

Degrees of Diversity

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Abstract

This is a paper that extends upon a previously written autobiography for my Cultural Diversity class. I use the readings of Lynn Kell Spradlin's *Diversity Matters* and Anton Treuer's *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask* to purposefully support my thoughts on what matters when considering cultural diversity and human relations and also what I have learned about cultural diversity and human relations. This paper is written entirely in first person as it is first an autobiography about my experiences with diversity and further an extension of my autobiography on what I have learned, found most important, and as a result may, act upon in the future. This paper begins with a brief introduction, followed by the body of the paper. The body contains three headings: travel, coaching, and North Dakota. The headings help to break down all the diversity I have encountered into experiences of related topics. The conclusion of this paper addresses five important questions based on the two readings. I answer the questions with implementations that I have learned about throughout the Cultural Diversity course, and then I add what I am eager to try and implement into my classrooms and sports teams in the future.

Being from a small town in North Dakota, I initially did not believe I have had many encounters with diversity. However, when I began my explorations and readings in my Cultural Diversity class, I realized I have had many encounters with diversity, whether big or small, very apparent or very subtle. In this paper, I will reexamine my autobiography, which highlights my most extravagant and most subtle encounters with diversity from traveling, coaching, and growing up in historic North Dakota. I will point out the things that I have learned and identified with, as well as what matters to me most in terms of cultural diversity and human relations with aid from the readings of Anton Treuer's *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask* and Lynn Kell Spradlin's *Diversity Matters*.

TRAVELING

The summer before I began my senior year of high school, my family and I went on a vacation to Orlando, Florida. From Orlando, we traveled to Port Canaveral where we embarked on a cruise ship, set to sail to the islands of the Bahamas, Disney's private island Castaway Cay, through the Bermuda Triangle, and back to Port Canaveral. For my age, there was a hidden teen hideaway. One experience I had I, to this day, am still not sure if the question asked was serious or more of a joke. While sitting in a pool with a newfound friend, who is a Florida native and so has never encountered snow in real life, and some other girls our age, we began talking about where we were from. When I revealed to the group that I was from North Dakota, a young Georgia Peach asked me, in what seemed to me as a very serious manner, "Do people still ride in covered wagons with Indians still running around?" As dumbfounded and unsure of the question as I was, I simply replied with a half-hearted chuckle.

Treuer (2012) points out that Native Americans "are so often imagined, but so infrequently understood" (p. 1). Many people have not personally had encounters with Native

Americans today, so they only know them as history and western movies portray them. This is an ongoing problem as people do not understand who and what Native Americans are today, which presents the need for educators to teach students about Native Americans today. Spradlin (2012) points out, “To transform curricula, educators must place emphasis not simply on *adding* to what is currently taught in schools but on *changing* it from the ground up” (p. 287). For peoples’ biases and perceptions to be changed, they need to learn the truths and facts of the Native American population.

For the past few years, I have made frequent trips to Watford City, North Dakota to visit my boyfriend. Central North Dakota and Western North Dakota are very different, especially when considering the recent Bakken Oil Boom. Many of the people who flocked to Watford City were looking to take part in the riches of oil at that time, and many men came without their families. When my boyfriend and I were in a Chinese restaurant over lunch hour, I soon discovered how outnumbered females were in Watford City. I told my boyfriend I was going to run to the bathroom, but he suggested in a hushed tone that I wait until we got back to his house. When we turned around to leave, I understood the reason for his suggestion. Sitting in the booths were about 20 to 25 of whom appeared to be Mexicans, and they were all gawking at me, a very outnumbered female.

Upon further studying of the Latino population, I understand that the Latino population “is an ethnically diverse group comprised of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Central and South Americans. . .” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 119). While I originally assumed the men in the Chinese restaurant were Mexicans, they may have actually been a very diverse group consisting of a combination of ethnicities belonging to the Latino population. “Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic minority groups in the United States, growing five times as fast as any

other group,” according to Spradlin (2012) (p. 120). In response to the North Dakota oil boom, many members of the Latino population came to North Dakota in search of jobs. Regarding other similar situations, it is no wonder the Latino group is the fastest growing population in the United States.

