

“Education is the great engine of personal development.
It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor,
that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine,
that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.
It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given,
that separates one person from another.”

NELSON MANDELA

Diversity at the Crossroads: *Mapping Our Work in the Years Ahead*

Edgar F. Beckham (1933–2006)

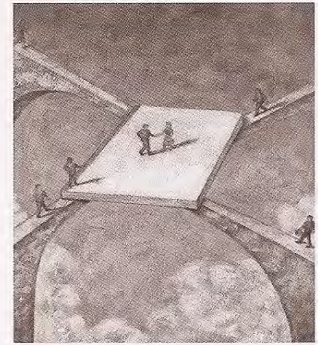
(First presented as a plenary on October 27, 2002, at AAC&U's conference, Diversity and Learning: Education for a World Lived in Common)

My first conscious encounter with diversity as a concept occurred in the mid-sixties, shortly after Wesleyan University, my alma mater and then current employer, made the fateful decision to enroll a substantial number of students of color, mainly African Americans. A number of black students (including me) had matriculated into Wesleyan in the past, but their enrollment had not resulted from an affirmative decision to make enrollment at Wesleyan sensitive to race. That fact changed in 1965 when Wesleyan, for the first time, enrolled a cohort of African American students whose admission had been influenced in an affirmative way by race. Now let me be clear. My admission, I am certain, was influenced by my race, but it was not an affirmative admission. It was to some extent negative and to some extent exemplary. That is, I was admitted despite my race, AND because I was expected to set an example. This is not speculation on my part. I can infer it from one of the questions I was asked in my interview, and I was told it explicitly by my high school principal, a Wesleyan alumnus who had hovered over my application from start to finish.

Things were different in 1965. Affirmative admission carried with it a set of expectations. These students were expected to constitute a distinctly black presence at Wesleyan, to assert a black identity, to establish a black perspective, to provide a point of contrast with the Wesleyan that had existed before they got there. Implicitly, they were expected to change Wesleyan, and they did so, profoundly and for the better.

It seemed at the time that these students had been admitted in response to a civil rights imperative according to which Wesleyan — along with all other historically white institutions of higher learning — had been complicit in denying educational opportunity to the sons and daughters of slavery. Social justice entailed the affirmative obligation that this be changed, deliberately, and systematically.

To its credit, Wesleyan attempted quite early in the process to move the discourse on its affirmative admission policy from the realm of social justice to that of education. That's when the term "diversity" was introduced. Black students were being admitted because they enriched Wesleyan's diversity, and diversity — as was well known — was good for education. In an address to a group of Wesleyan alumni, the dean of admissions put it succinctly: "Wesleyan needs black students," he said, "in order to educate white students."



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As you might imagine, his comment was not popular among black students. In fact, they were offended by it. What a perversion of the social justice impulse it was, they thought, to bring black students to Wesleyan for the benefit of privileged white students.

For my part, I was annoyed by the substitution of the term “diversity” for the goal of admitting black students. The term seemed to diffuse the urgency of the desired social justice outcome. It was a euphemism, I thought, designed to duck the real issue. But it worked as a tactic, and as black, Hispanic, and then Asian and Asian-American enrollment grew, and opposition to it fell mute, I resigned myself to “diversity” as an artful term of necessity.

Mediating Deficits of the Term “Diversity”

That is one of the enduring legacies that continue to burden the term “diversity,” at least in higher education circles. The legacy has three elements. First, there is the suspicion that diversity is used to avoid a tough confrontation with racism, our own if we’re white; yours if we’re not. Many people want that confrontation, some because they want to vent their righteous anger; some because they hope for a catharsis that will clear the soul as well as the air, and create a platform from which we can launch initiatives aimed at healing, reconciliation, and a mutuality that would adorn a world lived in common.

The second deficit that “diversity” still carries is the suspicion that the term serves as a prism that deflects our focus completely onto those newly admitted into our midst. Diversity viewed through this prism is not all of us; it’s those of us who are not like the real us. Our students of color give us our diversity; we do not. This is the more severe distortion, for it makes of diversity a term that divides, reifies separation, and builds barriers between people who belong together.

