. Your colleague believes that your perspective is shortsighted. She feels that in order to not repeat history, you must understand it. She has encouraged you to read accounts of people of color, gender minorities, and other underrepresented groups. You believe that you can best understand students by understanding their circumstances in the here and now.

Individuals use their historical perspectives to understand culture, actions, and each other. Using history to understand people who are different from oneself (students, in the case of educators) is commonplace. How could an educator work with African American students and not know about Martin Luther King? Or work with women and not understand the significance of the women’s movement? Without a complete knowledge of history, educators may confuse one group with another or mistakenly merge them.

But as Winston Churchill ostensibly said, history is written by the victors. The statements that Columbus “discovered” America and the U.S. West was “won” are illustrations of how some accounts of

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history reframe conquest and genocide from a more palatable perspective. This reframing downplays negative consequences, masks inhumane treatment, and diminishes the accomplishments of underrepresented groups. Awareness of only these historical perspectives may lead educators to unconsciously accept the accounts of white racial and male superiority that are built on historical accounts that exclude the important achievements of others.

To counteract the power of the dominant version of history, Ronald Takaki and James Loewen have written historical texts from an inclusionary perspective. In Takaki's book, subtitled *A Multicultural History of America*, he traces the history of multicultural groups in the United States and discusses their substantial contributions to the country's founding. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen analyzes several standard high school history texts, taking issue with the white-centered perspective that forms the backbone of U.S. high school history. Takaki and Loewen re-envision how people of color are represented in history and shift the perspective to present a more inclusive and accurate account of the past.

But, one can grasp history and still use it as an excuse for inaction. If one believes that history is destiny, then we are certain to live the path deemed for us. This deterministic view is expressed by educators who believe that nothing will ever change: power structures remain as historically expressed, women will never gain full equality, and English is destined to be the predominant language spoken in the United States. Conventional history, an incomplete representation of disenfranchised groups, will continue to express the accomplishments and records of underrepresented people through extraordinary accounts from women's and ethnic studies programs.

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COLOR-BLIND

You are working on the Commission on Equity and Diversity with a colleague who is a white female faculty member. She has expressed her desire to be on the commission because she feels the university should adopt a perspective in which skin color, sexual orientation, and other expressions of identity are excluded from consideration for college admissions, employment, and scholarship. You struggle to understand her perspective, which she skillfully and convincingly argues at every commission meeting.

The color-blind (which I use in its broadest sense of ignoring any difference, including physical ability, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) perspective is undergirded by a belief in the equality of people simply because they are human. Charles Taylor called this the politics of human dignity and described its underlying values as equality of citizenship, respect, and human potential. This perspective holds that because we are all equals as humans, there is no reason to consider difference. Difference work from this perspective entails an underlying trust that any inequities or unfair treatment can be corrected with education, knowledge, and policy.

The desire to consider the human dignity of people above all else has value and should not be dismissed lightly. A positive expression of this approach might include making an attempt to consider everyone with equal respect and consideration. This sentiment was best expressed by Martin Luther King when he spoke of being judged by the content of one's character rather than the color of one's skin. If society reaches that end point, laws implementing affirmative action and programs that mandate or encourage difference will be unnecessary because equity and equality will have been achieved. Of course, few believe that such a utopian place will be reached any time soon.

Because the United States is not at that utopian point, many educators take issue with color-blind expressions in policies, laws, and practice. Negative expressions of the color-blind perspectives are best represented in the resistance of some people to affirmative action and the dismantling of legal gains concerning equity. Ward Connerly's effort to dismantle state affirmative action laws is an example of this negative

aspect of the color-blind perspective. In higher education, hiring the best person (as defined by dominant culture norms) in lieu of people of color, women, and candidates whose diverse life experiences and multiple perspectives (e.g., ability to live and work in multi-racial environments, understanding of dominant and non-dominant perspectives) better equip them to work in the complex environments of the twenty-first century is another example of the negative expression of this perspective.

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DIVERSITY

Mann University [a pseudonym] is in the midst of a student takeover of the president's office. The students' demands include curriculum change so that classes reflect social justice. The president expresses her frustration about the takeover. She has spent a great deal of effort and funds to increase the numbers of diverse faculty, staff, and students at the institution. She feels the increased numbers on campus represent great progress and is angered by the students' activism.

