

This issue of Core focusses on issues of diversity and equity in the university curriculum. Deborah Barndt, a faculty associate at the Centre for the Support of Teaching and faculty member in Environmental Studies, highlights the process and outcomes of a three year project on curriculum diversity equity, including the guidelines, tools and strategies that have emerged from the project.

Voices of Diversity/Equity *Transforming University Curriculum*

Deborah Barndt, CST Faculty Associate 2002-2005

What compels us as teaching faculty to rethink our curriculum content and teaching/learning practices to better reflect diversity and promote equity?

For the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), the opportunity came as we were revisioning undergraduate curriculum in 2000-2002. It is rare that we take the time to step back and ask the bigger questions about what we teach, how, why and for whom. Curriculum review shakes up the normally ossified structures of our programs and courses, and allows us to reconsider our *raison d'être*. Part of this process, we decided, was to re-imagine who we are, students and teachers, and what we are about in terms of diversity and equity, and how we engage equity issues in our course content and practices.

In 2002-2003, FES launched a Curriculum Diversity/Equity Project with a series of six workshops. This York pilot project was supported by the Centre for the Support of Teaching, along with the Centre for Human Rights and Equity and the Equity Committee of the York University Faculty Association, as well as specific co-sponsors for each workshop.

The workshops provided fora for critical examination of curriculum around six key areas of equity: disabilities, sexual and gender diversity, Aboriginal ways of knowing, class and poverty, race and ethnicity, and gender. From October 2002 to March 2003, twenty-five to fifty students and faculty met monthly for three hours to hear panels focus on one equity area, to discuss our new areas of concentration in terms of these areas, and to propose new directions in FES policy and practice.

One of the things that drew me to FES was this kind of discussion. I've been hoping for this in more of my classes, but I've felt like there is a lot of very superficial touching on some of these issues, but not a lot of deeper analysis. It's something I really want to have more of.

Charles Levkoe
Graduate Program in
Environmental Studies

The stated objectives of the workshop series were to educate ourselves, to create a more inclusive community, to develop curriculum guidelines and to propose policy changes. One of the most important outcomes was that the workshops broke silences around equity issues that are often not discussed and created a space for ongoing debate and discussion.

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Upcoming event:
Active Learning Symposium:
Ways of Knowing
in Learning & Teaching
Wednesday, February 23, 2005

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*(Voices of Diversity/Equity from page 1)***An interlocking analysis of power**

The Curriculum Diversity/Equity Project represents one response to York's mission statement:

York University is part of Toronto: we are dynamic, metropolitan, and multicultural. York University is part of Canada: we encourage bilingual study, we value tolerance and diversity. York University is open to the world: we explore global concerns.

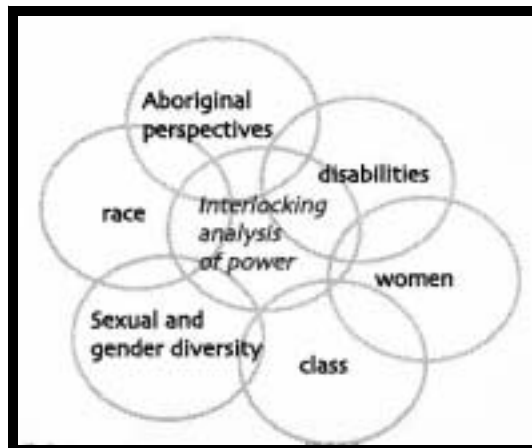
We add the word "equity" because "diversity" initiatives do not always address the power relations implicit in teaching and learning contexts, and because we believe equity-seeking groups should direct the kind of curriculum transformation we advocate.

In fact, both *diversity* and *equity* are loaded terms, and need to be deconstructed even as they are engaged. The Curriculum Diversity/Equity Project thus promotes the exploration of equity areas, but also challenges the categories themselves as socially constructed and limiting. In particular, we want to guard against a fixing of these categories, all of which are fluid and contested, as well as any treatment of them in isolation from one another. Even as we may focus on a particular equity area, we encourage an analysis which considers their interrelationships. An interlocking analysis of power, or intersectionality, promotes a more complex examination of the ways in which these aspects of identity constantly shift and mutually shape each other.

