Teaching Ain't Easy, but Somebody Has Gotta Do It:
Education in an Age of Anti-Diversity and Civil Rights Rollbacks

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In the aftermath of Supreme Court decisions and the consistent assault on public education, educators must focus on discovering the best methods and approaches for addressing diversity within the classroom and the importance of learning different perspectives as part of a solid education. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), while criticized by political operatives and demonized in the court of public opinion, the tenants of inclusion, creating space for marginalized voices, and assisting students in seeing the gift in the differences each person brings to the classroom and society at large is still valid and essential as a methodology in education while navigating difficult conversations in an anti-diversity climate. Civil and human rights rollbacks are becoming more prevalent, it is crucial to reimagine how we discuss, teach, and embody DEIB or human-focused methodology as an educational tool. Educators must explore how to develop, question, learn, and reimage relationships, community, and educational institutions as incubators for people of diverse cultural backgrounds to share dynamic learning and teaching together.

Keywords: diversity, human-focused methodology, community of practice, value humanity

INTRODUCTION

The end of Affirmative Action in education, the demonization of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), the assault on public education, and the deliberate misinformation narratives across the United States (US) will have a lasting impact on education and leadership (Carruthers, 1999; Hansen, 2014; Huber & Muñoz, 2020; Ravitch, 2000; SPLC, n.d.; Squire, 2020). Book bans and classroom censorship reflect a world of fear, false narratives, and uninformed responses. The current challenges offer space to explore methods for promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) without directly using buzzwords or focusing on banned topics, yet aiding students in exploring history, literature, race relations, the use of narratives, and the political complexities of this country in creative ways. Educators and leaders in education can reimagine how to use various tools to assist in this endeavor.

One option to explore is incorporating innovative teaching methods and technology to create engaging learning experiences that challenge traditional narratives and promote critical thinking. AI-powered tools can assist educators in facilitating meaningful discussions on sensitive topics, providing diverse perspectives, and encouraging empathy. Imagine the impact of merging different fields, perspectives, and methodologies. Using a co-teaching model with other educators in the building, one can facilitate interdisciplinary learning teams and streams of information that highlight the diversity of the discipline taught, its links to other fields of study, tap into the strengths of diverse backgrounds, such as music as literature, and art as the window into the culture, to create a genuinely holistic approach to teaching

(Gyimah-Concepcion & Capello, 2022; van Eck et al., 2014). Another option to explore is using different methodologies and DEIB tools of inclusion, respect, listening, affirming, and creating space for multiple stories in the classroom.

The Current Challenge

Education in its fullest sense has become a pawn in the political quest for power and DEI has been mis defined and misused, turning it into a political boogeyman supported by racialized rhetoric central to debates over classroom content (Carruthers, 1999; Hansen, 2020, Huber & Muñoz, 2021). Across the US, school boards have faced attacks over information not taught in K-12 classrooms or included in the curriculum. Teachers have been threatened based on false narratives about history and what some parents deem unsuitable for their children (Hansen, 2020; SPLC, n.d.). The underlying issue that extends beyond the curriculum and culture wars is: How do we teach students the challenging and positive aspects of a diverse nation's history and its ongoing struggle to embrace culture, language, history, experiences, and the human condition, even when difficult? It is irresponsible and misrepresentative of education and educators to omit, diminish, or exclude histories simply because a particular group disagrees with their content. Education aims to help students learn, expose them to diverse perspectives for growth, cultures, and foster dialogue where differences exist (Hofsted, 1983).

This process strengthens critical thinking, enhances conflict management skills, and helps distinguish between scholarly and fictional information (Goleman, 2012). Education and its supporting systems aim to provide a safe space, scholarly information, and tools for learning and reasoning. These resources enable students to engage in thoughtful, respectful discourse, fostering growth and the development of innovative solutions to emerging problems as they progress. Emphasizing the core values of DEI is essential in educating and working with diverse populations. Anchoring these values in education is crucial for creating an environment where education transforms how we see, engage, and lead as both educators and students.

