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# Crossing the Line: Framing Appropriate Responses in the Diversity Classroom

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## Abstract

The assignment for the students was to write honestly about how they felt regarding specific current events dealing with diversity. However, what resulted was a *kairos* moment for the professor—an instance that called for her best response even when she did not know what that was—when a student crossed the line in terms of respectful communication. Our story picks up there and follows us through our own emotions and dialogues as we worked to make sense as to why the student responded as he did and how the emotionally charged issue could be turned into a teachable moment around language, boundaries, understanding, and acceptance.

## Keywords

diversity; faculty development; classroom climate; culture and communication; transcendent learning; teaching moments; management education

Comfort with diversity is one of the most critical skills today's college graduates can possess.

Dennis Archer (Former mayor of Detroit, 2004)

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Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions . . . by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions . . . [however] it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren't betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort.

Malcolm Gladwell (2005, p. 97)

Teaching subjects such as ethics or diversity is challenging as it requires us to give up some of the control in our classrooms to teach in a "gray area" where discussions can be difficult and personal to all involved. However, only by being prepared to step into this arena will we be able to help our students learn at a more transcendent level, where they develop the skills they need to communicate and collaborate in a diverse world (Baker, 2004; Frederick, 1995; Schor, Sims, & Dennehy, 1996; Wheeler & McLeod, 2002).

Ideally, in courses on managing diversity, we would want students to reflectively draw on their own experiences. However, given that experiences differ and so values clash, the commitment to cooperative controversy may collide with the reality of deeply held prejudices. Bartunek and Carboni (2006) describe such a *kairos* moment as "a particularly important time that calls for our best possible response, even if we are not exactly sure what is most effective" (p. 501). They tell us that learning to respond creatively rather than reactively requires that we take the time to distance ourselves from our assumptions and judgments and reflect on our mental models to be fully present to the moment and to one another. This requires courage, a "leap of faith from a known place of stability and safety to a place of shifting sands and changing tides" (p. 502).

This article is a moment, a one-point wonder (McNeely, 2000), in our autoethnography (Van Buskirk & London, 2008) as teachers trying to model compassion and community. Like Van Buskirk and London's, it is "a personal document and an academic one" (p. 295) because our ability to reason things out with one another sets the stage for our originally interpersonal and subsequent academic response to a critical incident (Flanagan, 1954) in the classroom. The beginning of the story is told from the voice of Professor D.

## The Story: Professor D

In the spring of 2007, I was asked to develop and teach an elective course titled “Managing Diversity” to 40 senior management majors at my university. Because we now have a workforce in the United States that is more diverse than ever before, my task was to help the students learn how to work with others who are perceived as “different.” I felt strongly that I wanted to go beyond the “traditional” types of diversity of race, gender, and age that are typically covered to include diversity based on physical and learning disabilities, sexual orientation, and appearance discrimination. I also included a model at the beginning of the semester that examined how people develop their value systems and how these affect their behavior toward others (Massey, 2006). I agreed with Day and Glick (2000) who note that “perhaps a more valid way to teach diversity would be to ensure that the student must meaningfully interrelate with a variety of different people throughout the educational process” (p. 350). To coax the students out of their comfort zones and consider or experience what it means to be different from others around them, I planned to use storytelling (Boje, 1991; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004), sensitivity exercises (Schor et al., 1996), and consciousness-raising experiences (Mirvis, 2008).