Diversity (sometimes called *structural diversity*), according to Sylvia Hurtado, Jeffrey Milem, Alma Clayton-Pederson, and Walter Allen, "refers primarily to the numerical representation of various racial, ethnic, and gender groups on campus" (p. 19). Traditionally expressed by presidents, provosts, and other administrators, this perspective emphasizes numbers and representation. Emanating from the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision, diversity is seen as a way to address issues of equity, affirmative action, and desegregation (see Hurtado and her colleagues in *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments*). A diverse student body is believed to have educational benefit for all involved, both white students and students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The students in the vignette for this section sought a transformed curriculum that removed the dominant white culture from the center of the institution. The president misunderstood their activism because she saw diversity only as increased numbers of people with racial, ethnic, and gender difference, among other differences.

However, simply increasing the numbers of diverse people on a college campus does not change the power structure to more equitable forms. In fact, such a redistribution of power is rarely addressed by those who express a diversity perspective. Because it works in their favor, the power structure is typically not identified as a problem by those in charge of institutions. Access and equal opportunity in terms of entry *into* the existing power structure are the primary concerns of those seeking social justice. But equity (for example, being admitted into a college) does not mean equality (for example, having that college adequately respond to your needs).

The diversity approach is positively expressed as an initial effort to establish a critical mass of diverse students, faculty, and staff on campus. Increased numbers of underrepresented people can build more equitable structures on campus as those systems change through the presence of different groups of people. This first step most likely needs to be taken by higher education leadership before the more complex perspectives (for example, social justice) can be pursued. But the danger and the negative expression of this perspective occur when diversity is viewed as the end goal.

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CULTURAL PLURALISM

An institution is making every effort to transform the curriculum to reflect difference. Faculty members are encouraged to include issues of race, ethnicity, gender,

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sexual orientation, and class in their courses. The effort is being reinforced through conferences and workshops on curriculum transformation sponsored through the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Cultural pluralism was one of the first terms used to describe activities concerning difference. In 1973, the National Coalition for Cultural Pluralism (cited in Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant's *Making Choices for Multicultural Education*, p. 170) defined cultural pluralism as "a state of equal co-existence in a mutually supportive relationship within the boundaries or framework of one nation of people of diverse cultures with significantly different patterns of beliefs, behavior, color, and in many cases with different languages. To achieve cultural pluralism, there must be unity with diversity. Each person must be aware of and secure in his [or her] own identity, and be willing to extend to others the same respect and rights that he [or she] expects to enjoy himself [or herself]."

Cultural pluralism comes in at least two decidedly different forms: assimilation or acculturation. Assimilation occurs when one culture is forced to adopt the ways of the dominant culture through the use of violence or coercion, either explicit or implicit. Acculturation involves blending cultures by choice; Rodney King was reflecting the acculturation style of cultural pluralism when he asked, "Can't we all just get along?"

The cultural pluralism perspective asserts that all communities benefit when distinct cultures, especially those without power to defend their way of being, are protected from extinction. Everyone loses when a culture is allowed to go extinct or is driven into extinction. Thus, every person, regardless of their culture, has a stake in supporting underrepresented groups as they work to maintain their cultural uniqueness. This interventionist perspective is easy to see in educational practice when we preserve, promote, and respect the similarities and differences of various cultural expressions. Ideally, educators see such support for multiple cultures as a moral imperative, an institutional asset, and a potent learning opportunity. Developing mutual understanding, valuing differences, and increasing cultural awareness and competence are issues within the cultural pluralism perspective.

Positive and negative expressions of cultural pluralism are readily seen on college campuses. In posi-

tive expressions, campuses celebrate different cultures through festivals, monthlong celebrations, and other events that promote awareness and cultural competence as well as reduce prejudice. Celebrations of cultures can be a rich learning experience for students if they are carried out respectfully and without voyeurism.

To avoid negative expressions, Paulo Freire's warnings against cultural invasion should be heeded in regard to the perspective of cultural pluralism. Cultural invasion occurs when the dominant culture appropriates and exploits features (particularly valuable ones) of nondominant cultures. Cultural invasion occurs on campuses when students from the dominant culture observe nondominant cultures voyeuristically or with the goal of becoming culturally competent in order to then translate that competence into cultural capital and use it to manage underrepresented groups, obtain goods and services not typically available to persons from their cultural background, or gain currency in underrepresented communities.

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ANTI-OPPRESSION

The women's faculty caucus has engaged in activism about the practice of consistently and repeatedly hiring white, middle-class, heterosexual men into the executive ranks of the university. The women are interested in transforming the dominant culture and structure at the institution to create more equity in institutional positions, salaries, and power.

