

2018

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Recommended Citation

Meluch, Andrea L. (2018) "Communicating Diversity: Writing and Reflections about Diversity in Organizational Settings," *Discourse: The Journal of the SCASD*: Vol. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/discoursejournal/vol4/iss1/10>

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GREAT IDEA FOR TEACHING

**Communicating Diversity:
Writing and Reflections about Diversity in Organizational Settings****Andrea L. Meluch, PhD¹**Assistant Professor
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ameluch@iusb.edu**Abstract**

Diversity includes the differences among various personal and social identities that individuals carry into their professional lives and is an important element of organizational work (Allen, 1994, 2011). As students are expected to be competent communicators in diverse workplaces, this activity provides students with the opportunity to design and appraise diversity statements in an organizational setting. Specially, students share their personal experiences of diversity in college settings and craft a statement to capture diversity, equity, and inclusion. Instructors interested in this 45-minute activity will be provided with instructions on guiding a lecture, small group writing assignment, and class discussion related to diversity in college and organizational life.

Courses

Business and Professional Communication, Organizational Communication, Intercultural Communication, and Globalization and Communication.

Objectives

- Students will identify various elements of diversity in organizational life and define diversity as they experience it in their daily lives.
- Students will design a diversity statement and appraise its utility within organizational life.

Introduction and Rationale

Diversity has become an integral part of our organizational lives and is no longer just a “hot topic” or “buzzword.” Diversity is defined as “a variety of personal and social bases of identity, including race-ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, country of origin, etc.” (Allen, 1994, p. 144). The value of diversity within organizations is a reoccurring theme in organizational communication and management literatures and is of particular importance to individuals entering today’s workplace (e.g., Allen, 1994, 2011; Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2011; Fine, 1996).

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Research has shown that organizational diversity can be both beneficial and challenging to communication within organizations (e.g., Grimes & Richard, 2003; Okoro & Washington, 2012). Specifically, the benefits of organizational diversity include increasing an organization's ability to interact with wider (often global) audiences and, in turn, be more competitive (Okoro & Washington, 2012). However, diversity in the workplace can also lead to challenges, such as differences in intergenerational attitudes toward work (Okoro & Washington, 2012) and tensions due to stereotyping individuals based on elements of their social identity (e.g., race, gender; Allen, 2011). Students experience diversity in higher education settings and their awareness of issues of diversity in these settings can create productive discourse in the classroom (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). Issues of diversity and globalization are increasingly covered in communication studies courses, such as business and professional communication, public speaking, and organizational communication. However, for students to understand the value of diversity within organizational settings it is increasingly important for instructors to help students to make clear connections between issues of diversity in society and their own experiences.

Institutions of higher education are particularly attuned to the diverse nature of their organizations (Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012). Many colleges and universities have public diversity statements and initiatives guiding their organizational practices, policies, and procedures. Today various *Fortune 500* companies also include diversity initiatives in their mission statements and have public diversity statements (Frankel, 2015). College students entering modern organizations can benefit from reflecting on the multifaceted nature of diversity in organizational life and the accompanying dilemmas organizations face when trying to implement diversity initiatives. This activity is designed to connect and apply the concept of diversity in organizational life to students' personal experiences of diversity at their university or college.

Description of the Activity

This three-step activity generally takes 45 minutes. However, the instructor can extend the activity to fill up an entire one hour class period with prolonged class discussion. The first step of the activity is to discuss definitions and elements of diversity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion and spirituality, disability) and the purpose of diversity statements in organizational work as a class. Step two includes putting students into small groups and instructing them to write a diversity statement for their college or university. Step three concludes with student groups sharing their diversity statements and having a class discussion to appraise the utility of diversity statements in organizational life and the potential dilemmas related to diversity they may encounter as organizational members.

Materials Needed

Prior to conducting the activity, the instructor should gather the diversity statements to provide to students over the course of the activity. These diversity statements include:

- The diversity statement from her or his university or college. Instructors may find their college or university's diversity statement on the university website or by directly contacting their academic affairs office.

- The instructor should also locate several public diversity statements from large organizations (e.g., *Starbucks*, *Apple*). These can also be found on corporate websites.

Some instructors may find that their institution does not have a diversity statement. If an official diversity statement cannot be located for this activity, the instructor should let the class know that their university does not have an official diversity statement and discuss this at the close of the activity.

