

## **I. Things We've Learned So Far: A Note on Teaching and Learning "Diversity" Issues**

*Xavier Briggs and Mary Gentile*

### **A. Why This Note**

This is a working document for teachers and learners. It is the product of many conversations with students and faculty. While diversity issues touch many aspects of university life, from admissions to alumni affairs, from faculty recruitment to student services, the Kennedy School of Government is, first and foremost, a learning enterprise. No matter what our personal point of view or life experience, our success in the public service demands - more than ever - the ability to understand, communicate and work across differences, find some common ground, and even agree to disagree.

Our aim is to provide two things: (a) a shared language and set of reference points for ongoing discussions important to a learning community; and (b) some concrete advice on how to promote learning in classrooms, study groups, and other learning spaces around important issues which we often seem quite determined *not* to address. Much of this advice, as you will see, is no more than advice on how to teach and learn better, whether or not some aspect of diversity is at issue. That is, the stories and advice here turn out to have a broader value.

A central theme is that faculty and students are *jointly* responsible - are "co-producers," in the policy jargon - of effective discussions . . .

### **B. Three Questions**

When faculty, students and administrators engage in conversations about "diversity" at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, three questions commonly surface:

1. What do we mean by "diversity"?

Such terms can become codewords for particular schools of thought or ideological positions, so we think it important to set out a concise working definition at the outset. We use "diversity" to refer to the [mix](#)<sup>[1]</sup> of people of all identities, backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and physical attributes (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, age, physical ability, education, class, work experience, family situation, political or economic perspective, etc.) in any particular classroom, organization, community, nation, or other context. Note that this definition includes *diversity of ideas* as well as *diversity of identity groups*. Furthermore, it refers to who is in the classroom as well as who and what is in the material under discussion. We recognize that exploring differences and commonalities are both important.

Most of this note is devoted to revealing experiences shared by teachers and learners and to advice that derives from those experiences or stories. But focusing on what works demands that we first consider a few basic but often ignored ideas about *identity* - the foundation of human diversity.

***First, we all need to - and we do - find ways to balance the multiple identities we experience:*** identities of race, ethnicity, gender, age, culture, nationality, class, religion, and sexual orientation as well as more subtle, situational identities as members of a particular group or organization (Kennedy School student, church member, and so on).<sup>[2]</sup> In a class discussion of policies that have differential impact across gender, many students may be more cognizant of their gender as they prepare to contribute than they would be in a discussion of policies which have, or are perceived to have, gender-neutral impacts. In the latter case, particular students may be most aware of their identities as KSG students, natives of Bombay, Korean-Americans, Mason Fellows, former policy advisors, the children of cancer-stricken parents, or something else.

***Second, we often experience contradictory urges or needs for a sense of belonging or "fitting in" as well as a feeling of uniqueness or "specialness."***<sup>[3]</sup> These conflicting urges can trigger complicated reactions of loyalty, rejection, pride, shame, opposition, even guilt within the same individual and within groups of, say, "the classroom conservatives" or "the African-American women" students. Part of the reason for such conflict is that being identified with a particular group may carry with it high perceived costs for people, depending on the situation. Costs and benefits vary with the situation - defined by both the issue and make-up of the participants - but one cannot always "opt out" of the costs. A participant in one classroom discussion may choose not to disclose her sexual orientation or religious views as part of a personal comment on the issues at hand; other participants cannot choose *not* to be people of color or white men or women. It is useful to understand the potential advantages and disadvantages of this so-called "invisible diversity":

If a lesbian student, for example, chooses to "pass," this choice can give her greater control over the impression she makes on her classmates and instructors at the same time that it creates personal and political dilemmas for her. She may wonder if her "discretion" is actually a manifestation of internalized homophobia and a lack of self-confidence or if it is a betrayal of gays and lesbians more generally...

The latter is based on the concern that the discretion allows others to assume they are not working with and depending upon homosexuals in their classes and study groups every day. One point here is that we treat groups as monolithic, individuals as simple spokespeople, and identities as all of a kind, at our peril. Another is that questions of identity are closely tied to matters of *power*, real or perceived.

***A third general point is that our individual identities are always in a process of redefinition and change.*** This creates opportunities and challenges for teachers and learners. If we can all become a little more aware that reconciling and developing our identities presents us with "privilege" in some circumstances and with "exclusion" in others, we can be more open to the same process in those with whom we interact, teach, and learn.

