

“Embedding Diversity in Course Content and Assignments” by Richard W. Slatta

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Most colleges and universities now support some definition of diversity as a core campus value. For example, North Carolina State University’s College of Humanities and Social Sciences asserts the following: “Diversity should be valued as an asset that provides a balance of different perspectives and strengths with respect for all human differences, including but not limited to cultural, ethnic, racial, international, socioeconomic, gender, age, sexual orientation, religious and persons with disabilities.”

These are noble goals, but how can we operationalize these values? How can we embed them in coursework, the bedrock of a student’s education experience? In this article, I try to illustrate ways to thread diversity issues through course content and assignments. By thinking analogously, I’m confident that you can visualize equivalent topics and approaches for your own discipline and courses.

The examples below come from HI 216: Latin America since 1826, a course that I teach online and as a hybrid (classroom meetings and online assignments). Desired course outcomes include intellectual and cultural broadening; enhanced empathy; reduced ethnocentrism; engagement with conflicting, contradictory evidence; situating oneself more clearly in a complex world; enhanced reflection on one’s own views and actions.

Strategy 1: Role Playing and Debates: Seeing the World through Other Eyes

I invite students to take the roles of historical figures, often in debate format. We usually form three groups—two groups presenting opposing sides of the debate and a third group

evaluating which students made the best arguments on each side. Debates may be staged in class or presented online. I find the best results by having student post their debate positions online, then having the evaluators read and post their response. Finally, we reprise the debate orally in class.

The sample topics below come from a course on modern Latin American history, but every discipline has its own rich sources for debate.

- Spanish colonial debates over the status and treatment of Native Americans
- Delegates to a 19th-century conference debating slavery
- Delegates to the first feminist congress in Latin America, circa 1880
- Debating war with Spain in 1898 and occupation of the Philippines
- Evaluating the rationales for revolution, using views of revolutionaries
- Debate over cutting down or preserving rainforests of the Amazon and Central

America

Some debate topics, such as slavery, are potentially controversial. However, reassuring students that their task is to present historical arguments, based on historical documents, not their own views, usually relieves any concerns. Frankly, I don't think we serve our student well by "cocooning" them. A university education should expose students to a wide range of new views and positions, some distasteful, but all aimed at enhancing student critical faculties.

Strategy 2: Guided Discussions Facilitate Diversity of Interpretation

I reiterate to students that opinions don't count; all of our discussions must be driven by and undergirded with empirical evidence. I often provide a guiding question that student must answer using a small set of historical documents. The closed document set eliminates plagiarism, as no generic history essay from the Internet will suffice. Second, students must ground their

analysis in direct quotations from the documents—unsupported assertions earn a healthy deduction.

Overall, students react well to two aspects of these inquiries. First, they enjoy trying to formulate their own interpretation, based on the evidence, rather than merely memorizing a textbook summary. Second, they enjoy reading the variety of ways in which their colleagues react to the documents. They get a much fuller spectrum of “understandings,” than if I simply lectured and gave them a single voice. All student quotations are taken from mid-semester student self-assessments for an online version of HI 216.

- “Finally, I've found a class where I don't have to sit in a dull, crème-colored classroom and take notes. I don't have to listen to a professor rattle on about his personal views on a subject. I finally get to read the primary sources provided to me and form my own opinions. Imagine! An intellectual environment where diverse opinions actually count for something!”

- “It was interesting to be able to follow along and have a look inside the other student's thought processes and ideas through their papers. I appreciated being allowed to comment on the more convincing arguments.”

- “I think it's a really good idea not to have everyone post discussions on the same point of view for each topic. I also think that responding to other students' discussions several days later provides a unique opportunity to really think about and dissect each other's arguments.”

- “The best thing about this class is that we do get feedback from our classmates in a non-intimidating way. It also makes a person feel good when a classmate chooses their argument as one of the best in the class. This has helped me build more self-confidence with my writing and my grades have improved.”

- “I also enjoy reading what everyone in the class has to say, because in a regular classroom setting, there are normally one or two people who answer all the questions and give their input. Everyone else ends up being inactive and learning without participating. I like that we all get a chance to participate equally.”

Strategy 3: Diverse Sources of Information; Not a Homogenized Textbook

I strive to present students with the “real world” of historical analysis. They get conflicting and incomplete primary sources on a variety of topics, with no pat answer. Paired with fuzzy questions, typical of an inquiry guided learning approach, these sources force students to a deeper reading and analysis. They can’t merely skim textbook pages, noting proper nouns and dates. Every discipline has a wealth of “raw material” where students can plunge in and get dirty, just as we do in our own research. Here are a few types of non-textbook sources that they engage.

- Social commentary in the lyrics of Mexican *corridos* or folksongs
- Anti-slavery poems and other socially conscious poems, such as by Pablo Neruda
- Testimonial literature of tortured and statements by military officers who committee torture

- School of the Americas website of the US Army and compare views found at School of the Americas Watch website—diametrically opposed views—

Again, students react positively to these different, diverse source materials.

- “The readings have done a good job presenting a number of different viewpoints, theories, and ideas surrounding their lifestyle, leaving it up to the reader to form his or her own opinions.”

- “I have taken several history courses and only one of them used the primary source method like this one does. I think it's great that we get to make our own opinions instead of it always being told to us by an historian.”

Strategy 4: Exploring Other Cultures, Looking for Similarities and Differences

Taking students outside of their conventional frame of reference, whether it is to another culture, time period, concept of time, or other variable, forces them to make comparative analyses. For example, after we've explored a given topic for Latin America (issues of race, gender, social class, political unrest, etc.), I'll often invite them to make comparisons with the United States (or with another country if we have foreign students in class). Again, many see not only the “other” experience, but also their own within their own country in a new light. The final comment represents a change that I hope occurs in most of our classrooms.

Again, student self-assessments reveal how some issues and discussions have affected their views.

- “It essentially, however, led them into a life of slavery. The colonists certainly had valid reasons for wanting their freedom. I also found the feminist movement and the desire for women to be recognized to be just as important an issue as slavery.”

- “I feel that I have become much more in touch with and aware of my feelings toward different cultures, especially the Latin American culture.”

- “I have seen the struggles of painters and politicians, poets and families and it is clear that the struggle of the past seems to have been a common theme amongst many peoples.”

- “I already know that I will not only walk away from this class with a new outlook on Latin American history, I'll also walk away with a new outlook on learning.”

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