

TODD A. HORTON

7. A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I was again confronted with evidence that people construct meaning in very different ways. I was chatting with a colleague after a hard day. She was ruminating about her move to a new office in another part of the university. This colleague found herself in the unenviable position of having to share an office; but true to form, she was willing to make the best of it. She mentioned that while unpacking her research books, she'd come across a small poster she'd brought with her from her former office. The poster, promoting tolerance of sexual diversity in the workplace, had been obtained from a well-known provincial organization and meant a lot to her. I wasn't surprised as I'd seen the poster before, and I knew my friend and colleague was supportive of all types of diversity. Indeed, this poster, along with several others, had graced the door of her recently vacated office, signaling to all that she was open and welcoming about issues of sexual diversity. I simply expected it would find its place on the door of her new office, but to my surprise, my colleague was casually wondering if she should put the poster up as it might offend her new office mate.

My colleague and I are old friends and we often engage in dynamic debate. What ensued was a robust discussion on the merits of promoting openness and acceptance and how we each understood the basic concept of 'diversity'. She offered arguments about common space, sensitivity, and the need to sometimes navigate through and around conflict. I countered with arguments about inclusivity and questioned why one person's discomfort should silence another's perspective. We ended the discussion with her unsure of how to proceed, and I shaking my head in wonder at the diverse views people can have on a topic. As I reflected on our discussion in the following days, I came to realize that I had been focusing strictly on principle, while she was considering principle *and* also negotiating sensibilities. We never discussed the issue again, but last week I visited her office and to my great pleasure noticed the poster prominently displayed on her office door. It continues to welcome and inspire all who read it.

WHAT IS 'DIVERSITY'?

Diversity is an interesting concept to consider if only because it is so ubiquitous in our lives. We, and all living things, are the embodiment of diversity to the extent that we exist as 'different' in one way or another from others. To be separate is to be

distinct from and to be different is to be unique. This, to me, is the joyous wonder of life itself. How incredibly boring would it be if we were all the same in every way!

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines diversity as the 1) “state or fact of being diverse; difference; unlikeness”, and 2) “variety; multiformity” (“American Heritage Dictionary”, n. d.). Its etymology or origin is from the early 12th century drawing on the French term *diversité* which itself is from the Latin *diversitas* meaning ‘difference’ (“Online Etymology Dictionary”, n. d.). Students should have little difficulty with the basic concept or definition, as they have been aware of difference for most of their lives. They need only look around them to realize that it is the array of difference that makes the world such an interesting place. Students can be asked to note such differences. For example, they might engage in an inductive activity by introducing broad concepts such as colours, animals, furniture, cars or music and see how many different examples students can generate. A variation might be to have students list as many different things they can think of that are able to fly, live in water, move people around or serve as a home. This activity can work deductively as well. Rather than moving from the general to the specific, one might move from the specific to the general. For example, bouffants, mullets and crew cuts are all examples of hairstyles, while blouses, jackets and vests are examples of clothing. In these ways, students obtain a thorough understanding of the concept ‘diversity’, yet are alerted to the fact that commonality and connection still exist.

A means of visually illustrating commonality and connection is to show a circular colour wheel whereby colours move about the colour spectrum blending one into the other. Students can pick out the primary colours – yellow, blue and red – while seeing how they blend into each other to create various shades leading to and from secondary colours – purple, green and orange. Students can create their own ‘wheel’ by placing a broad concept in the middle (e.g., sports that use balls) and then placing examples of the concept around the outside in circular fashion with examples that have common features next to each other. In due course, the examples should blend one into the other to meet again and complete the circle.

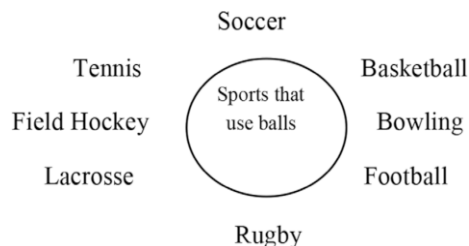


Figure 1. Concept wheel

Students will undoubtedly struggle with this activity initially as they realize that some sports are team sports (e.g., soccer) while others are more typically individual

(e.g., tennis). Some sports use a large ball (e.g., basketball) while others use a small ball (e.g., lacrosse). Eventually students will ascertain their own system. [Figure 1](#) illustrates a system of sports using larger balls blend into sports that use smaller balls. Beginning with soccer, and moving clockwise one meets basketball, then football, where there is a slight change in ball shape, but the size remains relatively large; this is followed by rugby, before transitioning to sports that use smaller balls like lacrosse, field hockey, and tennis. This, and similar categorization activities, allows students to use what knowledge they already have while building on the original concept. In this case, each sport has its particularities, its unique aspects; yet they share commonalities as well—a wonderful baseline in which to grow in conceptual understanding of diversity.

SHOULD WE TEACH STUDENTS TO EMBRACE DIVERSITY?