At KSG, this awareness can help us to allow students - and faculty - to learn and change as a project, semester, or degree program progresses. We can expect such learning, in fact, and so avoid “typing” others. If our first and perhaps least informed comments serve to type us in the eyes of our classmates, students and instructors, we are much less likely to candidly say what is on our minds, and therefore less likely to hear our colleagues’ responses. Everyone’s learning is diminished. As one student we spoke to observed:

*“The biggest lesson I learned about diversity over the past year at KSG is that if you have an opinion that is very different from the class norm, speaking becomes an exercise in persuasion. I used to think that my opinions are so right that people should just agree with them. But I saw that the more I spoke up in class, the more difficult it became for classmates and faculty not to brush [my views] aside as the “woman-of-color-thing” again. It didn’t take long at all to be discredited because they expected to hear certain things from me, and therefore just stopped listening.”*

This student is learning how to express herself in ways that help others to hear her. But the listeners have skills to develop and a role to play here, too. A faculty member we spoke to expressed the listeners’ challenge this way:

*“Tolerance is a begrudging willingness to sit still and listen to an unsettling viewpoint. That’s much too low an aspiration for us. The challenge is to create an atmosphere of active curiosity and respect.”* Kennedy School faculty member

I think of what we want to do as moving beyond tolerance. . . I often talk to students about developing the *intellectual skill of empathy*, which is the ability to understand a very different life experience or view - as distinct from sympathy, which is merely feeling sorry for someone else. Empathy is important in public service for practical, not just ethical, reasons.

## 2. Why are we talking about this (again)?

None of these ideas about identity precludes the development and pursuit of *shared goals*. We propose that the most central and basic of these is maximum learning for all, even - no, especially - when that learning is hard. A shared commitment to such learning seems essential if we are to take up what we announce as the defining challenge of our community: “preparing leaders for the twenty-first century.” Much of the most important learning entails grappling with uncomfortable ideas and unsettling new insights, getting at the often unstated assumptions, emotions, and divergent “frames” - i.e., value-laden ways of approaching an issue - that make public problem-solving both rewarding and difficult. <sup>[4]</sup>

A few *working principles* follow from this: (a) that we define diversity inclusively (this is everyone’s conversation); (b) that we define the stakes of the conversation as learning for both “majority” and “minority” individuals, however those groups may be defined in a particular context (ethnicity in one classroom session, nationality or social class or religious creed or sexual orientation in a particular study group meeting, etc.); (c) that

more effective learning does not necessarily demand or result in consensus but is premised upon candor, mutual respect for persons and their experiences, and a willingness to disagree without needing to silence others; (d) that we design our efforts to focus primarily on our students' future professional effectiveness. One faculty member we spoke to said he tries to focus his students quite directly on these concerns:

I try to minimize the speechmaking, so early on in the semester, I will say things like, “It’s not important who wins the conversation here. Establishing the righteousness of your cause here does little for the world.” I emphasize that what’s important is learning how to move these issues in the wider world, learning a lot about the views of very different people - what’s driving people, not just the facts and figures, not winning the moral high ground.

3. Enough on the problem. What works?

How can we approach diversity issues in ways that encourage learning? Read on.

### **C. Things We’ve Learned So Far<sup>[5]</sup>**

We have organized this section around a *repertoire of skills* valuable for teachers and learners, and, beyond those discrete skills, around recurrent *discussion dynamics*. Such dynamics are revealing in their own right and may suggest additional skills not identified here.

#### **There are Multiple “Levers”**

##### **Diversity can be raised and addressed in a variety of ways:**

1. Through the inclusion of appropriate *course content*. This content might come in the form of teaching cases, to be sure, but it might include articles, media clips, films, guest speakers - any content which helps illustrate concepts and support discussion about distinct viewpoints, identities, differential impacts of policy, and so on. One faculty member reminded us that diversity issues may be most invisible (to faculty) in the most familiar cases; asking course assistants, faculty colleagues, and others “what are the issues here?” can shed new light on known material. Decisions about content are grounded, necessarily, in the overall course objectives. But sadly, some faculty, wondering reactively, “How much diversity is enough?” may choose to avoid the issues and the appropriate content altogether or may contribute to what one student called “the problem of exceptionalism.” This means treating a particular reading or case as “the diversity material,” overlooking the point that learning to understand and implement across differences is the rule, not the exception, in public service. Inadvertently, faculty thereby signal that such material is separate from course objectives - a digression at best. In response, one educator suggested that discussions be regularly punctuated with the teaching question, “What are the transferable lessons here, and what lessons are unique to this population, political context, etc.?”

