



About Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

I have noticed this issue (which goes totally against systematic practices of an inclusive learning/working environment). I present my case more than once to those higher up who will listen and have some power to address the issue. They listen. They respond. Oh yes, that sounds indeed troublesome. We still have so much work to do. With a sympathetic look they return to what they were doing and go back to business as usual.

This is a generalized summary of my regular encounters in my role as a professional within the educational system dedicated to promoting inclusion. “There is a lot of work to be done”, is a statement I hear more often, than not. It is for me to figure out how that work is to be done. Appreciation and awareness are one thing, doing is another.

I have started my work from my own position. As a woman of African descent who, as an immigrant experienced her whole academic journey within the United States. Those early days I used to relish in the confusion my mere position would cause for those who approached me. I was Dutch? How was that possible? Where was I really from? I was a swimmer? Since when do black people swim, let alone on the swim team! Sometimes I would sit at the black table, sometimes at the international table, sometimes with the jocks, and at times with just anybody. How was this possible? From those early days on in the US, being included was just about doing and going, even if my presence was questioned. I learned that soon people would get over it and get used to it. They don’t get over it anymore, however. They need help, lots of help.

Secondly, I have approached my work from my academic training. I was trained in the standard knowledge base. I started in physical education and psychology, majors that I loved, and went on to pursue graduate work in clinical psychology and medical anthropology. As much as I loved all my pursuits, the perspectives of people of color were lacking or missing all together. So were the perspectives of women or other marginalized populations. As much as I was informed, enlightened and entertained by my scholarly pursuits, they didn’t move or touch me. They didn’t stir within me, until I discovered the likes of Patricia Hill Collins, Faye Harrison, Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Molefi Asante, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson, and other scholars who introduced viewpoints closer to my own life experience. They validated other ways of knowing and doing, and that my way of standing in the world was not less than, only different and equally valid.

Once I encountered these scholars, I could not let them go. They were my lifeline. They showed me that it was ok to do academia my way. I also learned that I had to hold on to them, but could not use them too often or too much. And so, I held on to them, until it was time. And that time is now.

In my work I have formalized two theoretical constructs that I use to help people engage the subjects of diversity and inclusion. The first is the concept of the “**dominant and the other**”. I use this concept as an accessible theoretical construct that explains how an inherent

structure of inequalities shapes and perpetuates an uneven leveled playing field. In my construct of the dominant and the other I explain how one of our stories has risen to the top and has become the dominant, go to, normalized reference story, while the myriad of other stories have become marginalized, overlooked, silenced or ignored.

I prefer the concept of the dominant and the other, rather than talk about white supremacy, white privilege, or hegemony, because those constructs tend to allow people to withdraw from the conversation, and I want to do the opposite. I acknowledge that yes, at times that dominant position is about white people versus those of color. But the dominant position can also be about hetero-normativity, gender, abled body-ness, wealth, academic status, and so on. At any given moment can we embody that dominant position. That position exudes power. Everybody enjoys power. The question is what do we do with that power? When needed I can use the metaphor to go far deeper and explain the implications that come with being raised in the dominant story. When one is raised as if one's story is always automatically validated, heard, seen, and being imbued with comfort, it becomes easy to understand why they might have difficulty engaging those other stories. After all, they have never had to.

I use the metaphor of the dominant and the other to explain that diversity is not just about difference, but also about this inherent inequality. Inclusion then is to work to make all stories, the richness of stories that exist, equally valid and honored. I explain that hundreds of years of careful orchestrating and conditioning have resulted in our unequal system and that many mechanisms come into play to maintain it the moment we try to challenge it.

Secondly, I use the construct of **indigenous knowledge** to provide an alternative paradigm to engage this issue. Indigenous knowledge starts with a sense of spirituality and the primary concept that we are all connected. Rather than positivistic facts, knowledge is a shared truth that is based in relationships. There is an element of knowledge of not knowing, of not immediately being allowed access. Access has to be earned and will arrive when the time is right. The pursuit of knowledge, especially for those of us from those marginalized stories, is about the pursuit of justice. Lastly, indigenous knowledge entails the blues aesthetic, the sense that in order to get better we have to go through the pain rather than avoid it, and be brutally honest in the process. The blues aesthetic also assures us that pain and beauty are never separate, and that growth and change happens through improvisation and expansion.

Given these theoretical premises then, I provide my audience with three basic charges in the pursuit of creating inclusive environments. **First**, one has to **care**. One simply has to care about correcting these patterns of inequality. **Secondly**, one has to be **brave**. One has to be brave to move, act, speak, and stand. That may mean breaking the silence, and stepping forward, even when one does not know what to do. **Third**, one has to be **humble** and understand that mistakes will be made, even with the best intentions. These are the basic ingredients to do the work of honoring true diversity, pursuing inclusivity, and affirming equity.