



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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In Their Words . . . Students' Ideas About Teaching

As one way to foster a dialogue about teaching and learning between undergraduate students and the teaching community, the TRC has established an ongoing series entitled "Undergraduate Student Focus Group on Teaching and Learning." Each month we invite a cross-section of about ten undergraduates to meet at the TRC to discuss various aspects of teaching and learning.

If you know any undergraduates who would be interested in taking part in a group or if you have an idea for a topic, please contact Jann Lacoss at jann@virginia.edu or 982-2815. Additional focus group results are available at our web site: <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/ugfocus.htm>

Students' Ideas about Diversity in the Classroom by Jennifer Chylack, Graduate Student Associate, TRC (English)

"Diversity" is a hot topic these days, but what does it really mean? We asked a group of students to describe their ideal "diverse" classroom, and to tell us whether or not the University of Virginia lives up to that ideal.

First of all, students noted that a distinction should be drawn between the inevitable divisions which occur in social situations and the ideal classroom environment. In a desire to feel comfortable and to make the university seem smaller, students define themselves by divisions and categories. Often, a student in the third or fourth year may wish for a more diverse social life, but by then, it can often seem too late to break old habits. This is not to say, however, that the classroom should mirror the cafeteria. In classes, the material alone should determine the class's interaction. Members of the panel frequently expressed a desire to see subject

matter take precedence over any kind of political (or "politically correct") agenda. At the same time, though, they held the teacher responsible for fostering an open atmosphere, encouraging difference, and promoting stimulating, provocative discussions. The worst thing a teacher can do, they said, is to stage a pretense at debate while subtly communicating the "right" way to think. The best thing he or she can do is create an environment which is both stimulating and "safe."

Students agreed that this environment is the responsibility of the teacher; if the burden is on the student to introduce challenging or provocatively "diverse" views, participation will be minimal. If the teacher introduces a variety of viewpoints and perspectives as a matter of course, students will feel much more willing to discuss "sticky issues," as long as they are relevant to the subject matter. Some students felt that "PC" topics were introduced arbitrarily in some of their classes, and that issues of racial, sexual, and economic difference should not have been raised because they were not integrated with the material. Other students felt that some subtle variety was welcome: for example, when professors used "he" and "she" when discussing exemplars, when they incorporated a range of perspectives in the reading, and when they sought out contemporary examples and models which mirrored the demographics of the class. Students view a moderate, sustained attention to diverse content as an appropriately "polite" way to approach the task of teaching the diverse population of the university.

A "melting pot vs. mosaic" debate ensued, in which some objections were raised to an approach which seeks to divide the university population into a series of separate groups. Undergraduates consider one aim of an American university to be to present a coherent cultural perspective and not a mixed bag of different viewpoints. Anxiety about

fairness and inclusiveness could overshadow material and result in a fragmented, confused educational experience. Other students argued that being American was a matter of “mentality” rather than race, sexual orientation, or class. They said that that mentality, at least in its ideal form, was naturally tolerant of difference. According to this view (shared by the majority of the panel’s participants), the presence of different perspectives is an asset rather than a flaw.

Some obstacles do exist to an education that reflects the variety of the U.Va. student body; the panel agreed that the pursuit of grades could inhibit open and free discussion of opinions, and some felt that classes were too rushed to treat sensitive topics with the depth they demand. The students also noted that no one present in the group opposed the basic premise that “diversity” was a good thing. They acknowledged that this view is not necessarily shared by all students or all teachers at the university, and that many courses are not designed to promote a range of perspectives. No student felt, however, that he or she had suffered overt discrimination at U.Va.

In sum, these students felt that “diversity” at the University of Virginia is not achieved by the mere presence of a varied population; it is the responsibility of the teacher to present material in a manner which acknowledges *and* capitalizes upon the perspectives already present in the class.