DEIB/Human Focused Methodology

The world is changing at an alarming pace. There is a breach in the human landscape concerning relationships, trust, and having safe physical and emotional environments to engage in learning. It is imperative to educational environments and learning to mend relationships and build trust in classrooms (Davidson & Case, 2018; Horton, 2016). When there is a sense of safety and trust, learning, leading, instructing, and creating a more diverse lens to engage an ever-changing landscape is possible (Bachman et al., 2022; Watson, 2018). The cultural wars across the US and the constant debate around what one can and cannot teach are contentious and incite fear in educators and students (Goleman, 2012).

This article will focus on developing DEIB or human-focused methodology using various techniques, first by creating a community of practice in the classroom and using interdisciplinary teaching, storytelling, students as living texts, and diversity wheel activities to engage in owning one's diversity to embrace the diversity that surrounds people daily. These techniques provide space to foster trust, community, and a new path forward. Art imitates life, and life imitates art. Exploring how the various arts and disciplines impact our lives, represent diversity, and challenge us to dig deeper into our humanity to coexist is one way to address DEIB methodology through learning about community, diversity, and acceptance in multifaceted ways without focusing on the divisive issues that have been politicized and weaken the current education system in the US, (van Eck, van Gastel, & van Kessel, 2014).

DEIB or human-focused methodology draws from the DEI organizational frameworks developed to ensure inclusion and full participation of all people and fair treatment of those persons in the educational, training, and work environment, particularly groups traditionally marginalized or underrepresented (Mousseau, n.d.). It is essential to tell the whole story of experiences and learn from those stories as part of DEI focused methodology. It is the richness of stories, those that are often not heard, or diminished that help to reclaim parts of history that have been dismissed or that are difficult to understand that provide a more complete picture of who we are as a society and the different cultural groups and experiences that provide meaning and context for the current climate and concerns (Cannon, 1995 & Kirk-Duggan, 2019). For this article, the terms DEIB methodology and human-focused methodology will be used

interchangeably to provide options for using less politically or culturally charged language. There are four key elements within this methodology, and each element has essential steps to support learning, growth, community, a sense of belonging, and the ability to tell one's story without dismissing or diminishing another's story. Educators must be willing to explore their biases, political positions, convictions, and knowledge gaps when beginning to employ DEIB/human focused methodologies as part of their teaching and curriculum development. Essential questions to explore personally, professionally, and with trusted colleagues:

- How do I see and honor students in the classroom for their humanity and unique expressions and experiences?
- What makes me uncomfortable in the classroom with these students?
- What do I know from a historical perspective about the cultural backgrounds of the students?
- Is the historical perspective anchored in a place of only strengths or weaknesses?
- Where do I need to grow in knowledge about emerging scholarship and issues that impact my teaching and the students I teach?
- What is my communication style? Is this style conducive to working with students from various cultural, socioeconomic backgrounds?
- How can I enhance my knowledge and openness to learning new perspectives, especially when the historical record I am familiar with may not accurately represent the cultural diversity that is contained within my classroom?

When educators understand their own biases and potential concerns about DEI and how personal, professional, political, religious, experiential, and intellectual understandings impact how students are viewed, how information is used or not used, and the consistent call to be self-aware to provide the most appropriate and inclusive education possible, that is the beginning of being able to embrace and utilize human-focused methodologies within the classroom.

Practical Application of Methodology

The first step in the practical application stage is to develop communities of practice (Lave & Wagner, 1984) to support the four foci for anchoring human focused methodologies as teaching tools. Lave and Wenger (1984) define communities of practice as groups of people who share a common interest or profession and learn to improve their skills and knowledge through regular interaction and collaboration. These communities are characterized by domain, a shared area of interest that provides members with a mutual understanding of a subject and a sense of identity. Second, a community is a group of individuals engaging in activities and discussions and sharing information and ideas to help and support each other while learning. The third area is practice, a shared collection of resources, experiences, tools, stories, and ways of addressing recurrent problems that develop over time. Communities of practice are formed by individuals working together to learn from each other, share best practices, and improve their collective understanding of a particular area or discipline.