The third deficit has its source in the specific social history of the United States. We know that the American past created the present problem, which gives the problem a decidedly American cast. We are inclined to urge, therefore, that we address diversity as a domestic challenge: one that belongs in our American house, a challenge that ought to define American identity. And we have grown skeptical of those who would locate the diversity challenge in a world of global concerns. Global citizenship, we fear, is a vehicle for skipping blithely over the unfinished business of finding and realizing America.

Some observers have suggested that the term “diversity” is so burdened that it should be abandoned in favor of pluralism, multiculturalism, global citizenship, or perhaps a neologism not yet invented. I disagree, and I would argue—along with an old teacher of mine—that abandoning a good word like diversity impoverishes the language and diminishes our capacity to communicate. I advocate a different course. Let us take control of diversity and its definition; let us make it mean what we mean. And while we are at it, let us wipe out its deficits and replace them with constructions of meaning that serve as assets to understanding, not merely passive assets, but performing ones that build our capacity to make a world we can live in common.

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This is a relatively new task for me. When I left Wesleyan in 1990 and joined the Ford Foundation to guide its newly established Campus Diversity Initiative, I had virtually no conceptual understanding of diversity. I knew diversity only experientially through my experience at Wesleyan. And so, when I was first asked by a very professorial colleague at the foundation what I meant by diversity, I fumbled for an answer in such sophomoric fashion that my distress lasted for days. I determined, largely on the basis of that experience, that I should look for ways to engage diversity without first defining it. As I was writing a paper on the campus diversity initiative that was to be vetted by the foundation's board of trustees, I hit upon the avoidance formula I would use. I asserted in the paper that rather than define diversity prematurely, the foundation should listen attentively to the conversations that occur when diversity is invoked. It would then be in a position to say what diversity means to those who talk about it, which would most likely provide a more felicitous basis for stating what diversity should mean to the foundation.

The formula worked, perhaps because it made sense in at least two respects. First, it called upon the foundation to draw its understandings of diversity from the field rather than impose its preformed notions on the field. Second, it gave the foundation an opportunity to examine the experience of institutions that had been grappling with diversity issues for years.

Tensions Between Educational and Social Justice Aims

As the foundation followed this suggested course of listening, what became apparent was that the conversations about diversity were themselves thematically diverse. Diversity was a matter of demographics for one group, of social justice for another, of American democracy for a third, and of education for a fourth. Each of these themes could be divided into subthemes. The themes and sub-themes could be combined in a variety of configurations. For example, there were often rich discussions of how to manage diversity in an educational environment that was undergoing rapid demographic change.

While the combining power of these themes often led to discussions that were blended productively, the differences among them often led to tension and conflict. Take education and social justice, for example. They look and sound rather compatible, until, that is, one identifies the intended beneficiaries. Some advocates of social justice argue that efforts in behalf of diversity should be targeted to benefit those who have been oppressed, deprived, and disadvantaged by the discriminatory practices of the past. The historically privileged may indeed benefit, but mainly by acknowledging their guilty responsibility for the original injustice. The notion that diversity education should benefit every learner is offensive to some who think of social justice as a correction of past wrongs. That was a primary source of the anger of black students at Wesleyan over the suggestion that they were there to educate white students. That is, they were offended by the suggestion that they were there to do what they were indeed doing.

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This tension between the educational and social justice aims of action in support of diversity continues to this day, and in my view, it is one of the most serious impediments to progress on diversity. The tension is most pernicious when it leads an advocate of one aspiration to discount the value of the other. Take, for example, the observation, made to me just a few days ago, that instruction on diversity should be aimed at the disadvantaged, not the privileged. Creating that kind of a division is perverse not merely because it transposes advantage and disadvantage in an almost vengeful way, but rather more importantly because it construes education as a zero-sum enterprise incapable of contributing to the growth and development of diverse students in differentiated ways.

Diversity as Difference *and* Inclusive Context

Perhaps this is as good a time as any to pause and make a couple of observations about what we ought to mean by diversity — that is, the meanings we as diversity practitioners in higher education should advocate. First and foremost, we should insist that while diversity denotes difference, it connotes inclusive context, and the context is potentially unifying. Ironically, the dictionary doesn't help us much with this analysis.