While we explicitly addressed six select areas of equity, there are many others which we could have taken and should take into account. Religion, for example, is central to personal identity and social conflict in these times; another equity area concerns the relationship between nations of the so-called "south" and "north." Finally, in the Faculty of Environmental Studies where this project originated, we challenge the way in which human/non-human relationships have been constructed and question human-centric views, proposing more biocentric perspectives.

Any group undertaking an equity initiative should name their own issues of power,

identifying which aspects and relationships most shape their experience of teaching and learning in their own context.

**From 'perfect stranger' to 'creating a new imaginary'**

One of the biggest challenges of diversity and equity work is acknowledging our own locations within positions of privilege and oppression, and recognizing that we are all implicated in relationships of power based on these different dimensions of equity. One panellist offered the metaphor of the "perfect stranger" in suggesting that many proclaim innocence or disconnection if they are not part of a marginalized group:

““ There's a way in which this position as perfect stranger allows a kind of innocence and a kind of not being responsible, because that's out there. And I am perfect stranger, therefore I don't need to worry about it or I can't do it; therefore, I don't have a responsibility to do it...”

But we're not perfect strangers to one another...because in fact we do have a relationship. If we want to contribute to a new and better relationship, we need to recognize ourselves in relationship to that history and in relationship to each other. ””

Susan Dion
Faculty of Education

We also attempted to integrate a critical analysis with a creative exploration of alternative ways of thinking and acting, or as one resource person described it, creating a new imaginary.

““ I don't see anything of my life ever being reflected anywhere. I deal with Eurocentrism as an everyday reality. I deal

with heteronormativity as an everyday reality, because my being lesbian, a dyke, a homosexual is not reflected anywhere either...

How does that get addressed? How do we construct a new imaginary and a new grammar that can address the (York University) mission statement? Because that's what we're asking everyone to do. We're asking everyone to imagine something different from heteronormativity and something different from Eurocentrism – and that requires not just reading differently or writing against the grain but actively imagining against the grain. ””

Sharmini Fernando, Graduate Program
in Environmental Studies

Our goal in transforming curriculum is to move from "perfect stranger" to a position where we are ready, with others, to work at "creating a new imaginary." We begin this process through dialogue, through opening ourselves up to new curriculum ideas and pedagogical practices.

““ What I'm trying to emphasize is dialogue. How will we talk with each other? And that's a big issue. It's not just here. This is like a microcosm of society: how will we talk to each other out there? It seems to me that the key thing is that everybody has to bring themselves, their selves, to the situation. If you just bring the book to the situation, it really constrains what happens. So, for me, the question is how can I create an environment, a space in which people will feel that they can really bring their self into the material that we're dealing with.””

Ron Sheese
Centre for the Support of Teaching

One of the outcomes of our collective examination of FES curriculum was a set of guidelines for use by teaching faculty in re-designing (individually and collectively) curriculum in general and in courses in particular to better respond to diversity and equity concerns (see page 3). Another outcome was the development of a video resource kit (see page 4). Further, an index of human resources at York that address issues of diversity and equity were developed (see insert), along with a bibliography of readings in the six equity areas (available on cst web site).

Curriculum Diversity/Equity Guidelines

I CURRICULUM AND COURSE CONTENT

How does the subject matter covered reflect the histories, experiences, and issues of groups marginalized by disabilities, sexual and gender diversity, Aboriginal identity, class and poverty, race and ethnicity, and gender status (women)?

In what ways are the complexities of these issues and their intersections engaged intellectually? How are controversies related to differences in context, history, power, and identity addressed?

II RESOURCES

Do the readings and audio-visuials include work by people from the above groups often absent in academic syllabi?

Are guest speakers or field visits included that can broaden the range of voices and interests represented?

III TEACHING/LEARNING PRACTICES

Are the learning activities varied to respond to different learning styles and ways of learning represented among a diverse student population?

How does the teaching/learning process draw upon students' experiences and link to the diverse communities represented, affirming different knowledges and practices?

IV ACCOMMODATIONS

Are options and special support offered in assignments and assessment processes to accommodate people with particular disabilities or other needs based on class and poverty, sexual and gender diversity, Aboriginal identity, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.?

V INFORMATION IN RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

Does the unit offer information to students (through recruitment and program materials, orientation classes, course syllabi) that alerts them to existing Senate policies on disabilities and equity, indicating campus resources available to students who might seek support around disabilities, sexual and gender diversity, Aboriginal status, women's issues, racism and poverty?

