Peer Experiences in Diversity: Students Learning from Students about Diversity

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Abstract - Learning can be more relevant and interesting to students if they are actively involved in the process as opposed to learning solely through the traditional lecture method. For example, instructors in diversity related courses can utilize “student or peer experiences” to facilitate both the teaching and learning of diversity. This instructor began using peer experiences in a diversity management course several years ago. By using this method, students are able to discuss their personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know to raise awareness of various diversity issues and learn about how to deal with specific concerns in diversity management. This learning approach has made the class more relevant and interesting for students because it uses actual student or peer experiences, as opposed to discussing hypothetical situations or recycled case studies. While a student is talking about a personal experience on a given diversity issue, the rest of the class can learn not only about that specific problem and how the student dealt with it, but have the opportunity to visualize themselves in that situation, ask questions, make comments, and learn from the experience. At the same time, students who are presenting their experiences gain additional perspective by listening to feedback given by the class and having the opportunity to think in retrospect about how they dealt with the incident.

This learning approach has had a win-win-win effect for my course from the standpoint of the students talking about their experiences, the students listening to those experiences and the instructor.

Index Terms -Peer experience

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, this instructor has been using peer experiences as a way to facilitate the teaching and learning in a diversity management course. This course is listed as OLS 454, Gender and Diversity in Management, in the department of Manufacturing Engineering Technologies and Supervision at Purdue University Calumet (PUC), located in Hammond, Indiana. The term “peer experience” refers to a type of vicarious learning where students learn from each other by using their personal experiences or those of another student, coworker, family member, friend or someone the student knows to promote the understanding of a given diversity issue.

In teaching OLS 454, the instructor has been using a multidisciplinary issues based learning approach to expose students to a variety of diversity related topics necessary for developing effective multicultural leadership [1]. Although the instructor has been teaching this course for over ten years, with each subsequent semester, different teaching and learning approaches have been used to improve the content and delivery of the course. However, for the last several semesters, the overall course structure has remained relatively the same with the exception of incorporating more peer experience assignments.

IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY EDUCATION FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

The omnipresent effects of globalization have increased the frequency of interaction and degree of interdependence between nations and diverse people forcing the business community to have to deal with diversity issues [4]. Therefore, success for American businesses is contingent on the abilities of managers and employees to understand and work with people with diverse backgrounds and cultures on both a national and international level. As the future leaders of business organizations and the global community, engineering students will need to learn how to effectively manage and interact with people who are different or perceived to be different. Engineering programs can take the initiative by providing diversity education to ensure that students develop the requisite skills for this endeavor.

Acknowledging the future leadership roles of engineering students, many engineering curriculums, including those in the METS department, have emphasized the importance of diversity education to help students develop their leadership skills. As future leaders, students will have a tremendous impact on upcoming events that will affect everyone everywhere. Consequently, diversity education is one of the key types of training engineering students must receive if they are going to be effective leaders.

ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

It’s been the instructor’s experience that most students at PUC have a natural curiosity about diversity and have had some degree of experience or exposure to diversity related issues, either personal or indirect through peers, family members or the media. For example, the instructor discovered that most
students have witnessed, been victims or know of someone who has witnessed or been a victim of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination in either their employment or social interactions. As a result, the use of peer experiences appeared to be a natural way to discuss and learn about diversity in the workplace [5].

Consequently, with each semester, the instructor noted that the more student discussion that occurred on a given diversity related issue or incident, the more feedback students provided about their personal experiences or the experiences of someone they knew on that issue or a similar situation. Because the peer experience approach appeared to evolve naturally and gradually, only within the last several semesters has the instructor begun to appreciate this approach as an effective teaching and learning method. As a result, the instructor began to intentionally restructure the diversity management course to incorporate more student or peer experiences into the curriculum for the discussion a given diversity issue.

Incidentally, when providing diversity training for industry, the instructor also noted that the trainees would often provide personal or peer experiences during the discussion of certain diversity issues.

### COURSE STRUCTURE USING PEER EXPERIENCES

With the exception of incorporating more peer experiences into the course, for the most part, the overall structure of OLS 454 has remained relatively the same over the last several semesters. However, with each subsequent semester, the instructor began requiring more assignments when discussing various diversity related issues and situations where students would have the opportunity to actively participate and learn from each other through the use of peer experiences.

For example, last semester the instructor required peer experience assignments for the study of several diversity issues. Table I lists the peer experience assignments used for the study of the following diversity issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue #</th>
<th>Diversity Issue</th>
<th>Peer Experience Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Introduction to Diversity</td>
<td>Discrimination Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Equal Employment Opportunity</td>
<td>Affirmative Action Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Women in the Workplace</td>
<td>Romantic Relationship Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Recruiting for Diversity</td>
<td>Finding a Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Recruiting for Diversity</td>
<td>Hiring Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>Resolving Diversity Disputes</td>
<td>Resolving Diversity Conflicts</td>
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</table>

### GUIDELINES FOR USING PEER EXPERIENCES

Over time, the instructor has discovered that certain guidelines need to be established and followed for the peer assignments to be effective. For example, with each assignment, several questions are asked which require students to provide certain information about their personal experiences or those of someone they know while preparing to learn about a given diversity issue. The information requested helps to improve the quality of student responses and establish some degree of standardization in preparing for the assignment. These questions also help to ensure that a certain amount of details are provided by the students when preparing and discussing their experiences. Consequently, instructors need to establish guidelines for students to follow when preparing for the assignments in order to maintain some degree of structure, uniformity and quality in completing the assignment. Table II lists the minimum guidelines for using peer experiences.

