How Do You Teach Diversity? ABC 2019 Detroit

Pamela Bourjaily, University of Iowa

Not "One and Done": Engaging in ongoing diversity discussion through semester blogging

This "assignment" is really a series of assignments throughout the first 9 weeks of the semester. Each Business Communication and Protocol instructor has a course WordPress site for students to explore communicating on a different digital platform. Over time the blog site has evolved from use as a course management tool to use as a team-building exercise. The latest blog iteration involves a series of posts leading students to explore diversity from the perspective of what makes them different and from the position that diversity is not something one "accommodates" but is an integral part of successful relationship building and problem solving within the workplace.

Students respond to 4 prompts throughout the semester:

1. Introducing themselves

2. Answering “How are you weird?”

3. Responding to the HBR article” Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity” <https://hbr.org/1996/09/making-differences-matter-a-new-paradigm-for-managing-diversity> Students reflect on what they have learned or on what surprised them from the article, which proposes using identity-group differences as levers for organizational growth and success rather than as differences that need to be assimilated or used for demographic advantage.

4. Outlining specific practices their team will take as a result of reading the HBR article and trying to incorporate the “learning and effectiveness” paradigm into their team. The article specifies 8 “pre-conditions” for making a workplace team stronger through its diversity:

1. Valuing variety of opinion and insight
2. Committing to the process of persevering in diversity work
3. Expecting high standards from everyone
4. Stimulating personal development
5. Encouraging openness
6. Making team members feel valued
7. Articulating a clear organizational mission
8. Creating a relatively egalitarian structure

Assuming a team of four, each team member takes two of the 8 (no repetition) pre-conditions. For each of the two preconditions, students state how (specifically) the pre-condition applies to their team and propose some specific task or operation their team should put into place to make sure the pre-condition can become a reality for their team.

The final blog post is due just as student teams begin the 6-week capstone communication project in the class, which requires intensive team commitment to design and execute multiple communication deliverables.

Students comment on classmates’ responses for prompts 1 & 2 and to team members’ responses for prompts 3 & 4. The blog posts take 9 weeks—so engagement with diversity is more ongoing throughout the semester rather than a “one and done” kind of assignment.

Students are responsible for content from the HBR article on the midterm, which helps to insure they read the material. The blog posts themselves, however, are more low-stakes in terms of semester grading: Posts 3 and 4 together represent 5% of the final grade; the first 2 posts are not assessed. Low-stakes assignments help to encourage students to take risks in what they share on the course blog. Connecting exploration of diversity to team functioning, which is then connected to a high-stakes capstone project (45% of final grade) provides motivation to those who are more focused on the final grade.

The blogging initiative was piloted in spring and summer of 2019 in individual sections of the required business communication course and is now required in all sections this fall. Students will have the opportunity to reflect on the diversity blogging experience in their team experience reports at the end of the semester. If you’re interested in learning more about how students perceived the diversity blogging assignment, please email me (pamela-bourjaily@uiowa.edu) in January.