Faculty members also recounted many positive experiences with new content. One eagerly described the value added by guest speakers to his course on social

policy. Knowing that his students should come away from the course with an understanding of the “emotional baggage of the issues,” as he put it, he invited welfare recipients to visit the class. Without such direct “material” on the topics of race, class, and government assistance at hand, he had discovered, “I couldn’t get past the *patina* of civilization - the abstractions and statistics. [Previously] we managed to avoid the serious emotional content of these issues.”

Changing course content alone is clearly no magic bullet. Even where a case has clear and important “diversity content,” for example, faculty say that students may shy away from the issues, despite considerable encouragement. A faculty member described to us, for example, how she often struggles to get students to confront the role of ethnicity in a case about a nonprofit, Latino-run social service program that is not performing well: Just like the actors in the case, no student wants to say that the organization is doing lousy. The state government had approved funding for this program as part of an affirmative push for more culturally sensitive service delivery. The right aim was there, but both the state and the nonprofit have abdicated responsibility and refuse to acknowledge that. I will even ask, “Is affirmative action the enemy of performance here?” It can feel like pulling teeth to get students to talk about it. *They tend to model the very behavior captured in the case.* [emphasis added]

Students, on the other hand, recounted instances where faculty discouraged engagement with charged material by failing to call on students who were visible members of a particular identity group being discussed or by responding to potentially controversial student comments with deferrals (“let’s save that for later,” where “later” never comes) or outright discouragement.

2. Through the **representation** of different populations and identity groups in teaching materials, including, for example, cases whose protagonists reflect varied identity groups, whether or not the explicit topic of the case is related to diversity. Such a practice might extend to the selection of guest speakers and other class materials as well. The purpose of this is to implicitly reflect the diversity of the world in which students will be functioning and the diversity of classroom participants themselves.

3. Through **teaching and learning practices** that help both faculty and students to recognize and value different points of view and different ways of communicating them. This might include, for example (a) making the classroom or study group discourse itself a topic of conversation (“What things are we not talking about? When do you find yourself backing out of the conversation? Were there any turning points in today’s conversation?”) so that faculty and students alike become more aware of their assumptions, styles of thinking and styles of talking together; (b) setting up provocative “straw man” views that are going unstated in the class but are influential in the world (asking a group or class, e.g., “What do you say to the person who argues...?”); (c) establishing ground rules for effective conversations that include diverse participants and controversial viewpoints (more on this below); (d) role playing, including “reversals” (asking students to argue the opposing view or to assume the role of a case actor whose views are unpopular); (e) affirming the importance - not to say the rightness - of a view

that a class wants to ignore or squelch (“This feels important, let’s stick with this for a moment.”); (f) asking course assistants to track discussion process (e.g., how many mid-careers - or women or people of color - spoke today?); and (g) engaging students in evaluating their own class participation, perhaps halfway through a course.

One reason to pursue such practices and not stop at the inclusion of “diversity content” (item #1 above) is that, via these practices, the well-taught classroom itself becomes a case and a model of how to understand and work across differences.

Students we spoke to felt that many classroom discussions are, most fundamentally, too controversy- or conflict-averse to maximize learning, too ridden with self-censorship. Faculty and students collude, often unconsciously, to disable or enable the good, challenging conversations we want to have and know to be important. . .

Given this tendency to avoid controversy in the classroom and other learning spaces - we suspect that it obtains in many study groups, too - the practices outlined above and skills they embody are invaluable for holding effective learning discussions whether or not “diversity issues” per se are on the table. The trick is to explicitly name the skills as necessary and learn-able. ***Learning about and across differences entails making controversy normal rather than something that we pretend happens only when we raise the topics of race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.*** One of the principal barriers to more effective integration of diversity-related issues into a curriculum is the fantasy that if we did not address them, we would never have to deal with uncomfortable controversy. The faculty choice to ignore important issues speaks volumes to students and models the classic sort of work avoidance - denial - that we often see in public institutions and public servants.