### EXAMPLE OF THE PEER EXPERIENCE APPROACH

To better understand the peer experience approach for learning about diversity, an example from last semester’s OLS 454 course will be discussed. One peer experience assignment required for the course was titled, “Resolving Diversity Conflicts” assignment. In this assignment, students were asked to identify an incident where the student or someone the student knew was involved in a diversity related conflict on the job.

With this assignment, as is true with all peer experience assignments, students are asked to provide certain basic information, such as the date of the incident, job titles, genders and ages of parties involved in the incident, the solution to the problem and what was learned from the experience. Other information may be requested depending on the assignment.

Students were required to submit a written summary and make a class presentation on the peer experience. During the presentation, each student discusses the experience and the rest of the class is allowed to ask questions and make comments.

The learning outcomes from the Resolving Diversity Conflicts assignment:
- Create awareness of a current diversity concern
- Identify common causes of diversity related conflicts
- Develop guidelines on how to resolve conflict
- Learn from the experiences of other students

### PEER EXPERIENCE ASSIGNMENTS

A summary of the other five peer experience assignments used during the Fall 2004 semester are listed below:

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**Session F2G**

October 19 – 22, 2005, Indianapolis, IN
1. Discrimination Experience
Stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination are not only experienced by women, minorities or other members of legally protected groups. Everyone, at some point in their lives, has been a victim of unfair treatment based on misinformation.

Assignment: Students are to identify a work related incident or experience where the student or someone the student knows believed s/he was treated unfairly and experienced discrimination based on stereotyping or misinformation.

2. Affirmative Action Experience
Affirmative action means different things to different people. Some people believe that affirmative action results in reverse discrimination against Caucasian males while others believe affirmative action is an effective way to correct for the effects of past discrimination.

Assignment: Students are to identify an incident or experience where the student or someone the student knows believes an employment decision was based on affirmative action.

3. Romantic Relationship Experience
How prevalent are romantic relationships in the workplace? How do such relationships impact the performance of those employees involved in the relationship and co-workers?

Assignment: Students are to identify an incident or experience where the student or someone the student knows was involved in a romantic relationship with a co-worker or supervisor.

4. Finding a Job
In today’s competitive economy, people have to be creative to find jobs. What are the best strategies for doing so?

Assignment: Students are to identify an incident or experience where the student or someone the student knows used a creative method for finding a job.

5. Hiring Assignment
Does the best qualified person who applies for a job get hired? How fair and objective is the job selection process?

Assignment: Students are to identify an incident or experience where the student or someone the student knows “perceived” that the best qualified person applying for a job was not hired.

**BENEFITS OF PEER EXPERIENCES**

Peer experiences allow students the opportunity to analyze their attitudes and beliefs about diversity, develop an understanding of different points of view, and increase their critical thinking skills. The peer experiences approach for learning about diversity involves active student learning as opposed to traditional passive learning methods. Based on the instructor’s experience, students enjoy discussing their personal experiences or those of people they know on given diversity issues, rather than simply listening to lectures on diversity management. Table III lists some of the major benefits derived from using peer experience assignments [1]-[3].

**TABLE III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PEER EXPERIENCE APPROACH</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Develops student writing and presentation skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>• An interactive learning method</td>
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<tr>
<td>• An alternative, interesting and enjoyable way to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students learn from other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides real-life, relevant and personal case studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Subject expertise is not required for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Effective way to improve student participation</td>
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<td>• Creates awareness of different points of view</td>
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<td>• Challenges the beliefs of students about certain diversity issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Complements other teaching methods and activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students learn from their own experiences and gain self awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can be used by experienced or inexperienced instructors</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Alleviates the monotony of class lectures</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can be used in classroom and industry settings</td>
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<tr>
<td>• An effective means for data collection for future diversity research</td>
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</table>

Incidentally, due to the effectiveness of the peer experience assignments, the instructor is developing an advance course on diversity management which will use peer experiences as the principal teaching and learning method.

**ASSESSMENT**

Each semester, several assessment tools are used to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of the instructor’s diversity management course, including the peer experience assignments. Listed below are some of the assessment tools the instructors used last semester to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of the diversity education provided. The results from the assessments reinforce the position taken in this paper.

1. Student/Course evaluations

The instructor evaluates the effectiveness of the diversity education provided in OLS 454 using student evaluations which consist of between 16-20 questions about the course. Table IV lists the average rating from student evaluations for 2000-2004. As the semester ratings indicate, the course evaluations have been relatively consistent for the last several semesters.
The only outside course assignments the author used in OLS 454 were peer experience assignments. The course evaluations asked specific questions on those assignments. Table V lists the results for the specific questions asked from student evaluations on the peer experience assignments.

