

Becoming a Teacher of Diversity and Social Justice: Influences, Purpose, and the Classroom

S. Terezia Orosz

California State University East Bay

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Instructor: Prof. Sarah Taylor

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### **Abstract**

This study highlights interviews with CSUEB professors on the subject of diversity and social justice (DSJ) in university teaching. The purpose of this project is to explore the knowledge and methods of experienced teachers of DSJ in different disciplines. The objective of the interviews is to examine (a) what factors influenced them to become DSJ teachers, (b) how they characterize their purpose, and (c) stories about how they include DSJ content. The investigator interviewed seven professors representing five departments (Biology, Sociology, Engineering, Dance and Kinesiology) using a semi-structured interview guide. Findings showed that professors were influenced by early personal experiences and awareness of oppression, privilege, religion, and family values. They also referenced the significant impact of their own student experiences as undergraduate and graduate students. Professors described their efforts in the classroom in student engagement, critical reflection, awareness of bias, and the unique experience of teaching at a university with as diverse a student body as CSUEB.

### Introduction

One of the most vital ways to create social change and to support diverse, underserved, and vulnerable populations is through education. This is true for education in both K-12 and higher education, but this study will focus mostly on higher education. In this author's opinion, diversity and social justice (DSJ) in higher education affects not just the students themselves, but also family systems, community systems, and larger social changes. Having a college degree can mean having power in our society either to uphold the current systems of oppression that exist, or to make changes. At a university with students who are mostly from privileged backgrounds, DSJ pedagogy can instill values of equality, justice, and social change perspectives in students who might not otherwise be exposed to these views. Administrative Services (e) 0.2 (uni) 0.22 (t) 0..2 (c) 0.2 (



engagement. The literature shows that two of the main categories for examining teaching DSJ are content and methods. It is possible to have class content that examines diversity or social justice issues, but using methods that do not reflect social justice process such as inclusion and student empowerment. It is also possible to use social justice teaching methods, such as student-designed projects, about content not directly related to diversity or social justice.

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has shown that fostering positive peer interactions in the classroom increases

(Larrivee, 2000). It is common for teachers to rely on the methods that were used in classrooms when they were students. A critically reflective teacher gives conscious consideration to the ethical implications of classroom practices. This involves continuous evaluation of teaching practice, and modification of curriculum and methods over time. Smith (2011) writes about the use of critical reflection in the healthcare field, and the importance of its inclusion in the teaching process. Smith emphasizes that critical thinking is not just an abstract skills, but something that can be taught as a concrete practice through reflection activities and writing. Keddie (2006) gives the example of critical reflection in terms of the underlying normative gender assumptions driving much of traditional pedagogy. The literature covers many areas of critical reflection, all of which demonstrate improved outcomes for students when their teachers are engaged in this process.

### **Bias in the Classroom**

Research on microaggressions have shown that prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes are relatively common on university campuses. According to Boysen (2012), 40% of teachers and 50% of students report an incident involving bias in the past year before they were surveyed. The term *microaggressions* is used to refer to the subtle nature of some incidents, in contrast to overt use of derogatory terms or discriminatory statements. Research shows evidence that students wish teachers would respond to these types of incidents, and to lead classroom discussion about them instead of ignoring them. Some teachers may not perceive all incidents of microaggression. Boysen (2012) describes evidence that older, male teachers are less likely to report incidents of bias than younger, female teachers. The ability to notice microaggressions can be connected back to critical reflection, and the practice of building awareness of our individual beliefs, assumptions, and biases.

Another important area to examine bias in academia is in the underrepresentation of women and people of color as university instructors. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2010), 60% of university full professors are White males. When all instructors are considered, including associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers and other faculty







There is some risk to the participants of these interviews. For professors that choose to allow their interviews to be public, it is possible that colleagues or university administrators could penalize them in some way based on a response to their comments. Their statements might be misunderstood, or used against them in some unforeseen way. Professors who speak about their challenges, or even share about mistakes they have made in the past are at risk for judgment or other consequences.

### **Interview Procedure**

Instructors were interviewed in their offices on campus. The interviews were audio recorded or video taped according to the instructor's preference. Instructors were given the choice of keeping their responses confidential, or allowing them to be shared publicly. Consent forms are shown in Appendices C, D, and E, and include an option for video or audio taping. Edited clips will be posted for use on the DSJ Teaching Guide website. Instructors were asked open-ended questions about their evolution as a DSJ teacher, the use of DSJ content in their classes, and their successes and challenges as teachers. The interview guide was piloted through testing questions with colleagues who teach DSJ. Four different drafts of the interview guide were considered. The final interview guide is included in Appendix B. Interviews were professionally transcribed to ensure accuracy.

Open-ended interview questions were written with the intent to discover information about the interviewee's process without overly influencing their answers. Open-ended questions allow interviewees to bring in topics that are important to them that the interviewer might not have otherwise considered (Webber, 2006). The entire interview guide is included in Appendix B.

