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BEYOND PROGRAMMING: CULTURE CHANGE IN THE CLASSROOM

By Kami Day

By creating The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI), JCCC has embraced a vision of an institution that welcomes and includes all members of the JCCC community. In the words of Myles Horton, we have our “eyes ‘on the ought to be.’”¹ Horton founded and directed the Highlander Folk School, which opened in Tennessee in 1931 as a labor education center and later became the educational center of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Kirk Branch, author of *Eyes on the Ought to Be*, “to work toward something that seems impossible to realize is not a mark of futile activity, but a sign that you might have chosen the right goal ... Horton invokes a vision of a world that is continually shaped and reshaped by us, a world that will never be right, that will never be good enough, that will always need more.”² JCCC’s vision of an inclusive and welcoming institution will, in spite of its worthiness and importance, challenge us continually. There will always be new faculty, new students, new staff, new issues. Our institution will “never be good enough, ... will always need more.” We welcome the challenge, but we must think carefully and deeply about how we will realize our goal of culture change.

For one thing, we must create opportunities for traditionally silenced or muted voices of individuals and groups to be heard. To this end, the ODEI is developing an impressive lineup of programming for 2008-2009 including speakers, workshops, panels, book discussions, and films. A number of faculty and staff are involved in the planning, and it is generating a great deal of excitement. This programming is necessary for increasing visibility of and awareness about JCCC’s diverse population, but programming alone is not enough to nurture a culture that welcomes and values all members of our student body, faculty, and staff. So, what must we do at JCCC, beyond excellent programming, to transform our culture – to change behaviors, and even hearts and minds? How do we meet the challenge of shaping and reshaping our culture?

When I posted this question on the diversity listserv, I received several thoughtful responses. Sally Gordon expressed a desire that people would be more aware of the language they use, and Maureen Fitzpatrick suggested a series of articles to raise awareness about nonverbal communication. These

messages convey a hope that behavior will change, but how do people come to realize their behavior must change? Two other responses to my query proposed that part of the answer lies in human interaction. Kevin Mimms feels we can do more to mentor students from marginalized populations because students from such groups may lack the schema for college that would lead them to seek out help. Sean Daley wrote that he tries to get his “students and community members to interact more ... one of the biggest obstacles around here is getting people past their preconceived notions and ideas about people.” Daley makes space for such interaction by encouraging (and requiring) his students to work together, and such collaboration is an example of embracing a pedagogy that gives students the opportunity to interact with others whose cultures, races, ethnicities, classes, abilities, religions, genders, sexual orientations, and life experiences are different from their own. Like Daley, I believe creating opportunities for interaction is key to changing our culture in a substantive way.

Along with several other faculty and staff members, I recently attended the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, and over and over again I heard that we educators must infuse our curricula and pedagogy with materials and activities that make our students more culturally competent. Listening to speakers and reading the work of authors from diverse cultures make our students more culturally aware, but we must also create spaces in which they (and we) experience diversity. In sessions about curricular transformation, facilitators emphasized that changing the curriculum is a waste of time if we do not change our pedagogy. JCCC’s Educational Affairs Committee labored long and hard to develop criteria for courses that can fill JCCC’s new diversity requirement. These courses must, among other things, “encourage students to experience a perspective that is different from their own.” Examples of ways to experience different perspectives include providing “students with an insider’s view of diversity,” and “enhancing student’s ability to consider the perspective, history, experience, and worldview of others.” If we believe that knowledge – disciplinary and personal – is constructed, then these goals are best accomplished by asking students to work together. However, the most common scenario involves students sitting in rows,

facing the front of the class and seldom speaking to each other. My students work collaboratively almost every class period of every semester. One recent group was made up of two Sudanese students, a Hispanic student, and two white students, one of whom was identified as having a hearing impairment. Their writing engendered conversations about U. S. culture as compared to Sudanese culture, about poverty and privilege, about living with disabilities, etc. One semester, I overheard a nontraditional Iranian student explaining to a young white American student that all people in Iran are not poor. In another group that semester, an Iraq war veteran provided an important perspective for his group, most of whom opposed the war but did not know much about it. In several of my classes, queer students have come out in their writing and therefore to their groups. If the JCCC culture is to change, faculty must lead the way, with curricular and pedagogical transformation, in creating opportunities for these kinds of interactions. For that to happen, every faculty member in every discipline must have diversity, or

cultural competence, in mind when they plan every course they teach, even if that course does not officially meet the criteria for the diversity requirement. How that can be accomplished is beyond the scope of this article, but it will be one of the ODEI's primary foci.

One faculty member responded to my question about reshaping JCCC's culture by emphasizing that such change requires courage, and it is true that addressing racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and all forms of oppression and prejudice can be risky. But our community must go beyond acknowledging and valuing difference in order to reshape our culture and create a model for other Kansas institutions.

1 Branch, Kirk. *Eyes on the Ought to Be: What We Teach When We Teach About Literacy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007.

2 ---. (2006). "Literacy, Nickleby, and the War on the Poor." *Kansas English* 90(1).

