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## Using Self-Awareness as a Bridge to Teaching Diversity at a Regional College Campus

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*Diversity is a mixture of individual difference in age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, education, and economic class. Demographic trends are showing increases in diverse populations in the United States and abroad within society, the workplace and classroom. Due to deep individual connections to our characteristics; conversations on difference include resistance and caution. Many faculty members understand the importance of teaching diversity but avoid the topic due to concerns of classroom interactions. This paper will share that diversity can be explained in a classroom setting using self-awareness as a learning strategy and tool to remove obstacles and create meaning in class discussion. This strategy was measured by analyzing student surveys and responses completed at the beginning and end of the semester on self-concept and feelings about others.*

Students enrolled in a 300-level personal skills development course at a regional campus were completing the course with the goal of learning self-awareness, stress management, conflict management, effective communication, and team building. As we covered various topics in these areas, the ability to successfully work with diverse populations became the overarching theme and anchor of the course. Self-awareness as a learning strategy created the technique for student engagement and participation in diversity assignments and classroom discussion.

Based on the universities published demographic information 81% of students identify as White, and 19% of students identify as non-White/Other. This information provides the racial demographic makeup for the campus climate and possible student experience(s) with diversity. There are other aspects of diversity also present which includes, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. The university does not publish this information.

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The literature review section will share how despite an increasing ethnic population; teaching diversity in the classroom with similar student demographics has been difficult. Faculty concerns on how to teach diversity and student perception demonstrate the need for effective teaching strategies in the classroom.

### **Literature Review**

While some studies have found that students do not see the relevance of diversity discussions or diverse experiences with their college education; Karimi and Matous (2006) found diversity in higher education connects to positive personal, societal and educational outcomes. This same study shared that the Association of American Colleges and Universities considered intercultural engagement a public good with university campuses being the stage where fundamental questions about differences, equality, and community are discussed.

Due to the increasing ethnic population in the United States, it is reasonable to expect increasing diversity in the ethnic composition of public schools (Juvonen, Kogachi & Graham, 2018). This trend along with the rapid increase in international student populations and the volume of global migration is contributing to the growing diversity of student bodies at higher education institutions worldwide (Karimi & Matous, 2006). Despite this information, many faculty members are not incorporating the subject in their curriculum and shying away from the discussions in the classroom. A study conducted on concerns about teaching diversity in universities found many faculty members had concerns on how to handle cultural interactions in the classroom (Prieto, 2018).

Research supports the need for nontraditional teaching methods finding teaching diversity in the classroom to be difficult (Consoli & Marin, 2016). The disruption of acceptance in conversation creates barriers. These barriers result in low student engagement and interaction. These barriers are more present in classrooms where the majority of the students do not represent or identify themselves as a member of a diverse group because personal bias or stereotypes go unnoticed and unidentified. As students self-identify with groups and views of their representation, the heightened climate on diversity becomes more difficult. Sutanto (2009), shares diversity when viewed as different has often meant wrong or alien. Even though these challenges are known, they cannot prevent faculty from moving forward with meaningful discussions and assignments on the topic of

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diversity. Mahaffey (2017) shared that “communicating with college students about diversity can be a major problem area, yet it is a critical teaching component necessary to develop their multicultural competencies” (p. 73). Expanded multicultural competencies for students is also essential due to the changing nature of the workforce. Today’s workforce is a mosaic of different races, ages, genders, ethnic groups and religions (Sutanto, 2009). Similar to the issues present in the classroom with diversity discussions, these same concerns are current in the workplace. Sutanto (2009), shares that tension, misunderstanding, and hostility between old and new groups in newly diverse organizations create issues for coordination and cohesion. Martinez, Hearit, Banerji, Gettings, and Buzzanell (2018) further shared members in organizations working together have an apparent need for a deepened understanding of diversity.