In designing the course, I wanted to expose the students to many different situations and people and felt strongly that the success of the class was very much dependent on full participation by all the students. I believed that students who are unwilling to speak up in class might feel more comfortable writing their thoughts and responding to the thoughts of others in a blog/comment format. Because people tend to express themselves more openly in cyberspace—the “disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004)—I set up a class Weblog. As noted by Proserpio and Gioia (2007), a blended learning approach appeals to the learning styles and habitual attention processes of the so-called virtual generation—the 80% of 18- to 24-year-olds who have Internet access and who are familiar with, and varyingly fluent in, communication expectations such as asynchronous downloads and synchronous and asynchronous one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications. The blog provided access to the syllabus, current events stories, and assignment details, as well as to my expectations for the class. In addition, using the blog allowed students with different learning styles (e.g., visual rather than auditory learners or those students who needed time to reflect before answering) to interact with the class. I planned to use the blog to provide links to timely articles and podcasts and to have the students develop

their own questions with which to invite outside experts into the conversation. Overall, my intention was to create a space for students to move beyond a role of “passive recipients of content” toward a more authentic expression and understanding of their thoughts and feelings.

Each week I posted reading assignments and questions and the students were then to comment online so that everyone in the class could read all of the comments made. We covered many topics dealing with diversity drawn from public information located on the Internet and in the local newspaper. I believed it was important that we shared real stories to add to the richness of the class experience. It is fairly easy to say what we *would do* in a hypothetical situation; it is much harder when actually confronting a situation where we are uncomfortable. Thus, about 6 weeks into the semester, the reading I assigned was from the *St Petersburg Times* on the recent firing of a city manager after he revealed he was planning to have a sex change operation (see the appendix for the article). The article was timely and the news coverage made the situation more concrete for the students, which was a reason I chose it as an assignment. This was not some generic or hypothetical situation; this was something that happened in their hometown and it could have been their coworker, boss, or friend who was fired. It was the elephant in the room: their families, churches, and peers were aware of the situation but uncomfortable talking about it.

Most of the students were indignant after reading the article and wrote on the class blog that this decision was not job related and that the manager should not have been fired.

I do not think that the Largo manager necessarily should have been fired for undergoing a sex change. As long as this change does not affect his ability to do the job in the same way he was doing it, then who cares. I think we all have more important things to worry about, regardless of whether we agree or disagree with his actions. (Male student)

I can understand both sides to this story. I can understand how some employees may feel uncomfortable with this change. Maybe if they give it a chance then over time they may become more comfortable. I believe that everyone has the right to be who they feel they are, but where do employers draw the line so that other employees feel comfortable with their working environment? What if the other employees were uncomfortable with someone who was black, or in a wheelchair? (Female student)

I was really infuriated when I initially heard about the City of Largo's plans to terminate its City Manager Steve Stanton because he was going to go through a sex-change operation. I really did not think that the City Commissioners would be this shallow and terminate Stanton just because he wants to become a woman. It's ridiculous. As one of the Commissioners said, "His brain is the same today as it was last week." I do not agree with the Commission that Stanton has lost his ability to lead. If nothing, this experience has the potential to make him stronger and more understanding. This is a perfect case of individuals jumping to conclusions without even trying to rationalize and/or understand the issue at hand. Not only was this man humiliated in front of his family, friends and colleagues, but his reputation as a City Manager has been overshadowed by something completely unrelated to his professional performance. (Female student)

However, one male student wrote the following:

After reading the article on the Largo city manager, I feel like the right thing to do is be politically correct and say that I feel an injustice has been committed. My true feelings get in the way because I think this guy is disgusting. I don't understand what kind of mental state a man has to be in to decide that he wants to become a woman. Most people would not feel comfortable having a transsexual make decisions as an elected official on their behalf. Well, maybe not most people, but definitely me. In our society's current state of political correctness, I often feel that voicing my true opinion on issues makes me look narrow-minded. So be it. Having a sex change is disgusting. It may not affect the managerial skills that this thing has used for the past 14 years, but anyone that would have this procedure has serious psychological issues and shouldn't be in a position of leadership.

As you can imagine, I was upset and even angry that the student apparently had not "gotten" the meaning of diversity after listening to my lectures, watching videos, and participating in class discussions and various experiential exercises. I was particularly upset by the use of the word "thing" to characterize a person. I knew that the other students would read this comment and would be waiting for my response. In other words, it was a *kairos* moment. I ranted later that day about the nerve of this guy to my colleague and coauthor, Professor R. She let me get it all out and calm down a little and then asked about my objectives for this course. Was the point to get the students to see things *my*

way? Did I really want to teach a course on diversity by using my power as the teacher to limit the students' words, meanings, and actions?

