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The Room Where It Happens: Teaching Diversity in the Classroom

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Abstract

Universities across the nation have focused increasingly on promoting diversity, to the point of including this goal in their mission statements. Additionally, millennial students come to college anxious to learn about diversity. This paper presents a lesson plan built around the musical *Hamilton*. The activity teaches public relations students in a writing class persuasion and rhetoric skills. It has a dual purpose of introducing diversity, the topic of privilege and its role in American culture.

Introduction

Diversity has become a guiding principle in higher education. In recent studies, the word “diversity” was found on the websites of the top 100 universities more often than more traditional terms “freedom,” “liberty,” “equality,” and “democracy.” (Talkington, 2006) A search of the websites for the top ten schools for journalism in the United States—Emerson College, University of Texas-Austin, and Northwestern University—found “diversity” in the mission statement, listed as part of a core value, and identified as a strategic theme, respectively (Emmerson College) (University of Texas) (Northwestern University). In a quick search of three universities in Utah,

diversity appeared in all mission statements. The University of Utah aims to “zealously preserve academic freedom, promote diversity and equal opportunity, and respect individual beliefs (University of Utah). Southern Utah University includes diversity in one of the core themes “Explore” (Southern Utah University). And the mission statement of Utah State University includes the phrase “cultivating diversity of thought and culture” (Utah State University). Colleges and universities are actively encouraging diverse thought and content, and often this is achieved with academic departments and courses with explicit multi-cultural focus such as religious studies, African-American history, and media and gender.

Encouraging and promoting diversity is an admirable goal, and recent statistics suggest that attempts to teach diversity are desperately needed. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “the percentage of American college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing” (National Center for Education Statistics). In Fall of 2013, the 58 percent of college students in the United States were white; down from 84 percent in 1976 (National Center for Education Statistics). But these numbers can vary widely from campus to campus. At the university where this project takes place, of the roughly 29,000 students enrolled, 79 percent are white and 69 percent are residents (Utah State University, 2015). One number on this campus fits with the national statistics, however: in the United States and on this campus nearly 80 percent of faculty are white (Utah State University). The vast majority of students in class are sitting next to someone who looks just like they do, and who looks just like the people they grew up with. And the course instructors, the author included, look familiar as well.

Beyond demographics, students in today’s universities are anxious to learn about and encounter diversity. According to Neville, Poteat, Lewis, and Spanierman, “traditionally aged college students are at a state in their lives where they might be challenging previously held assumptions about social issues” (Neville, Poteat, Lewis, & Spanierman, 2014). This has brought on calls for instructors to help students “learn to deal more substantively with how issues of power, privilege, and oppression manifest within the contemporary United

States... gain a better understanding of how issues of social justice play out in their own country, in the present day” (Broido, 2004). Professors can help this learning by better understanding objectives and preferences of millennial students. Research shows that they want to be collaborative, want to encounter meaningful ideas, want classes that prepare them for a career, and want that career make a difference (Mohr & Mohr, 2016). This paper will present a lesson that uses a work of popular culture to present the power of language and communication (a listed course objective in the syllabus) but also promotes the idea of diversity.

The class activity described in this paper is an attempt to bring diversity to students who have likely not been presented with even the most basic ideas of privilege and systemic racism. Following the pedagogical recommendation to “develop curricula that include diversity for all courses, regardless of the racial and ethnic makeup of the class” this activity is designed to meet the needs of millennial learners in that it promotes better understanding of issues of social justice but does so in a lesson plan that prepares students for their chosen career (Marin, 2000). The course is a required class for students majoring in journalism and communication with an emphasis in public relations and usually numbers between 14 and 20 students. Though the course description in question includes “cultural sensitivity,” the course is not explicitly labeled as aimed at gaining understanding of diversity and cultural criticism. Marin found that “educational possibilities can be enhanced through interaction across race and ethnicity in all types of disciplines, not just those in which race and ethnicity are related to and incorporated in to the syllabus” (Marin, 2000). Ultimately, the skills developed from this lesson will make students more effective professional communicators, but also more open-minded individuals in society.