One faculty member noted that academics are often trained in very “chummy” environments and so are often unaware of the power of “hidden messages” they send - when teaching - about which viewpoints are important or valid. Another faculty member was more personal:

*“I avoided race issues, in particular, for many years in the classroom, thinking that, as a white person, I had nothing to add . . . [but] now I help set the tone by acknowledging to students my racial identity and the [racial] isolation I experienced growing up in an all-white, rural area of the U.S.”*

One student we spoke to realized that she was perceived as a strident speaker, while a classmate with whom she agreed on many issues tended to speak more “moderately.” The two students spoke explicitly about their respective roles in the class and set out to work together. They recognized that the more extreme position made the more moderate position and tone appear tame by comparison such that classmates would consider their views more seriously. Note that these talk strategies began with an awareness of self and group, led to checking insights with others, and were aimed at potential gains for everyone involved in the learning, not “winning” the conversation.

**Stories: Teachers, Learners, and Diversity**

Having identified some general tools, we now examine the concrete experiences of teachers and learners grappling - and choosing not to grapple - with diversity issues. These experiences are organized under several recurrent patterns:

When diversity issues do get raised, students and faculty may have multiple agendas which are unstated and potentially in conflict.

During the debriefing of a seminar discussion on diversity issues, one student noted with some frustration that "this discussion felt more like a *policy* discussion than a *diversity* discussion." This simple remark yields a number of useful insights and helps reveal why teachers and learners sometimes come away from efforts to discuss diversity issues feeling confused, dissatisfied, or even angry. The fact is that our agenda for so-called diversity discussions may be overly determined and unstated. Recognizing this can help us to develop more explicit and realistic expectations.

For what was the student quoted above, the one who distinguished between diversity and policy discussions, and other students like her, yearning? There may be several answers to that question, especially in a large class. First, since one of her identities is *public policy student*, she probably did want a "policy discussion." Judging from our recent talks with students and from years of overhead commentary by students and alumni, there is a strong appetite for identifiable skills that situate problem-solving amidst a diversity of peoples and contexts.

In other words, the perceived dichotomy between "diversity" and "policy analysis" is often a false one.

This student quoted above probably wants much more, though. She wants, second, to feel that the instructor and her classmates share her sense of urgency and priority about diversity issues. Sometimes, this can be addressed through the frame a faculty member places around such discussions (see below), but her fellow students also have a role to play.

Third, if she is a member of a specific population under discussion, she may feel exposed and want to distance herself from the perceived role of "victim."

Fourth, and conversely, she may feel an obligation to speak for her group and wonder if she will be as forceful and compelling as the situation warrants. Such internal pressure can lead students to either silence themselves for fear of not doing the issue justice or speak out with more emotion and force than is typical in the KSG classroom, triggering discomfort or even defensiveness in other students and faculty.

Fifth, if she is *not* a member of a specific population under discussion, she may feel uninformed and reticent to speak out, for fear of generalizing inappropriately, offending someone, or exposing her ignorance. This may result in her feeling frustrated when the tools to correct these inadequacies are missing. If the conversation remains at a very theoretical and abstract level - "above the neck" - the student may feel that she still would

not know how to speak directly to a member of the group under discussion about these charged issues.

Sixth, she may anticipate accusations of insensitivity and bias, thereby approaching the conversation with a "pre-offended" demeanor. Her frustration may reflect the fact that the conversation has not relieved her of this anticipatory guilt and anger.

We could expand this list of multiple agendas - "appetites," in a sense - that students bring to such discussions. And in the next section, we explore faculty agendas in some detail. But the first task is to recognize that there are, in fact, multiple agendas that students and faculty bring. These multiple agendas, especially when they go unstated, tend to make challenging conversations less satisfying than they need be. One reason is that they lead to conflicting definitions of what an effective conversation would look like in a particular instance. Another is that the power to make one's voice heard depends on more than membership in a particular group, adherence to a particular view, or authorization by the instructor to speak. It involves additional subtleties of identity and personal objective, as well as previously held assumptions or "baggage," much of it internal to the student and faculty participants.

