Creating a Healthy Learning Environment for Student Success in the Classroom

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Effective education to every student is a moral imperative for all teachers. Educators are obligated to avoid issues that present a conflict of interest in order to create a healthy learning environment for all students. This document provides a review of diversity related issues such as harassment and general teaching considerations geared toward educators of diverse students.

Introduction

The creation of a healthy learning environment requires teachers and facilitators who are culturally competent. Faculty members of higher education are obligated to treat each student fairly and expect high standards from them regardless of their diversity makeup.

Furthermore, teachers should and must avoid all issues that present a conflict of interest in their faculty-student relationship. For example, regardless of whether "quid pro quo" cases are intentional or unintentional, they must be avoided since they put students in a challenging position when their course grade depends on the faculty member's perception. This document presents the basics of sexual harassment, implications of diversity issues, diversity management concerns in education, and best teaching practices while offering suggestions for educators of diverse student populations. The key is to find out what works well and get the whole organization to do it. The suggestions offer ideas so adult educators can be successful in achieving their learning outcomes based on fair learning practices that can produce positive results for everyone.

Diversity Management and Adult Education

The student population of nearly all tertiary institutions has drastically changed from what it was twenty and thirty years ago. It is apparent that today's student populations are much more diverse in terms of their gender, ethnicity/nationality, age, disability, and beliefs than they were twenty years ago. Therefore these student populations need diverse teaching skills, different experiences, and more facilitation abilities in order for them to learn best as per their learning styles. One of the needed skills would be to acknowledge their differences and actively incorporate their experiences into the learning objectives of each session. Recognizing and understanding these differences are not easy, nor automatic, since they require conscious focus and a good level of comfort on the part of the faculty with cultural diversity issues. In order for educators and students to be successful, they need to become culturally competent. "Cultural competency" for all practical purposes refers to the continuous learning process that enables both educators and students to function effectively in the context of cultural differences both in academia and in the workforce.

Nearly all organizations and academic institutions have various forms of formal or mandatory training for their associates, faculty and/or staff during their initial hiring process and as an ongoing process annually. However, in many academic as well as corporate organizations, much of the training on diversity and sexual harassment topics are not reinforced through training and development. Often time, employees are provided a handbook or a website link to read the material individually and to sign a document that they have read the material. There is no assessment of actual learning. Furthermore, some organizations

that do offer a formal face-to-face training session on such important topics tend to brush through the content to make sure the legal side is covered without making sure that the material is received, understood, fully comprehended, and the specific behaviors can be successfully applied by those who attended the session. Nonetheless, many of such topics are often effectively presented by experienced facilitators and a review of them seems relevant for educators.

"Sexual harassment" is often times seen as behavior that is un-welcomed (the recipient does not want it), unsolicited (the recipient did not ask for it), and repeated (the behavior is not one isolated incident). A behavior can be considered sexual harassment when submission to such conduct is made a condition of the individual's course grade or employment; when submission to, or rejection of, such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for grade or employment decisions (such as salary increases, promotions, etc.) affecting the individual; and when such conduct has the purpose or effect of interfering with the individual's performance or of creating an unfriendly or offensive environment. Quid pro quo is a condition created by the harasser in which the harassed submits to unwanted sexual and physical advances to either obtain a reward (such as a good grade without earning it through objective performance in the course) or to avoid a consequence. An actual act is not required to establish quid pro quo. Such situations must be avoided by using professional, consistent and fair treatment strategies for all students in the class. Also, adult educators should be aware and eliminate the presence of a "hostile learning environment" in their classroom. A "hostile learning environment" can be described as a situation where inappropriate remarks consistently take place and it is not corrected by the teacher/faculty member. This is a situation where insensitive and inappropriate remarks should be addressed publicly by the faculty member so everyone in the class understands the ground rules and the fact that inappropriate/insensitive comments are not appreciated nor tolerated. Educators must also avoid and eliminate the presence of sexual harassment from taking place in the classroom while maintaining a faculty-student relationship. Tangible consequences such as a lowered grade do not have to occur to substantiate the existence of sexual harassment. If a student's emotional and psychological abilities are substantially affected, there may be enough proof that sexual harassment occurred.

Diversity also encompasses the multitude of experiences, aptitudes and attitudes available in today's workforce. Diversity initiatives encourage leaders and educators to empower their associates and students as well as to tap into their wealth of differences in order to achieve synergistic results. In return, these students and associates will be ready to satisfy, excite and delight their diverse customers and achieve organizational effectiveness by delivering superior value as a result of diversity initiatives modeled in the classroom by the educators. Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor during Clinton's Administration, said, "No longer are Americans rising and falling together as if in one large national boat. We are, increasingly, in different smaller boats." So, our classroom students, customers, organizations, and societies will become progressively more diverse and we as educators need to tolerate differences, respect them, understand their nature, and educate our students about them so they can successfully work with their diverse organizations and customers. Eventually, this may lead to student's personal and professional success and they can be as successful as they so desire to be.

