

Head, Heart, and Hand: Tools for Working Through Conflict in the Classroom.

D-L Stewart is professor and chair of the Higher Education Department in DU's Morgridge College of Education. Dr. Stewart will be leading a morning session as part of the Provost's conference on October 12th, 2023 which offers faculty, especially early career faculty, tools for working through conflict in the classroom. To prepare for the session and the conference as a whole, attendees are invited to read an early article of Dr. Stewart's which offers ways to engage conflicting viewpoints in the classroom while remaining attuned to the humanity of all students.

Please read Dr. Stewart's article, **beginning on the following page**, which was published under a dead name, and use these questions to help you think about how these issues show up in your own classroom. We look forward to welcoming you at D-L's session!

1. Dr. Stewart was early career and pre-tenure at a previous institution when this article was written. How do rank and series shape how you experience conflict in the classroom? How might it shape conversations on difficult topics on campus overall?
2. Think about a time when a "hot moment" has arisen in your classroom or pay attention as you teach this fall. When this happens, what do you feel in your body, your mind, and in your spirit or emotional core? How do you tend to handle these embodied, cognitive, or emotional responses?
3. Stewart's students begin to differentiate between "support" and "agreement" in their conversations around political and social topics. How do you understand these two stances? Do they show up in your own classroom? What sort of approach do you invite students to take?
4. Your classroom or lab may not seem initially like a space where controversial topics would emerge. Think about a time when you've been surprised by a "hot moment" or what sort of unexpressed conflicts might be simmering below the surface.
5. How might learning outcomes, disciplinary conversations, and other scholarly norms help with these challenges? (See the example of page 7 where Stewart introduces Patricia King and Bettina Shuford)
6. Stewart's article offers a way to engage meaningfully in difficult conversations without endorsing a particular stance as a faculty member. How does he model and describe this practice? What tools does he use or moves does he make to deepen the conversation? How might it be adaptable to your context?

Too often, political liberals are automatically assumed to be multiculturally competent. Dafina Lazarus Stewart's students grappled with the possibility that this assumption could be flat wrong.

By Dafina Lazarus Stewart

Confronting the Politics of Multicultural Competence

SINCE BECOMING A FACULTY MEMBER in higher education and student affairs, I have taught classes that focus on the experiences, personal development challenges, and other issues faced by underrepresented groups in higher education. My personal goal for teaching such courses has long been to empower my students to transform the campuses on which they will live and work into more democratic, just, and nurturing environments for all students, especially those who feel invisible, silenced, or marginalized. During the fall semester of 2005, however, my idyllic march toward campus transformation was arrested. As I used my model of persistent questioning to encourage twelve students in a master's level course on multicultural issues in student affairs to drill down into subjects, our group hit "oil." We subsequently found ourselves immersed in the sticky issues associated with multicultural competence.

Allan G. Johnson's *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, which prompts readers to look beyond individual responsibility and toward institutional transformation, directed us to the oil well. Raechele Pope, Amy Reynolds, and John Mueller's *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs*

helped us begin the drilling as it focused our attention on the practical implications of diversity. We drilled deep during a class discussion in the seventh week of the semester while considering the question "How do we create supportive environments for all students?" Initial responses included the following statements:

- "Meeting [targeted students] where they are"
- "Supportive environments are not enough; we need to talk to [resident assistants] about how to become *visible* allies!"
- "Normalize the marginalized groups' [identities, experiences, worldviews]"
- "Educate [students and staff] on what it means to be an ally"
- "Create different environments for people to come out [in terms of their sexual identity]"

The class, having drawn from the readings done up to that point in the semester, seemed content that it had



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fully answered the question. I sensed that there were greater depths to which we could go. I queried further: “What is an ally?” The students brainstormed other words that defined an ally for them:

- “Advocate: speak on behalf of marginalized groups.”
- “Safe person: marginalized people do not fear judgment around you.”
- “Supportive: being helpful.”
- “Friend: can be trusted, shows concern, and stands up for you all the time.”
- “Being knowledgeable: knowing what resources exist, having awareness.”
- “Challenging one’s own behavior, language, and viewpoints.”
- “Giving visible support sometimes; showing up and being heard.”