Oppression is the root of all isms. Without an understanding of this concept, some argue, unfair structures cannot be dismantled. Paulo Freire is an early theorist on oppression, which he defines in this way: "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (p. 37). An early definition from the counseling literature (specifically, Donald

Atkinson, George Morgen, and Derald Sue's *Counseling American Minorities*) reflects Freire's approach: "Oppression . . . is a state of being in which the oppressed person is deprived of some human right or dignity and is (or feels) powerless to do anything about it" (p. 7). Topics within the anti-oppression perspective include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (see Iris Young's chapter "Five Faces of Oppression" in the collection *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*); systemic and institutional expressions of power; and the dynamics of privilege (particularly white, heterosexual privilege) (see Peggy McIntosh's chapter "White Privilege" in the collection *Race, Class and Gender* as well as Paula Rothenberg's book *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*).

Fighting oppression, an aspiration of many educators, requires liberatory and transformational agendas. People who fight oppression (for example, anti-racists, anti-homophobes, anti-classists) are not interested in equity alone; they are interested in transforming inequitable systems. The goal is not to acquire and use power in the traditional ways of dominant persons and cultures but to use power collaboratively and cooperatively. Those fighting oppression work *with* underrepresented groups and disempowered people rather than exert power *over* them.

Anti-ism work (for example, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, or anti-classism) is the positive expression of an anti-oppression approach. Using Freire's concepts of action and reflection, those who fight oppression actively dismantle the individual and institutional aspects of any ism. This stance involves not just an expression of opposition to the ism in thought and voice but active work to transform systems of oppression.

The negative expression of anti-oppression occurs when educators, particularly those new to work concerning difference, assume a paternalistic approach. Freire (1997) warns of two ways this paternalism can be expressed. First, when educators do *for* rather than *with* people different from themselves. Second, when the oppressed become oppressors as they gain power and use the model of the former oppressors to craft the new community. History gives us evidence of many situations in which the formerly oppressed practiced the idea of "turn about is fair play" and became oppressors themselves.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Several faculty members are concerned that students' preferred names are not listed on the class rosters. They feel strongly that transgender students are placed at risk when their given name, called out in class during attendance, does not reflect their gender expression. Although the percentage of transgender students on campus is relatively small, these faculty members feel a sense of urgency about changing the roster to include the preferred name.

The social justice analysis is closely linked to that of anti-oppression in that they share the same philosophical root. The difference between the concepts is that anti-oppression focuses on the cause—assumed superiority of the oppressors—whereas social justice focuses on the outcome—hope, equity, and fairness.

Although other perspectives focus on issues of ethnicity, classism, or sexism, a social justice perspective includes all of these as well as other discriminatory practices that involve unequal power distributions (for example, those related to age, language, immigrant status, and disabilities). According to Estella Chizhik and Alexander Chizhik in their article "Decoding the Language of Social Justice," unequal power distribution is the difference between those with power (that is, the privileged) and those without (that is, the oppressed).

Equity and equality are the means to judge progress from a social justice perspective. Who receives the privileges? How is power distributed? Can affirmative action, laws, and policy correct the system? Those with a social justice perspective work for change and shifts in power by accepting positions (elected or appointed) within the existing power structure. They hope and trust that reason and hard work will result in more equitable and fair institutional structures.

Obviously the positive expression of the social justice perspective, particularly in higher education,

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is the activism that often accompanies a commitment to action in regard to changing systems and removing injustice. Through incremental, evolutionary means, activists chip away at the unfairness that is inherent in institutional structures.

A negative expression of social justice is hard to imagine. One could stretch this perspective to perhaps include the paternalism of liberal racism as a negative expression. Another possibility could be the practice of treating persons from the dominant culture (for example, white people, heterosexuals) as rescuers when they engage in social justice work. But neither of these positions is socially just.

I have purposely discussed the social justice perspective last because I believe many educators claim this position yet have an incomplete understanding of its full meaning. Just as diversity became a catch-all phrase for all practice related to difference, social justice is unfortunately becoming the generic phrase for the same. Yet without an understanding of oppression, action related to transformational change, and passion for equitable sharing of power, claims of social justice may be another perspective in disguise.

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CONCLUSION

IN THIS ARTICLE, I have outlined seven perspectives on higher education practice related to difference. Recognizing one's approach allows an educator to better understand the motivations, belief structure, goals, modes of understanding, and ways of operating

associated with that perspective. With that understanding, educators can better articulate their meaning and better achieve their goals. Actions can become more purposeful when educators gain a fuller understanding of the foundation of their beliefs and the implications of their work. Most important, I am hoping that this awareness will help educators better understand students, administrators, and other campus members when those parties speak from different perspectives. In this way, we can collaborate and comprehend more and compete and misrepresent less.

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