CHANGING OUR PRACTICES: ONE STEP AT A TIME

Rethinking our courses in terms of diversity and equity concerns can take a lot of energy. But there are small ways we can begin this process. Consider these different scenarios:

- 1) You have been teaching for a long time and don't have time to rethink the content:
 - a) Add new readings that reflect the greater diversity represented in the student population
 - b) Bring in a guest speaker who can bring a different perspective on the subject
 - c) Integrate a film that brings diverse voices into the classroom not normally heard or seen there
- 2) You have been teaching the course for a while, and would like to take some time to update and redesign it:
 - a) Critically review and challenge the topics included in the course by asking whose histories and interests are represented
 - b) Research materials in the (expanded) field, identifying work by authors that may have been marginalized
 - c) Diversify the kinds of teaching and learning activities included to respond to different ways of learning and different students' needs and perspectives
- 3) You are going to create a new course and want to consider diversity/equity issues as you design it:
 - a) Seek out people who might have experience or knowledge that comes from diverse histories, and develop a range of course topics that is broader than what you might have come up with by yourself
 - b) Follow suggestions in 2) a, b, and c above.
 - c) Put a statement in your syllabus noting the campus units that offer support in equity areas and indicating your openness to learn from students about these issues.

Voices of Diversity/Equity Video Resource Kit: *Transforming University Curriculum*

Voices of Diversity/Equity: Transforming University Curriculum is a training kit which grew out of the FES pilot project. A DVD with short video clips (one to eight minutes) and one longer piece (one hour) offers key moments of critical questioning, contradiction, and debate from the workshops. They can serve as catalysts for discussion in classrooms, in the professional development of teachers, in workshops with affirmative action officers or union equity committees, or in meetings with relevant committees and administrators concerned with practices and policies related to diversity and equity. A twenty-four page Users' Guide suggests questions and other activities to accompany the video clips and to stimulate their creative and collective use. A bibliography and York resources list are also included. The video clips are listed below with a sampling of the kinds of issues raised.

Clips on Class and Poverty

If we think of the affirmative action policy on campus, it is quite accepted for us to talk about racial inequality or gender inequality, but it's not accepted or acceptable to talk about class inequality.

Tania Das Gupta
Atkinson Social Science

A Question of Language (6.5 min)

How does academic language reflect class? For whom is it a barrier?

Academia & Alienation (2 min)

In what ways does university education alienate students from their families and peers?

Clips on Disabilities

Have we built an education system that speaks to the experiences of people with disabilities, makes use of the knowledge that circulates in universities – a knowledge that accounts for the diverse and unique standpoints of people with disabilities in our culture and society?

Michael Bach
Canadian Association for
Community Living

Accommodating Disabilities (4 min)

As a student or faculty member with a disability, how can you make your needs known? As a faculty member, how can you rethink the way you offer support to students with disabilities?

Viewpoint on Disabilities (3.5 min)

In what ways can we see the social construction of disabilities operating in the university?

For a copy of the DVD, accompanying users' guide, bibliography and resource list, contact the CST (1050 TEL, 416-736-5754, cst@yorku.ca)

Clips on Gender

Poverty and racialization is often conflated with the gender position of women of colour who are rendered largely invisible, not only within the academic project, but within society as a whole, within public policy, within government policy, within employment structures.

Punam Koshala, Graduate Program in
Environmental Studies

Privilege & Oppression (2.5 min)

How and why are we often unaware of both our privilege and our oppression?

Power of the Researcher (5 min)

What research ethics could guide more equitable university/community relations?

Parenting & Academia (2 min)

In what ways do academic schedules and expectations conflict with parenting responsibilities?

Clips on Sexual Diversity

Sexuality, sexual diversity and gender diversity are power relations that have an enormous impact not only on social life in general but also on academic inquiry and dynamics of academic institutions and classrooms...It is not just that people may feel excluded, but that the whole knowledge system in which disciplines work are organized along those foundational assumptions of natural heterosexuality and natural gender dimorphism.

Cate Sandilands
Environmental Studies

Exclusionary Assumptions (4 min)

How can we address diversity from within heteronormativity and Eurocentrism?

Queering International Development (2.5 min)

- How can a field such as International Development be challenged

in terms of the assumptions it makes about gender and sexuality?