I urged them to go deeper. I asked, “Can I be supportive without [being in] agreement?” There was a quick moment of silent consideration and then the reply “Yes,” made unanimous by both verbal and non-verbal agreements. I was surprised, to be honest; I had expected them to say that it was not possible to both support and disagree. Not yet certain of their depth of critical thought, I did not relent. “What does it mean to be supportive?” I asked. Their responses were undaunted:

- “[To] respect, value, appreciate, honor”
- “Be there for [someone] when they need you to be”
- “Knowing what is important for them”
- “Not being oppositional”
- “Being aware of where you are”

For all of us, this was a moment of profound insight; to assert—as the group had just done—that, as one student said, “I *can* support someone even if I do not agree completely,” brought us to a central paradox in the promotion of multicultural competence.

Martha Nussbaum’s writings (for example, in Robert Baird and Stuart Rosenbaum’s *Hatred, Bigotry, and Prejudice* and in Susan Okin, Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum’s *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*) note the existence of similar paradoxes of espousal and dissent in all educational, political, and social discourses. In contexts ranging from the legitimacy and need for gay and lesbian studies to Aristotelian democracy, she argues that true education requires the critical consideration of multiple vantage points, which may, at times, conflict. Yet the conflict does not itself negate the positions held.

Having encountered the paradox of support without agreement, we were able to productively continue our classroom discussion, assisted, in part, by the community standards we had set at the beginning of the semester. Acknowledging Barbara Applebaum, who asserts that classrooms are arenas of power, I had entrusted the students with developing guidelines that would shape our class interactions. These community standards reflected our collective desire to create class sessions that would be safe for vulnerable self-exposure and for disagreement over ideas and that would allow room for multiple people and perspectives to be heard. Armed with this collective commitment to respectfully disagree, we continued to drill.

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IMPLEMENTING THE CONCEPT OF SUPPORT DESPITE DISAGREEMENT

ONE STUDENT TOOK A RISK and confessed that he found Johnson's book to be "very liberal" and indicated that he was unsure of what to do with much of the content. Among the many messages that this student, "Sam"—a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied man—had received during the semester from the readings and class discussions was that his conservative politics and values were inherently oppressive. He was hearing in the class that he could not simultaneously be politically conservative and effectively engage marginalized students or be an advocate for diversity and multiculturalism, despite his personal commitment to promoting justice, equity, and empowerment for all college students. Sam challenged many of us to enact our belief that we could support someone with whom we do not agree. Moreover, he challenged me as an educator to use my influence to direct subsequent discussion so as to prevent political polarization and to promote learning from difference.

Using affirmative action pedagogy, which, Applebaum suggests, allows only for affirmation of (and agreement with) oppressed groups, would have meant telling Sam and his conservative peers that their feelings of marginalization and silence were irrelevant, given the larger issue of physically or psychologically violent societal oppression, silencing, and marginalization that happens routinely to targeted social groups. However, such dismissal would have, at the very least, hampered student learning and weakened relationships among students in the class. Applebaum opens her discussion of affirmative action pedagogy with the question "Does all silencing subjugate?" (p. 151). I believe that all silencing does not subjugate (oppress) but that all silencing does suppress learning by jeopardizing the social contract of the classroom learning environment.

The relationships among the participants in a class are central to any learning that occurs. Both Parker Palmer and bell hooks have described classrooms as learning communities in which the teacher functions

primarily as a guide and facilitator. In order for me to be an effective guide, those following me must trust me, that I know where I am going, and that I will make sure they reach the destination without undue harm or exposure to unnecessary danger. Moreover, as Nevitt Sanford recognized four decades ago, development happens because of appropriate levels of both challenge and support. Development will not occur if individuals remain in their comfort zone, but it will also stagnate if there is no affirmation, validation, or encouragement that they are on course. Therefore, dismissing the concerns and feelings of my conservative students would have changed the classroom climate, reduced their trust in me as a learning guide, and suppressed further development.

Educators should attend to how privilege and power are rewarded in the classroom, a setting in which students practice dealing with these issues in preparation for dealing with them in the larger environments of other institutions, society, and the world. When students wrestle with how their personal values intersect with the concept of multicultural competence, educators can use the opportunity to help them reflect on and openly discuss the thoughts and feelings that arise. At these moments, teachers can model respect for unpopular views and encourage students to consider how they are responding to the discussion both cognitively and affectively. Because teachers of mine used these strategies when I was a student, I have made a conscious effort to practice them in my classrooms.

Ready for conflict, I chose to give Sam space to elaborate on his position. He explained that for him, conservative politics and values did not equate to racism, sexism, homophobia, and religious fundamentalism. Rather, he characterized his conservative politics and values as representing an alternative, reasonable means of accomplishing the aims of the founders of the republic: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. Sam acknowledged the inherent contradiction in the fact that most of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders and that they made no provision for the equal rights of women, enslaved Africans in

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the United States, or native peoples. However, he felt that the values they espoused were still honorable, desirable, and just and that conservatives offered a different path for actualizing those values.

