Diversity Across the Curriculum
A Guide for Faculty in Higher Education

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Incorporating Diversity Into a History of Psychology Course

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The History and Systems of Psychology course at the University of Pittsburgh–Johnstown is an upper level undergraduate class that fulfills a curriculum requirement for psychology majors. Nonmajors may take the class as well, with permission of the instructor. When I began teaching this course 10 years ago, I designed it specifically to be interdisciplinary in nature. I wished students to examine the evolution of the field of psychology through this course, which I viewed as part psychology, part history, and part philosophy. In the first portion of the course, I spent a good deal of time discussing the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline of psychology. I began with the early Greek philosophers (i.e., Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), progressed to the early and medieval Christian philosophers (St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas) and the Renaissance (Descartes, da Vinci, etc.), and finished with the Mental Passivity movement (Hobbes, Locke, Hume) and the German rationalists (Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer). In this part of the course, I stressed the duality of rationalist and empiricist thought that began in ancient Greece and persisted over time to influence early schools of psychology in the mid 1800s to the early 1900s.

For the rest of the course, I turned my attention to examining the early emerging discipline of psychology. Traditionally, I’ve accomplished this by examining some of the advancements in scientific methodology and human anatomy/physiology that have impacted psychology, followed by an in-depth look at each school of thought (e.g., structuralism, behaviorism, gestaltism, etc.) in roughly chronological order. When I discuss each school of thought, I focus on the primary theoretical features of the paradigm, the classic studies of interest, and the people and personalities involved. The following list of course objectives summarized what I expected students to learn:
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- To compare and contrast various historical schools of thought in psychology
- To analyze how various schools of thought have led to the state of the field today
- To critique original works from major historical figures in the field with regard to their impact on the current field
- To become conversant in the language of those historical figures who helped shape the field
- To have a general working knowledge of the philosophers and historical figures in the field in terms of who they were and why they were important

In terms of class assignments, students were required to read, analyze, and critique three original works from major historical figures in psychology (e.g., Pavlov, Watson, James, Skinner, etc.). They also performed a group assignment in which they assembled a multimedia presentation on what they believed the field of psychology would look like 50 years from the present day.

Impetus for Change

After teaching this course for many years, I realized that, with respect to multiculturalism and whether a course is exclusive, inclusive, or transformed (Kitano, 1997), the way I taught the course probably fell in between the categories of exclusion and inclusion. An exclusive course, as defined by Kitano:

- presents and maintains traditional, mainstream experiences and perspectives on the discipline. . . . The instructor conveys information in a didactic manner, and students demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge through objective or subjective written examinations. . . . In the exclusive classroom, class time is not given to discussion of social issues not directly related to the discipline. (p. 23)

On the other hand:

- an inclusive course presents traditional views but adds alternative perspectives. Content integration in an inclusive course can range from simple addition of new viewpoints without elaboration to efforts at analyzing and understanding reasons for historical exclusion. The instructor uses a wide array of teaching methods to support students' active learning of course content. . . . The instructor monitors student participation and employs learning activities that support participation by all students. (p. 23)

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And, finally:

A transformed course challenges traditional views and assumptions; encourages new ways of thinking; and re-conceptualizes the field in light of new knowledge, scholarship, and new ways of knowing. . . . Methods capitalize on the experience and knowledge that students bring and encourage personal as well as academic growth. (p. 23)

In essence, my goal for modifying this course, with respect to issues of diversity and multiculturalism, was to move it from the exclusive-inclusive level to the inclusive-transformed level. One reason for this change lies with the characteristics of the student population at the university I teach. The students are overwhelmingly Caucasian, Protestant/Catholic individuals drawn from the rural area of western and central Pennsylvania. Many of these students are the first people in their families to attend college, and many have not traveled outside the immediate geographic area. In terms of their future careers in psychology, many of the majors take jobs in urban settings or other areas of the United States, where they encounter diverse populations they have little experience with. I feel strongly that students need to develop a sensibility and sensitivity about other cultures and populations that will serve them well in the future, particularly when working with people in a clinical or social services capacity. I view a high level of social consciousness and knowledge about diversity and multiculturalism as essential for these students.

