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"THE COLORADO SEEKING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY PROJECT: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN DIVERSITY BETWEEN THE COLLEGE AND K-12 COMMUNITY"

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"THE COLORADO SEEKING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY PROJECT: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN DIVERSITY BETWEEN THE COLLEGE AND K-12 COMMUNITY"

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This session describes and then models exercises/techniques used in the Colorado Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) Project, a collaborative partnership between Metropolitan State College of Denver and several Denver public schools. These partnerships were created to provide faculty-centered professional development opportunities to support those who wanted to incorporate multicultural issues into their curriculum.

The first half of the presentation will provide a description of the Colorado SEED project, the challenges involved in setting up such partnerships, and explanations of some of the pedagogical techniques used in it. The second half will involve conference participants in examples of exercises and facilitation techniques used in SEED seminars.

SEED Description

The National SEED program began in 1987 and has sponsored seminars reaching over 10,000 educators in over 30 states as well as abroad. Both the National SEED program and the Colorado SEED Project seek to create multi culturally equitable and gender fair curricula which allows girls and boys (in K-12), men and women (in higher education) and faculty (in K-16) to reflect upon their lives and to understand how their own education and backgrounds may have influenced their attitudes toward multicultural education.

The Colorado SEED project is the first to combine educators at multiple levels, and this collaboration enables educators to see the impact of and challenges involved in diversity education from kindergarten through college. A few key SEED ideas are:

- Unless we as teachers re-open our own backgrounds to look at how we were schooled to deal with diversity and connection, we will be unable to create school climates and curriculum which more adequately equip today's students to do so.
- Intellectual and personal faculty development, supported over time, is needed if today's schools are to enable students and teachers to develop a balance of both self-esteem and respect for the cultural realities of others.
- Without systemic understanding of gender, race and class relations, educators who try to transform the curriculum will lack creative flexibility and coherence when dealing with scholarship.

Some of the issues addressed throughout the Colorado yearlong SEED seminars are:

1. How to assess one's own courses for multicultural content and to access materials to make courses more inclusive
2. How to feel comfortable incorporating multicultural materials in the classroom and facilitating sometimes "heated" discussions about them and
3. How to incorporate pedagogy which will enhance students' understanding of the relevance of the materials to their own lives

SEED Project Pedagogy, Classroom Management and Challenges

Precisely because the SEED Project allows participants time to consider topics that many would prefer keeping from the surface because of the volatility in the issues (the "isms" such as racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia) and the conflicts that might arise for both educators and students, we, as seminar leaders, try to model in our seminar sessions certain pedagogical and management strategies.

Inherent in presenting diversity topics is the potential for students to be enlightened and/or to feel targeted—especially for those who have personally experienced oppression. The educator needs to be able to create a safe environment in which students are able to share reflections. In order for respectful open discussion of these difficult topics to occur, the educator must be sensitive to the needs and frustrations of the class and must also be aware of his/her own biases that accompany him/her to the classroom.

Facilitating multicultural discussions should include the following principles:

1. Tenets of feminist pedagogy, acknowledging students as knowledge constructors and establishing de-centered classroom authority on the part of the educator (Maher & Tetrealt, 1994).
2. Principles of Native American story telling and listening skills (Collins, 1996), in which students become aware of each other's life experiences and context;
3. Establishment of basic respect and tolerance as the primary goals in the classroom.

Classroom management techniques include:

1. the establishment of discussion ground rules
2. careful development of student listening skills, and
3. incorporation of the discipline of the discussion circle (Collins, 1996).

The major challenge of the Colorado SEED Project is to build and support a community of educators with the same multicultural motivations and to provide a safe environment for discussion of issues not supported by participants' own schools. The monthly seminars allow for the sharing of the individual participants' challenges in their classrooms (e.g., students wearing clothing with hate group insignias, homophobic statements, and the Columbine tragedy) and allow time for participants to share possible solutions from different grade-level perspectives. The group also exists to provide outside support for those who feel their efforts are not supported by their own school/ administration and for those who are the "one and only" (person of color, of different sexual orientation, with a disability) in their respective schools.

In summary, this session will share the challenges of SEED projects and will invite conference attendees to join us in experiencing some of the exercises and techniques we use as part of the SEED process.

References

- Collins B. (1996). The process of knowing and learning. An academic and cultural awakening. *Holistic Education Review* 9(4), 35-39.
- Maher, EA. & Tetreault, M.K.T. (1994). *The feminist classroom*. New York: Basic Books.

Presenters:

Dr. AnnJanette Alejano-Steele is an assistant professor in the departments of Psychology and Women's Studies at Metropolitan State College of Denver. Her educational background includes a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Michigan State University and NIH-supported postdoctoral work in Psychology and Medicine from the University of California, San Francisco. She is committed to diversity issues in women's health, especially for women of color and is currently conducting research on psychosocial factors that affect birth outcomes for low-income African-American and Latina women. She is equally committed to diversity issues in higher education and curriculum, and she recently chaired the 7th annual Colorado Women of Color in Higher Education Conference in April, 2000. She is a co-facilitator for the Colorado SEED III (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project, which is devoted to helping K-12 and college educators become more inclusive in their curriculum.

Annette Bennington McElhiney has a diploma in nursing and a Ph.D. in English. She is a full professor of English/Women's Studies at Metropolitan State College of Denver. She is the coeditor of *Beyond Portia: Women, Law and Literature in the United States*, published by Northeastern University Press, 1997, and one of five editors of a Women's Studies text: *Women Studies: Thinking Women*, published by Kendall Hunt, 1993. In addition, she has published a number of articles on women and literature; on mentoring; on curricular revision for diversity in terms of race, class and gender; and on multicultural women's literature. She has given a number of presentations at regional and national conferences on these topics. Dr. McElhiney's interest in diversity dates back to her consulting work with US West in their pluralism training and in their Women of Color Project in the late 1980s. Currently, she is a co-leader of the SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) III seminar which includes participants from elementary, secondary and higher education, sponsored by a grant from the Presidential Professional Development Fund at Metropolitan State College of Denver.