Sam clearly recognized the injustices that confronted and continued to confront people of color; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals; the poor; and those with disabilities and felt empathy for their plight both on campus and in the larger society. He said he believed in the value of ensuring that every student felt validated and knew they mattered on campus. He also said that he worked consistently to make sure that he demonstrated that belief to every student with whom he came into contact. Moreover, Sam confided that although it had been very difficult for him to participate in the early class activities that highlighted the differences among us along lines of privilege and oppression, he had come to accept that he was privileged and that his privilege came at the expense of others, even though he did not seek that outcome. However, Sam was not prepared to join Allan Johnson in his attack on capitalism, free market economics, or traditional conceptions of chivalry. Neither was he convinced that race-based affirmative action was an appropriate means of ensuring the presence and participation of oppressed racial groups in higher education.

The class met his comments with silence, and I chose to let the silence continue. Another student shared in Sam's risk, confessing that she also was a conservative, and stated that she did not agree with much of the "conservative bashing" she had experienced from others working in colleges and universities. She said that she felt marginalized and that her commitment to equality and justice had been discredited by people who knew only her voting record and not her values.

More uncomfortable silence followed. I invited other students to enter the discussion by asking the class to consider the implications of these students' perceptions and feelings. I made it clear that debating the validity of their impressions was not the issue. It was not just these students who identified themselves as political

conservatives who were troubled by the perceived liberal tenor of the conversations about diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice; there were educators, parents, and fellow students who felt the same way. In a recent *About Campus* article, Jodi Fisler and John Foubert note, "The stereotype of politically and socially liberal college faculty and administrators has, for many, taken on the status of indisputable fact" (p. 3). These authors, like my students, question whether there is a political bent to today's education and whether disagreement amounts to disrespect.

In our class, addressing these questions led all of us, me included, to wrangle with how we could promote multicultural competence without making judgments about people's values. We left class that semester with these questions still on our minds. The students who took the risk of confessing that they felt somewhat marginalized by a conversation that was intended to be inclusive ended the semester feeling empowered to make a difference in the lives of students without needing to reject a critical part of their identity. This empowerment occurred through careful tending of a respectful, accepting classroom environment created by our class norms and maintained throughout the semester. Liberal students in the class learned to genuinely listen to their conservative classmates and acknowledged that they understood how a conservative could come away from Johnson's book and much of the other reading we had done for class feeling silenced and devalued. We all, regardless of our politics, openly grappled with the messages of conservatives and liberals and how they lined up with the multicultural competence and social justice paradigms that our readings advocated.

CHARTING A NEW JOURNEY

THE CLASS had ended with all students feeling heard; however, my work as instructor continued.

Including Different Voices. I spent the next several months trying to find a way to make the class truly inclusive of multiple points of view. Thanks to an informal conversation with Merrily Dunn at the annual

meeting of the American College Personnel Association in Indianapolis, I decided to add a new book to the course syllabus for that fall. Alongside *Privilege, Power, and Difference* and *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs* would sit *Letters to a Young Conservative*. This book by Asian Indian political conservative and scholar Dinesh D'Souza would provide the counterpoint to Johnson's liberal perspective. D'Souza is also the author of *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* and *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, among others. In these texts, D'Souza unapologetically positions himself against affirmative action, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and what he sees as the cultural balkanization of U.S. campuses and universities. In *Letters to a Young Conservative*, he proposes that college students be required to acquire a better understanding of Western and non-Western history and literature in order to "develop an authentic multiculturalism that teaches the greatest works" of cultures around the world (p. 52). He also asserts that merely affirming the positives of non-Western cultures amounts to a "bogus multiculturalism" that actually demeans the very people it supposedly uplifts. Particularly in *Letters to a Young Conservative*, D'Souza's prose is brash, strident, and, at times, mocking. It is certainly different from what I would typically assign for this class in both its tone and conservative content.

Given this addition to the reading list, students would be required to consider seriously the multicultural competence of both Johnson's and D'Souza's books, using Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller's characteristics of multiculturally competent student affairs practitioners as the baseline. I would not allow the students (or myself) to assume that Johnson's discussion was compatible with multicultural competence and the goals of the course or that D'Souza's discussion was necessarily incompatible with those same goals and objectives simply because they came from two opposing perspectives.