Traveling has brought me to new places where I have met new faces and viewed new things. Often while traveling, I find myself a little out of my comfort zone as I do not know the customs and norms of the area I have traveled to. While traveling has presented me with opportunities to experience obvious diversity, I have found diversity in the young lives of the girls I coach in my small hometown.

COACHING

While I was able to experience so much diversity and learn about other places and people through my travels, I have had additional diversity encounters in North Dakota. I coach volleyball and basketball at the school where I graduated from. I coach junior high and high school girls, and I have learned so much about human relations and diversity through my coaching experiences. Spradlin (2012) points out that “if teachers are to be effective, they must understand cultural diversity and its many elements and be skilled intercultural communicators,” (p. 3) as well as “fully realize their influence in their positions of authority as they lead and persuade their students” (p. 61). I have learned that diversity comes in all kinds of different situations, both subtle and not, and that approach to handling situations matters significantly.

Before the Cultural Diversity class, I never really thought much of people who have disabilities as being a diversity group, however it does make sense because people with special needs make up their own percentage of the whole population, for lack of better words. I have had the opportunity to coach a young girl who unfortunately has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The

mother of the girl explained that the girl loves to be around people, and she wanted to play volleyball. The mother further explained that the girl did not want to play in any volleyball games, she just wanted to go along and sit on the bench to cheer on the team. Spradlin (2012) notes that too often “parents are kept at a distance when it comes to the education of their children.” (p. 33). This experience, especially, taught me the importance of parent involvement and having a mutual interest between educators and parents in helping children succeed.

Although we coaches still made a point to hold high expectations for the girl, “equitable treatment does not mean approaching and working with all students in the same way” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 7). We made modifications for the girl, and we did so with a lighter workload, which would allow the girl to be successful. For example, we allowed the girl to practice serving from a line that was closer to the net so that she would be able to serve the ball over the net. We also designated the girl the spot of “defensive specialist” so that she knew where to go when the team broke up into positional work. Education books stress the point of creating opportunities for students to achieve, and sometimes creating opportunities to succeed requires adaptations. According to Spradlin (2012), “effective teachers are adaptable and flexible in their approaches” (p. 62). Adapting also applies to coaching and sometimes adapting is what is required to make education fair and equal for students.

Another interesting, although indirect, experience with students with disabilities I have with coaching comes from observing another team under the instruction of another coach. Following high school girls’ basketball practice one day, the head coach and I watched the junior high boys’ game. One of the boys on the team had cerebral palsy, and his entire right half of his body was affected. The boy could run, although he had a limp, but he could not use his hand and arm as they were constantly in a stiff position. However, the boy did not let his physical

limitations stop him as Spradlin (2012) points out, “Many persons with disabilities have coped with oppression by calling attention to their *abilities* and making themselves visible as people who exist beyond their *disabilities*” (p. 253). The young boy did just that by choosing to go out for basketball because he was capable of running, jumping, and dribbling, just in modified ways.

Both students, the young boy and you girl who had disabilities, showed me first-hand how much impact inclusion can have on all students. According to Spradlin (2012), inclusion is “integrating students with disabilities in regular classrooms and whenever possible *with* the supports necessary for them to succeed” (p. 249). From my own experiences, the students with disabilities got to participate in activities and have opportunities to do things that their peers who did not have disabilities got to do. The students who did not have disabilities experienced first-hand that students who do have disabilities are not to be feared or shunned, and they seemed inspired by the students with disabilities. Spradlin (2012) points out that “it is imperative that teachers and school officials embrace the mission of schools and work with diversity advocates to help students with disabilities actualize their academic potentials in “regular” classrooms” (p. 251). Through coaching, I have come to understand and support inclusion.

While encountering students who have disabilities in my school occupation and setting seems to be my most obvious encounters with diversity, I have found diversity to be many other every day, but important situations in students’ lives. I have coached a girl who has a drug involved mother and a working father, students from divorced families and other unfortunate or busy family situations, sisters who were only a grade apart, and students who were participating in multiple sports at the same time. It is important to fairly and equitably work with students in regards to their needs and situations, because treating students unfair will not allow for a safe environment with good relationships between students, educators, and family members.

According to Spradlin (2012), “Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject” (p. 61). No situation is ever the same, and therefore, no situation can ever be treated the same, but without a safe environment and trusting relationships, understanding of situations may never be possible.