## **Framing Our Response**

In the two decades since the Hudson Institute released its landmark study on the increasing diversity of America's workforce (Johnston, 1987), businesses and universities have examined their role in educating managers in what it will take to be successful in the 21st century. Both content- and process-based training programs were seen as appropriate in making employees and students more sensitive to and able to manage diversity issues. However, research has shown that "college graduates do not possess the critical skills that are needed to handle diversity," such as being able to communicate effectively with those from diverse backgrounds (Day & Glick, 2000, p. 348).

One reason for this shortfall may be the personal development level of the students themselves. Students come into our classrooms with a variety of life experiences and different levels of self-understanding that affect their level of awareness of others (Schor et al., 1996). They often assume that everyone shares their way of perceiving, evaluating, and behaving—or ought to. Different perceptions, frameworks, and meanings threaten what is perceived as normal and when these expectations of others are not met, it is often the fault of these assumptions and perceptions rather than the circumstances themselves.

Diversity means variety, whereas stability, regularity, and predictability depend on limiting variety (Axley & McMahon, 2006). Uncomfortable with ambiguity and unpredictability, or "the gray areas of management," students want to know the "right" answer, one that will guarantee them success in the course, if not also in the workplace. Having a name for something, knowing the correct term to use, seems key to the ability to predict and control outcomes. However, when it comes to diversity, "little substantial guidance is available on how to constructively talk about differences and grapple with the ambiguity of not being able to predict what will happen" (Baker, 2004, p. 693).

Growing in self-awareness occurs in social and organizational contexts when we identify ourselves with, and distinguish ourselves from, one another's perceptions and interpretations. Thus, an understanding of oneself includes an increasing awareness of one's assumptions and a tacit framework for judging value (Neville, 2008). "We are fully responsible for our choices only if . . . we come to know what we are doing in making them. Our lives are self-chosen only when they are grounded in self-awareness" (Cell, 1984,

p. 60). This means “management educators hold an obligation to enhance students’ ability to recognize their underlying assumptions. In doing so, educators teach students to responsibly engage with others and with the diverse perspective of others” (Neville, 2008, p. 101).

For our students to be able to successfully manage themselves and others amidst a wide variety of assumptions and meanings, they need to realize that diversity is not just demographic differences but rather the “possession of different mental structures that lead to differences in the perception, conception, and interpretation of experience” (Dugal & Eriksen, 2004, p. 493). Assumptions have consequences. Different meanings result from and in different actions, depending on a variety of historical, interpersonal, and material contexts.

A tree is not the same object to a lumberman, a botanist, a poet; a star is a different object to a modern astronomer than it was to a sheep herder of antiquity; communism is a different object to a Soviet Patriot than it is to a Wall Street broker.” (Blumer, 1969, p. 69)

As Hayakawa (1939) put it,

$COW_1$  is not  $COW_2$  is not  $COW_3$  . . . The word “cow” calls up in our minds the features that this cow has *in common* with other “cows.” The index number, however, reminds us that this one *is different*; it reminds us that “cow” does not tell us “all about” the event; it reminds us of the *characteristics left out* in the process of abstracting. (pp. 254-255)

Diversity thus refers to differences in experiences with different objects as well as differences in the uses of the same objects. This richness in potential meanings creates both ambiguity and opportunity. Diversity management therefore is a question of balancing integration and differentiation (Hampden-Turner, 1970; Katz & Kahn, 1978) to both sustain and permeate the distinctions among and within the organizational members—at work and in the classroom (Scott, 1992).