Classrooms are an excellent means of creating communities of practice. The concept capitalizes on learning as a social process, and students deepen their understanding by engaging in collective activities. For example, domain- the subject matter or curriculum is the shared domain where students and teachers focus. Community- the classroom creates a community where students and teachers interact, share ideas, and support each other's learning. Such activities include discussions, group projects, and collaborative problem-solving.

The last area within a community of practice is practice. Throughout this process, the classroom develops its own set of practices, which includes problem-solving techniques, language for discussing concepts, and routines for managing tasks. Students and teachers create a rich learning environment through sharing resources, strategies, and experiences. This model focuses on the teacher as the facilitator who guides and supports the students' learning. While students actively engage in discussions, contribute knowledge from their own experiences, and learn from each other. This approach fosters a sense of

belonging and helps students develop deeper understanding and practical skills through collaboration and shared experiences.

Once a community of practice and learning has been established, educators can use the four foci in several ways. The first tool to explore is the diversity wheel. This tool draws from the Native American medicine wheel and the tapestry, allowing the participant to think about four areas of knowing and how those areas shape perception, engagement, understanding, acceptance, and how one integrates that information and responds to the world.

For the past fifty years, America has been reshaping its cultural paradigm regarding the existence, functions, and significance of persons of color in society (Tapestry Institute, n.d.). This is due in part to the outdated notion that the majority of "Real Americans" who "matter" are white people, failing to reflect our everyday reality. The diversity wheel activity can be used for educators, leaders, and students. This activity draws from the arts, allowing for an opportunity each time a new concept is introduced that requires them to build a bridge to another idea or a new way of engagement. It provides opportunities for personal exploration, introspection, and learning from others while seeing the commonalities as well as the differences without qualifying as good or bad.

In this activity, participants are encouraged to broaden their perspectives on other ethnicities by examining how they have been influenced by, learned from, and even adopted practices from other cultures. We will aim to answer the question: "How do we embrace and integrate these cultural elements into our everyday lives?" This exercise is designed to help educators and students embrace diversity within to accept the differences and diversity they encounter in the world. The four components of the diversity wheel represent ways of knowing-Spiritual, Mythic, Experiential, and Intellectual, and the center of the wheel is Integration, which are ways of knowing, understanding, and engaging the world. The diversity wheel activity provides an opportunity for multi-sensory and interdisciplinary educational engagement within the classroom, allowing for creativity and more in-depth learning. The four parts of the diversity wheel offer space to discuss with students from their perspective, experience, point of reference, and understanding of spiritual ways of knowing asking questions such as: Do you have a faith tradition that your family practices? How does it help you daily? Mythic ways of knowing invite students to explore these questions: What stories have you heard or read that are part of the myths within literature and the community? The intellectual ways of knowing offer space to discuss what students know, what they are interested in via subject matter, and what draws them to those areas. The final way of knowing is experience. This piece of the diversity wheel provides an opportunity to learn about students' experiences, hobbies, travel, friends, and life as they understand.

Once students have physically assembled their wheels with the things representing each area, ask them to add the integration portion to the wheel and discussion. Integration: How do these ways of knowing inform one another or inform how the student understands and engages in learning, play, relationships, or other activities? Provide students time to share their diversity wheel with the other students. The colors for the diversity wheel are Black-Spiritual, White-Mythic, Red-Experiential, Yellow-Intellectual, and Brown-Integration. The diversity wheel exercise can be used in multiple ways after the initial creation. This physical representation of one's diversity is a tool to use in conversations about various disciplines and the stories that piqued students' curiosity as they listened to their colleagues' share. What are the similarities and differences, and what are the places of growth for learning? These inquiries and open space of dialogue provide space to anchor the importance of diverse backgrounds, thoughts, experiences, and ways of knowing, exhibit equity in that all students have the opportunity to share without interruption their perspective, promote inclusion because all stories are included and valued in this activity, and model for students what it means to belong to a community of people that are not monolithic.

