

Building Diversity into the Agricultural Studies Major: The Stranger Assignment: Costs and Benefits

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Abstract

Gaining approval of the general education requirement at Iowa State University for a course related to US diversity was a major achievement, but a single course was never intended to accomplish the goal of increasing tolerance and appreciation of a pluralistic and multicultural society. Anti-bias and diversity education must also be presented—in ways that accomplish genuine learning—to students in core content areas on a continual basis. This presentation explains a diversity unit in the AGEDS 315 *Leadership in Agriculture* course in which students from Agricultural Studies, Agricultural Education, and Agronomy and other production majors enroll. The course addresses a need identified in the 2002 National Study of Student Engagement, which documented that nearly two-thirds of Iowa State seniors have failed to have a significant conversation with a person different from themselves. The interview-based assignment asks mainly White, rural undergraduate students to meet and spend time with a student “different from them.” The presentation will engage the audience in a discussion of the costs and benefits of the assignment, including the burden on minority and foreign students. Data from five years of assignments and evaluations will be presented to illustrate the impact on students.

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Introduction

Personal Note from Nancy Grudens-Schuck

When I arrived at Iowa State in the summer of 1999 from New York, I was given permission to put my personal “stamp” on an undergraduate course, AGEDS 315 *Leadership in Agriculture*. I added a diversity assignment. There are important theoretical and job-related justifications for teaching diversity in a leadership course. However, commitment came first. I began the assignment committed to making it happen because my prior experiences with anti-bias education were positive. More, I had witnessed the painful effects of unmitigated racism in my rural hamlet in upstate New York. In a so-called “homogenous” hamlet of 800 households, dairy farms, and sweet corn operations, a neighbor became heavily involved in hate group activity (Downer, Grudens-Schuck, Olmstead & Onishi, 1995). Activities included publishing a newsletter that targeted non White and non Christian families. We formed a local “tolerance” group to counter his activities after he and others held an (unsuccessful) Ku Klux Klan rally in the county seat (Auburn, NY). This experience, more than anything else, led me to introduce the diversity assignment. Commitment helped see me through the ups and downs of the evolution of the assignment, which is the topic of this presentation.

Personal Note from Mike Retallick

I have been the coordinator of academic advising for the Department of Agricultural Education and Studies since January 2001. During the summer of 2003, I was asked to serve as the instructor of one section of AgEdS 315 for the upcoming academic year. The previous instructor had incorporated the diversity assignment into that section the

previous year. I elected to continue the assignment because I felt it had a lot to offer the students in our department. First, the students as a whole are very homogenous, generally Caucasian males. Second, I saw value in the students studying leadership in a much broader scope than what they were accustomed to in rural Iowa. One feature that was implemented in this section was a class presentation as the final expectation for the assignment. It has proved to be an excellent addition to the assignment. The project enables students to get outside of their comfort zone and begin to internalize some of the issues they may soon face in the workforce.

Summary

The AGEDS 315 Leadership in Agriculture course enrolls about 50 students per semester, or 100 per year. Section 2 has utilized the Stranger Assignment since fall 1999, and section 1 has required the assignment since 2002. Grudens-Schuck has taught section 2 of the course since 1999 for a total of 12 semesters to over 250 students. Retallick taught the course in 2003-2004. The course has evolved into a facilitation and leadership training course. It is our hope that the course will enable production-focused undergraduates who enter the agricultural industry, government agricultural positions, and/or continue to farm may succeed as leaders in agricultural and community-based organizations and as team players in their work. The course teaches enough leadership theory to support practical aspects of the course, such as moving from command-and-control forms of leadership to participative, inclusive forms of leadership (see course texts, Bergmann et al., 1999; Gardner, 1990; Kaner, 1996). We teach students to be flexible, responsive, and communicative as well as to take initiative and to support others to do their best work. The course sections differ in the

way in which these goals are accomplished but the goal is the same: to enhance students' ability to function as effective leaders in the field of agriculture. The course is required for all Agricultural Studies majors but also is taken by students in Agricultural Education, Agronomy, Animal Science, and Public Service and Administration.

Students in the AGEDS 315 mainly are White, traditional college aged (17-21), and from small towns where agriculture is the major occupation. About two-thirds are from farms and half enroll for the first time at Iowa State in their junior year. The trend toward enrollments by transfer from community colleges is expected to increase and in 2004 accounted for over 50% of new matriculated in the major.