This understanding requires a level of transcendent learning, or process of intentional inquiry, in which students can see the limitations of their current values, paradigms, or mind sets (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Cell, 1984). Specifically, the highest or most transcendent level of learning requires dialogue with those whose views differ from our own and respect for the choices made by others (Weick, 2008). Out of such dialogue emerges increased awareness of self and others, a new set of perspectives and identities, and new

possibilities for action. In other words, transcendent learning requires redefining our self-identity, thus allowing us “to learn a whole new set of behaviors” (Cell, 1984, p. 61).

This is a process from the inside out, so the teacher who tries to convince a student to change perceptions is at risk for being seen as crossing the line. As noted by Varela, “when you try to persuade someone about something, the other person’s natural reaction is to raise barriers against being persuaded” (Varela, 1971, as cited by Barnett, 2007, p. 121). In fact, when someone attempts to impose meaning on others without taking into account their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, what results is a form of violence akin to colonization (Purdy, 1991). Respectful communication, on the other hand, ideally allows for differences in interpretation of what might seem to be the same experience. In reality, differences in interpretations and meanings often do challenge interpersonal interactions and communication, so it would be helpful to look for ways in which such differences can support, and even improve, cooperation in the classroom and in the workplace (Duck, 1994).

One way to do so is proposed by Tjosvold (2008), who contrasts cooperative controversy, in which the participants give up some certainty to see the others’ points of view, from competitive controversy, where a debate rages as to who is right and who is wrong. Skill development in how to discuss opposing ideas constructively is often part of courses in teamwork, negotiation, and conflict management (Tjosvold, 2008). We suggest that diversity education, too, requires moving beyond attention to external physical characteristics that indicate race, color, sex, and national origin, toward an appreciation of the variety of meanings around such distinctions that cause conflicting assumptions and stereotypes.

Our story examines our experience in taking this leap of faith when a student in a managing diversity course both followed the directions to share his honest feelings yet violated the requirement to speak respectfully. In this case, the professor and the student differed in their perceptions toward another human being. The student’s comment was an opportunity to add sensitivity to authenticity (Avery & Steingard, 2008), although initially it did not feel that way. The professor’s emotional reaction to the student’s blog post paralleled that of Rosile’s (2007) hurt and dismay when a number of her students cheated in her class.

Our choice of a story format as discourse is guided by values explicated by Foss and Griffin’s (1995) theory of invitational rhetoric, in which relationship rather than domination is the purpose of communication. Putting our experience into story format to share with our readers is an ethical choice

intended to support relationship, cooperation, and learning. The “medium is the message,” so the way we express ourselves has consequences (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Our choice of structuring our discussion around our personal narrative is therefore based on our attempt to “practice what we preach” in terms of diversity.

Invitational rhetoric provided us a more complex and nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. “A story is not told as a means of supporting or achieving some other end but as an end in itself—simply offering a perspective that is subject to revision as a result of the interaction” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, pp. 7-8). Because our story is about the subjective responses of our students to the representations of gender in a business school class on diversity, and our responses to the students’ responses, we imagine that ours might be a contribution to a way of “standing back from the space of representation in order to examine how it reflects and reproduces specific subjectivities” (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004, p. 432). In applying Lewin’s (1945) assertion that there is nothing as practical as a good theory, we contribute to our colleagues our story of how to handle *kairos* moments by stepping back and explaining the objective reasons why we perceive each other’s words and meanings differently. Professor R continues the story.

## Professor R: The Conversation

When Professor D told me about the student’s use of the terms *disgusting* and *thing* to describe the Largo city manager, I thought of how Edmund Leach (1976) and Mary Douglas (1966/2002) characterize the anxiety about crossing the line. According to Leach (1976), boundaries have no dimensions and so are “ambiguous in implication and a source of conflict and anxiety” (p. 34). “The zones themselves, whether in time or space, are considered normal, clear-cut, and secular, while the boundaries are abnormal, ambiguous, and sacred” (p. 35). A boundary marks a change of state, so crossing it is deemed dangerous—either sacred or taboo. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966/2002) says this explains our reaction, and even revulsion sometimes, when we feel the integrity of categories have been contaminated. With these in mind, I responded to my colleague.