The main three questions asked were:

1. Describe your evolution as a teacher of DSJ.

2. In the syllabus you

When asked to describe their evolution as a teacher of DSJ, most participants began speaking about their childhood and background. They named factors such as family and religious values, exposure to DSJ in college, and personal experience of oppression and awareness of privilege. None of the participants chose one precise moment as the most important, but instead described a series of experiences and influences that led them to become teachers of diversity and social justice.

**Family and religious values of social justice.** Two of the participants described growing up in families with social justice values. One participant described their experiences in the '70s during the civil rights movement as a major influence. She said her family was political, and engaged in advocacy to make life better for people in our society. The second participant spoke about going to protests and political events as a child, and the influence this had on his political awareness. Three of the participants referenced religious values of justice and equality as a formative part of their youth.

**Exposure to diversity and social justice in college.** The majority of the participants described their experiences in college, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, as a formative part of their path to become DSJ teachers. An engineering professor described taking elective courses in Chicano studies, Asian American studies, and Philosophy and how those courses helped him become a more well-rounded person. Another professor talked about his awareness 1 Tf ( ) Tj



designed projects where they could choose the topic of their work. One professor recommended that creation of lab time in the humanities and social science courses, so that students could have the experience of applying the theory of what they are learning to cool projects.

**Combine theory with real life.** Making class content relevant to students is another part of student engagement. One professor described how teaching about theories such as Marxism, but using it as an analysis of the recent financial crisis

to develop their social justice spirit so that they're willing to do the work that it takes to really make change in the world.

### **CSUEB is Special: Teaching and Learning at a Diverse University**

Many interviewees spoke about the unique aspects of teaching at CSUEB. Participants referenced the depth of learning to be experienced in a diverse classroom, where students could share and learn from each other's knowledge. "Just the act of working together with a diverse group of people...I think is very beneficial." Beyond describing the diversity of the students, participants spoke about students' open-mindedness:

And then I had some prejudices about a place that was this diverse ethnically and with so many people coming from traditional cultures or, and being the first person in college in their family, and things like that I thought that there might be a lot of acceptance for different race identities, but not necessarily different gender identities or sexual orientations. And I found kind of the opposite, that just an incredible amount of acceptance and openness...so many people who have been marginalized and disenfranchised have gathered here. So there's a real openness that has touched me a lot.

### **Teaching DSJ in STEM Subjects**

Two participants from science departments spoke about the ways that they bring diversity and social justice into their classes. An engineering professor described giving students projects that include tasks such as supplying refugee camps and internally displaced persons. He stated, "I teach engineering and I don't want to produce engineers that are thinking only about money and the technological aspects of it. I want them to realize they exist in a society." A biology professor went even further to describe her view on how easily DSJ can be incorporated into science:



People have always come to me and said, "Gosh, it must be really hard as a biologist to incorporate issues of social justice and diversity into your classes." And I've actually seen it as it's not even an evolution. It's always been part of who I am and it's been the easiest thing to do because science actually lends itself to inclusion and inclusion is synonymous with social justice because when you're inclusive then you go into things and you see things as all under one umbrella.

This professor went on to describe her research about intersex people, and its use in a legal brief as evidence to overturn Proposition 8, a California proposition against gay marriage.

### **Discussion**

#### **Personal Background**

Personal background appears in the literature as an important influence on teaching for DSJ. Gay writes about the impacts of her ethnic, racial, and cultural identity as an African American. She writes

I know from personal experiences the transformative benefits of culturally responsive teaching, and the devastating effects of perpetual failure due to educational irrelevance and ineffectiveness...I am neither apologetic for these autobiographical nuances in my scholarship, nor do I pretend they do not exist. While I do not always make these declarations explicit, their presence is not difficult to discern. I am not unique in writing (and teaching) through my filters of identity and affiliation. This is a common occurrence among scholars of cultural diversity and for classroom teachers in general (Gay, G, 2013, p. 53)

Gay goes on to describe how her personal influences are always part of her teaching, and are incorporated into her style and content.

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about recognizing stereotypes they might hold, and being reflective of bias. Some interviewees mentioned how they seek to modify their teaching according to the cultural characteristics of their students, similar to the manner described by Gay (2002). One example of this is the dance instructor who encouraged students to analyze contemporary dance moves. Although interviewees did not describe the specific example named by Gay around differences in classroom communication, they referenced their awareness of communication patterns and seeking to engage students in ways that are relevant to them.