Students take Writing for Public Relations, prepared to gain knowledge in the “theory and practice of information-gathering for public relations, including basic news releases, features, speeches, annual reports, newsletters and brochures, broadcasting, and other forms” (Utah State University, n.d.). We begin the semester with a discussion of legal and ethical concerns of the public relations industry, addressing specific precedents and common concerns of professionals in the field. Because students will be working in public relations,

crafting strategic communication messages, the class then moves on to the topic of persuasion. Readings address the rhetorical triangle (ethos, pathos, and logos), language, paralanguage (volume, pitch, articulation, rate, etc.), and meta-language (non-verbal language and personal characteristics) strategies for more effective communication including schemes and tropes. Students are given a six-page list of schemes and tropes with their corresponding definitions and an example of use in classic literature and film. If not careful, the class sessions can devolve into questions on how to pronounce Greek and Latin words such as “onomatopoeia” and “chiasmus.” But the point of the discussion is not to memorize a list of linguistic schemes and tropes; rather, the goal is to show students the power of these tools.

The most effective recent use of language in all of these areas is Lin-Manuel Miranda’s groundbreaking musical *Hamilton*. This musical about the life, politics, and scandals of founding father Alexander Hamilton, features hip-hop music and a diverse cast. The cast album swept the nation in 2015, becoming the highest debuting cast album on the Billboard 200 Chart since *Camelot* in 1961 (Caulfield, 2016). In 2016, the show was nominated for 16 Tonys, making it the most nominated musical in history (Paulson, 2016). And even before the Tony nominations were announced, ticket prices had hit an average of \$1,200 apiece (Grant, 2016). The show has been seen by world leaders and celebrities and has become a pop-culture phenomenon.

The expectation is that students come to the session having read the schemes and tropes list. After initial discussion, students watch the YouTube video of Lin-Manuel Miranda (LMM) performing at the White House Poetry Jam in 2009 (White House, 2009). In the video, LMM explains the background and inspiration for the musical and performs the opening song. Viewers see President and Mrs. Obama laughing at the description of the musical, underscoring that what they are about to see will be very different. After students view this background information, they break into pairs and then draw from a selected list of pre-selected *Hamilton* songs. Each pair is given a printed copy of the lyrics to their selected song and a worksheet (see Appendix A). The worksheet includes a list of tropes and schemes, as well as various paralanguage techniques and the rhetorical triangle. The bulk of the class session is dedicated

to listening to the selected songs from the cast soundtrack. The teams follow along, highlighting and making notes on their lyric sheet. There is a brief introduction to each song and time allowed for short discussion after, though the goal is to keep the flow of the musical going. The musical is entertaining enough that by song two students are fully engrossed and engaged in conversation regarding what they are hearing.

Once all songs have been listened to, the class discusses specific rhetorical strategies in each song. Students are often adept at spotting many of the more than 30 schemes and tropes listed, as well as the paralanguage. Some instructor guidance is usually necessary for discussion regarding the presence and use of ethos, pathos, and logos. Students share favorite examples from songs and discuss the reasoning behind each. This challenges students to think of less interesting ways to express an idea and try to uncover the various layers of the language at play. For example, in the song “Right Hand Man” George Washington describes himself as

The model of a modern major general

The venerated Virginian veteran whose men are all

Lining up to put me up on a pedestal

These three lines give students the chance to discuss alliteration, antonomasia, assonance, homoioteleuton, and isocolon. They also represent important changes in pitch and rate. And for the sharp-eared students, there is a reference to a line from the song “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General” from the classic Gilbert and Sullivan opera *Pirates of Penzance*.

Once students have gone through favorite examples from each song and teams have had time to fill out their worksheets (which they turn in for credit), the class turns to meta-language and any other distinctive messages being sent. This is usually a quiet moment wherein students struggle to come up with an answer. Students then watch an interview with several of the original *Hamilton* cast members. In this interview from *60 Minutes*, stars describe the importance

of the musical and its very deliberate genre and casting choices (CBS News 60 Minutes Overtime, 2016). LMM discusses the evolution in the show as the musical styles move from very basic hip-hop as main characters introduce themselves to intricate raps as politicians engage in complicated cabinet debates. This is a chance for students to discuss medium, form, and format as important to persuasion.