Evaluating Structure, Not Content. Helping students disagree with ideas while still respecting the people expressing them and helping students evaluate how people arrive at conclusions rather than what specific conclusions they make were my goals for this

course. I wanted to include different ideas in the course, especially because it was a course on student development. When I teach cognitive development in this course, I emphasize that cognitive development deals with the *structure* of knowing and knowledge judgments, not the *content* of those judgments. It is not enough to know that a person does not support affirmative action, for instance. It is necessary to know how that person arrived at that conclusion, what evidence the person is using to support that belief, and whether the person is foreclosed to new information that might change that belief. These deeper questions inform an assessment of someone's cognitive development, or reflective judgment à la Patricia King and Karen Kitchener. Given what my conservative students shared at the end of our class in fall 2005, I realized that I had neglected the cognitive complexity of multicultural competence and failed to recognize that a barometer of political values and attitudes could not assess that cognitive complexity. In order for my students to work effectively with undergraduates to develop skills for dealing with diversity and multiculturalism, they had to appreciate the cognitive complexity of the task, as well as learn to assess cognitive development in more complex ways than simply listening for "politically correct" language and positions. Confronting my students with the task of objectively analyzing both Johnson and D'Souza was my way of creating this opportunity for them.

Making a Fresh Start. The students who enrolled in my course in fall 2006 admitted to experiencing a wide range of emotions, including anxiety, curiosity, and excitement, just from seeing the books in the bookstore. In the class, we began by building a foundational understanding of multicultural competence. Pope and Reynolds explain in an article in the *Journal of College Student Development* that multicultural competence intertwines awareness, knowledge, and skills about self, others, the relationship of self to others, and the relationship of self and others to society. Other readings that reinforce definitions of oppression, group identity, and privilege and power completed the introduction to the course. From here, the class explored Johnson's discussion of privilege, power, and the role of systems in

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reinforcing privilege and oppression. At one point, Johnson's analysis describes the operation of privilege and power in society as akin to the game of Monopoly. He pointed out that people playing Monopoly often act in ways uncharacteristic of their typical demeanor and attitudes—for example, becoming competitive and aggressive or manipulating the rules in order to win the game. Likewise, Johnson suggests, people with privilege do not usually consciously decide to oppress others but follow paths of least resistance because it is easier to cooperate with the system than to deviate from it. Following the discussion of Johnson's work, we joined D'Souza in his exploration of multiple topics on the conservative landscape as he seeks to affirm and validate young conservatives on college campuses. Throughout *Letters to a Young Conservative*, he makes it clear that he believes affirmative action, abortion rights, gay marriage, a multicultural curriculum, and feminism will not solve the problems of discrimination, poverty, and injustice that exist in the world. Rather, D'Souza emphasizes personal accountability, merit, and traditional values as better means by which to fulfill the values of the United States' constitutional democracy.

D'Souza's perspective enlivened discussions, engaged students, and evoked emotions. Students were angered, frustrated, or welcoming of D'Souza, depending on their own political affiliations. One student even confessed in class that she got so angry while reading D'Souza that she cried. Nevertheless, regardless of their emotional reactions to the readings, each student took seriously the challenge to engage both Johnson and D'Souza cognitively instead of only affectively, critiquing each author's argument and comparing it with the characteristics of multicultural competence.

Through class discussions, activities, and written work, the students and I grappled with the same thorny questions that the previous fall semester's class had. Two questions framed the discussion: (1) Does multicultural competence represent a political/philosophical point of view? (2) If it does, is multicultural competence an appropriate tool for assessing ourselves and our work with students? We asked one another whether there are right or wrong answers to some of the issues relevant to multicultural competence on campus, such as affirmative action, gay marriage, abortion rights, and religious

expression. Both conservatives and liberals in the class wondered aloud whether conservative perspectives could be deemed multiculturally competent. Struggling with those matters led us to examine whether incorporating multicultural competence in the basic tool kit of student affairs practitioners, as Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller recommend, is the same as incorporating social justice advocacy as one of the basic tools. The students understood social justice advocacy to be intentional and committed advocacy on behalf of marginalized and oppressed groups *for* the platforms that those groups support—that is, ally work.

We also engaged with D'Souza's query "Do education and intelligence lead one to adopt the liberal viewpoint?" (*Letters to a Young Conservative*, p. 113). D'Souza passionately argues against that claim but emphasizes his belief that most academics think the answer to that question is an unqualified "yes." In contrast, the students typically felt that of course one could be highly educated, intelligent, and conservative. That was a forgone conclusion in the students' minds, regardless of their political affiliation. They refused to rate intelligence with a political barometer. What was of greater importance in our minds, though, was affirming that conservative perspectives were not necessarily opposed to the goals and characteristics of multicultural competence, even as we wondered how to get that message across to others.