You know, the kid is having a predictable reaction to having his categories disturbed. Merely saying that we are all equal doesn’t really discount how we have different words, and therefore different categories, for males and females.

I held up my hands with my thumbs and forefingers forming two separate circles, and then I overlapped them like a Venn diagram.

Edmund Leach says that the places where the categories overlap are no-man's land . . . either sacred or taboo. Mary Douglas said that intrusion of stuff that belongs in one category into another evokes feelings of fear. She makes it a point to talk about how dirt is matter out of place. Dirt in your yard is good; dirt in the house is bad.

Your student is having an emotional reaction to having his categories challenged. Feminism and some psychoanalysts, like Kristeva, theorize that the categories of male and female are fundamental to all other distinctions, like language and power. In this student's world, the city manager's action crossed the line. His discomfort is justified. It is cool that he is able to talk about it in your class, in a weird way.

However, I am interested in why you are having such an emotional response to your student's comment. Seems like some line was crossed for you. What categories, if Leach and Douglas have a point, are breached and challenged by this student's action? Do you feel responsible for how this student is responding? Is he breaching expected language conventions of politeness?

## **Professor D: My Response**

I went back to my office and looked again at my course objectives and the instructions for commenting on the class blog that I had given the students:

Questions will be posted on a regular basis on the class blog and you will be expected to respond to my and your classmates' comments. As you think about your comments, remember that you are going beyond just facts to your thoughts and feelings. The raw fact might be that you visited your grandmother in a hospice. Write about how you felt and what the experience meant to you and its effect on your life. As you write your blog entries, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I said what I really think and feel or only what I think the professor is looking for me to say?
- Have I tied this experience to a real world experience of mine?
- Would my comment and examples make sense to me six months from now?
- Have I been respectful of my fellow classmates' thoughts and opinions and kept an open mind even when I disagree?

I then looked at the first blog post I had made in which I asked the students, “As we use this Weblog to create a learning community, what questions or concerns do you have about using this technology for this class? What issues or comments do you have about the class itself?” The students commented that they thought the class “will teach us things that we will actually be able to use daily in our future (or current) jobs” and “I think we will understand how diversity affects us every day in our career and our lives.” One student noted, “I guess part of learning is learning to do things that you aren’t completely comfortable with doing.”

One issue that came up several times was, “Do we have to be concerned about political correctness?” As one student wrote, “Diversity can bring up ‘touchy’ subjects and it may be easier for some people to type rather than to speak their thoughts, experiences, ideas, etc.” Another noted the following:

Concerning the class, I am interested to see how socially sensitive the language about race and ethnicity will be. I have been in other classes where I felt like I had to be so p.c. in my language that it really impaired me from discussing hard social issues.

My response:

I’m hoping we create a classroom culture so that everyone feels comfortable discussing the “tough topics.” I will expect everyone to keep an open mind and treat all members of the class with respect so that we can explore differences, start understanding, and become better colleagues and managers. As Dr. Morris Massey says, “If you can’t talk about it, you can’t change.”

I then went back to my colleague and said, “You’re right. The student is entitled to his opinion. But I really think his calling another human person ‘a thing’ is disrespectful and that I need to address this in class.” I asked her if she would be willing to be a guest speaker the following week to share our discussion with my students.

## **Professor R: The Presentation**

As I thought about how I wanted to approach my colleague’s students, I realized I wanted to emphasize that the dualism itself was the construct under deconstruction. Therefore, I began my lecture by trying to show the students how the “both/and” construction, and its accompanying hierarchical ranking, is functional in business management.