### Table V

**Ratings from Selective Questions from Student Evaluations for OLS 454**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year:</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester:</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students:</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question No. 136: Directions for course assignments are clear and specific</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question No. CO3: The assignments are relevant, interesting and well integrated into the course</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Pre and Post Test

To evaluate the effectiveness and degree of learning that occurred in the OLS 454, the instructor administered a pretest at the beginning of the semester and a posttest at the end of the semester. The questions asked on both test were the same and reflected a sample of the various diversity issues covered in the course. Table V lists the results from last semester’s pre and post test. Incidentally, the results listed in Table V have been consistent for with the results of the last several semesters.

### Table VI

**Results from the Pretest and Posttest for OLS 454 (Fall 2004)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students: 19 Pretest:</th>
<th>Number of students: 18 Posttest:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Percent of Correct Answers</td>
<td>Average Percent of Correct Answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Student Continuous Improvement Surveys

Continuous improvement is the nomenclature used in academia and industry for the process of evaluation and improvement. Each semester the instructor administers such a survey for the diversity management course to evaluate and improve the course for the subsequent semester. Evaluations of the peer experience assignments are also included in the survey. Tables VI and VII lists the average rating from selective responses to questions from last semester’s survey.

### Table VII

**Average Rating of Selective Responses from the Continuous Improvement Survey (Fall 2004)**

1. On a scale from 1-5 (1= little change and 5= great change) rate how your perception of people from other cultures has been influenced as a result of this course: 3.39
2. On a scale from 1-5 (1= little value and 5= great value) rate how important diversity education is for improving relationships between people of different cultures: 4.5
3. On a scale from 1-5 (1= not optimistic and 5= highly optimistic) rate how optimistic you are about improved relationships between people of different cultures in the long term (10 years) without diversity education/training: 3.04
4. On a scale from 1-5 (1= little improvement and 5= major improvement) rate your belief on how well diversity education/training can improve the following areas:
   - Reducing stereotyping: 3.94
   - Reducing prejudice: 4.25
   - Reducing discrimination: 4.19
   - Improving communication between cultures: 4.0
   - Improving national security: 3.5
   - Reducing terrorism: 3.5

### Table VIII

**Average Ratings of Selective Responses Concerning Peer Experience Assignments from the Continuous Improvement Survey (Fall 2004)**

1. On a scale from 1-5 (1= not effective and 5= very effective) rate how effective the following assignment was in raising your awareness or understanding of diversity or a certain diversity issue:
   - Discrimination Experience: 4.4
   - Affirmative Action Experience: 4.5
   - Romantic Relationship Experience: 3.8
   - Finding a Job: 4.1
   - Hiring Assignment: 4.4
   - Resolving Diversity Conflicts: 4.6
2. On a scale from 1-5 (1= not difficult and 5= very difficult) rate how difficult it was for you to prepare for the following assignment:
   - Discrimination Experience: 2.3
   - Affirmative Action Experience: 2.7
   - Romantic Relationship Experience: 1.9
   - Finding a Job: 2.3
   - Hiring Assignment: 2.5
   - Resolving Diversity Conflicts: 2.3
3. On a scale from 1-5 (1= least relevant and 5= very relevant) rate each of the following assignments in terms of importance or relevance for the course:
   - Discrimination Experience: 4.0
   - Affirmative Action Experience: 4.5
   - Romantic Relationship Experience: 3.9
   - Finding a Job: 4.5
   - Hiring Assignment: 4.8
4. Peer Experiences

Peer experience assignments are an effective overall assessment tool used to evaluate the relevance and understanding of the course material and what was learned in the course because they deal with experiences or incidences that are personal, contemporary, relevant and real-life. In addition to the benefits listed in Table III, each semester, these assignments have consistently provided the learning outcome identified in Table VIII.

TABLE IX
LEARNING OUTCOMES RESULTING FROM PEER EXPERIENCE ASSIGNMENTS
- Awareness of current diversity related concerns
- Awareness of the fact that most people perceive that they have been victims of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination
- Appreciate the importance of being sensitive to the feelings of others
- Learn from the experiences of other students
- Develop guidelines for dealing with various diversity related situations
- Improve intercultural relationships
- Appreciate how the course has influenced student thinking and behavior in relation to diversity

CONCLUSION

Based on the instructor’s experience in teaching diversity related courses, it has been noted that the more student discussion that occurred on a given diversity issue or incident, the more feedback students provided about their personal experiences or the experiences of someone they knew. Consequently, the instructor has intentionally structured a diversity management course to incorporate student or peer experiences into the curriculum for the discussion of certain diversity issues. Using peer experiences is an effective technique for raising the relevance, interest and active participation of students in learning about diversity. This learning approach provides benefits for students, the instructor and the overall learning atmosphere of the course. However, for the method to be effective, instructors need to establish and follow certain guidelines to ensure some degree of structure, uniformity, and quality in completing the assignments. The peer experience approach is an effective way to facilitate the teaching and learning of diversity and is adaptable for other types of courses and industry training.

REFERENCES