Transgender Challenges (4 min)

How can teaching faculty become better oriented and prepared to support transgendered students?

Community Partnerships (2 min)

Who sets the agenda in community-university relations?

Clips on Race and Ethnicity

Racialization and ethnicity are the products of years of prejudice that happens within society but also within institutions and that is often intersected by issues like classism. As a result in North America, we tend to take white skin and European culture as the standard and the norm, leading to other cultures and other skin colour becoming ethnicized with mostly negative meanings attached to these others.

Ilan Kapoor
Environmental Studies

Rethinking Whiteness (7.5 min)

What classroom ethics can help students and faculty deal with issues of racism?

Racism: Intellectual or Moral Issue? (3.5 min)

- What are the particular challenges of addressing racism in an academic context?

Creating New Knowledge (1 min)

What is the role of the professor in a process which sees the classroom as creating new knowledge?

Aboriginal Ways of Knowing (60 min)

This tape presents the entire panel discussion on this subject, offering a contextualized introduction to key principles and practices of Aboriginal education.

Teachers Who Take Diversity/Equity Issues Seriously

The following statements are excerpted from the nomination files of TAs and faculty members who were nominated for York's University Wide Teaching Awards. They represent the thoughts of some of our most committed teachers, who can offer insight into the challenge of integrating diversity/equity concerns into curriculum development and classroom practices.

Integrating accommodations into course planning

Isabel Killoran, Faculty of Education

Inclusive practices are at the core of what I teach, and how I teach my students. My courses address a variety of interests, needs, learning styles, and work styles. On the first day of class, I encourage my students to let me know of any accommodation they may need during the course. I have now included this on the course outline. Over the years I have accommodated assignment topics to address students' work and interest areas; had oral reports rather than written, helped students gather materials, addressed proximity issues, gave flexible assignment schedules, pre-read assignments for students with learning disabilities, and addressed the needs of students experiencing emotional, physical and familial difficulties. I have brought inclusivity to all my courses, undergraduate and graduate. I extend this beyond the usually addressed issues of race, class, and gender and include ability, culture, and sexual orientation.

Challenging the white Western intellectual tradition

Deborah Davidson, TA in Sociology

As I understand it, teaching is not separate from learning. We are each the teacher and the learner. I understand teaching and learning as a dialectical process.

I have been inspired by many, not the least of whom are Howard Gardner, bell hooks, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, and my students, all of whom elaborate my head, heart and hands approach to teaching and learning. My teaching philosophy recognizes that the institution of education inscribes a white Western intellectual tradition. This tradition that privileges some is challenged in the work of bell hooks. For hooks, social location matters; that we are, for example, raced, classed, and gendered is consequential to our teaching and learning. Being mindful of one's privilege and power in the classroom is the first step to appreciating diversity and encouraging students to 'talk back' to me and to the system that perpetuates privilege and division. Also consistent with teaching and learning as a dialectic, for bell hooks teaching is a performative act that allows for passion, spontaneity and the specificities of each class.

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon problematizes the notion of 'critical thinking', offering instead the possibilities of 'constructive thinking.' Critical thinking, says Thayer-Bacon, is also rooted in and reinforces Western intellectual tradition as it assumes a value neutral distinction between the knower and the known. Rather, through constructive thinking, we also recognize and value vital qualities such as emotion, imagination, intuition, and experience in intellect. Additionally, Thayer-Bacon offers the advantages of a relational epistemology where it is through a grounding in experience and interaction that we, as social beings, develop a sense of self, of others, and of the world. Thus, she reinforces my philosophy that teaching and learning should be reflective, active and collaborative.

My philosophy, however, is barren without the challenge of practice. And my practice is nourished by my students who manifest many

intelligences, who occupy many social locations, and who highlight the responsibility, opportunity and the challenge of teaching to, and learning from diversity.

Challenging the canon through a diversity/equity lens: *Beyond teaching art history as "Masterpiece Theatre"*

Sarah Parsons, Faculty of Fine Arts, Visual Arts

Over the past three decades, postmodernism, feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism and other cultural discourses have dramatically impacted the epistemology and methodology of art. Cutting edge research has shifted the focus away from the teleological canon of masterpieces towards the ideological functions and social histories of art. As a graduate student and now a faculty member, my teaching developed in dialogue with those changes. I want students to leave the classroom with an enriched ability to read images critically and to express those interpretations verbally and in written form. They should also depart with a better understanding of the participation of images in histories of oppression and of resistance and agency, and how images can represent and invite different subject positions inflected by historical moment, gender, race, sexual difference, class, or nationality. These issues can only really be explored through dissonance and by challenging assumptions, hierarchies and long held beliefs, but the traditional forms of teaching in the discipline do not necessarily suit these goals.

