Diversity Reimagined: Creating a Culture of Possibilities by Relating to Others as Partners, Fellow Learners and Builders

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Abstract:

There's no doubt. 'Diversity' has gotten a bad rap. It has become increasingly equated with a kind of moralism or political correctness that is not helpful. The word tends to get people all wound up, bent out of shape, and either clamped up or up on their high horse (present company included). In its most formal expression in the workplace–the 'Diversity Workshop' … dun-dun-dun—'diversity training' is often experienced as something to be checked off on a to-do list. Many find conversations about diversity to be off-putting and divisive; very heady and emotional stuff. In these ways, diversity can be seen as a drag by the majority, instead of an opportunity to create, learn and grow.

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Part of the problem is historical, as it is one of power and privilege–the legacy of colonialism, the control of labor (Black people, poor people, women), and ongoing forms of exploitation and structural discrimination. Part of the problem is also people just not being very good listeners — i.e. being know-it-alls.

Our incessant need to know things, and to think we need to know things to do things, is part of the problem-mix. As children, we certainly didn't know how to walk, talk, or read (or their equivalents) before we started doing these things. We creatively imitated others as we waddled, babbled, and played with sounds. And by doing these things and having others relate to us as fellow walkers, talkers, and readers, we learned. What was true for us as children is true for us as adults. Why not be more child-like, ask more questions, provide less answers, and carry on with less need to know (our adult safety-blankets) and more openness to learning and developing?

We, the authors of this article, are scholars, teachers, scientists and humanists — each of us considered 'diversity experts' in our respective fields of study (History, Chemistry, and Human Development). We are professional knowers, and as such are sympathetic to our fellow knowers (academic and non-academics alike). We get it, there is a pleasure, a sense of power, even a rush in knowing things. However, we are also deeply aware of the limitations of knowledge in and of itself.

When it comes to diversity and engaging issues of power and privilege, knowing, as a posture and practice, seems to stifle participation, creativity, and the possibility of qualitative change. Developmental psychologists and educators, Dr. Lois Holzman and Dr. Lenora Fulani, point out the 'epistemological bias' in how our schools and universities operate — the bias being that greater value is placed on what we know than what we do. Yes, knowing things is important and can be helpful. Changing diapers, performing open-heart surgery, designing a building, or refrigerating and transporting perishable goods, are all helpful, if not critical, to our society. These require specialized knowledge. However, we don't want to be over-determined by the importance of knowing. Transformation and innovation in society (and at a personal level) would not be possible if we only did (or attempted to do) what we knew how to do.

As 'experts' in a given area, it is sometimes tempting to use knowledge as a weapon to make others feel dumb or small. The problem of epistemological bias rears itself over and again when the issue of diversity (in its myriad forms) comes up—and we believe it does so to our collective detriment. Simply put, being 'knowers,' as opposed to being partners and fellow travelers, limits us in what we are able to do. We can be crippled into over thinking rather than trying things, failing, and trying some more. Critically, by being overly focused on knowing, we fail to relate to others as having something to give that can be made of value through our shared activity.

Knowing, however, is institutionally validated through assessments of various kinds (the stick) and the chance of professional advancement (the carrot). Knowing is alluring, if not spellbinding, but it can limit what is possible to create with others. And that's the point.

But here's some good news: we have a way forward! What if we relate to everyone as our partners in learning and growing? In other words, what if we treat everyone—and all the time—as fellow learners with things to add to the conversation or the task at hand, regardless of what we perceive that they do or do not know? What happens when we do this?

Our experience is that people, when related to as partners, fellow learners, and builders, tend to become more open themselves, as evidenced through body language, actions, and/or words. Sometimes people open up in fits and starts. Sometimes they don't open up. Sometimes their

actions are so subtle that they are virtually imperceptible. We need to pay careful attention to work with what people give us.

Borrowing here from the theatre 'improv' world, the concept of "Yes, and" is helpful. The idea is to closely listen to and watch those around us, acknowledge what they are saying or doing, and then build on these things (as opposed to ignoring or negating what others say or do). The trick is to notice the 'offers' that others make (however small and in whatever way), and use them as golden opportunities to help create spaces where we can grow and collectively create new possibilities.

Are there times we must say 'No' to what people say or do, for example when the actions of those around us are purposefully hurtful or destructive? Of course. But our experience is that by engaging our fellow human beings as much as possible by curiously and warmly asking questions—for example, asking "When you say ____ what do you mean?" or "I'm wondering if there are other ways of understanding _____?"—we have a much better chance of getting closer to others than we do by negating them or being combative. By asking such seemingly basic questions (being philosophical with our 'partners') we invite others to create with us. This is power.

In the midst of the macro political and economic disparities of our society and the necessary ongoing efforts to enact policies that support inclusivity, we can help reorganize our immediate spaces in meaningful and practical ways. That is, we can practice being more attuned to each other, becoming more skilled in our abilities to help support each other grow, and less emotionally fragile to the vicissitudes of a society that remains fundamentally racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, ageist, and ableist (to mention a few of the ways in which we divide ourselves and are divided).

As we three see it, diversity, practiced in this cultural-performative way (as opposed to relating to people as having to 'know' all things diverse and needing to be told what's what), is developmental for all involved. Focusing on building on what others give you (as opposed to focusing on being 'correct' or negating what others say or do) might, at first, feel counterintuitive–at least the first 99 times! But practicing building with what others give us consistently effectively begins to create culture-change—to create a culture of possibilities. By being radically supportive of others (asking questions, listening carefully, and building with what others offer, instead of negating them) we give ourselves and each other the opportunity to try new ways of being, feeling, and seeing. We begin to see our mutual humanity and historical inseparability. We grow.

For us, it's about deliberately creating (albeit not always successfully) social environments where people can simultaneously stretch, grow, learn, and develop. Relating to each other as if we're all paddling in the same direction in the face of all our differences and backgrounds takes discipline and generosity. Mostly it takes paying attention in the moment-to-moment-to-moment(ness) of interacting with another person. Being willing to fumble and fail is also key.

It turns out, 'diversity' in higher education, as in other work spaces (mailrooms, classrooms, and corporate and non-profit boardrooms) has been derailed by both proponents and non-proponents

of diversification alike. It has largely been understood as a moralistic imperative, instead of an opportunity for people to create new possibilities and make new discoveries together. Creating meaningful diverse and inclusive environments is not a cognitive (knowing) activity, but a deeply human activity that requires an acknowledgement of what each of us bring to the group, and our collective ability to create something of value with whatever the members of the group bring.

By being with people who are different than ourselves (in the millions of ways that this looks and feels) in deliberate and self-conscious ways, we are compelled to stretch and grow. Put another way, if we only hang out or work with the same people, with similar ways of being and seeing, we are less likely to develop–learn, grow, and see anything differently. This development is our increased capacity to recognize possibilities and act on them in productive ways.

Each of us—a historian, scientist, and human developmentalist—have come to see the power of intentionally creating environments that are characterized by a culture of possibilities for all involved where people can stretch and grow by consistently (if not insistently) relating to ourselves and everyone else as capable, willing, and wanting to grow and develop. Our posture of inclusiveness, creativity, and belief in each other has been effective in our respective areas of work. In the words of the ethicist Dr. Carol Gilligan, author of In a Different Voice, "Everyone will be responded to and included … no one will be left behind." No one.

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