

Editorial
Learning Stuff We Don't Know

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With all due humility, it's hard for me to learn that I don't know something, especially something about disability. My husband says that's because I graduated from Berkeley. Needless to say, he didn't. But a recent experience organizing a panel of experts for my online introductory Disability and Diversity Studies course gave me a good look at my own ignorance.

It started out as a really great idea to put together a panel of people with different kinds of disabilities, from different cultural backgrounds, to talk to my class about multiculturalism. The students have read about multiculturalism. I've talked about multiculturalism. But I thought it would be good if they could hear it straight from the source. The article in this issue by Hulgin, O'Connor, Fitch, and Gutsell on Disability Studies Pedagogy points out the value of these sorts of experiences for students who are being asked to critically examine new ideas.

Also, I am of the opinion that "experts", many of whom do not actually have disabilities, often get paid far too much to offer their expert advice about disability, backed by lengthy citations and references, when a two minute conversation with a person with a disability would help people figure everything out. If this sounds strange coming from the Editor of an academic journal, so be it. I just wanted to recognize the guy who provides the two-minute conversation.

I began making enquiries of various colleagues and colleagues of colleagues, looking for that perfect mix of crippiness and culturalness that would truly impress upon my impressionable students the nuances, richness, and complexities of a multicultural society. In my case, I got a good dose of the complexities.

There was the diversity of communication needs of my panelists. Now being deaf-blind myself, I am no stranger to communication diversity and in fact consider myself to be quite the little "expert" when it comes to matters of communication. I had one panelist who was deaf-blind, but who has some vision and hearing, so I thought Real Time Captioning would be a great accommodation. Another panelist was Deaf. Hey, great, kill two birds with one stone. In fact, I figured we could all type back and forth, instead of talking, to give the students a sense of what it's like to experience a lecture without sound. So I was shocked when the Deaf panelist told me, "Sorry but my English is not that great and I would really prefer to use a sign language interpreter." And then another panelist said, "I would love to type everything, but I have limited use of my hands."

So I arranged for sign language interpretation for the Deaf panelist. And I arranged for a student to assist the other panelist with navigating the keyboard. Then the deaf-blind guy said he couldn't see the captions.

Luckily the deaf-blind guy had a friend who could assist him. And it turns out the captioning was needed after all because another one of the panelists spoke English as a Second Language. Unfortunately for me, Dr. Cultural Sensitivity, his name and his country of origin have a lot of

Y's and V's and Z's all next to each other, so I introduced him as something like “Yes-is-kee Ze-sis-kee from Ku-ku-staskee”. Then I introduced the deaf-blind guy as being “of the Native American People” and he said, “I'm not *of* any group of people. I just am. And by the way, I don't think of myself as being ‘deaf-blind’.”

In the end I felt really good about meeting the needs of all of my panelists. And they were all terrific speakers. And the class got a lot out of their presentations.

But inside—where lurks that little spark of pride for being the Disabled-Woman-Who-Preaches-Disabled-People-as-the-Experts—there is also a little flicker of shame. Although I tell every one of my students that the key to changing our views about disability and diversity is to admit that what we *think we know* may not be the truth, I thought I knew everything. And then I had to learn stuff I didn't know. And that was hard.