**In response, we propose that faculty and students consider the following:**

- That the priorities of the classroom are to: (a) recognize important issues at hand (especially those not yet under discussion); (b) share relevant information from as diverse an array of participants as possible; and (c) develop the capacity to rigorously analyze the issues and their implications, including the ability to critically question one's own perspective.
- That, at the same time, we should not expect the public policy classroom to be the only or the most important forum for conversations we often do not take responsibility to engage in the wider world. Where diversity issues are concerned, we should look to the classroom and, say, the barroom for different *kinds* of conversations and recognize that many kinds can contribute to our learning.
- Nevertheless, that prior agreements among students and their instructor as to the ground rules of discussion can be enormously helpful and enabling. Such rules are not likely to be effective where faculty and students fail to enforce them together. Nor are rules synonymous with "restrictions." The key is to agree that participants have both *rights* and *obligations* to the discussion if it is to be a dialogue (see below).

As for faculty agendas, it may feel risky to teachers to depart from a "script" or lesson plan, but such departures can lead to important learning.

Both faculty members and students perceive, in some instances, a conflict between predetermined teaching plans and an interesting, if perhaps unpredictable, conversation about divergent perspectives, identities, and so on. They both observe that diversity issues are often triggers for such "departures" and that if faculty attempt to strictly limit conversation to a pre-conceived agenda, some students may resist through open confrontation or, more often, by disengaging.

In an effort to “protect” learning as defined by the teaching plan, therefore, faculty may inadvertently undermine important learning. On the other hand, total flexibility can frustrate learning as well.

One student told of a well-intentioned faculty effort to discuss diversity issues which began with an open invitation: "I'm sure you have things you'd like to say about this issue." This led to a completely undirected, hour-long conversation. The faculty was apparently trying to be open and responsive, but students experienced it as unhelpful at best, and an abdication of responsibility, at worst. On the other hand, several faculty members recalled having chosen to diverge from their lesson plans in a particular instance, only to be sharply criticized by students who wanted an expert lecture, not “more about people’s feelings.” Such reactions are more likely to obtain when conversations about diversity are not understood to be closely linked to larger course objectives - i.e., where the exploratory discussion *feels* like a detour.

Faculty members can address such concerns in part through thoughtful “what-we-are-here-to-do” messages early in a course/program. Such messages help legitimize a variety of conversations as important for learning. But framing messages are also important in-the-moment, during particular class sessions. With them, what seem to be departures from the teaching script are revealed to be important opportunities. One faculty member responds to student-initiated “departures” from the teaching plan in this way:

I'll stop and say, “This is a teaching moment. Let’s have a dialogue here and not a polarized debate. What are one or two good questions we could pose to gain some insight on the issue?...” how gender matters, say, in terms of the management or political analysis we are doing. I may ask the two or three students whose [expressed] views are most divergent to help us, the class, with this process. . . The point is that we’re trying to develop take-away skills, not talking through these issues because we’re hip or politically correct.

A management faculty member emphasized the importance of helping students to distinguish among a therapy session, a debate, and a dialogue.

Therapy sessions consist of the open exploration of experiences and feelings with no larger analytic agenda. Debates are contests of words; participants are not necessarily committed to understanding or to learning from each other. ***Dialogue is harder, here in the classroom and in the wider world, but it depends on skills and habits that students and faculty can learn and model for each other by setting up ground rules.*** This faculty member added:

The rules we tend to develop include both rights and responsibilities. For example, people are *obliged* to speak from the “I” voice [to take personal responsibility for their views and avoid sweeping generalizations], obliged to stay in the conversation even when they are angry or conflicted. They have the *right* to clarify what they mean and to ask others to clarify meanings, also the right to change their positions over time (not to be “typed” as holding position X). My obligations, which also we agree upon in advance,

have to do with protecting students from attack by their peers during class discussions. I will also agree to help mediate disagreements by these same what-do-you-mean questions. I further agree to acknowledge my own biases when I have particularly strong feelings about a case.

As part of such ground rules, instructors might further agree, in partnership with their students, to recognize and resist various reasoning pitfalls, such as "defensive reasoning,"<sup>[6]</sup> simple either/or thinking, inappropriate use of generalizations, group think, and reliance upon undefined concepts. This, too, is much more than a matter of "political correctness." It is a valuable intellectual discipline.

