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Sorting Ourselves Out: Celebrating Diversity in the Classroom

From Day One of the semester, I want participants in my classes to recognize and celebrate their diversity as well as their similarity. In order to "see" differences and similarities more clearly, I ask them to physically sort themselves out in terms of a number of demographic and psychological factors. The procedure is simple and several sorts can be made during a typical class session. For each sort, participants physically move into the subgroups identified. For example, I typically begin with a sort by gender so that men and women move to opposite sides of the room and I draw our attention to gender differences. Other demographic sorts include ethnicity, birth order, geographic referent ("Imagine the floor is a map of the world and go to the place where you were born or the place where you earned your high school diploma or college degree." "Imagine the floor is a map of the community and go to the place where you live or the place where you work." "Imagine the floor is a map of the campus and go to the place where you spend most of your time."). I can sort in terms of any variable of interest to the group and I tailor the sorts to the audience. For example, when I work with teachers, I ask them to sort themselves out based on the number of years of experience they have in the field. This creates a continuum of experience in the form of a living histogram—new teachers on one end of the distribution and those with the most years of service on the other. New members of the profession and elders can be easily acknowledged. If I am working with college students, I sort in terms of number of semesters on campus or academic major or level of prior experience with the subject matter of the particular course I am teaching. With any group I can sort in terms of musical talent (Who plays what instrument? Do we have the makings of a band in the group?), languages spoken, employment (part-time or full-time, on- or off-campus), physical fitness routines (Are there runners or swimmers or soccer players in the group who may want to work out together?) I can ask the group what sorts they want to see and do any sort that they suggest as long as there is no likelihood of personal embarrassment (e.g., no sorting on criminal record).

For sorts on psychological variables, I ask participants to arrange themselves along an imaginary continuum from "high" to "low." I can sort on variables such as creativity, assertiveness, patience (with others and self), sense of humor, math anxiety, computer literacy, leadership ability or experience, punctuality, degree of comfort with the subject matter of the course I am teaching, tendency to procrastinate in doing one's work, any or all of the multiple intelligences, etc. Again, any variable of interest is a potential sort as long as there is no likelihood of embarrassment.

After all of the sorts have been made, students can "free write" their reactions to the exercise ("What did I learn about us as we sorted ourselves out?" "What did I learn about myself?") and reactions can be shared in small groups or in the group as a whole. Sorting is easiest when an open area can be created in the classroom in which the various subgroupings can be formed. Otherwise, subgroups can form around the perimeter of the classroom; or, perhaps, the class can move to a more open area inside or outside the classroom building.

The sorting exercise gets everyone up and moving in and out of various groups. And when it is all over, everyone has a clearer picture of our differences and similarities.

Enjoy!
David