Instructors should consider printing out both the official university diversity statement and the example university statements to give to students. However, the official university diversity statement should not be given to students until they have written their own diversity statement. In addition to the diversity statements, instructors should consider providing the following hypothetical situation and discussion questions to students (either via handout or on a projector) to help guide students in this activity:

The Director of Academic Affairs at [name of college or university] has decided that [name of college or university] needs an official diversity statement. The director feels that students have a unique understanding of the diversity at [name of college or university] and, thus, should be included in the development of this diversity statement. You and your fellow students have been invited by the director to draft an official diversity statement for your university. This statement should capture your university's commitment diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- What does diversity mean to you as a student?
- How is a diverse environment beneficial to organizations and, in particular, this university?
- How can organizations in general, and specifically this university, promote diversity?
- What are some of the barriers organizations face when promoting diversity?
- What are the benefits of having a diversity statement at this university?

Lecture Materials

Before beginning the activity, the instructor should prepare a short lecture (i.e., about 20 minutes) to define and explain the various aspects of diversity in the workplace (Allen, 1994, 2011). For instance, the instructor may discuss generational differences within the modern workplace and the challenges and opportunities that these differences offer organizational members. Particular attention in the lecture to the challenges, such as differing understandings of attire and communication channels (e.g., face-to-face, phone, email), and the potential benefits (e.g., technology skills, historical knowledge) of intergenerational communication in the workplace should be paid. The instructor may also discuss how gender differences can influence workplace communication. Gender differences in the workplace related to issues of unpaid parental leave and sexual harassment should be covered to highlight the intersections between current social issues and the challenges of working in a diverse organization. Thus, the instructor should emphasize throughout this lecture both the potential benefits of a diverse workplace (e.g., increased competitive edge) and the many communication challenges also involved.

Finally, the instructor should explain that the purpose of diversity statements within organizations is, similar to mission statements, to guide the organization's dedication to

diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition, the instructor should then provide students the examples of public diversity statements from large organizations that they located and go over these documents with the class.

Procedure

1. Students should be placed in small groups (4-5 individuals) at the beginning of this activity. Student groups will then be asked to write one-paragraph diversity statements for their college or university using the hypothetical situation and discussion questions. Student groups should be instructed to write no longer than a paragraph (5-7 sentences). (20 minutes)
2. Once student groups have completed writing their diversity statements, the instructor should ask all groups to share their statements with the rest of the class. While students share their diversity statements with the class the instructor and students should pay close attention to themes across the diversity statements. The instructor may want to write themes and key ideas from the student generate statements on the board to help guide the class discussion. (10 minutes)
3. After the students have shared their diversity statements, the instructor should provide the official university diversity statement to the class and read through it with them. Students should share their reactions to the official university diversity statement with the class. The class should then compare and contrast the statements the student groups crafted with the official statement. In particular, the instructor should ask students whether they feel the university's official diversity statement adequately captures the institution's commitment to diversity and is embraced by the institution's policies, practices, and procedures. If the university or college does not have an official diversity statement, the class may discuss the implications of the institution not having their commitment to diversity in writing. Instructors should be sensitive to the issues being discussed when carrying out this activity, as students may bring up controversial opinions about diversity and/or difficult personal experiences. (15 minutes)

Debrief

The activity should be concluded with a class discussion focusing on the challenges involved in communicating and enacting diversity initiatives within organizations. The class discussion can be initiated by using the "complete the sentence" debrief technique (Debriefing techniques, n.d.). All students should be asked to complete the sentence: "During this activity my feelings about diversity, equity, and inclusion at [college/university] were . . ." Specifically, the instructor should prompt students to consider whether they believe it is personally important to them to work within organizations that effectively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Further, students should share how they can individually contribute to their organization's diversity initiatives and/or promote a safe and inclusive environment for all individuals within their organizations.

Appraisal

At the conclusion of this activity, students have identified the ways that diversity is enacted on their campus and defined how they experience this diversity in their lives as students.

In addition, students have had the opportunity to practice writing a diversity statement and critically appraise the usefulness of these types of statements both on their campus and in other organizational settings. Students are able to speak to the value of diversity in their higher education experience and are further contemplating the significance of diversity in organizational settings. As this activity provides students with the opportunity to connect their personal experiences to course content, they are more likely to further understand the content (Shih, 1986). Finally, this activity's use of both small group discussion and writing and class discussion provides students with multiple opportunities to participate and share their perceptions.

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