

USING A
"DIVERSE IDENTITIES" COURSE
TO PROMOTE
STUDENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

At Whittier College, the psychology department has been offering a unique "Diverse Identities" course that promotes identity development.

The course is interdisciplinary, drawing on materials from psychology, sociology, social work, political science, literature, and film.

The course reviews general theories and research on identity development, as well as specific theories about the development of African American, Native American, Latino, Asian, white, and mixed ethnic identities.

It also discusses national, religious, social class, geographic, school, occupational, gender, sexual, family, age, health, political, and other identities.

It analyzes stigma, prejudice, discrimination in the United States and examples of conflicts around the globe.

COURSE GOALS

1. To understand processes of identity formation and change.
2. To appreciate the identities of others.
3. To understand ones own identities.

INTERACTIVE LEARNING

To promote interactive learning, class exercise forms are used frequently to guide discussion in small groups of four. Every student is thinking, discussing, and writing about the issues raised in the readings.

Because Whittier College has a diverse student body, the students can share with each other the ways in which the readings do or do not apply to their own experience.

Supplementing the theories and research articles are first person accounts written by persons with various identities who describe their struggles with identity issues.

In addition, documentary and commercial films dealing with identity themes are shown in a weekly evening film lab.

A midterm and a final exam encourage critical thinking by requiring students to make connections among concepts in the readings.

Before each exam, study questions are distributed which students are asked to answer prior to the review session before each exam.

To encourage answering all study questions, students' answers are collected just prior to the exam and scored for completeness but not content.

ANALYSIS AND SELF-REFLECTION

Students write one-page reaction papers to the first person accounts and to each of the films.

Students also find and analyze a journal article dealing with some identity issue.

At the end of the course they write a 10-page Self Identity paper in which they describe each of their identities and the issues with which they have been dealing in their lives.

COURSE SYLLABUS

The course syllabus, with reading list, is available online at the following website:

web.whittier.edu/chill/teach/teach.html

RELATIONSHIP TO THE COLLEGE

The course is cross-listed in sociology, and meets requirements for both psychology and sociology majors.

It is part of the program of Diversity Across the Curriculum in Psychology.

It also fulfills the International and Global Perspectives requirement of Whittier College's Liberal Education Program.

The course was inspired by ethnic identity issues raised by the instructor's traveling abroad, and by the annual Diverse Identities Week programming organized by Student Services staff in collaboration with student leaders of many campus organizations.

Hence it complements other efforts on campus to promote multicultural awareness and identity development.

EFFECTS OF THE COURSE

Students report that the course makes them think about identities that they had not thought about before.

They realize that they have many social identities, and often they have mixed identities within a given category, such as ethnicity.

They also state that they have become more aware of the discrimination faced by other groups. The struggles of others for acceptance are similar to their own.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Chuck Hill at chill@whittier.edu

APPENDIX 1:
SELF IDENTITY PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Think about your various identities. Think about ways in which your identities have changed, and identity issues that you have dealt with or are still dealing with. Think about theories and theoretical concepts that do or do not fit each of your identities and identity issues.

Write a 10 page paper in which you do the following for each type of identity discussed in class (gender, ethnic/racial/national, religious, social class, geographic, school, occupational, sexual, family, disability/illness, age, political, hidden/false):

- a. Identify the type of identity.
- b. Discuss your various identities in that category.
- c. Describe any ways in which your identities in that category have changed.
- d. Identify issues in that category that you have dealt with or are still dealing with.
- e. Identify theories and theoretical concepts that might apply to your identities in that category.
- f. For each theory that you identify, explain how it does or does not apply to you. Pay particular attention to alternatives and steps. Illustrate theoretical concepts with examples from your life.
- g. At the end of your paper, add a paragraph in which you discuss ways in which this course has helped you to understand your identities better.

If you do not feel comfortable discussing a particular identity, think about why you are uncomfortable about it. If you feel strongly about it, try to discuss as much as you do feel comfortable about. If you wish, you may state that you prefer not to discuss it further, so that it is clear that you have thought about it.

APPENDIX II:
DIVERSE IDENTITIES FILMS

A Class Divided -- Follow-up interviews 14 years later with students who participated in Jane Elliott's classroom experiment in which students were given privileges and stereotypes based on having blue eyes or brown eyes. Prejudice.

Fakin' da funk (1998) -- An Asian American, adopted by an African American family, thinks he is Black, but his new peers in LA treat him differently. Ethnicity, stereotypes.

Mi Familia (1995) -- Three generations of a family that migrated from Mexico to Los Angeles. Ethnicity, family, prejudice.

The Joy Luck Club (1993) -- Four Chinese women who immigrated to America, and their daughters raised in America. Ethnicity, gender, friendship, family, and conflicts between cultures.

American History X (1998) -- A powerful film about a white supremacist, his experiences in prison, and his brother's involvement in a white supremacist group. Prejudice, ethnicity.

Devil's Arithmetic (1999) -- A contemporary teenage girl who doesn't understand the significance of being Jewish is transported back in time to the Holocaust. Religion, prejudice.

Mississippi Masala (1992) -- A man of Asian Indian descent raised in Uganda is forced to leave when the Africans gain independence. In the US, his daughter begins dating an African American, creating problems on both sides. Ethnicity, geographic identities, biracial dating.

Taylor's Campaign -- Documentary about homelessness in Santa Monica.

Get Real (1999) -- Sensitive portrayal of the problems of being gay in high school. Sexuality, school identities.

Butterflies Are Free (1972) - A blind man, attempting to live independently, and his relationships with the girl next door and his overprotective mother. Disability, family, romance.

On Golden Pond (1969) — Relationships between an eighty-year-old man, who is angry at being old, and his loving wife, a lonely boy, and his resentful daughter. Age, family, friendship.

Priest (1995) — Conflicts between celibacy and sexuality experienced by two Roman Catholic priests in Ireland. Religion, sexuality, hidden identities.