Usage helps us more. If I suggest that Americans are different, I may mean that they differ from Indians or South Africans. But if I say that Americans are diverse, it is clear that I mean two things: they differ from each other, and they are all Americans. I think we need to work harder to emphasize these two dimensions of diversity simultaneously: to insist on both the denotation and connotation of the term, to reject the notion that it focuses simply on difference.

The educational implications of this observation are quite far-reaching. If we neglect diversity as inclusive context, we are very likely to neglect the educational needs of some of our students. We may justify our neglect by invoking the need to redress past wrongs, to focus on the needs of the historically oppressed, but that, in my judgment, simply introduces a new form of oppression. Exchanging one target for another is not a proper aim of diversity education.

But even more importantly, or perhaps more ominously, the neglect of context can blind us to the productive complexity of the teaching-learning process. Let's suppose we are teaching African American history and are seeking thereby to enrich the self-understanding of our African American students. That is indeed a worthy goal, but it is not the only goal, even if all our students are African American. Our students, regardless of the racial/ethnic mix, will position themselves differently in relation to the subject matter. Their positionality will affect what and how they learn, and what they do with that learning subsequently. If we neglect positionality, ignore where people "are at" and where they "are coming from," we drastically diminish the potential power of education.

When I was seventeen, some high school buddies took me to the Jewish Community Center, where I joined a class in which my friends were being instructed in the enactment of a ritual Passover meal. I listened, I watched, and I learned. But my learning was very

different from theirs, because, as a non-Jew, my perspective and my prospects were different. I was viewing the ritual as a respectful Christian, having little need to know what they were learning and no need to do what they were being trained for. Years later, it occurred to me that while they had received Jewish training, I may have been getting a Jewish education, that is, learning to remember the past in behalf of the future. Just think for a moment what kind of education it might have been had the instructor rejected me, signaled through word, gesture, or attitude, that his instruction was exclusive, meant for the Jewish guys, but not for me.

Inclusive education is good because it's just, but also because it teaches more and teaches it better. Exclusive education, on the other hand, is abusive and corrupt. When diversity education pays adequate attention to both difference and unifying context, difference and commonality reinforce each other.

About four years ago, the Ford Foundation sponsored the second in a series of three seminars on diversity in higher education that involved representatives from India, South Africa, and the United States — at that time the largest, the youngest, and the oldest democracies in the world. All were grappling with the ominous challenge of diversity. The seminar was held in South Africa, and at one of its most memorable sessions we heard an address by Albie Sachs, a justice of South Africa's highest court. Justice Sachs talked about his life, about growing up in a family of radical social activists, a Jewish family that taught him early in life that he was different and the same. He described his work in opposition to apartheid, and the assassination-attempt bombing that crippled his body and strengthened his resolve to help build a new South Africa in which everyone could be different and the same. He returned again and again to that phrase until it was imprinted on the minds of his listeners that we are all different and the same.

Justice Sachs' pronouncement that we are different and the same has deepened my conviction concerning the value of diversity and the meaning we should attach to it.

In our diversity, we are different and the same. In South Africa, apartheid arranged society so that difference was in an unequal war with sameness — and difference won. And its victory was so lopsided that even the basic understanding of diversity as a concept suffered a grievous defeat. The notion of a unifying South African context was submerged. The triumphant understanding glorified what it called cultural difference by imposing a rigid hierarchy of access to rights and resources. To this day some South Africans are suspicious of the term diversity because of the perverse way in which it was used to support oppressive separation.

In other words, the pursuit of social justice does not, by itself, protect us from this kind of distortion of the meaning of diversity. On the contrary, if we view social justice exclusively as redress of past wrongs and not as an inclusive condition in which we all seek to live a world in common, we run the risk of defeating ourselves and creating new injustice. We must remember two things — that diversity is inclusive of difference, and that inclusive education pursues justice.

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Tensions Between Domestic and Global Diversity

I mentioned earlier that I considered this tension between the educational and social justice aims of diversity to be another serious impediments to progress. The other is the tension between what I will call domestic and global diversity. Now part of this tension is ordinary and probably permanent. It's the simple and straightforward competition for resources. It's important, it needs to be dealt with, but it will most likely not be overcome. What we need to do is acknowledge the competition and manage it productively.

But the competition for resources is not the issue I wish to address. I am much more concerned about our failure to appreciate the complementarities of domestic and global concerns, and about our tendency again to discount the value of one in our effort to promote the other.