The unit, called the *Stranger Assignment*, does not offer students an intensive or all-encompassing learning opportunity. We do something modest and specific. In short, the assignment asks students to introduce themselves to a person who is “different from them” and to learn how that individual thinks and behaves with respect to “leadership and participation”—i.e., the course content. Students meet with the person for an informal interview and, in section 2, accompany the person to a meeting of an organization or work team to observe “how people participate.” Products of the assignment, in physical terms, include a paper or oral presentation (or both) and completion of a Critical Incidents Questionnaire (based on Brookfield, 1995). Learning supports include (depending on the instructor), a long period of time (6 weeks) to complete the assignment, readings about the role of understanding culture as part of learning leadership (Gardner, 1990; Young, 2000), modeling respectful ways of thinking and talking about differences (Kaner, 1996), and group discussion about students' fears, challenges, and joys associated with the assignment. We provide more detail

about each of these aspects later. Before talking more about the specifics of the assignment and students' reactions and outcomes, we need to explain the context for anti-bias education in the Agricultural Studies major.

Starting Points

Apropos of diversity issues, students themselves describe their prior experiences as few and far between. From a White female student in the course. (Student work shared with permission).

I am intimidated to meet new people of a different race. Where I grew up, there was only one individual that was of a different race, so different ethnicity groups was not something I was accustomed to.

From a different White female student.

One of the areas that interested me was a person with a different ethnic background. Having come from a very small town with a mostly Caucasian population and very little cultural and ethnic diversity I thought that would be very interesting.

From a White male student from Iowa.

When choosing someone to interview I was hoping I could find someone that was totally different than me: someone who knew little about agriculture, comes from a large city, and has a different perspective than me.

These comments may or may not be surprising. They may please us or not. Some of us may recall a similar point in our lives when we had some of the same thoughts about people in the "world out there," even if those people lived next door. However, for students in the course, the person who is different is not likely to live next door. Only one or two students (per 100) annually are non White or non traditionally aged. Older returning students typically have spent time in the military and may have wide experience with different places and cultures. However, the overwhelming majority of

students have had little or no contact with non White, non Northern European language speakers (e.g., Dutch, German, Swedish). Students in the course uniformly state their inexperience [(although this is changing quickly as Mexican agricultural workers become more numerous and more integrated in Iowa) (Flora, 1999; see also Rao, Arcury & Quandt, 2003)]. At the undergraduate level, the university itself is considered a *predominantly White institution*—similar to many 1862 land-grant colleges (Ingram, 2005). This history impacts both White and non White students, as well as students who speak English as a second or third language (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Grudens-Schuck, Wallace & Grant, 2001; Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003).

Structural Issues

The inexperience of students in the major with non White people does not, however, mean that students are “color neutral.” We know that lack of awareness of Whites regarding privilege is highly correlated with maintenance of racism—both overt and institutional (i.e., systemic). Graveline (1998), a First Nations Canadian scholar, documented similar reflections of students in an anti-bias course focused on aboriginal issues.

The ways in which my parents socialized me are very much within the expectations of white middle-class status. Although no one has ever taught me to be cruel or harsh to others in order to insure I will succeed in life, my membership in the white culture is enough to ensure that I will be somewhat successful. (p. 225).

Graveline’s student expressed her ideas with greater sophistication and awareness of the mechanisms of bias than AGEDS 315 students, but the message is the same: students’ early experiences make it difficult to “see” how difference—including culture, race, religion, and ethnicity—shape themselves as well as others.

Assumptions, Warrants, Elements, and Challenges

The Stranger Assignment is constructed purposefully. The goal was not to accomplish “everything in one day” (or one course), but to build upon and elaborate anti-bias education that students have already encountered. We also needed the assignment to support learning in the content area (i.e., leadership in agriculture). Relevant to learning about the intersection of leadership and working effectively with “others” especially those of different race, ethnicity or culture, this section describes: (a) *assumptions* about students’ prior knowledge and experiences, (b) *warrant* or obligations of the instructor, (c) *elements* of the assignment that relate to assumptions and needs, and (d) challenges.

1. The “right thing” needs to become “their thing”

Assumption: Prior educational experiences with anti-bias education have convinced students that other people want them to address diversity issues, and that it is shameful not to (Povinelli, 2002). This is compliance-based ethical reasoning but it is a start.

Warrant: The Stranger Assignment needed to be presented authoritatively in order to push students to do it. However, it also was crucial to build opportunities for cooperation and autonomy into the assignment or students would continue at the compliance level, which is not satisfactory in human relations (Graveline, 1998; Kaner, 1996).

Elements: Students are permitted wide latitude with respect to whom they choose as their “Stranger.” Some students choose to meet a person that they believe is very different from themselves—in other words, they challenge themselves. When these students compare their choice to others in the class, or get feedback from me, they realize that they themselves made it happen. As I put it, “You created a great learning

opportunity for yourself.” This transforms the learning into something more developmentally appropriate and long lasting.