There are infinite forms of diversity in the world. Scientists have been using the term ‘biodiversity’ to refer to variations in life form within an ecosystem, biome or the entire planet since the mid-1980s. However, the term is more commonly used to refer to various aspects of culture including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, sexuality, language, politics, philosophy and socio-economic status. It is also often used in reference to aspects of personhood such as sex, age, physical ability, mental and physical health, intelligence, genetic attributes, behavior and attractiveness. Many people choose to view diversity through a lens of positivity, delighting in the infinite possibilities it affords each of us. Indeed, some see it in religious terms, believing that all things emanate from the Creator and are creations of inherent value; while others are more spiritual, viewing diversity as evidence of the unique life force in all things. Some view diversity scientifically, seeing it as a necessary aspect of Darwin’s natural selection theory while others view it culturally as a rich, vibrant expression of humanity’s infinite capacity to self-create or just ‘be’.

These days it is not unusual to hear representatives from social and political entities (e.g., neighbourhoods, cities and nations), institutions (e.g., universities, hospitals), and businesses to speak of trying to ‘enhance diversity’ or ‘become more representative of society’s diversity’. These people are invariably informed by the current dominant western cultural values of inclusion, multiculturalism, and social justice. These sentiments are evident throughout the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2004) but are best captured in Article 1:

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations. (p. 6)

T. A. HORTON

“Respect for Diversity” is also one of six guiding principles in the Global Greens Charter created by Green Party delegates from 72 nations at a meeting in Canberra, Australia in 2001. It states:

We honour cultural, linguistic, ethnic, sexual, religious and spiritual diversity within the context of individual responsibility toward all beings. We defend the right of all persons, without discrimination, to an environment supportive of their dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well being. We promote the building of respectful, positive and responsible relationships across lines of division in the spirit of a multi-cultural society. (“Global Greens Charter”, n. d.)

Teachers who educate for citizenship (i.e., preparing students to share and participate in society as productive and contributing members) are often informed in this way also, believing that it is important to foster a positive attitude toward diversity. They, too, see diversity in the world as a simple fact of life and believe that a dynamic life can be lived through learning about and engaging with all forms of diversity. These teachers see a role for themselves in creating a large and inclusive ‘comfort zone’ for students – reducing the strangeness of difference while framing it as possibility and opportunity.

A simple way of having students appreciate diversity is to have them imagine a world without it. Students close their eyes and imagine people all wearing exactly the same clothing, hairstyle, and accessories; they picture all houses built exactly alike, and rooms painted in all the same colours. I’ve seen students go further, producing posters and videos illustrating a homogenous world of single races, ethnicities, and religions. Their experience can be likened to the sepia tinted film used in some video productions where everything looks the same, and students quickly yearn for variety, intuitively knowing that a diverse palette means greater interest and a wider array of choice and opportunity.

The following are a series of related questions and activities designed for students’ exploration and embrace of cultural diversity in the classroom or school.

Learning

- Look at a map of the world and test your knowledge of other countries. What languages are spoken in each country? What types of governments do these countries have? Do they embrace and promote diversity? How?
- Survey your class or school to learn about the student body. Find out what ethnicities, religions and languages are represented. Prepare a statistical overview of your class or school.
- As a means of getting at the human stories in your class or school interview one to three students about an aspect of their culture and how it informs their lives. As a set up for the human story, prepare background information about their culture.
- Organize findings into a presentation using written, visual and/or multimedia format.

Informing

- Present your findings to the class or school.
- How is your class/school unique from your perspective?
- How are your interviewees unique? How are they similar to other students in the school?
- What did you learn about cultural diversity in your school?

Action

- Encourage respect for differences in your classroom or school by creating or modifying a constitution or charter.
- Generate a list of ways you can encourage respect for diversity in your daily life. Enact your list and report to the class at a monthly “Respect for All” session.
- Start a club with a mandate to inform others about the positive aspects of cultural diversity.
- Move your club onto a website and inform the world!

For me, educating for citizenship involves celebrating diversity and promoting its positive aspects whenever and wherever possible. To do otherwise would, in my estimation, undermine each student’s inherent value and special qualities, causing potentially irreparable harm while creating a world in which marginalization, exclusion, fear, and hatred win the day. This is antithetical to my understanding of what it means to be a teacher, a citizen of society, and a human being. Not everyone agrees.

WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE CHALLENGED BY DIVERSITY?

Diversity itself is not challenging, it’s a simple fact of life – there is diversity all around us as the ‘normal’ state of affairs. Where the challenge arises is with the meaning people choose to associate with particular aspects of difference and how they choose to act in response. Some people feel threatened by aspects of cultural or personal diversity, fearing it might undermine their moral conception of right and wrong, leading to a weakening of social cohesion. Others are afraid the ‘excessive’ embrace of diversity will erode the dominant position of particular cultural groups and lead to a destabilization of the local and/or national community. Some are angered and frustrated by what they view as a societal move away from individual rights of free thought and expression to social sanctions that demand political correctness and cultural sensitivity—one can just hear it, “Is it me or is everyone just a little touchy?” Still others are overwhelmed with the multiplicity inherent in diversity, constantly feeling off balance and out of step.