As I have suggested, some advocates of attention to the American context fear that global considerations will be at best a distraction, most likely a drain, and at worst a vehicle for avoidance of urgent American concerns. On the other side, advocates of global engagement suspect that the focus on American concerns is yet another example of American incapacity to see beyond its navel. The argument is often made that Americans think their way is the only way, and that their efforts to craft approaches to American diversity really seek to manufacture yet another American export. This tendency was evident in the tri-national discussions at the three seminars I mentioned earlier. Throughout the meetings there was an undercurrent of suspicion that what the Americans were really after was hegemony of their vocabulary, their formulation of the problem, their approach to solutions.

The Americans tried to defend themselves, but we often sounded like white people saying they are not really racists. In other words, we were defending ourselves personally against a structural accusation. Now I won't go so far as to suggest that personal racism is irrelevant, but I will say that I would be prepared to tolerate lots of it if I could rid our American institutions and structures of the racism embedded in them. And I am also prepared to acknowledge that whether or not I personally want my American values and understandings to prevail throughout the world is trivial in comparison to the overwhelming influence of the United States in the world, and its structural tendency to impose its values, tastes, products, and predilections unthinkingly and insensitively on a world without the power to oppose them.

But there is confusion here, and, I think, an intellectual error. An international business consultant once asked me to explain the difference between a multinational corporation and a global one. Knowing that I would politely ask him for the answer, he paused only briefly and provided it. A multinational, he explained, is viewed as multinational only in the country of its origin; everywhere else it is viewed as national. A global corporation, on the other hand, has learned that it must understand the character of its original national culture in order to enter into respectful and productive relationships with global partners.

Now isn't that one of the most important lessons we've learned from our work on diversity — that it is not merely a matter of getting to know the other, but rather most likely begins with knowing ourselves? What has been the most insistent American question since September 11, 2001? What does it mean to be an American? I would argue that that is the first iteration of an ultimately global question, and that if we insist on polarization between the domestic and global dimensions of diversity, we will miss the developmental process that the international business consultant was referring to. We will miss the need to know ourselves, indeed, to proceed from self in the direction of wider worlds in which we can be different and the same, worlds we can live in common with others.

I know this will sound pretentious, but I think it was in collaboration with my mother that I improved upon Descartes' famous dictum: I think, therefore I am. I know he was wrong, because I was, long before I ever thought I was. But here's the right answer: my mother thinks, therefore I am. I would ask you to pay close attention to my choice of words. I am not suggesting that I owe my existence to my mother's being, or to her nurturance, but rather to her thought, to her deliberate — or as we like to say in educational circles — intentional structuring of worlds that I could enter safely and learn to be different and the same, or to put it another way, to enter into respectful and productive partnerships across lines of difference.

One of my favorite stories about my mother has to do with the world of black heroes she created for me. It was inhabited by Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune. There were some men, too, like Crispus Attucks, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Frederick Douglass, who supplied my middle name. My mother, whose favorite course in high school had been elocution, communicated to me who was in this world of heroes not by the content of her speech, but by its rhetorical register: the pitch of her voice was slightly raised, the vowel sounds were longer, the intonation of sentences tilted upward, she seemed to sing her words. One day — I must have been five or six years old — she shifted into the special register and began to talk about a familiar name. I was confused, but the power of her patterns of speech was so overwhelming that I asked her without hesitation if President Roosevelt's wife was a Negro. She chuckled good-naturedly and said, "No, she's not." My mind spun, and reached the congenial conclusion that the communication system was still intact, indeed, the world of heroes was intact and needed only a slight adjustment to admit a white woman like Eleanor Roosevelt. By the way, neither her husband made it, nor did any other white man I can remember.

My mother transported me into other worlds too. For instance, there were the frequent field trips to other Congregational churches in the Greater Hartford area. Since ours was the only black Congregational church in that part of Connecticut, our trips took us to white churches that seemed strange and discomfiting at first, but which I learned to negotiate by following her admonition that we not all sit together. I think hers was a calculated strategy, an orchestration of ventures into safe spaces that would allow me to explore and discover myself, to be different and the same.