Being a small town coach in North Dakota is a career that is sure to present opportunities to experience diversity. However, on a much larger scale, visiting or living in historic North Dakota is a diversity experience in itself. North Dakota is home to the flat Red River Valley to the east and the rugged cattle country to the west. To the north is the International Peace Gardens, and to the south is the great Standing Rock Reservation.

NORTH DAKOTA

Going further back in time before I became a coach and was still in high school being coached, I remember a time when we went to Standing Rock for a volleyball game. This was my first time going to Standing Rock. During the junior varsity game, the varsity girls went back to the team locker room to change for their game. When they entered the locker room, they found two girls who were from Standing Rock. Due to concerns about belongings being stolen, all the duffel bags had to be removed from the locker room and placed in the bleachers behind our athlete bench. I found this to be very stressful, and I became almost fearful of the Native Americans because I had never had an encounter like this with other athletic teams, who were White with the exception of a minority person or two. Since that game in Standing Rock, a “special belongings” bag has been used to collect girls’ important items to be kept by the safety of the coach.

Another unsettling experience I have had with Standing Rock was with the conflicts of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Our volleyball team was scheduled to go to Standing Rock for a

volleyball game. In the midst of the Dakota Access Pipeline conflicts, we had to be escorted all the way to Standing Rock and back. In addition, we also had to take an unfamiliar route to Standing Rock as the more convenient route was too dangerous. Again, we had a valuables bag in which each girl placed her most valuable possessions and it was guarded by the coaches.

In the case of the “valuables bags” recalled from high school sports and coaching, I was not aware of the extreme poverty on reservations. Of course, belongings could be stolen from locker rooms at all kinds of schools, but typically the places where my sports teams travel are not areas of extreme poverty. Perhaps we have had encounters with people trying to steal belongings on the reservation is due to the poverty those people face. Treuer (2012) explains that quite a few reservations have unemployment rates over 50 percent and most have unemployment rates over 20 percent” (p. 88). It seems many people on the reservations may not be able to afford the luxuries other people have because they live in a place with such high poverty.

On a more positive note, what I find fascinating on Standing Rock reservation is the Native American language used to label bathrooms and classrooms. Concerning the fact that approximately 500 different languages may have once existed in North America and now only about 180 remain, preserving language directly in school settings is a great way to try to teach young people Native American languages and preserve that piece of their culture (Treuer, 2012, p. 79). Considering tribal languages were “the first languages of this land and the first languages of the first Americans,” Native American languages are in fact a big part of history (Treuer, 2012, p. 82). Efforts to preserve Native American cultural languages are truly an intriguing and worthwhile effort.

Despite my own growth in understanding diversity, many questions still remain. How can all the cultures be accommodated for in classrooms (Spradlin, 2012)? How can we include

students with disabilities into classrooms and other activities (Spradlin, 2012)? Why is there so much tension between Native Americans and non-Native Americans (Treuer, 2012)? “How much can people change before they are no longer the same people” (Treuer, 2012, p. 45)? Why don’t Native Americans leave the reservations and poverty so many of them are in? Many thoughts and solutions exist, but to sum up what I have learned and value most, I will share my own thoughts.

To answer the first question, first, educators need to make great efforts to understand other cultures so as to better counter cultural biases. Spradlin (2012) supports understanding cultures with the point, “In order to truly know, one must commit himself or herself to a continuous journey of curiosity, investigation, and critical analysis of what is presented as knowledge” (p. 285). In educators’ defense, it may be impossible to understand ALL cultures at once, so educators can focus most on the cultures of students who are in the teachers’ classrooms at the time. Eventually, knowledge and understanding will begin to accumulate over the years. As an educator myself, I naturally find other cultures interesting. In the future, I can encourage students to share about their cultures, as in group projects and such. If I demonstrate acceptance and interest for all cultures, my hope is that my students will follow my lead.

To answer the second question, educators, whether in-class teachers or coaches, must understand the importance and impact of inclusion. The process may be difficult and is not always feasible if inclusion does not actually benefit the person being discussed. Inclusion may require a bit of an adjustment by educators and all students, but the long-term effects can be worth the effort, however. As a result, as a coach I especially plan to welcome and encourage students with disabilities to be part of teams, whether actually playing a sport, being a manager, or being a statistician. Spradlin (2012) gives the term ally to an individual who “purposefully and

proactively works to help secure social justice and equality for oppressed groups of individuals in society” (p. 301). From experience, inclusion has demonstrated benefits for the person with a disability, as they have the chance to interact with peers and the community.