Challenges: Some students choose someone who is not very different from themselves, and they have nothing to say at the end of the day. Consequently, their grade suffers and they make little progress related to diversity. They may even get worse.

2. Move from silence to respectful talk

Assumption: Because students know that it is wrong to talk disrespectfully about others, and because they think they don’t know any other way to talk, they remain silent (Kaner, 1996). This makes the “invisibility” issue worse with respect to not seeing or hearing others around them. It also creates a peer reinforcing system in non formal venues that instructors can’t influence (see also Graveline, 1998; Gregg & Leinhardt, 2002).

Warrant: Instructors must offer regular opportunities for students to see, hear, name and talk about differences—not just in the unit. Modeling the right way to talk is a better form of correction than critical comments.

Elements: In every unit, I build diversity into instructional materials. For example, early in the semester, I show a brief clip from *Patch Adams* (Shadyac, 1998) with a character played by an African American woman (a nurse). Students discuss the scene without once mentioning her race. I bring it up. I model respectful talk. One student may try a term or two, but not many. I offer other materials, such as decision teaching cases (Grudens-Schuck, 2000a, 2000b), structured discussions, articles (Young, 2000), and

guest speakers. Students get more comfortable and try their hand at different ways of talking about others (see also Gregg & Leinhardt, 2002).

Challenges: Students sometimes make racist jokes or derogatory comments. They make fun of TAs who speak English with an accent and describe Mexican workers disrespectfully. They ask questions about sex and marriage among people of different cultures and races. Some romanticize other cultures and even wish they belonged (Lee, Beale-Spencer & Harpalani, 2003; Wernitznig, 2003). When one opens the box, it all comes out. We typically address or tolerate rather than shut it down. We wonder about the effectiveness of this approach. We understand why teachers “don’t bring it up” but can always revisit Freire (1998) for reinvigoration.

3. Stay bounded: focus on groups and participation.

Assumption: There is nothing generic about race, ethnicity, or culture, so why teach that way? Everything has a context (Povinelli, 2002; Young, 2000). Ours is leadership and participation and agriculture.

Warrant: I ask students to address participation and leadership issues in their assignment, and I stick with our course materials. This bounds the issue for them and makes it seem more reasonable. It is also important to show that people in other cultures and from other races are part of groups and organizations. For example, the Rosa Parks story is often told as “Rosa alone,” which is not true (Kohl, 1995; see also Harrison, 2001; Kahne & Bailey, 1999). Her activities were nested in an organized collaborative social justice movement, which is more impressive—and more threatening—than the one-person-can-make-a-difference rhetoric.

Elements: Students are required to attend a group meeting of their Stranger. This works really well at ISU because there are so many groups. We all have learned about the great variety of groups and how they function through this. The experience, when a student attends a group event, also is more powerful overall. For example, a German Catholic exchange student in the course attended a youth meeting at a Synagogue with a Rabbi in attendance. She had met no Jews in her lifetime. She was warmly welcomed and the effect was transforming for her.

Challenges: Groups are unpredictable. Meetings get cancelled. Students also have poorly developed observational skills and can't pick up differences in talk or behavior (see also Young, 2000). And sometimes, there is very little difference between ways of working among groups.

4. Fun and games, please!

Assumption: Many students begin the assignment in a terrified or suspicious state. They anticipate being rejected and even hurt. We know this from talking to them and from reading their writing.

Warrant: Positive experiences are required when the learning curve is steep.

Elements: Over the long period of the assignment and with a small class size, we have a chance to check in with about half of the 25 students easily and reward them for gains, insights, and surprises. They also just plain have fun as they venture forth and learn about commonalities.

Challenges: The assignment is not fun for everyone—and that becomes clear during final presentations. Students who have fantastic experiences (most of them) shine. However, these students also may talk about their Stranger as a type of museum

piece—exotic and shocking but not really fully human (see also Povinelli, 2002; Wernitznig, 2003). That worries us. We also worry that it presents a burden to minority and foreign students who are the most likely to be tapped for service in this regard. What burden is placed on them individually and as a group?

Conclusion

Our conclusion provides questions for discussion.

- (1) Given the modest, non-critical nature of the assignment, does the superficial or stereotypical understanding of a culture or race or religion through a single encounter make things better or worse?
- (2) What experiences before and after the Stranger Assignment would make it more powerful and long lasting? Who would do this?
- (3) How should the instructor manage the negative, biased talk that comes with opening up?
- (4) Would more structure provide more learning? Or is the loose structure working?
- (5) Regarding forms of reflection that build on learning, what are the trade-off's between oral presentations and written papers?

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