

## **Diversity, Democracy and the J-School Professor**

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In the middle of a meeting with the faculty of a journalism school last fall, a professor teaching a sports literature class helped to underscore the challenge facing those who want diversity taught in journalism schools.

“I must tell you,” he said, “that I have never thought about diversity when I teach my class.”

The authors whose work the class reads, he said, were all white and included one woman. Challenged by some of his colleagues to expand the reading list or otherwise include the work of people who were not white, he said:

“I get it. You want me to choose the best writers out there, then be sure to add some black people, right?”

The moment was pregnant with meaning and potential. The question seemed sincere. Other professors in the room seemed perturbed. The distance between goal and success could be measured by his question, and the peril of even broaching the subject could be calculated by taking the temperature of the room that day.

What is the value of diversity in journalism education? How do you make it top-of-mind without making it mindless exercise? What exactly does it mean

to “get it?” And how do you manage a conversation that includes people who get it, those who think they get it and those who don’t think there’s anything to get?

For the journalism professor interested in weaving diversity into a course, or for the school hoping to raise the issue across the curriculum, answering those questions is critical.

At stake is not just the contents of a course or the education of a student. At stake is journalism’s ability to tell accurate, complete stories about a society steadily morphing from monolithic myth to boundless mosaic. At stake is the industry’s ability to live up to its constitutionally protected role as the connective tissue linking people to the knowledge they need to function in this democracy.

It’s no small leap to go from a single professor’s innocent myopia to a concern about democracy’s future, but it’s no great exaggeration, either.

On its worst days, the morning newspaper or local newscast is still the most common way communities connect, learn about one another, identify mutual interests and separate needs, and get enough information that they can decide what to do next. But on its best days, the media also misrepresent, ignore, bend and distort the stories of whole groups of people.

Even with the best intentions, an industry unpracticed at making real its mandate to cover the whole of the people it serves has sometimes provided shallow, trivialized, stereotypical coverage of those groups. It hires people of

color or white women because of their “difference,” then makes no use of that difference, sometimes pushing them to conform to established ideas of news values and storytelling. In the name of diversity, young people with promise are hired but not developed, while others are brought into jobs for which they simply weren’t qualified. People of color languish or leave and resentment among others festers.

Too many of diversity’s champions have surrendered the intellectual high ground on this issue, joining less thoughtful detractors in a debate that assumes racial and ethnic diversity always means less-than and always comes at the expense of more qualified white men. Thus, an effort that has had a hard time finding its stride is constantly shooting itself in the foot.

At the same time, the story of America’s undercovered racial and ethnic groups – Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, black people and poor white people – continues to evolve as these groups grow in their complexity and in their estrangement from journalists. Like their counterparts across the country, newspapers and TV stations in Utah, North Carolina, Iowa and Minnesota find themselves needing to substantially increase their knowledge of Hmong, Somalis and Mexicans as immigrants transform cities, counties, states and regions. This, while journalists still struggle to tell the whole story of Native Americans, Latinos, poor white people and black people who have been there all along.

What does any of this have to do with a lone professor teaching sports literature in an American journalism school? It’s as simple and profound as this: the values of journalists and journalism are established in that

classroom. If students are to learn that all people must be heard in order for a democracy to thrive, then professors are among the first to deliver that message. They deliver it by expanding the books and articles students read, the broadcasts they see and hear, the speakers who come before them, the issues raised in class.

They do it by attacking their own ignorance, defeating their own fears, deepening their own understanding and sharpening their own skills, then taking students along that journey with them. They do it by freeing themselves and their students from the seductive lie that race, gender, class, age, hometown, faith or politics are disconnected from decisions about what texts they assign for the spring semester.

That is what it means to “get it.”

The teaching that flows from those actions can't be dictated or mandated, since comfort level, style and perspective are so individual. But once a professor “gets it” in this way, the drive toward journalistic excellence will have to change. It can't be accomplished in a single lesson on diversity that corresponds to the single chapter on diversity found in the average journalism textbook. Nor can a professor legitimately preach excellence while failing to help students understand and overcome the obstacles “difference” presents to those trying to cover all people completely and fairly. Those obstacles take the form of prejudices, biases, old and unexamined habits masquerading as journalistic truths, a segregated and misinformed society rife with mistrust and hostility aimed at people not like them.

Diversity must be present in all that the teacher teaches, from the examples used to guest speakers who speak to stories assigned to the ethical dilemmas parsed to the management case studies studied. It must be possible for the subject to come up during any class, since the issues that fall under the rubric of “diversity” reside in every phase of the journalistic process.

Teach students to find story ideas and they must be taught to move beyond their familiar worlds, whatever those worlds might be, to find the stories that so often go untold. Teach them to interview, and they must learn enough about other cultures that they know when to take off their shoes, wear a scarf, shake hands (or not), expect eye contact or interpret the absence of eye contact correctly. Teach them to write strong stories or edit weak ones and they must learn that the true power of language is that it can transform its meaning depending upon who’s speaking, who’s listening and in what context the information falls.

Teach students to edit, coach, manage, influence or otherwise lead other people, and they must also be taught that talking across (and about) race, gender, class, geography, age, sexual orientation and other differences requires a deeper awareness of those differences than the average person possesses.

A professor can’t do any of that if he has “never thought about diversity when I teach my class,” as the sports literature professor told me.

Thinking about it is a big step, but it's only the first one. Then comes learning, then teaching. Then change. It may be something small like expanding a reading list, but it's a big deal for the classroom and beyond. Because the people being taught are the ones who will frame the master narrative of tomorrow's America.