**Student engagement.** Multiple professors described “student engagement” as a problem from different perspectives. Two interviewees’ answers focused on the difficulty of getting students engaged, and referred to the problem as the students’ lack of academic commitment. Interviewees also referenced issues of remediation that are higher than average at CSUEB in correlation with the higher number of students of color. (2013) writes about how it is important for educators to maintain a strengths-based approach, and to not overly focus on the academic struggles of students of color. She writes:

multiple references to hands-on activities and student-directed learning. This reflects much of what is in the literature around student engagement. For example, Gibson (2011) writes about the success of a student-designed syllabus in which students selected from a list of

topics that would not have occurred to me to ask about, creating rich data in the process. Some of the limitations were the limited amount of time I had to conduct the interviews, and the small



This project was only an initial investigation into the resources available through interviews with CSUEB professors. It uncovered the richness of experience, commitment and knowledge already present at this school. Many instructors mentioned lack of funding as a major impediment to increasing their capacity to teach for diversity and social justice. With more support and resources to support teaching for diversity and social justice, students at CSUEB that represent diverse, underserved, and vulnerable populations would be able to benefit from the innovative strategies of current education scholars. It is the hope that this project will serve to

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**Appendix A: Recruitment Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are invited to participate in a brief interview about your role as faculty in diversity and social justice (DSJ) teaching. You have been chosen because your syllabus submitted to the DSJ

Planning Project funded with a PEIL Planning Grant in 2012-2013 contained exemplary content. In our analysis, we saw interesting content or an interesting approach or attitude. **The objective of this interview is to explore how you see your role in DSJ education, and what personal and professional experiences and supports have been useful for you.**

Your interview may be used in the development of the DSJ Pedagogy Guide website, which is being developed as part of one of the 2013-14 PEIL Implementation Grants. **We encourage you to participate so that you may share your story and inspire faculty at CSUEB and elsewhere to further develop their DSJ teaching.**

**The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, and will take place at a time and location convenient to you.** The interviewer will either be a Master of Social Work student (Terezia Orosz or Serom Kim) working as a research assistant on our project or one of the co-investigators (Rose Wong, Assistant Professor in Social Work).

With your permission, the interview will be audio or video recorded. You will have the option at the end of the interview to confirm whether you authorize the use of your audio, video or transcribed written text of the interview in the DSJ Pedagogy Guide website, or if you would prefer that your interview content remain confidential and used only for study by the research team.

**Please respond by *Wednesday, March 12, 2014* if you are interested, or if you would like**

interview is completely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. It will take about 30 minutes.

**(If syllabi submission)** We have asked to interview you because of the exemplary DSJ-content/quality found in your syllabus submitted to the DSJ Planning Project funded with a PEIL Planning Grant in 2012-2013. The aim of the interview is learn about how you carry that out, what is your aim, and how you set the tone in a classroom. The goal is also to know about your view of how your background and life/social/professional experiences have influenced your view of and approach to DSJ in education.

**(If Advisory Board member)** We have asked to interview you because you are on the Advisory Board for the Diversity and Social Justice PEIL Implementation Project. The aim of the interview is learn about how you teach DSJ, what is your aim, and how you set the tone in a classroom. The goal is also to know about your view of how your background and life/social/professional experiences have influenced your view of and approach to DSJ in education.

With your consent, this interview will be audio or video recorded. You may choose whether you would like to keep the recording confidential, or consent to its use in the DSJ Pedagogy Guide. These are likely to be products of your work that the research team identifies as exemplary. Let's take a few moments to go over the informed consent and release forms.

*Go over consent and release forms, give option for audio or video recording.*

Do you have any questions before we begin?

4. Describe your evolution as a teacher of DSJ.

**Probes:**

What has inspired you personally and professionally?  
 Personal, family, social or political events and factors that contribute?  
 What has brought you here?  
 What has supported you to teach DSJ?  
 Aims and goals?  
 How did you come to see it that way?

5. **(Omit if advisory board member)** In the syllabus you submitted to our study last year, we found\_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell us more about that?

**Probes:**

What was that like for you?  
 How decide to include that?  
 What are you trying to achieve?  
 How do students respond?

6. Describe a success and a challenge you have experienced in teaching DSJ.

**Probes:**

- a. What was that like for you?
- b. Students, colleagues, institutional (response, support, challenges)?
- c. What do you find rewarding about teaching DSJ?

- d. What has been your greatest learning/realization about DSJ?

**Appendix C: Written Consent to Participate in the DSJ Pedagogy Guide  
or Self-Evaluation Interview**



All materials, including audio and video documents, will be retained for two years following the



**Audio Release Form**

As part of this project, we will be making an audio recording of you during your interview. Please indicate what uses of these materials you are willing to permit, by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to, and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. We will only use the audio recordings in ways that you agree to.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The audio recordings can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The audio recordings can be transcribed, and directly quoted for publications, the web guide, conferences, public presentations and meetings.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The audio recordings can be used for scientific publications.

**Video Release Form**

With your permission, we will be making a video recording of you during your interview. Please indicate what uses of these materials you are willing to permit, by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to, and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. We will only use the video recordings in ways that you agree to.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be transcribed, and directly quoted for publications, the web guide, conferences, public presentations and meetings.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be used for scientific publications.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be shown at scientific conferences or meetings.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be shown in classrooms to college students.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be shown in public presentations to non-scientific groups.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be used on television or the audio portion can be used on radio.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The video recordings can be posted to a web site.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the video recordings as indicated by my initials above.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)