As mentioned previously, diversity is a mixture of individual difference in age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, education, and economic class. The purpose of teaching diversity in education is to provide students with insights and promote tolerance and open discussions (Mahaffey, 2017). Understanding starts with our ability to accept others in their difference. Research has found a connection to self-concept and our acceptance of others (Whetten & Cameron, 2016). These same individuals shared that self-awareness and self-acceptance are prerequisites to know and accept others. Hinkle (2018) describes self-awareness as “the ability to think critically of oneself and understand social cues and interactions with others as they relate to our own behaviors” (p. 42). Additional research also suggests humanizing the educational experience in the classroom weakens barriers to cross-cultural intellectual engagement (Cleeton & Gross, 2004).

As indicated in the literature review, our openness to others begins with self-awareness. The purpose of my study was to see if self-awareness development as a nontraditional method for teaching diversity in the classroom increased acceptance of others.

## **Method**

The study was completed on one class of undergraduate students enrolled in a Personal Organization Skills course. This course was selected because of the focus on self-awareness for personal development and working with others. The study included 19 students. There were 5 female students and 14 male students with an ethnic composition of 13 White

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students, 3 African American students, and 3 International students. The mode of instruction for the course was face-to-face.

The course was presented in a lecture format using self-awareness strategies and tools to incorporate diversity topics into classroom discussions and exercises. The lectures on self-awareness were designed to establish a personal connection to others. Students were also required to participate in classroom discussions and complete exercises that incorporated diversity topics in their daily activities.

Student measurements were completed using recommended assessments from the course text. At the start of the course, three core self-awareness assessments were completed. They were self-awareness assessment, defining issues assessment and tolerance of ambiguity. Students completed these assessments to understand the connection between their self-awareness; opinions on controversial issues and level of comfort in different situations with different ideas. In addition to these assessments, two of the five core aspects of the self-awareness model were incorporated into the exercises. They were emotional intelligence and values. The course text defined these core aspects. Emotional intelligence is the ability to correctly diagnose and manage one's own emotion in relation to others. Values are enduring individual characteristics.

These assessments generated thought, awareness and baseline measurements of student scoring demonstrating if there was or was not a need for improvement in these areas. The assessments were also used during course lectures for further personal evaluation and completion of exercises.

Student impact was measured at the beginning and end of the semester. The rate yourself survey was the first measurement completed at the beginning of the semester to score student perceived level of self-awareness. The rate each question survey was the second measurement completed at the end of the semester to score feelings about others. The reflection essay was the final measurement completed at the end of the semester to understand how self-awareness impacted views on difference.

On the student rate yourself survey, students were asked to rate their skill level on self-awareness using a five-point Likert scale. The rating categories were: Extremely Skilled, Very Skilled, Moderately Skilled, Slightly Skilled and Not At All Skilled. On the rate each question survey, students were asked to rate their level of agreement on questions using a five-point Likert scale. The rating categories were: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree,

Strongly Disagree and Not Applicable. Their level of agreement was measured for the following statements: (1) This course had an impact on my ability to understand the emotional needs of others. (2) This course had an impact on my sensitivity in relating to others. (3) This course had an impact on my openness to others with differing values, cultures, and perspectives. On the reflection essay students were asked to respond in essay format to the following prompt: Share how your individual and organizational view on matters of difference in values, beliefs and culture has been impacted through your self-awareness. Also, share if the impact is a result of the course.

These questions and prompts created an opportunity to understand student connections to emotional sensitivity and openness to others through self-awareness — all areas of importance when assessing diversity measurements.

## Findings

**Table 7: Self-Awareness Skill Level Rating (n=19)**

Self-Awareness Skill Level	Number of Respondents	% of Respondents
Extremely Skilled	3	16
Very Skilled	6	32
Moderately Skilled	8	42
Slightly Skilled	2	11
Not At All Skilled	0	0

**Table 2: Student Reflections**

Student	Share how your individual and organization view on matters of difference in values, beliefs and culture has been impacted through your self-awareness:
1	"Through self-awareness I have learned to be more understanding of differences in values, beliefs and culture."
2	"My values, beliefs and cultural views have been strengthened as a result of increased self-awareness."
3	"My views on many things, inwardly and outwardly have been impacted because of the growth of my personal self-awareness. The biggest thing I gained from this was respect for others."
4	"I believe I was already aware that everyone is different and their diversity is what makes up effective groups and it affects the way people think and behave. But this being said, I believe that this course made me more versed when it comes to those topics."
5	"I might have totally different values, belief, and cultures than our other classmates; that absolutely impacted my self-awareness as an international student who comes from China."