Traditional surveys are predominantly organized around a line of Western male artists and elite, high culture objects. Lectures would often include as many slides as possible while the professor offered varying degrees of biography, description, analysis and evaluation of the images. As a graduate teaching assistant for traditional survey classes, I found politicized teaching to be an almost "natural" process. Picasso and Georges Braque were presented in lecture as men whose work almost single-handedly turned Western art on its ear through their daring use of "primitive" inspirations. In section, we would then consider what it means to designate some cultures and their art as "primitive" and whether such borrowing practices could ever be the basis of really innovative artistic development. I included the work of "marginal" groups to be examined alongside mainstream practices, but this was all done in relation to an unchanged canon. Mine was a reactive pedagogical practice and, as such, could do little more than give lip service to the fundamental critiques of feminism or post colonial theory with minimal disruption to "business as usual."

As course director, I have struggled with how to disrupt the expected or inherited narrative of the subject at hand in a way that still offers students the unique analytical tools of art history and maintains a sense of history. Canons are crucial to intellectual history but their existence should provoke questions, not reverence or acceptance. In most of my courses, the result of my struggle is a

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balance of a fairly cohesive historical overview and critical case studies. As much as possible, both my lectures and the small group discussions are grounded in concrete texts and images. I find that tethering abstract debates to something tangible gives every student an entry point into the discussion. First, I try to model various approaches to the critical articles, historical texts, artists' statements or visual objects we are studying. Deconstructions, comparisons and contrasts are followed by very specific group discussion activities that will enable students to develop their comprehension, critical thinking, risk taking and confidence in the course. In my experience of teaching visual culture, eliciting a response from students about images or films is rarely a problem.

To maximize the *quality* of student involvement, I try to teach students to challenge the material and my presentation of it in ways that are both thoughtful and respectful. My interest is not just in provoking but in shaping debate. By breaking them down into small groups to apply a "jigsaw" instructional strategy to a reading or to discuss the way a particular 1940s film about Tom Thomson constructs the myth around him, each student has a chance to bring his or her own voice to the discussion. By hearing back from groups as a class, I can use their insights to funnel discussion towards the larger intellectual debates of art history in the latter part of my lecture.

Those are the nuts and bolts of my pedagogical strategy but the most powerful overarching tools for my purposes are transparency and a desire to make students' own voices a fundamental part of every course. The process of destabilizing the canon can be uncomfortable but it can also be empowering. If what we find in art has much to do with the questions we ask of it, there is a great deal for scholars of every stage to contribute.

Why a white male TA would approach material from an anti-racist and feminist perspective

Stephen Bosanac, TA in Political Science

We can see that political economy's focus on production, consumption and class is vital, but the addition of anti-racist and feminist elements to the approach make it more dynamic, vital and pertinent in a contemporary classroom environment. Why would I approach material from an anti-racist and feminist perspective? Within the contemporary university environment, there is a growing preponderance of female undergraduate students, and a culturally diverse student body has become the norm. This is particularly true when considering many sociology programs. Currently, my student count is 125, with approximately 75% of those students being women and approximately 85% of them being visible minorities. Consequently, it is more important than ever to tailor the classroom experience to the educational needs of these previously neglected cohorts who are most directly affected by issues of gender and race in their daily lives. This is the impetus behind my choice to shape my course offerings in this fashion. One must work to recognize these demographic factors structurally, but to leave them out of individual interactions and considerations. This is not to negate them, but to ensure that I do my best to consider no student individually through the veiled ideologies of race and/or gender.

Teaching about political conflicts

Saeed Rahnema, Atkinson Social Sciences

Throughout more than two decades of teaching in different parts of the world and at different levels, I have never experienced a tougher course than "War and Peace in the Middle East" at York University. The reasons are obviously related to the sensitivity of the topic and the configuration of the students taking this course. The vast majority of the students have deep roots in the region, both Jewish and Muslim, and are also from different ethnic origins. All are extremely passionate, and understandably biased towards their own and others' backgrounds. The heightened tensions in the region are immediately felt in the classroom.

