# Integrating Emotional Intelligence Training Into Teaching Diversity

# By Gail A. Dawson



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## Abstract

To function effectively in today's diverse and multicultural environments, workers must be properly prepared. Businesses and universities are focusing more attention on diversity training; however, teaching diversity is not an easy task. This article examines the challenges of teaching diversity and proposes the integration of emotional intelligence training as a way to assist both students and instructors. In addition, it provides practical emotional intelligence activities to enhance teaching diversity.

## Introduction

With today's global and multicultural environment, it is essential that workers are prepared to effectively manage diversity. In such a diverse workforce, creating an inclusive environment where all employees can fully contribute to the organization's success is crucial. Increasingly, organizations are investing in diversity training while many colleges and universities are addressing this issue by developing diversity courses or adding discussions of diversity issues into existing courses (King, Gulick, and Avery). Students benefit from diversity content in curriculum as well as from the actual diversity of the classroom – although, as Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin note, diversity in the student body is not sufficient for maximal benefits. Both content and interaction within a diverse environment are necessary to get the full benefit of diversity. However, discussing diversity, whether in corporate training or in a university setting, is not an easy task – as a professor in Minneapolis recently discovered when three of her students filed a discrimination complaint alleging that she created a "hostile learning environment" because her discussion of structural racism made them feel uncomfortable (Cottom; McDonough).

Although this example is a bit extreme, most trainers and professors are all too familiar with the awkward silences and tense environments that often accompany discussions of diversity. Given the importance of these discussions, it is worth looking at more effective ways to facilitate these discussions. This article examines the challenges of discussing diversity and proposes the integration of emotional intelligence training into teaching diversity as a way to assist both students and the instructor. In addition, this article suggests practical emotional intelligence exercises to enhance diversity.

## Challenges of Teaching Diversity

The topic of diversity presents unique challenges for instructors and students alike. Teaching diversity is complicated due to the complexity of the topic itself and the lack of clear guidance in teaching the topic, for example – limited teaching materials and the lack of standard content (Bell and Kravitz). Avery and Thomas note that courses that mainly lecture with little student interaction and experiential learning are unlikely to increase diversity awareness. Active engagement and experiential activities help students make the transition from cognitive knowledge of concepts to more thorough understanding and practical applications. The information becomes more interesting, memorable, and salient. However, moving to interactive and experiential methods of

teaching which have greater potential to create effective learning "requires us to give up some of the control in our classrooms to teach in a 'grey area' where discussions can be difficult and personal to all involved (Kirk and Durrant 824). For some, this loss of control combined with the often sensitive and personal nature of the topic necessitates stepping further out of their comfort zone than they are willing to go.

From the perspective of the student, diversity discussions may also be uncomfortable as they challenge them to discuss the "undiscussable" (Lindsay) and may be viewed as questioning the way they view the world (Bezrukova, Jehn, and Spell). Many students have been taught that certain topics should not be discussed and have never learned to question and explore information on their own. They blindly follow what they have been taught and don't consider other perspectives or learn to analyze information and interpret the meaning for themselves. In addition, many students may perceive diversity issues rigidly as being wrong or right which can cause them to resist exploration and consideration of messages inconsistent with their own views (Stewart, Crary, and Humberd). As a result, students tend to disengage from discussions that would enhance their development and foster the exchange of ideas and perspectives that would create learning, growth, and a more inclusive environment. Although it may initially be difficult, engaging in discussions with others whose thoughts and ideas may oppose and contradict their own helps students learn and grow together as they create new understanding and meaning through their conversations (Baker ; Baker, Jensen, and Kolb). Exposure to and active discussion of various points of view enhances students' ability to process information and develop the critical thinking skills often noted as weaknesses of college graduates (Day and Glick), but vital when making decisions in diverse environments.

In addition, diversity "may be perceived as threatening to some students' way of life by questioning the powers and privilege that society has conferred upon members of their group(s) (Avery and Thomas 382)." This can cause students to experience intense emotions, such as anger, guilt, confusion, and self-doubt (Marbley, Burley, Bonner, and Ross). Without a sufficient level of emotional intelligence, it is likely that the student will respond with defensiveness, silence, avoidance, or passivity and disengage from the discussion. Integrating emotional intelligence training into diversity courses may help alleviate this situation.

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a set of abilities that includes the abilities to perceive emotions in the self and in others, use emotions to facilitate performance, understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and regulate emotions in the self and in others (Mayer and Salovey,). Goleman (317) defines this as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well, in ourselves and in our relationships." An emotionally intelligent person is described as one who "is able to recognize and use his or her own and others' emotional states to solve problems and regulate behavior" (Huy 325).

Recognizing one's own emotional state and regulating behavior may enable one to take a step back from the emotional attachment to topics of diversity in order to hear and understand the perspectives of others. When one is too close to controversial topics and lacks a degree of emotional intelligence, often he or she is able to conceive of things from only his or her own perspective. Being able to understand the perspective of others enhances one's ability to comprehend the reality of others and empathize with the issues that may affect them differently. This is particularly important in the case of managers who make decisions that affect employees from diverse backgrounds. Recognizing the emotional state of others can help diffuse volatile situations and improve communications as well as mutual understanding.