Another reason for change was the more global goal of fostering critical thinking. In the history of psychology, many contributors to the field were ignored for years because of their status as women, ethnic minorities, or non-Western researchers. I felt that I needed to emphasize more strongly an analysis of the societal conditions that led to these situations and have students work through the logic of how these types of situations occur and how to understand them.

Implementation

In general, when overhauling existing courses, I am loath to change numerous aspects of the course simultaneously. As a result, I decided to make incremental changes to the course and see how they worked before making more extensive changes. First of all, I incorporated three additional course objectives:

- To recognize the historical contribution of American minorities and women to the field
- To recognize the effect that sociocultural factors have had on the development of psychology
To synthesize a sophisticated view of the historical development of psychology that encompasses various issues related to the social context of the time periods involved.

To begin the transition to a course that emphasizes diversity and multiculturalism, I made several changes. The first change was in the assigned readings. Ultimately, I will choose a new text for the course that emphasizes the history of psychology within a larger social context, which will help in terms of how I frame the discussion of the historical figures and schools of thought in psychology. But for the time being, I inserted a number of new readings into the course that focus on women, African-Americans, and Asians who have impacted psychology over time. These readings were woven throughout the course. By having students read these articles, I hoped to create an atmosphere whereby the readings suggested a number of issues that could be discussed at various points throughout the semester.

I also introduced two new writing assignments. The first was a biographical exercise. For this assignment, students selected a historical figure from the history of psychology who was a member of a nondominant culture from the late 1800s or early 1900s (my definition of nondominant refers to people from cultures or countries outside Western Europe and the United States, to women, or to ethnic minorities within the United States). They either chose someone from a list I provided or found a person on their own. Some examples of historical figures the students wrote about included Mary Whiton Calkins, Kenneth Clark, Edna Heidbreder, Francis Cecil Sumner, Chen Li, and Zing-Yang Kuo. The second new assignment was to read and critique an article about a female psychologist named Ethel Puffer who, in the early 1900s, faced many obstacles in her work. I felt that students would gain a greater appreciation for the problems American women had gaining status in the field in the early 1900s.

Overall, these initial changes were modest. When I offer the course again, I will make further changes that are more substantial. The first change will be to explicitly incorporate into class content and discussion the neglected role of women and minorities in American psychology. The second change will be to the critical analysis papers for the course. In the modified assignments, students will have to explicitly address how the sociocultural zeitgeist of the historical times affected the author's work. The third change will be to insert a two-week examination of a psychological disorder—namely, hysteria—and how this disorder was handled with respect to the schools of thought in psychology. This will provide an opportunity to explore how gender, race, and class factors related to the treatment of this disorder over time and will provide an opportunity to examine how non-Western cultures handled this disorder. I believe that these changes will open a window to class discussion on how these diversity-related issues affected psychology in the past and how they affect psychology today.

Conclusion

I believe that the incorporation of the new readings and assignments lent themselves to opening up class discussions of how gender, race, and class issues have impacted the development of psychology as a field. In addition, I believe such changes sparked discussions of whether these issues still affect the field today, and I hope they raised students' consciousness about diversity. I did not receive any negative feedback on the changes. The initial incremental changes I made took well, so I am ready to move forth with further changes. As I continue to teach this course, I do believe that it will move closer to the inclusive-transformed level.

Another point to mention is that, although the student population is fairly homogenous at the University of Pittsburgh—Johnstown, there are increasing numbers of women, members of ethnic minorities, people of differing sexual orientations, and foreign students in the student body. Positioned as I am—namely, as an American, Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual male—I have tried to understand to a greater degree how my status affects my interactions with students from different backgrounds. I want to ensure a safe atmosphere where all students feel comfortable in expressing their opinions. Related to this issue, I
inserted updated guidelines into the course syllabus emphasizing rules for class discussion that specify appropriate conduct for interacting with others in the class.

Finally, although I have put a considerable amount of thought and work into transforming this course, it is an experiment. As an experiment, certain aspects of change will succeed; others will fail. But overall, for the reasons that I cited at the beginning of this chapter, not only do I believe that it is desirable to prepare my students for a future diverse and multicultural world; I believe that it is necessary. I hope that in some small way what they experience in this particular course generalizes to their thought processes and the manner in which they later approach the postdegree world and their personal interactions with others.

References