Throughout the course by addressing the controversial and deeply sensitive issues, I try to get the students to explore the sources of the conflicts. To do this, I need to be fair and considerate of the sensitivities, but at the same time be able to provide the objective information and knowledge through providing various viewpoints and perspectives on a specific topic. Many students come to the class believing that they know their side well, and are only interested in learning about the other. Soon, however, they learn that this might not necessarily be the case, and start learning new things about themselves.

Fairness begins with reading materials. Every year I have to spend a fair amount of time choosing the material for the course. Most writings on the Middle East are either biased or written from a particular perspective. Lectures follow the same policy. Inevitably I have my own views. Students are encouraged to argue with and challenge every viewpoint including my own, and they boldly do so. The lectures, while structured, are interactive and many students participate in discussions. Another aspect of fairness relates to giving equal chance to different groups to express themselves. Maintaining a critical balance is the most difficult part of teaching this course.

One thing that I make clear from the beginning is that I cannot be intimidated. Neither would I allow one student or a group to intimidate and silence others. All students feel they are free to say whatever they want, and to take any political position. There are few restrictions with zero tolerance; no anti-Semitic (which is also anti-Arab) and no sexist and racist remarks are tolerated. On days of hyper-tension, often resulting from a specific event either in the region or on the campus, students are asked not to respond to each other and only address me.

Two practices in this course are very appealing to students. One is that at the beginning of each class we spend a few minutes discussing major events of the week, which sometimes is accompanied by hot debates. The other is the group debate exercise at the end of the year. Each year, two groups of students (five students on each side) organize a debate on major issues facing Israel and Palestinians, such as land, water, refugee, economy, etc. At the end of the course, relations among students are usually improved, as both sides have learned more about each other and tensions are lower. Nevertheless, the debates are extremely hot and passionate. At times students invite their friends or parents to attend the debate.

Sampling Diverse Practices

The FES plan of study: A model of an empty core

Deborah Barndt and Mora Campbell,
Faculty of Environmental Studies

Since its inception in the 1960s, the Faculty of Environmental Studies has been known for its unique graduate program, now comprising both MES and PhD components. In its official promotional material, FES emphasizes that at the core of these programs “is the belief that there can be no single defined program of study for all students, that the pattern of learning experiences should meet individual needs and that learning is a lifelong endeavor for which the student assumes responsibility.”

In effect, this means that there is no core curriculum in the FES graduate programs. This individualized and self-directed model allows the student to define who they are, what they want to learn, and how they want to learn. The options are endless, both in terms of substantive areas of interest as well as pedagogical approaches to these areas.

The Plan of Study is the document through which students articulate their backgrounds, substantive interests, and methodological orientations. This plan is developed and revised over a student’s program in consultation with an academic advisor, thus reflecting the dynamic process of change that one goes through in an intensive interdisciplinary program. The whole notion of a core curriculum, or canon, is questioned as each plan is unique, defined by the students. They may choose to approach their studies mainly from a theoretical perspective, or mainly from a practice-based approach, or a combination of the two. In designing their program, students may choose to learn through any number of methods: intensive reading courses, field experiences – both local and international, student-organized courses, hands-on workshops, the use of art and media as tools of inquiry and modes of expression. Both disciplinary and epistemological boundaries are challenged.

So how does this model respond to issues of diversity and equity? On the one hand,

its openness provides the space for diverse students to name the issues that are important to them and to define the learning approaches that are most appropriate to them, their focus and goals. The Plan of Study begins with a personal narrative that allows students to situate their current interests in the context of their personal, cultural, and intellectual history. This is certainly a place where one may clearly identify the ideas, interests, and ways of knowing/learning that are central to one’s multi-faceted identity – in terms of race/ethnicity, class, gender, ability, sexuality, relationship to the non-human world, etc.

Some will question, however, the plan of study model itself, suggesting that it is not value-neutral (nor can any model be so), that it is, in fact, based on a very liberal, rationalist and linear way of thinking reflected in a proposed format that requires the development of specific learning objectives and strategies. The plan has been challenged by Aboriginal students, for example, who have proposed alternative models, such as medicine wheel teachings as a framework for articulating one’s interests. In most cases, such challenges are honoured and students can propose an alternative form of plan to fit their epistemological orientation.