What is success and who defines it? According to Sophocles, "success is dependent on effort" and not necessarily physical characteristics or limitations. According to Brian Tracy, Author and Speaker, "One of the most important rules for success is this: every great success is the result of hundreds and thousands of small efforts and accomplishments that no one ever sees or appreciates." In the summer issue of Nova Southeastern University's Foresight publication (2001), Dr. Randolph Pohlman, Dean of Graduate School of Business and Entrepreneurship, wrote, "In this final issue ... we strive to get at the core of what is success. By sharing with you the thoughts of various leaders, educators, and entrepreneurs, we hope to help our readers define for themselves what is success?" The same is true for students; therefore, success should be defined by students based on their desires, abilities, goals and efforts. At his primary school, Malcolm X (African American leader) was told by one of his (white) teachers that he should not dream of becoming a lawyer since he could not be very successful in that job and should pursue something that requires the use of his hands. Unfortunately, due to strong biases and stereotypes such in-competency may still exist in the American education system and we need to do everything possible to ensure it does not happen in our schools or to our students. It is not the place of the faculty member to determine how successful a student can or should be based on his/her first impression of the student or based on the student's physical/personality characteristics. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What is success? To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived." Simply put, success can be practicing what you preach, progressively realizing predetermined goals/ideals, and doing one's best to make worthwhile contributions to society. It is our moral imperative and obligation as educators and faculty members to (assume and) proceed as though limits to our

students' abilities do not exist, unless objective evidence tells otherwise.

Recognize and Respect Diversity in the Class

Recognizing, understanding, appreciating, and valuing personal differences in each individual student can eliminate groupthink both in the classroom as well as in the boardroom. Groupthink is a pattern of faulty and biased decision making that occurs in groups whose members strive for agreement, among themselves, at the expense of accurately assessing information relevant to a decision. Groupthink is not a desirable objective in today's diverse and sophisticated world of intermingled competition. This usually happens in homogeneous teams and groups because everyone's societal values tend to be similar. Research has shown that homogeneous teams are neither as creative nor as productive as heterogeneous teams when dealing with or solving complex problems. Diverse teams can achieve synergistic results if they appreciate, understand and value their differences effectively. Synergy is where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Ultimately, synergy is the performance gains that result when individuals, teams and departments coordinate their actions toward the same goals. Synergistic teams, colleagues, peers and departments tend to function more cooperatively and productively than if they were operating in isolation.

Synergy happens when two or more individuals working together produce more than their combined efforts individually. For example, a team of four students should produce a final project (product) that is much better than the combined results of each of the four students' work that is produced individually. Diversity awareness can help teams function harmoniously in the context of cultural differences and produces synergistic results. On the other hand, lack of diversity awareness and lack of respect for diversity can lead to negative synergy. Negative synergy, similar to social loafing, is when two or more people working together produce less than what they could produce individually. As you know, negative synergy takes place when people do not respect and appreciate each other's differences.

Differences may even exist in how male and female students relate to and understand material presented in the classroom. Using sports analogies to make a point in the classroom may not clarify the concepts or objectives to those who are not familiar with the rules of a specific game. This can apply to both males and females in the same way. Faculty members need to be aware of their audience and create an "inclusive learning environment." An "inclusive learning environment" is where all of the students and participants are actively involved in the learning process and can fully relate to the concepts being presented. Research has shown that gender differences (in orientation, communication, and behavior) seem subtle, yet they represent great dissimilarities in the ways that men and women function on a daily basis. Simply put, the differences can translate into an institutionalized tendency to work only within one's comfort zone, men working only with men and women working with women unless this tendency is consciously acknowledged and avoided. Many firms have established gender-sensitivity training in order to create awareness and to eventually produce synergistic results among teams. During the training at The Kinney Shoe Corporation, the participants learned that females, in general, view work as a process while males usually focus on the end result and desire specific action plans. Researchers have concluded that many of the males were raisedwith a competitive nature, where power was the key. Furthermore, males have been found to have more of a succinct speaking style, similar to military speech, whereas, females communicated in a storytelling style. While many females prefer a circular style of group discussion so everyone can be heard, seen and acknowledged; males tend to prefer the lecture style where the group is directed and the meeting can be brought to a closure in a timely manner. Females tend to put more focus on the process (how we get there) while males may focus more on the results (where are we going and when will we get there). Such differences may exist in the classroom as well and educators need to recognize and capitalize on such differences appropriately as per their course learning outcomes. Understanding and respecting such differences can create an "inclusive learning environment" where groupthink is avoided and synergistic results flow infinitely as learners think for themselves and stretch their abilities beyond their existing boundaries.

Summary

Valuing diversity and the educator's genuine commitment to its thorough implementation are critical to one's success as an individual educator and to his/her student's survival in the real world. In order for educators and students to be successful, they should become culturally competent.

Furthermore, teachers should and must avoid all issues that present a conflict of interest in their faculty-student relationship.

For example, just as faculty members must not use student information for marketing or promotional purposes they must not put students in "quid pro quo" positions that are often linked to cases of sexual harassment. Many of the (students') employers are concerned with proper employee behavior and code of conduct compliance in relation to their industries and related organizations. As such, educators have the responsibility of being and becoming role models for students as these future leaders/managers are likely to mimic the actions of their teachers. Overall, this document has pointed out the moral/ethical imperatives of education in the diverse environment. As Thomas Henry Huxley states, "Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not . . .." Many individuals tend to live with general stereotypes, misinformation, and biases for a lifetime but educators are more likely to be open-minded in treating their students fairly. Being open-minded and treating all students fairly are critical to creating a healthy learning environment.

Bibliography

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