It is too simplistic to accuse people who feel this way of insensitivity and exclusivity or call them racist, sexist, or xenophobic. While these accusations may indeed be accurate in many cases, it obscures the real challenges that come with living

in a diverse society, and it minimizes the complexity of feeling and perspective on issues. Do I have to embrace every aspect of cultural diversity? Are right and wrong always relative? Should one person's free expression of support for cultural diversity silence another's rejection or call for limitation? Are we becoming too 'accepting'? These are difficult questions and in Western societies that have embraced cultural diversity they can be political, social and legal minefields.

The best way to engage students in these questions is to encourage discussion and debate within a community of respectful, thoughtful, critical thinkers. The following are a series of starter scenarios for secondary students that can be 'fleshed out' with appropriate background information and thinking strategies by teachers. Students should be encouraged to look at the issue(s) from as many perspectives as possible, weigh the pros and cons of any courses of action, and make recommendations how best to handle the issue(s) at hand. For example:

- A judge hands down a decision banning publicly licensed gym facilities from limiting memberships to a single sex. Many women threaten to resign from their gyms if men are permitted to join. Community groups line up on both sides of the issue as the case heads to Appeals Court.
- Two male students in their final year of high school walk down the hall holding hands to verbal and physical harassment. Several of the harassers are suspended from school, as are the two male students ostensibly for their own protection. Parental outrage on all sides leads to the unveiling of a new school policy banning all public displays of affection between students regardless of sex.
- A filmmaker for a national news organization produces a documentary that equates male and female circumcision rejecting both as abusive. He calls the Canadian government sexist in not outlawing male circumcision as it has for females. The airing of the film results in local religious and women's groups protesting the network leading to the filmmaker's suspension from work.
- The year is 2025 and Chinese has surpassed French as the second most used language in Canada. A Federal MP from Toronto introduces a private member's bill granting Chinese official language status. Uproar ensues from many quarters in the country particularly from Francophones and First Nations peoples while some Chinese-Canadians call much of the outrage Eurocentric and racist.
- A local hospital is criticized for cultural insensitivity over the displaying a Nativity scene on its lawn at Christmas time. The majority of the town's population supports the display but the hospital dismantles it under government and media pressure.

A few years ago, one of the teacher-candidates in the Bachelor of Education program where I teach decided to use the second scenario during her teaching placement. She was teaching a grade 11 law class and the students had been considering a number of laws and policies related to social issues currently in the media. She chose this scenario specifically as there is much student interest in the Marc Hall case unfolding in Oshawa,

Ontario. The case, *Marc Hall v. Durham Catholic School Board*, was initiated by the student against the school board because were preventing him from bring his boyfriend to the year-end prom claiming homosexuality is incompatible with Roman Catholic teaching. In this context, the scenario resonated greatly with students. I observed as she deftly introduced the scenario, considered the multiple issues, engaged in a pro and con exercise, introduced related legal rulings, and deconstructed their balancing of charter rights and freedoms. What stood out for me was the incredible acuity of thought exemplified by the student responses. Though they respected a notion of community standard regarding excessive displays of public affection, and recognized the vague nature of such notions, the students were wholly unconvinced that because it was two boys holding hands, this met any standard of ‘excessive’. In reality, it simply indicated a communal dislike for this particular manifestation of difference. As one student said, and I am paraphrasing from observational notes, “when you have a right to free expression others are sometimes going to get upset, but unless you’re actually, really, truly hurting someone...too bad, so sad!”

CONCLUSION

Diversity is a rich concept that is intertwined with all the other concepts in this book. At its core it is the state or fact of being different but its manifestation in life offers not only variety but also great possibility. Students definitely benefit from engaging with diversity in all its forms, exploring the ways each aspect interweaves with the others to inform who we are and how and why we think and act as we do. Diversity also comes with great challenges too. I began this chapter with the story of a debate with a colleague over the posting of a poster promoting sexual diversity. Such are the cleavages that emerge as each of us works to understand and respond to difference at all levels of our lives. To that end, students need to engage in activities that challenge them to critically consider different perspectives as they make judgments and develop creative solutions. It will hopefully make a world of difference.

REFERENCES

- UNESCO. (2004). *All different, all unique: Young people and the UNESCO universal declaration on cultural diversity*. New York, NY: UNESCO.
- Diversity. (n. d.). *American heritage dictionary of the English language*. Retrieved November 20, 2014 from <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=diversity&submit.x=35&submit.y=32>
- Diversity. (n. d.). Retrieved November 20, 2014 from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=diversity>
- Global Greens Charter. (2001). Retrieved November 29, 2008 from http://www.globalgreens.org/globalcharter_english

*Todd A. Horton
Schulich School of Education
Nipissing University*