

Diversity and Climate Committee: Year End Report, 2011-12¹

Suzanne Withers, Magie Ramirez, Lynda Turet, Tish Lopez and Vicky Lawson

Published September 12, 2012

Introduction

The Geography Department at the University of Washington is committed to fostering an inclusive and reflexive community. The Diversity and Climate Committee consists of two faculty members and three graduate students committed to facilitating the following goals within the UW Geography Department:

- To foster a reflexive practice of human geography by actively working against unintentional and intentional exclusionary practices related to race, gender, disability and other differences in our discipline
- To make visible unintentional and intentional exclusionary practices and to catalyze strategies for a more inclusive and transformative discipline

During the 2011-2012 school year, the committee has organized and facilitated three events for faculty and graduate students around departmental climate and diversity.

Background and approach

Geography as a discipline is slowly becoming more diverse on the national level, but there is still much work to do (Solis et.al. 2012). There have been a series of initiatives and projects coordinated by the AAG to advance this work (Diversity Task Force; AAG Diversity Committee; EDGE Project; Aligned Project). Much of this work has focused on bringing under-represented students and faculty into departments and so increasing the critical mass of under-represented groups overall.

Our committee in UW Geography has taken a somewhat different approach (in addition to outreach and recruitment efforts). The core focus of our work is on building an ever-more inclusive department. In short, we decided that rather than ask “why aren’t under-represented people applying to our department?” we would begin by asking “how might we make our department yet more attractive to all people?” Our hope is that we can think together about what inclusivity and exclusivity looks like for each of us. Given the kinds of work we as a department are committed to doing (on questions of social justice, community partnership, engaged and innovative approaches to teaching, and so on), we are an ideal group to think this through for ourselves and perhaps for geography more broadly.

Specifically, the goal of our committee is to create spaces where we can foster a reflexive practice of human geography which **values how we do our work as much as what we work on**. This can of course mean many things and department members are encouraged to share their own perspectives. Our work has led us to think differently about ‘diversity’. We understand clearly that diversity and climate encompass **a range of dimensions of difference** (gender, class, race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and so on). And we understand that difference is intersectional rather than experienced singularly. For us, thinking about diversity

Diversity and Climate Committee: Year End Report, 2011-12¹

includes race, gender, the relative valuation of different subdisciplines within geography, reflecting on our ethical challenges as educators, and much more.

2011-2012 Events

Our departmental work focused this year on **moving beyond “categorical diversity,”** (all too common in universities) which frames success by numbers of people enrolled or hired within pre-given, essentialized categories (race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and so on). Our focus has been on engaging the transformative potential of difference. This involves learning across difference in order to question what is often taken for granted (as normative) and its political content.

We see this work as having immediate benefit for our department as a community, but we also see this work as being of value in our professional development going forwards. So that as practitioners of our work both within and beyond this department (wherever students will land), we will benefit from reflecting on i) how difference and privilege operate and ii) each others’ wisdom about how to deal with challenging or difficult moments.

So, our events this year focus on everyday relationships and practices – with each other and with our students. In the everyday performances of our identities and our professional selves there are many moments for learning from each other and that learning might facilitate our work and contribute to the cohesion of our community. Building reflexivity into our practice as researchers and educators also means appreciating our own positionalities and embodied experiences. Thus, it was important to expand beyond our roles as academics and theorists and engage with one another on a personal level.

Fall 2011 Event: ‘Whiteness and Race Privilege’

Our first event focused on **whiteness and race privilege** as our point of entry into thinking about how difference shapes our department, who is here and who might come here in the future. We chose to focus on whiteness in order to challenge the notion that diversity and race meant only people of color, and to make visible how whiteness shows up in our lives and discipline. We acquired the support of Theresa Ronquillo from the Center for Teaching and Learning who supported the development of our agenda and helped to facilitate the event.

Our retreat included faculty and graduate students and was focused on stimulating reflection about race and privilege. Our activities involved personal written reflections, small group discussions and a large group discussion to close. Department members were asked to reflect on what this work brings to our practice as critical human geographers and in departmental life.

After the event, graduate students organized a debrief lunch to discuss the event and what we can learn for our future work.

Diversity and Climate Committee: Year End Report, 2011-12¹

Outcomes:

- Introduced the idea that working on diversity is about working on our existing community as much as it is about outreach to new people
- Introduced the idea that working on diversity includes a consideration of whiteness
- Began building trust between graduate students and faculty in a process of dialogue
- Started to center reflexivity and community cohesion as important to human geography's broader goals
- Developed a webpage with readings and other resources on race and difference see: <http://depts.washington.edu/geog/diversity-and-climate/>

Winter 2012 Event: 'Building Ethical Pedagogies'

Building upon suggestions from the first event to practice reflexivity and inclusion in our practice as educators, this event focused on ethical dilemmas around difference in our teaching. This event was a case-based workshop including small and large group discussions. As we did with the first event, we sought the feedback and support of Sarah Kavanaugh, a PhD candidate in the School of Education, whose specialty is pedagogies around difference. Our goals included: engaging in reflection and learning about how we engage with identity and power in the classroom; sharing best practices for how to engage with identity and power in the classroom responsibly; building trust as a learning community of educators.