When we finally tackled the first question, both liberal and conservative students in the class believed that multicultural competence did have a politically liberal bent to it. When I asked them where they saw this in the characteristics of a multiculturally competent student affairs educator, they pointed to the multiple statements about systems and institutional barriers and institutional oppression. They saw this emphasis on institutions and systems as a contrast with the emphasis D'Souza and other conservative writers we read put on individuals and merit. They also identified Pope and Reynolds' language of "acceptance" and a "personal commitment to justice, social change, and combating [oppression]" (p. 271) as liberal. I did not see the characteristics as either liberal or conservative, so I asked them to elaborate. For them, "knowledge about institutional barriers that limit access to and success in higher

education for members of oppressed groups” (p. 271) would result in support for affirmative action policies. Ultimately, they confessed that the liberalism they perceived might have had more to do with their interpretation of how the characteristics would look in action than with anything inherently liberal about them.

These students—who would be full-time educators in less than a year’s time—stated their collective impression that the field they were entering was dominantly liberal and identified with liberal values and attitudes. Exploring the implications of this impression, they realized that this perceived bias may cause conservative students and professionals to resist programs designed to promote multicultural competence because they may assume they could not participate in the discussion without being labeled part of the problem. Then it was time to answer the second central question about whether it was appropriate for educators to be identified as having predominantly liberal values and attitudes. For a moment, there was uncomfortable silence in the room, for the first time in our discussion. For most of the students, the liberalism of their chosen profession was not a problem; for others, however, as members of a political minority and a population that could feel silenced in the academy, it raised continuing questions about their fit in this field and their capacity to advance and be effective in their roles.

At this point, I raised Patricia King and Bettina Shuford’s idea that multiculturalism is a viewpoint that requires the development of cognitive complexity beyond defining and refining identity and values. I reminded the students that the language of cognitive-structural development theories, including epistemological and moral development, definitively stresses the *structure* of judgments about knowledge and decisions, not the *content* of those judgments. As such, the key to defining and assessing multicultural competence lies not in *what* we think about such issues as affirmative action or religious expression on campus but in *how* we think about those issues. Such a distinction is critically important when dealing with our

students and colleagues, whether they echo the dominant perspectives in our field or stand apart from them. Yet as a class, we admitted that too often we assumed that a student or colleague was or was not multiculturally competent based on the *content* of their opinions, without investigating *how* the individual used evidence to form his or her opinion. We each could remember a time when we looked askance at a colleague or student who confessed that they were against affirmative action or who openly professed to being an evangelical Christian, immediately assuming them to be “multiculturally incompetent,” a term that one of my students coined that semester. After being challenged to think critically about multicultural competence and consider the ways in which D’Souza demonstrated some characteristics of multicultural competence and Johnson did not, we all recognized that we needed to give each other and our students more latitude to explore their viewpoints and opinions, regardless of the political camp to which they belonged.

CONCLUSION

I AM GLAD that I challenged the class to engage D’Souza’s ideas; the result was that conservative students felt they finally had a legitimate place in the conversation and liberal students admitted to gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the views of relatives and friends. Student evaluations unanimously encouraged me to continue using D’Souza’s book. I left the course having come to the following conclusions: I believe that the multicultural competence that Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller outlined is accessible to *all* student affairs educators, regardless of their political, religious, or philosophical beliefs. For me, multicultural competence seeks to expand awareness of self and others through multiple perspectives and builds both foundational and specific knowledge bases while resisting ethnocentrism. It refines one’s ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogues and situations with awareness of

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the challenges that may arise without resorting to attacks or retreating into defensiveness. Finally, I believe that multicultural competence requires that we resist interpreting people, situations, and beliefs through binary either-or lenses that allow only two options. Being a conservative does not equal being privileged and oppressive; neither is liberalism synonymous with enlightenment and multicultural competence.

Multicultural competence requires that we embrace the feasibility of multiple possibilities of truth, reality, and justice along with multiple avenues of reaching those goals. We must embrace the both-and nature of cognitively complex discussions and seek to include a wider range of possibilities, even those that we may not personally agree with or understand. On that basis, multicultural competence is not political, but it does engage us in a critical dialogue with our politics, our values, our experiences, and each other. Such engagement is necessary in order to create campuses that honor and support the transformative learning, growth, and development of all its members.

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NOTES

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