The following methodology is interdisciplinary teaching. In 1989, the Kanawha County School (KCS) board created a new consolidated school, Capital High School in Charleston, West Virginia (KCS, n.d.). The curriculum was developed around interdisciplinary learning, which created interdisciplinary learning teams (ILT). The classes were taught in blocks, such as English, history, and fine arts. The lessons linked what was being taught in each discipline based on literature and period, history and what was taking place within that period, and the art and music of the time (KCS, n.d.). The interdisciplinary teaching model

provides a window to link learning, explore diverse information, discuss various participants within the disciplines, and help students see the connections between what they are learning, the "Who's Who" of the period and discipline, and pull from their own cultural experiences about what is being taught. Interdisciplinary teaching provides an opportunity to discuss a wide range of people, places, and things that students are interested in based on the subject matter and provides context and content that can be diverse.

For example, when discussing math and science because West Virginia was referenced in the above paragraph, one can discuss the NASA space program and Katherine Johnson, who was instrumental in the mathematical calculations behind the first man going to space in the US (Deis, 2020). She is a woman in science technology, engineering, and math (STEM) before it was popular and a Black woman who worked during the time of segregation in this country. Beginning with being a woman from a small, rural, and economically challenged state will help facilitate a conversation and invite students to research Mrs. Johnson and other women in math and science. There can be a discussion about gender and race without making it the focal point of the conversation by providing context for the importance of people who are brilliant and gifted that may be left out of areas of study or industry and how students feel about those challenges and where they see them currently. The educator has not mentioned banned books or histories but opened the classroom for discussions that may reference challenges but are not the focus. Students may question or share the sentiments of their family of origin, and that is okay, provided the educator reminds students of respectful engagement and holding a different opinion, which is a relevant place. Conflict does not have to be harmful or violent. The goal is to help students entertain several ways of seeing, understanding, experiencing, and learning without rejecting a person, yet understand the point of distinction and be okay with disagreeing without being disagreeable.

When education is siloed, students miss how particular subjects connect and the sociological understanding that people create systems and provide meaning and context to the epistemological landscape at the heart of education and learning. In interdisciplinary teaching, students are given the context necessary to identify significant connections between disciplines and comprehend how those connections relate to the study as they are introduced to other fields' viewpoints, bodies of knowledge, and investigative techniques (MacDonald, 2020).

The next methodology is students as living texts. Using students as living texts involves recognizing and valuing their unique experiences, cultural backgrounds, communities, socioeconomic statuses, religious beliefs, and family origins as rich sources of knowledge and learning (Blum & Ladson-Billings, 2012). This approach emphasizes the importance of the student's lived experiences as a vital tool in their education that is diverse, inclusive, and necessary for the growth of the student intellectually as well as personally. Personal experiences highlight the fact that each student brings a wealth of personal experiences that shape their understanding of the world. By sharing and reflecting on these experiences, students contribute to a deeper, more relatable, and enriched learning environment.