As in the fall, the graduate students held a debrief luncheon to learn from our efforts. There was also extensive email and face to face conversation about what transpired.

Outcomes:

- Learned about deep differences around what the work is/should be
- Learned that some department members didn't feel that their perspectives were included in our committee's work
- Learned that for some members of our community their understanding of race and power remains mostly intellectual, a finding which reinforced the need for the efforts of this committee
- Learned that joint discussions of teaching are extremely valuable for many of us
- Continued to build a practice of reflexivity and community building across the graduate student and faculty communities
- Generated a list of best practices for difficult classroom moments (Appendix A)

Spring 2012 Event: Looking Back, Looking Forwards

This last event built on the previous two events. We designed the spring gathering to arrive at a better understanding about what makes us invested in this work and to get feedback about the committee's work for the year to come. More specifically, the spring event focuses on seeing connections between our theory and embedded practice in our daily professional lives. We learned from our past events that we need to start with a broader conversation about

Diversity and Climate Committee: Year End Report, 2011-12¹

inclusion and exclusion in order to allow people entering the conversation from different life experiences to connect to and contribute to a greater understanding about inclusion and exclusion. This event was designed in response to what we're hearing from department members about needing to build a stronger climate and shared language and practice around these issues.

The event began with an exercise to build a 'community contract' that built a shared agreement on how we would all engage with each other throughout the 3 hour event. We then conducted a writing exercise, focused on moments when each of us felt excluded and included, followed by small group and large group discussions. We then moved on to a discussion of the work of the committee, how it came into being, its focus this year and then a discussion of what is most valuable to the department in the coming year. We learned from the previous two meetings that intentional use of the physical space was important, as was frequent use of breaks and food to encourage a more relaxed and social atmosphere that engendered trust between participants.

Outcomes:

- People valued greatly the time together, both in the formal and informal activities of our sessions. Everyone felt that this was a very valuable community building effort.
- People expressed a desire to spend more time focused on teaching and pedagogy.
- This year focused on faculty and graduate students and many expressed a desire to include undergraduates in our work and events.
- Some wish to work on disability access to Smith Hall.
- Some interest in a pedagogy of the oppressed workshop.
- Work on exclusions experienced by international students (we focused on Chinese students specifically)

Recommendations for the Department

- Continue community-building events where faculty and students mingle and work on common issues (pedagogy, diversity, inclusion).
- Offer more workshops including both faculty and students around teaching and pedagogy and incorporate them more formally into faculty and graduate student orientations and trainings
- Focus on learning from each other about inclusivity and what makes members of our community feel excluded. In the process, demonstrate how to engage with each other reflexively.
- Co-host a cultural event on race, history and difference – possible for academic year 2012-13 with the Directors of the African-American Museum in Seattle.
- Ensure that our graduate admissions process includes a diverse slate of students every year (using our own resources in addition to GOMAP)
- Reinstate the teaching seminar offered in the fall quarter with faculty involvement

Diversity and Climate Committee: Year End Report, 2011-12¹

Appendix A: Best Practices Building Ethical Pedagogies

These best practices can be helpful strategies for educators and facilitators when taking on “ethical dilemmas” in the classroom. We define an “ethical dilemma” as a situation where we are faced with having to negotiate between different viewpoints and moral positions. They often touch on the very belief systems that define our lives, from our political stance, to our identities, to our beliefs of right and wrong. There is often no one correct way of engaging these dilemmas as they come up, but if done well they can be key vehicles for deep and critical learning.

These best practices are distilled from a discussion of graduate students and faculty at the *Building Ethical Pedagogies* workshop on April 6, 2012 in the UW Geography Department.

Best Practices:

- Take on ethical dilemmas deliberately through the content of the curriculum as an opportunity for critical reflection and engagement
- Set up a safe learning environment by collectively setting a “covenant of agreements” (principles and ground rules for discussion). The class can read an article together to prepare for that conversation, such as *The Seminar* by Michael Khan.
- Prepare students by anticipating that ethical dilemmas will inevitably come up, but it’s how we engage with them that matters most.
- Have a list of “back-pocket” questions beforehand to help students question their assumptions (ex. what would you need to know to substantiate that claim?)
- Deliberately make space for different perspectives through the structure of the conversation
- Make the moment last longer than that moment by acknowledging it and making explicit that the you will continue the conversation at a later point, when you’ve had time to think about it.
- Make an effort to use inclusive language (ex. using “we” when discussing groups often “othered” or “she” or “they” when often assumed as male)