## Can Emotional Intelligence Be Taught?

Research on emotional intelligence indicates that it is associated with a greater level of success in many areas including leadership, sales, communication, and decision making to name a few (Cote et al.; Farh, Chein, and Tesluk; Hess and Bacigalupo; Lillis and Tian). More recently, however, researchers have started to delve into the question of whether emotional intelligence can be taught. Although many workshops profess to train emotional intelligence, researchers and theorists note that there is little empirical evidence to support results of significant changes due to training (Antonakis, Ashkanasy, and Dasborough; Ashkanasy and Daus; Clarke) and some question the validity of the concept itself (Landy; Locke). Others contend that emotional intelligence can be increased through training (Ashkanasy and Daus; Groves, McEnrue, and Shen; Joyner and Mann). Schutte, Malouff, and Thorsteinsson provide a review of research in a number of fields, including organizations, education, mental health, and sports which seem to indicate that through training, not only can emotional intelligence increase, but there is an increase in positive outcomes in work, school, life satisfaction, mental and physical health, and personal relationships. In addition, Boyatzis and Saatcioglu suggest that emotional, social, and cognitive competencies can be developed through graduate education provided a holistic approach of developing knowledge, competencies, and values is used.

## Integrating Emotional Intelligence into Teaching Diversity

A number of researchers have suggested the inclusion of emotional intelligence in business curriculum (Fall et al., 2013; Myers and Tucker; Sigmar, Hynes, and Hill). This article incorporates some of these suggestions and provides additional activities and suggestions to meet the specific needs of teaching diversity. The first step, as recommended by Sigmar et al. is to teach students an emotional vocabulary. For this, they suggest the use of a Matrix Exercise in which students are asked to fill in a matrix of high-, medium-, and low-descriptors for several categories of emotions (e.g. happy, sad, scared, angry, confused, strong, weak, etc.). Using the emotion anger as an example, students might identify furious as the high-level and annoyed as the low-level. However, the difficulty students typically have in completing the task would illustrate the need to develop better emotion vocabularies to identify emotions and their subtleties. In

addition, Sigmar et al. suggests playing Emotion Charades where students act out different emotions (e.g. anger, outrage, etc.) while others guess what emotion is being acted out. These activities when combined with a discussion of how temperament and mood can influence how we interpret events (Brown) help provide an emotional vocabulary as well as a basis for students to understand and explore emotions and their interpretations. In general, we have become so accustomed to not talking about emotion and denying that it has a place in organizations that we often have difficulty identifying and acknowledging emotions and the role they play in our lives and our decisions. These exercises set a framework for emotions on which other activities and discussions will build.

In addition, students can be given a group activity (referred to by the author of this article as "What Had Happened was. . .") in which they view an array of pictures of people displaying various emotions. For each of the pictures, the students identify the emotions and create a story describing events that may have led up to the picture. The pictures can be clipped from magazines and other publications. It may be useful to focus on pictures of diverse groups in a corporate setting. This activity not only challenges students to identify emotions but encourages team interaction which allows them to see how others may interpret things differently and make vastly different attributions about what led to what they see. Collaboration with members of their group also allows them to build better interpersonal skills in thinking through different perceptions of the pictures.

Maintaining diversity journals can also be useful to help students process and interpret the information being presented in the class. Assignments requiring students to journal about specific events may also be beneficial. For example, Brown has students journal about incidents related to school or work where they recall being emotionally charged. In class, students are asked to share these incidents within a small group. This helps students understand how emotions are triggered and how they affect behavior. An additional component can be added to this activity by specifying that the incidents have to relate to some aspect of diversity. As a group, students can examine these incidents and develop ideas about how to handle similar situations in the future. In addition, journals help students record and track changes in their thoughts related to the topic.

The use of scenarios and role playing can also be valuable. In general, role playing accelerates the acquisition of knowledge skills, and attitudes by focusing on active participation and sensitization to new roles and behaviors (Sogunro). Direct experience in activities that are similar to real-life situations help students practice and retain information and enable the transfer of knowledge and skills to everyday life. Role playing can be used as a part of business curriculum as well as corporate training (Dawson; Myers and Tucker; Sogunro; Weiss). Providing students with realistic diversity scenarios will help them model emotional intelligence while developing an understanding of the complexity of diversity issues by taking on the perspective of another.

## Conclusions

Although little data currently exists in this area, the integration of emotional intelligence into diversity appears to be worth trying. It has the potential to make a significant impact in the knowledge gained by students as well as their ability to deal with the diverse environments they will face. Increasing the level of emotional intelligence will allow for better self-reflection and enable students to benefit from the input and experiences of others. Simply seeing how others from different backgrounds interpret the same information in different ways can inform and broaden the student's perspective. This allows them to view and make sense of the diversity issues from multiple perspectives which, in turn, will better inform their decision-making and interactions with others. In addition, emotional intelligence will facilitate the development of interpersonal and critical thinking skills as they process the information and build better awareness of their own as well as others' emotions. This will provide them with a broader base of knowledge as well as the tools to handle the complexities of diversity issues where there are few clear-cut, black/white answers, but many shades of grey.

The integration of emotional intelligence and diversity seems to be a natural fit, but also has its challenges as both faculty and student will have to adjust. Initially, students may have a difficult time acknowledging and understanding their own emotions and developing the skills to monitor and adjust for their emotions and that of others. Faculty will have to adjust to giving up a bit of control in the classroom and simultaneously taking on more of a role in managing the process. While this adjustment may initially be difficult, it opens up the possibility for faculty to be informed by the different perspectives of the students and create greater shared knowledge. Additional research in this area is needed to explore its potential, but this combination may be just what is needed to prepare students for global and multicultural environments in the workplace.

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Note: Leaves photo by Carole E. Scott