**Table 3: Course Impact Level of Agreement**

	This course had an impact on:			
	Agree	Disagree	Neither	
<b>My ability to understand the emotional needs of others.</b>	16 17.33 ( 0.10)	3 1.33 ( 2.08)	0 0.33 ( 0.33)	<b>19</b>

<b>My sensitivity in relating to others.</b>	18 17.33 ( 0.03)	1 1.33 ( 0.08)	0 0.33 ( 0.33)	<b>19</b>
<b>My openness to others with differing values, cultures, and perspectives.</b>	18 17.33 ( 0.03)	0 1.33 ( 1.33)	1 0.33 ( 1.33)	<b>19</b>
	<b>52</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>57</b>

$$\chi^2 = 5.654, df = 4, \chi^2/df = 1.41, P(\chi^2 > 5.654) = 0.2265$$

The course impact data was used to measure the connection between self-awareness and acceptance of others. To simplify the data, calculations were completed in the following manner: Strongly Agree and Agree were grouped into one category. Strongly Disagree and Disagree were grouped into one category. Not Applicable remained a stand-alone category.

The null hypothesis assumes there is no association between self-awareness and connection to others and the two are independent. The alternative hypothesis assumes there is an association between self-awareness and connection to others and the two are not independent. To test this hypothesis a Chi-Square Test of Independence was completed. The critical value for the chi-square statistic is determined by a .05 level of significance. The observed chi-square statistic of 5.654 is greater than the critical value of .05 so the null hypothesis can be rejected and we are able to determine there is an association between self-awareness and connection to others. The size of the data is a limitation in this result. Some of the observed or expected frequencies are less than 5 so the central limit theorem may not apply and could impact the validity of the chi-square statistic. Additional studies are needed to increase the sample size and reduce the statistical risks associated with a smaller population.

### Conclusions

Diversity is a topic that is widely discussed and widely misunderstood. Much of the misunderstanding stems from who it applies to and how it is applied. When the application of diversity involves the

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acceptance of others outside of the normalization of self, recognition becomes difficult, and resistance is present.

Many students initially thought about diversity as an abandonment of self to accept others opposed to an understanding of self to accept others. This transformation took place as students internalized their self-perceptions as the bridge toward connection, acceptance, tolerance, empathy, and understanding of others.

Majority of students had a moderate level of self-awareness at the start of the semester. At the conclusion of the semester, the majority of the students strongly agreed the course impacted their ability to understand the emotional needs of others; relate sensitively to others; and have an openness to others with differing values, cultures, and perspectives. The survey results demonstrate how improved self-awareness also improved student feelings about others.

This study contributes to literature on teaching diversity in the classroom by changing the concept of diversity from an outward reflection to an inward reflection using self-awareness. In this process, students look at themselves opposed to looking at others introducing another method for teaching that removes barriers of difficulty in student participation and classroom discussion.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The impact of this learning experience for the identified population is limited in scope. This teaching and learning experience was completed at the regional campus of a PWI. Majority of the students identify as White. Historically, this student population has a low amount of diverse experiences which increased the probability of impact. If this same learning experience took place at a campus or classroom with a different demographic structure, the results could be different.

Suggested future research would include studying this topic in demographic segments. This would provide information on the impact of self-awareness and acceptance of others for different groups of people. For example; is the impact different for male vs. female or White vs. non-White students? This information would help researchers understand the impact in a narrower scope.



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### **Personal Biography**

Sonseeahray Ross-Yisrael is an Assistant Professor at Miami University. She is currently working on her Ph.D. at Miami University in Educational Leadership. She graduated with her MEd from Wright State University and her MBA from the University of Phoenix. Sonseeahray has held leadership positions in university administration and fortune 500 companies driving growth strategies and organizational campaigns. She has researched urban community and education models. She has presented her work on urban student populations at local, regional and national conferences. She received professional and community awards for her work and leadership. Sonseeahray's research interests include working with unique populations, urban community development, advocacy, and partnerships. She has taught courses in organizational leadership, marketing, strategy, statistics, and personal, organizational skills.