When considering cultural backgrounds, the students' cultural backgrounds provide diverse perspectives that enhance discussions and broaden the scope of learning. Integrating these cultural insights helps foster a more inclusive and respectful classroom atmosphere. The community context of the students supports the function of the community's impact on students. The communities in which students live influence their viewpoints and learning styles. Educators can create more relevant and meaningful connections to the curriculum by incorporating community contexts. The economic circumstances into which students are born and within which they live impact their learning experiences, access to educational resources, and the way they see and engage with the world. Understanding students' socioeconomic backgrounds helps educators tailor their teaching methods to address diverse needs and challenges, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. While religion can be contentious based on rhetoric and how it is used to help or harm particular groups, understanding the impact of religious beliefs on students' education provides beneficial context to unspoken fears, concerns, or particular focus. Acknowledging and respecting students' religious beliefs and practices enriches classroom discussions and promotes an environment of mutual understanding and respect. Finally, a student's family of origin provides insight and context about the value of education, what is essential, and why it is vital within the learning community of a classroom. Family histories and traditions play a significant role in shaping students' identities.

Integrating these elements into the learning process allows for a more comprehensive understanding of each student's perspective.

By treating students as living texts, educators can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment where diverse experiences and backgrounds are not only acknowledged but actively used to enhance the educational experience for all students. This approach encourages empathy, critical thinking, student conversations as learning tools, and a deeper appreciation for the richness of human diversity.

The final portion of this methodology is storytelling. Storytelling is an ancient tool continually employed to understand diversity, see common ground, learn something new, and explore other ways of doing and being in non-threatening ways. Our lives revolve around narratives; we use them to fantasize, plan, grumble, support, amuse, instruct, educate, learn, and remember. At the individual and collective levels, they give hope, heighten, or lessen disappointments, question, or uphold moral order, and evaluate hypotheses about the universe (Schiffrin et al., 2010).

Storytelling as a methodology leverages diversity, equity, and inclusion principles to enhance teaching and learning experiences (Gyimah-Concepcion & Carpello, 2022). This approach uses narratives to celebrate diversity, promote equity, and foster inclusion. In celebrating diversity, it is essential to incorporate stories from various cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives to ensure that all voices are heard and represented. This concept helps students understand and appreciate the rich tapestry of human experiences and identities. Promoting equity allows the educator to use storytelling to give equal weight to different narratives, especially those historically marginalized or overlooked. This action ensures that every student's background and experience are valued and recognized in the learning process.

Finally, fostering inclusion creates an inclusive classroom environment where every student feels seen, heard, and respected. Through storytelling, students can share their own experiences and learn from the experiences of others, building a sense of community and belonging. Educators can create a more engaging, empathetic, and comprehensive educational experience by integrating DEI principles into storytelling. This methodology enhances students' understanding of the material and promotes critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness.

A note of caution when seeking to employ any of these human focused methodologies: it is imperative that the educator, leader, person in charge sets clear boundaries, ground rules, and the importance of confidentiality when dealing with students' stories. The key is cultivating a safe space and knowing when to intervene when there are sensitive subjects that arise and how to support and protect the students within the classroom. It is the responsibility of each educator to develop a plan that is representative of their values and safety measures that reflect the rules of the institutions where they work.

CONCLUSION

In this article, educators and leaders were introduced to different ways to think about how to address being diverse in their approach, equitable in their teaching, cultivating inclusive classrooms, and creating a place of belonging for all students through using human-focused methodology. Each method or approach can be adjusted to fit the uniqueness of classrooms, subject matter, discipline, and teaching styles. The goal is to seek to see students, meet them at the point of their humanity, and provide instruction, content, and context that allow students to value their humanity and others in how they learn and engage with educators and students. These approaches are not a magic wand to undo the damage of politicizing education and a failure of leaders to deal with the persistent challenges of racism, sexism, and othering to weaponize education that are prevalent in the US currently. This methodological focus uses what we claim to value yet often fail to embrace as an educational tool, educating the whole person as valid and important. Practicing how to integrate knowledge, critically think, and celebrate the uniqueness that each student brings to the learning field is one step in many to see the fullness of our potential as educators. These steps are important to making incremental changes in how to support students' learning and personal development by assisting them in seeing the gift of all humans and the way each person contributes to the broader world and what we need to live and thrive together. Educators have the power to shape the minds of future generations and foster a society that values education, equity, and justice for all students.

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