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Making Traditional Courses More Inclusive: Confessions of an African American Female Professor Who Attempted to Crash All the Barriers at Once

Angela Mae Kupenda
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“My concern is that we need to make legal education, and especially traditional law school classes, more inclusive of our diverse society, more inclusive of minorities and women, more open to the reality of diversity and differences that we live.”

In my first year of teaching law, for the very first time I heard a lecture by a black law professor. His ideas engrossed me. But more than that, I realized it was the first time, in all my previous years as a law student and now as a law professor, that I heard a "voice" like my own. It was empowering.

For my first semester of teaching I was assigned Contracts 1. As I planned and prepared, I began to remember how I, as a student, had missed seeing myself portrayed positively and realistically in my physical classrooms, in my classroom materials and in the "classroom of ideas." I decided then that my "goal" for the semester would be to teach Contracts well and to teach it with an emphasis on inclusiveness.

I had to do this, for myself and for all my students. I knew that these future lawyers needed to be equipped to practice and live in a diverse world. I also knew that law school is almost the ideal place to confront our preconceptions and broaden our perspectives (at least it was for me).

I would have to be very creative to achieve this goal, as I looked through the casebook and found that most of the nonwhites mentioned in the book were portrayed in only a negative light. I also knew that I would have to confront one of my greatest fears: the fear of not being accepted - the fear that, being a black woman, my goal of inclusiveness would be read as excluding white males (I was especially concerned considering approximately 65 percent of my class would be white males, and many could be conservative southern white males).

This presentation is the story of how I attempted to make Contracts I more inclusive of the diversity I live. In the essay I will confess my successes and my disappointments as I attempted to bring diversity into the Contracts physical classroom, into the classroom materials and into the "classroom of ideas." I also will confess how, in my second and third years, I have revised my approaches but have not sacrificed my goals.

My concern is that we need to make legal education, and especially traditional law school classes, more inclusive of our diverse society, more inclusive of minorities and women, more open to the reality of diversity and differences that we live. In classes such as contracts, many nonwhites and females are not adequately mirrored in- the classroom so

as to make their law school learning real to their experiences and realities. Furthermore, the invisibility of nonwhites and women in traditional law school class materials and environments also affect those from the dominant or majority culture, as they enter the practice of law with less understanding of our world and less understanding of possibly their own preconceptions.

In the concluding part of the essay I will talk about the lessons! learned and my renewed commitment that nonwhite and white women should be apparent in the entire law school experience, and should not be readily apparent only in courses like Women and the Law, Civil Rights, etc. For future lawyers to be prepared for living and thriving in our diverse world (and for the sake of all of us), diversity in the physical classroom, in the classroom materials and in the "classroom of ideas" are essential.

In my presentation, I will confess and share my "ups" and "downs" as I made inclusiveness one of my goals. I hope you find it of interest.

PRESENTER

Angela Mae Kupenda is an assistant professor at Mississippi College School of Law. She teaches Contracts, First Amendment, Civil Rights and Constitutional law. Professor Kupenda graduated summa cum laude with her B.S. from Jackson State University, received her M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania, the Wharton School of Business, and her J.D., graduating first in her class, from Mississippi College School of Law. While in law school, she served as a judicial clerk/intern to the Mississippi Supreme Court, Justice Fred L. Banks, Jr. After graduation she was law clerk to the Honorable Charles Clark, former Chief Judge of the United States Supreme Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, and later was law clerk to the Honorable Paul Roney, former Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. She worked briefly with the U.S. Department of Justice in the Constitutional Torts Department of the Civil Division and practiced law, first in Washington, N.C. with the Arnold & Porter law firm and later with Phelps Dunbar, L.L.P., in Jackson, Miss. Her publications include: "Making Traditional Courses More Inclusive," published in volume 31, University of San Francisco Law Review, page 975 (1997); "Aren't Two Parents Better than None: Whether two single African American Adults (who are not in a traditional marriage or a romantic or sexual relationship with each other) should be allowed to jointly adopt and co-parent African American children," published in volume 35, University of Louisville Journal of Family Law, page 703 (1997); "Why Isn't What's Good for the Goose, Also Good for the Gander?: Confronting the truth and reframing the affirmative action question," forthcoming in the next issue, Southern University Law Review; "It's Wrong, It's Backwards and It's Unfair: The difficulties and burdens in getting your case remanded to state court after an improper removal; and proposals for change," with W.L. Kidd, forthcoming in the next issue of the Trial Lawyers Quarterly.