EDI in the classroom: Just what are we talking about anyway?

By: Ann Braithwaite, Professor, Diversity and Social Justice Studies, UPEI, abraithwaite@upei.ca

Your institution is no doubt like mine these days, where talk of "EDI" is widespread and, importantly, working its way into several policies and protocols. But what does this acronym (and its related incarnations: EDID, EDIA, JEDI)[1] mean for and in our many kinds of classrooms? What does this term have to do with what we teach—that is, with our syllabi, our curriculum, our program structures, and with who is teaching, and who is in the classroom? There is much to say about these questions. But I want to think briefly about two interrelated and yet quite different ways in which this emphasis on EDI plays out in teaching and learning—and how the differences between them can make a difference.

On the one hand, people often understand EDI as a question of *who,* and argue for the necessity to "diversify" the faculty complement, or who is "at the front of the room" ("front" here is metaphoric, of course). Representation matters, and who is present—and absent—in teaching can make a huge difference to students in any classroom. They deserve to see themselves reflected in their professors; they need to know that there are many embodiments of both "knowers" and "producers of knowledge." These differences invite them into the course materials and the subject more broadly and let them know that people like them belong in this space called post-secondary education too. And this representation spans several identity categories: gender, race, sexuality, disability, national identity, language, and age, among others, are all important ways in which professors' embodiments enter into and matter in the classroom. This focus on the *who* of teaching denaturalizes and decenters a long history of who has so often been the professor, making other people now present and visible. When universities, for instance, make commitments to cluster hires of previously disenfranchised and excluded groups (such as Black or Indigenous scholars), this is the focus on representation as embodiment.

---

[1] EDI = equity, diversity, inclusion; EDID = equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization; EDIA = equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility; JEDI = justice, equity, diversity, inclusion.

On the other hand, representation must also be thought of in *what* is being taught, not just who is doing the teaching. What kinds of knowledges are in our classrooms? How do taken-for-granted assumptions about disciplines—with their canons, key texts, major theories, etc.—gate-keep whose knowledge has mattered, whose voices have been heard, who has been present—and absent—as subjects of knowledge in our courses? As many have noted, disciplines are "citational practices"; they make some knowledges register as important and others not even present.[2] They create "closed circles" of knowledge that then come to be seen as "what the discipline is," overlooking, rendering invisible, how that knowledge has only ever reflected a particular way of being and knowing in the world, has only ever reflected particular embodiments. Readers here of course recognize the many recent challenges to disciplinary knowledges that critique their perpetuation of whiteness, eurocentrism, masculinism, colonialism, etc. Questioning these closed circles means rethinking gate-keeping practices ranging from who and what is on the syllabus, to what kinds of examples are mobilized to explain course materials, to how other knowledges are included. More than simply adding other materials to the curriculum ("add and stir" models), it demands of us all, no matter what our fields, to both rethink what "counts"—and what doesn't—as important to know, and to be attentive also to *how* people have been included (i.e., as "other," as victim, as criminal, etc.). And it demands that we highlight these questions of why these ideas, theories, and voices have come to matter and become the "discipline"—and to make them not just ancillary to our classrooms, but central to it too.

These two understandings of EDI can, and do, often conflict, though. Making curriculum responsive to not just changing student demographics, but new and different knowledges necessary for the major social issues facing us all, cannot just be left to that "diverse" faculty embodiment. This is the added work, the "cultural tax," that so often becomes that which drives precisely those same faculty out of academia (and many other sites too) and leaves too much in our many fields untouched by the abovementioned questions. The work of rethinking all our fields must draw us all into recognizing who and what has been present, and who and what has been absent, or made absent. It is time for us all to think about how our taken-for-granted classroom practices around knowledge and knowers perpetuate exclusions that can no longer (could they ever?) meet the needs of us, our students, and the world around us.

---

[2] Some commentators on how citational practices construct knowledge include: Sara Ahmed, Victor Ray, Andrea Eidinger, Hannah McGregor, Katherine McKittrick, the Citational Justice Collective, and Nancy Chick et.al., among others.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Have EDI initiatives on your campus made a difference to your work or influenced the way you teach?
2. Has your own journey becoming aware of EDI influenced the way you teach? How?
3. What could STLHE do to better promote EDI and support you and your students?