Now equipped with some tools for *framing* and *managing* the unplanned conversation, we still face the question of how to find the optimal balance between "scripted" and unplanned conversations when class time is limited. We have learned that faculty and students can do several things:

- Faculty can open conversations by laying out the range of potentially relevant issues and providing the learning rationale for the emphasis they have selected; alternatively, they can ask "what are the issues here?" and then pursue a more negotiated discussion plan.
- Students can acknowledge the need for some issue selection and the faculty's responsibility to assume that task.
- Students can raise omitted issues and perspectives, ideally with a rationale why the omissions embody important learning for the class.
- On the other hand, faculty can remain open to the possibility, and even the likelihood, that their prior assumptions and perspectives have hidden discussion routes valuable for learning. Points on the pre-planned agenda can often be summarized at the end of a class session or in the subsequent session.

### **Important discussions of diversity issues can be personally painful for participants.**

Take, for example, a recent case discussion about Japanese-Americans seeking redress from the U.S. government for their internment during World War II. Some students perceived a classroom consensus that the Japanese-Americans' "operating objective" was merely financial compensation and that the analysis of viable options was premised on that. For some members of the class, and for some Japanese-American students in particular, these perceived assumptions and collective approach triggered pain.

Students who identified with the Japanese-Americans in this case, whether the students in question were or were not Japanese-American themselves, felt that the objectives were much broader than merely monetary, including an emphasis upon education and policy changes which would prevent similar horrors in the future for other ethnic groups. For these students, the class consensus was educationally limiting but, more than that, the class seemed to turn a blind eye to the real pain and injustice that had been done at an important moment in history.

Sometimes pain is a source of valuable learning. However, if pain or discomfort is felt by one group in a class - with others being unaware, at best, or being the *cause* of the pain, at worst - then maximum learning is not happening.

It is especially useful, in such instances, to recognize that a topic is painful, thereby legitimizing the reactions of some students and raising the awareness of others. Faculty have a special role to play in doing such recognition, but students can exercise leadership - speak up - on this score, too. And naming the weight or pain of an issue is not synonymous with taking sides or, as discussed above, with inviting a therapy session. It is about acknowledging that “emotional baggage” underlies many vital public issues and persistent political stand-offs. We recognize, furthermore, that not all unsettling “consensus views” are intentionally callous, also that the open discussion of financial objectives in the case described, among others, is not necessarily incompatible with empathy and learning.

### **The Exclusion of Personal or Emotional Content from Discussions May, in fact, Reduce Intellectual Rigor**

This point is closely related to the perceived tension between an instructor’s plan and an important *unplanned* conversation. It often appears to both students and faculty that personal or emotional content does not belong in a particular classroom. However, both students and faculty acknowledge that diversity-related issues often bring up such content, and, if it is omitted from the discussion, participants may leave feeling dissatisfied. The following example illustrates this:

A school-sponsored discussion focused on the question of how a private organization might evaluate two requests to fund research into the possible genetic basis of sexual orientation. Although very appreciative of the faculty's discussion-leading skills, both gay/lesbians in the class and participants who held religious views that condemned homosexual behavior felt some dissatisfaction with the conversation.

Initially, this dissatisfaction was framed by many as an instance wherein one group's "rights" seem to be pitted directly against another's. Some framed the conflict as a zero-sum game in which class "air time" was the scarce resource coveted by proponents of divergent views.

One "out" gay student identified an alternative frame for this situation. He suggested that the starting point for the discussion was what he considered a conservative Christian point-of-view: namely, that gays and lesbians would need/desire proven biological origins for their sexual orientation in order to be morally justified in their identity. He argued that this perspective was implicit, unstated, and therefore not up for debate in the classroom. He also noted that this limited the range of the discussion because the frame was unanalyzed.

On the other hand, a conservative Christian student expressed frustration that his religious perspective on homosexuality did not seem to be welcome in the conversation either, that it was not addressed with seriousness. What we've learned is that when any

key perspective is not engaged openly and explicitly, all participants, regardless of their stand, suffer.

Here, both the gay student and the conservative Christian believed that neither the issue of religion nor assumptions about morality were explicitly confronted in the discussion. Making this area of agreement between the two students visible could be the first step toward constructive dialogue.

Let us reiterate that a consensus of opinion is not necessarily a realistic objective or important criterion for effective discussion in the situation described. The two students we have focused on felt a personal stake in the topic; it was their emotions that *helped* them connect to important arguments and ideas. We think that an effective discussion should lead students to a better understanding of views and “frames” on all sides, though. More broadly, such a discussion could well lead to better understandings of the range of important influences that religion has on organizations and policy around the world. But neither domain could be seriously treated by avoiding the emotional baggage that participants bring to important, charged topics.