Another critique is that the plan is based on a very individualist way of thinking, counter to some cultural practices that stress accountability to community, collaborative work, etc. There have been attempts to introduce issues of diversity and equity into the group orientation to the plan, to suggest that students take these into account in developing their personal plans. But some will say that diversity and equity questions do not apply to them, a classic response of denying our relationship to these issues. In these cases, then, the openness of the plan can mean that such questions are not addressed. How can this more individual analysis be challenged and expanded to include structural questions of inequities that limit marginalized individuals and groups? These are ongoing questions for the program, and for any faculty member or student interested in diverse

constructions of knowledge, power, and ways of knowing and learning.

Intergenerational interviews: Families as a source of knowledge

Deborah Barndt and Anders Sandberg,
Faculty of Environmental Studies

The Environmental Research and Action Workshop, or ENVS 1200, is a first year required undergraduate course in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. It offers new BES students the opportunity to work collaboratively in groups, to investigate issues of equity and sustainability, to develop basic research skills, to engage in diverse forms of action, and to reflect on the learning that comes through participatory and action research.

During the 2003-2004 academic year, the class of 150 included students from over fifty countries of origin, with a very small minority representing families living in Canada for more than three generations. This is increasingly the demographic of our classes, reflective of the GTA, and a source of pride for York University.

But how do we tap the richness of this diversity in the learning process? One of the most popular assignments in ENVS 1200 is intergenerational interviews. Once groups are formed to focus on particular issues, group members undertake this activity:

Interview your parents and grandparents (or people of their generations, to cover a span of 50 years) about their understanding of and involvement in the issue your group has chosen to research, and how they saw this issue (in terms of equity and sustainability) when they were your age.

Consider how differences in culture, gender, class, and age influence how people see this issue.

Select from your interviews a couple of key points or stories that will illustrate the shifts over three generations in your family (and the influences of the above differences), in terms of how they see the issue you are researching.

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Highlights are then shared orally in a tutorial session, with some students offering photographs or other props to illustrate what they had learned from older family members.

The intergenerational interviews have three stated objectives:

- To appreciate the histories of our own family as sources of knowledge
- To situate the issue we're researching in an historical context
- To get to know the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of our group members, and understand where we each are coming from

This assignment has many unanticipated side effects. Some students say this is the first time they have had conversations of this nature with their parents and grandparents, learning aspects of their history about which they were totally unaware. It counters the tendency for second generation immigrants to de-

value their parents' experiences. For some parents and grandparents, this activity connects them not only with their offspring but also with their studies. This activity has stimulated one parent, for example, to seek out materials related to their son's or daughter's research. There is a validation of the knowledge that is accrued through life experience and families are brought into a collaborative research process which deepens their understanding of their own experiences.

Even though the multicultural nature of our classes is often taken for granted, students rarely have the opportunity to learn so much about their fellow classmates. When the intergenerational interviews are shared, they feel much more connected with each other, and find surprising commonalities as well as rich differences. When taken collectively, there is a very rich source of comparative data that broadens the social and historical analysis of the issue being researched. One group, for example, that was focusing on the issue

of borders all had historical experiences of being uprooted from their homelands; while this was a common experience, the contexts were very different and provided material for a rich analysis of the different causes of dislocation.

Finally, the activity also provides us as teachers with information about our students that helps us to understand where they were coming from, what influences might account for their particular perspectives, skills, and struggles. One group, for example, that was investigating the corporatization of universities was made up of students who were all the first in their families to go to university. This limited the kind of information they could get from their parents, and also revealed some of their academic challenges. Another limitation of the project has been a tendency for students to idealize the past, stressing in particular the attachment to place and family of their grandparents but failing to note the repressive factors that were likely responsible for the migratory patterns that lead their grandparents to Canada. Similarly, students have tended to be critical of their own situation of intense work schedules, busy family lives, and fast food without exploring the seeming ease by which they adopt and accept such a lifestyle. One challenge of the seminar leaders has been to provide more balance to the idealization of the past.

Nonetheless, the intergenerational interviews offers both affective and cognitive learning, often building bonds within families as well as within the class, and validating diverse personal, family, and cultural experiences as sources of knowledge. By asking students to reflect on the generation, culture, gender and class aspects of their experiences, we move toward a more shared critical analysis of time and power as reflected in our own histories.

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