

Traversing the Liminal Space: An Analysis of Graduate Student Responses to Diversity in the Classroom Context

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In the university setting where our research was carried out, graduate students have the opportunity to participate in college, departmental, and centralized diversity workshops. During the year that our research was carried out, approximately 25% of 1200 graduate teaching assistants took part in the centralized diversity workshops. Their statements of uncertainty about how to teach for diversity led us to seek further knowledge about their thoughts about diversity and their attempts to integrate diversity into their classroom practice. The Threshold Concepts Model (Meyers, Land, 2006; Land, Meyers & Smith, 2008) provided an analytical tool to determine how they viewed diversity in their classrooms. This study at a major research institution examined how graduate student teachers from all disciplines recognize, confront, and integrate the concept of diversity into their content and teaching practice. Qualitative data from open-ended questions on a survey completed by 280 graduate student teachers suggest that they experience the concept of diversity as troublesome knowledge. Using content analysis (Berelson, 1952) of both manifest (Gray & Densten, 1998) and latent content (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998), the data lead us to argue that diversity itself is a threshold concept because of its inherent subjectivity. Additionally, graduate student instructors report that they frequently struggle both to recognize diversity and effectively integrate it into content and classroom practices. Thus, diversity as a concept within the classroom context is especially troublesome. Responses delineate the liminal space that graduate student teachers must pass through to more completely understand diversity within a teaching context. We suggest that the different ways in which graduate student teachers recognize, confront, and integrate diversity within their classrooms demonstrate the reality of different phases through which they appear to stagnate or move through the liminal space associated with this threshold concept. We conclude that graduate and professional student developers centrally and in departments need to discuss, teach about, and work to help graduate student teachers move successfully through the liminal space they encounter, so that they can expand their understanding of diversity in disciplinary content, pedagogical skills, and student demographics in order to teach contemporary collegiate undergraduates most effectively.

Laura L. B. Border is director of the Graduate Teacher Program (which received a notation as a Best Practice from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in 2005 and won the Theodore M. Hesburgh Award for Exceptional Faculty Development Programs in 2006) and has also published previously on diversity (Border & Chism, 1992).

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