In another example, a white faculty member described his experience, over many years, teaching a well-known case about taxicabs in Boston. In the case, cab drivers, complaining of high crime risk, are apparently refusing to take passengers to a mostly low-income, African-American neighborhood. The instructor shared how his approach has changed over time and how students’ level of work experience seems to influence discussion of the case:

Early on, I tried to teach it in very [nonracial] analytic terms, leading some students to think I was cold and heartless. But you had to acknowledge the emotions of people in the case. I learned that I had to spend time on that, had to show that you could *use* information about the outrage [of African-Americans] in the case *to help solve the problem*, not just because it was “emotionally correct” to do so. . . Some of the more experienced students, whether from the U.S. or another country, have dealt with these issues every day. Other students tend to offer more “soapbox speeches” or symbolic statements.

Another faculty member described his approach to student comments that are clearly charged with emotion:

These present a real opportunity, but you often feel, as the instructor, that you have only a moment to catch them and use them productively. I might say, “There’s a rule in my business: ABC. `Affect Before Content.` You seem to feel really strongly about this, you were really upset. Help us understand why.” I might even make it easier for emotional connections to the material to be expressed, saying “Any personal reflections on that point? How did that feel?” Or “It sounds like you’ve had an important experience related to that.” I am, through these comments, inviting the group to be more self-conscious, and I am reasonably good at modeling non-defensive listening [as the comments come].

Not all satisfying discussions promote learning, of course - some are simply pleasant to be a part of - and not all learning dialogues are immediately satisfying. Still, we will take our chances with real dialogue, and we find students willing to do the same.

### **Conclusion: Students and Faculty Have Distinct Roles to Play**

This has been a subtext throughout the note so far. Students and faculty regularly show both skill and personal courage in this area. But as we were reminded in the Spring 1997 Diversity Seminars, both faculty and students contribute—one could even say that they unconsciously conspire—in countless ways to avoid diversity issues in discussions as well. Both faculty and students have a responsibility to the overall quality of class discussions, and each has, we think, some optimal roles to play in enabling those discussions. Here, rather than summarize lessons outlined above, we highlight key elements of the faculty and student roles that we think those lessons suggest.

We've learned that the optimal *faculty role* might include the following commitments:

- To *establish the importance and legitimacy of the issues* for all students and actively welcome input (through inclusion and placement in the course, careful preparation, through explicit naming of the educational and policy implications of key issues, through a willingness to explore charged terrain, whether or not on the pre-set agenda). As one faculty member emphasized, “I tell my students early on that engaging these issues in an important, real-world skill - period.” Part of this is establishing the legitimacy of controversy itself.
- To *hold students accountable* for rigorous discussion, to *protect* a range of views - not some “party line” held by one faction or another - and even to be a gadfly who *introduces* unpopular views that are important for learning. (“What do you say to the person who argues . . . ?”)
- To help *set clear ground rules and model key behaviors*, including active curiosity about issues and about discussion dynamics, non-defensive listening, and a willingness to incorporate new information and change one’s mind. Students sense and respond to faculty anxiety, or lack thereof, about controversial issues.
- To *broaden the agenda and be flexible as to discussion routes*. In the words of one student, this might mean “including in every discussion of a case or reading, at least some attention to the ‘lens’ through the material was written and the lens or lenses through which the class appears to be discussing it.” In the words of one faculty member, “Consider opening a discussion with ‘what is this case about?’ to reveal the range of assumptions.” Consider following unexpected but potentially valuable routes of discussion that diverge from a pre-conceived teaching plan.

We've learned that the optimal *student role* in diversity discussions might include the following commitments:

- Most broadly, to *take responsibility* for some of the work of enabling discussion.
- To think and act as *partners in a dialogue*, not competitors on talk radio. To express views in ways that are designed to keep the conversation going, rather than to shut it down. This does not mean being passion-less but rather acknowledging our own emotions and values *and* actively inviting other points of view. It also means to risk being wrong and to accept that eventuality without resentment, avoiding the use of sweeping generalizations, disciplining our arguments with specific evidence, editing our thoughts for conciseness and clarity (avoiding tirades, speeches, moralizing). It means trying statements that may be out-of-the-norm: “I think I disagree with you strongly but want to better understand what you think and why.”