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We need to explore more worlds. We need to discover our own humanity in distant places, learn to be different and the same. We need to engage global concerns from the vantage of ourselves and learn to live a world in common. To do so, we need to understand more deeply and richly who we are, in all our multiple dimensions, which include in a most consequential way, our national identity — for many of us, as Americans.

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Identity, Social History, and the Teaching of Diversity

Let me dwell on the word “consequential” for a moment. You may recall that in the Hopwood case in which the University of Texas’ use of race as a criterion for admission to its law school was successfully challenged, at least one judge commented that race and gender should be no more relevant than height or weight. I thought the comment made sense if one considered height, weight, race, and gender as incidental biological characteristics without correlation with educational qualifications. But the picture changes when one asks about social consequences that have unfolded through history.

All four of these characteristics have been consequential socially, but certainly race and gender have had the most far-reaching, compelling, destructive, and costly consequences in American history.

I think there are two educational points that need to be made here. The first is that the consequences of diversity have history — history that needs to be taught; and second, that the more powerful the consequences have been, the more powerful their histories can be as educational resources.

That brings me to my final point. The teaching of diversity is the most effective resource we have for overcoming the deficits of diversity and realizing its power. The teaching of diversity can model the very attitudes, skills, and capacities we want to convey to our students. Through the teaching of diversity, they can learn to value diversity as difference in a unifying context, learn to be productively different and the same, move confidently and respectfully among the domains of their experience, and ultimately live a world in common with others.

We have already discovered and created strategies and methodologies for pursuing diversity education in the classroom. They include, among others, the use of personal narrative to encourage students to invest themselves in their own learning, the establishment of dialogue groups that serve as safe venues for exploration and encounter, and the invocation of spiritual values to encourage students to see beyond the limits of the assumptions they receive from their home traditions. We need to redouble our efforts to make these strategies and methodologies more visible and more useful. And we can do so by increasing our emphasis on diversity as an educational resource.

The primary question put to institutions regarding diversity still remains, “How much diversity do you have?” A secondary question is, “How well are your ‘diversity’ students achieving and how comfortable do they feel in your institution?” I want us to modify the second question and create a third. We must, of course, get rid of the notion that our diversity students are a subset of our students and replace it with the

conviction that our diversity students are all our students. Then we must add the third question, "What are you doing educationally with the diversity you've got? How are you using it intentionally as an educational resource? And how are these uses benefiting all your students?"

I would like to conclude my remarks, characteristically, in the form of a story. In May of 1999, I was visiting in Germany at the home of close friends. One day, I had a conversation with their daughter Tina, who was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart. During the course of our conversation, which had focused in part on Tina's struggle to keep her German identity intact in the face of glib condemnations by other Europeans who assumed she must be a Nazi, I asked her if she felt responsible for the Holocaust. She said, "Yes." I asked, "Why?" "On behalf of my parents and grandparents," she answered. That's when I took issue with her, suggesting that I agreed with her acknowledgement of responsibility, but disagreed with her reason, not only because I knew that neither of her parents were born when Hitler came to power, nor because I was personally familiar with the sentiments of her grandparents, but rather because I firmly reject the notion of intergenerational transfer of guilt. Her responsibility, I suggested, was to connect her German identity to German social history and to craft honest history at the crossroads where her identity and social history intersect. In other words, she was not the "perp," she was the historian.

...I would like to ask you to pursue [this line of inquiry], to encourage students in whatever venues you and they share, to think about their identities and simultaneously about the social histories with which their identities intersect. Their identities are of course multiple, and will include race, ethnicity, and gender, and also class, religion, and national identity. I once asked a group of Indian students to explore this in a workshop, and they faltered until several high-caste professors admonished them to consider the intersection of their caste-identities with the social history of India. Then they got it.

I wish I were teaching again and could try this for myself. I think it could be developed into a powerful pedagogy that answers the question, "What are you doing educationally with diversity?" and would also realize some of the power of diversity as an educational resource.

Like everyone else associated with AAC&U, I consider myself an advocate of liberal education and, for me, the function of liberal education is to liberate. To liberate us all from both oppression and privilege, from unexamined assumptions, from passivity in the living of our lives, from ignorance of ourselves and others; to free us for the pursuit of a world lived in common. Our diversity is our pathway to liberation.

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