Later in the clip, cast members explain the importance of the decision to hire performers of color to portray white founding fathers and their families. As Leslie Odom, Jr., who narrates as Aaron Burr, says, the show has “made these dead white guys make sense to a bunch of, you know, black and brown people. He's made them make sense in the context of our time, with our music” (CBS News 60 Minutes Overtime, 2016). This is the moment when students are asked how many of them have struggled to see themselves in American history. In a class that is roughly 80 percent white, very few students answer affirmatively, though there are occasionally hands from some of the women. This presents students with the chance to step outside their individual cultural experience and to consider other perspectives.

The final discussion topic of the day centers on the idea that message delivery and style can change effectiveness. Additionally, the idea that failure to reach a specific audience may be a question of larger systemic influences is new to students who have not experienced cultural diversity.

Students who have experienced little diversity early in their home community and continue to experience homogeneity in their university’s culture deserve to be challenged in an effort to provide a more well-rounded education. Beyond the personal perspective gained, for public relations students, this diversity is important because these students will craft communication messages meant for wide audiences. The chance to explore the power of language when used effectively is important professionally. The opportunity to understand the power of paralanguage and meta-language, the impact of medium and form and voice, is valuable both personally and professionally—personally, because it pushes students to see outside themselves, and professionally because it will

make them more effective communicators. This activity is also a solid blend of the preferences millennial learners seem to have.

Of some concern was the question of whether students would see this benefit as well. To measure this, course evaluation scores (using the IDEA system) from a semester without the Hamilton activity were compared to scores from a semester with the Hamilton activity. Questions regarding the career preparation and development of writing skills were selected. For the question measuring the goal of “*developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course,*” scores held steady from semester to semester (5.0 to 4.9). For “*Developing skill in expressing myself orally or in writing,*” scores went from 4.8 to 4.7. And overall “*Progress on Relevant Objectives*” went from 4.9 to 4.8. Quantitatively, student evaluations were unchanged with the introduction of this activity.

In open-ended IDEA Evaluation questions, students mentioned that the course prepared them for professional work. In answer to the question “*What aspects of the teaching or content of this course do you feel were especially good?*” one student noted that they felt the course was “very hands-on” and another noted that “the assignments were really beneficial because they applied to what I would be doing in the future.”

This Hamilton activity is a concrete way for professors to help support the common mission of promoting diversity on college campuses. It uses a piece of work from the popular culture to demonstrate the real-world use of class topics and application in the professional field. Specifically, it encourages more diverse thinking about message source, language, and context for effective communication. Further, it does so in a course that is not designated as a diversity course, so it reaches students in “traditional” fields. It is also a way to give students an indirect, but substantial lesson in how “issues of power, privilege, and oppression manifest within the contemporary United States” (Broido, 2004).

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About the Author

Debra Jenson is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Utah where her dissertation research focused on social justice movements and their communication efforts to impact public policy. Her current work expands that research, studying representation of marginalized groups in media and policy discussions. She was a TEDx speaker at USU in October 2016, giving a speech on the impact of diversity and popular culture.

Appendix A: Hamilton Worksheet

Name: _____

Name: _____

Song Title: _____

Identify as many of the following rhetorical and linguistic strategies in your example.
List the quote and explain the impact of the use. Be prepared to share them with the class.

Tropes:

Onomatopoeia
Antonomasia
Metonymy
Hyperbole
Metaphor
Allegory
Anthimeria
Interrogatio
Prolepsis
Paralepsis
Dubitatio
Concessio
Oxymoron
Parrhesia
Litotes
Prosopopoeia
Enargeia
Irony

Schemes:

Prothesis
Epenthesis
Paragoge
Aphaeresis
Syncope
Apocope
Metathesis
Parenthesis
Apposition
Apostrophe
Asyndeton
Polysyndeton
Anastrophe
Ellipsis
Synonymy
Antanaclasis
Homoioteleuton
Anaphora

Antistrophe
Symploce
Climax
Chiasmus
Alliteration
Assonance
Polyptoton
Isocolon
Antithesis

Paralanguage:

Volume
Pitch
Rate
Pauses
Vocal variety
Pronunciation
Articulation
Dialect

Rhetorical Strategies:

Ethos
Pathos
Logos