To answer the question on why Native Americans and non-Native Americans have so much tension between each other, it is important to point out that settlers really did come and take land from the Native Americans. Treuer (2012) points out, “When asked what Indians called North America before Columbus arrived, noted scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., simply replied, “Ours” (p. 7). Too often the harsh history between Native Americans and settlers is hidden, not included in the pages of history books and curricula because like Treuer discusses, “All human beings have dark chapters in their personal histories. However, it is important for all countries and all individuals to examine dark chapters in order to learn from them and prevent them from reoccurring” (p. 31). Before the arrival of settlers, approximately 500 Indian tribes owned and roamed North America (p. 11). Like Treuer notes, “No matter how one interprets the data, Native Americans are not immigrants. They are indigenous to the Americas” (p. 18). Settlers arrived and horribly mistreated the Native Americans, as well as bringing diseases to North America that Native Americans were not immune to, which decimated tribes.

Based on Treuer’s insight and Spradlin’s book on diversity, I understand the importance of adapting curricula. I hope to make strides in this area as a future educator, although I know it will be difficult. My experience from the cruise ship has always stuck with me, and throughout the duration of the Cultural Diversity course, it has become ever more concerning that some people actually think Native Americans are still living in teepees somewhere, and this is the year 2017.

Treuer's question, "How much can people change before they are no longer the same people?" has been an intriguing question throughout the Native American section of the Cultural Diversity Course (p. 45). The course helped me understand how badly Native Americans have been mistreated by settlers. The happenings of the past still affect the Native American population today, with notable impacts on culture. Treuer points out the significant loss of culture throughout the years since contact with Europeans. He explains that while there may have been as many as 500 distinct tribal languages prior to contact with Europeans, today there remains roughly 180, with numbers quickly diminishing (Treuer, 2012, p. 79). The acculturation that Native Americans were forced to endure has changed the people so much, that some people have lost nearly all of their Native American identity, which brings up Treuer's question.

Treuer's question is intriguing to me and makes me curious. I am unsure of what all I can do to combat the significant Native American culture loss. Perhaps I can encourage all students to explore their family histories and heritages to better understand who they are and where they come from. When I was in school, I found family tree products to be very interesting, and I think it would be a fun and beneficial project for my students.

Treuer points out the extreme poverty that can be found on reservations. According to Treuer (2012), "Quite a few reservations have unemployment rates over 50 percent and most have unemployment rates over 20 percent" (p. 88). After Treuer's facts and insight on what life may be like on a reservation, it left me wondering why people do not leave the reservations if they are so bad to live there. However Treuer's reasoning was quite simple as he simply explained, "Like most Americans, Indians love their home" (p. 88). After learning about all the efforts being made to preserve Native American cultures, I also understand that Native

Americans also prefer to live with each other to practice their cultures and make efforts to preserve them.

I do not intend to teach on a reservation, however I can attempt to educate people that not all Native Americans may live on reservations just for the “government benefits,” although some might. I can shed light on the fact that many people are most comfortable living among people who have the same culture. Also, Native Americans are making efforts to preserve what culture they can so it is not all lost as a result of acculturation when the Europeans came to North America and took over.

In this paper, I highlighted my most notable diversity experiences. It is interesting to discover what all diversity entails, especially when my previous knowledge of diversity was basically people who are from another country than I am. Now I have learned that there is so much more to diversity, and diversity experiences can be very noticeable or very subtle. As an educator, whether in the classroom or on the gym floor, I must treat my students as differently, but fairly, as they all are. They all have different situations that I will need to keep in mind, and so each student and situation will need to be handled differently. In addition, whether I am in the classroom or on the gym floor, I intend to welcome diversity with open arms. Diversity needs more supporters and less oppression. In my classroom, I will encourage students to share about themselves—their traditions, cultures, and backgrounds. As a coach, I will invite and welcome all students to participate in extracurricular activities. As an educator, I will no doubt encounter diversity in my classrooms and sports teams, and how I support and react to diversity is going to be very important, especially with the United States becoming more and more diverse every day.

References

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