Organizations, and therefore managers, largely depend on our ability to discriminate between what will help us maximize performance, and what will not. In order to affect change and guide outcomes, we try to understand what is and isn't acceptable, and how to get back on track when errors occur. When we set up standards, we create two contrasting categories—acceptable and unacceptable. We make judgments based on values that require distinctions. You choose either/or between options, and you need to. The kinds of options I am talking about, and the ability to have options at all, rely on language. The words we use represent our choices, and so they need to be pretty clear-cut.

I was, of course, walking and waving my arms around to emphasize the dynamic and emotional qualities of these concerns.

You probably know these categories as boxes you are supposed to check—on application forms, for example. The form requires you to mark your sex as being male or female, your military status as being a veteran or not. Sometimes the categories offer several choices, such as your race and/or ethnicity but you can only check one box.

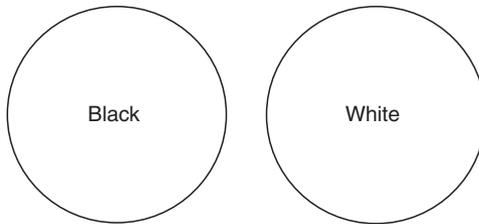
The standards and our understanding of them are based on our use of language. An important scholar of anthropology who focused on communication and culture, Edmond Leach, pointed out that language is based on a whole range of these contrasting categories. Did you ever watch *Sesame Street*? Remember the little puzzle, “Three of these things belong together; one of these things is not the same?” Or do you remember learning antonyms—sets of opposites? Good versus bad is an important example of what Leach calls binary coding. Our ability to define things is based on our ability to contrast them with what they aren't. Maybe you have heard of the cartoon character Popeye the Sailor Man who exclaimed, “I am what I am and that's all that I am.” We understand what “day” is by contrasting it to “night.” We can make a list of similar oppositions.

Fortunately, there was a dry-erase marker in the classroom, so I went to the board and made a list to illustrate oppositions/antonyms:

Day	Night
Large	Small
Short	Tall
Good	Bad
Empty	Full

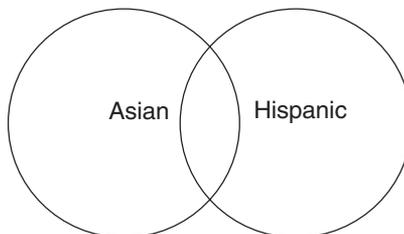
Generally, we think of these categories as expressing completely different aspects or identities. Leach uses circles to illustrate the clear distinctions assumed in binary coding.

I drew the circles and, knowing that we would eventually get to consider male and female, I started off with the colors black and white so that I could get to what a former student called “the gray area.”



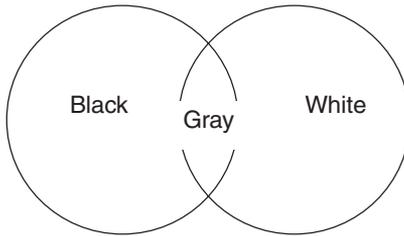
We consider these two, binary, categories to be mutually exclusive, or oppositions. Something is one or the other, so obviously can't be both. Think about bureaucratic operations. Did you know that the word “bureaucracy” refers to a bureau, kind of an old-timey word that means a chest of drawers or a file cabinet? In a well organized bureau, for example, socks go in one drawer and shirts in another. In bureaucracy, organization and rationality depends on having clear categories of mutually exclusive items. Remember those job applications I mentioned earlier, where each box represents a category that you have to identify, such as male or female, or which nationality? The problem comes in when, for example, you don't neatly fit into the categories. One of my students asked me what she should put on those forms because her dad was Asian and her mom was Hispanic. She is a little bit of both, but the application form she needed to complete didn't have a place to mark that.

I drew two more circles, this time overlapping, to illustrate the student's dilemma.



The student found herself in “the gray area” that happens when black and white intermingle.

I erased the nationalities and inserted the color terms.



I want you to consider the categories of male and female. Those are distinctions that we learn from a very early age, particularly as it relates to our understanding of the differences between Dad and Mom, brother and sister, boys and girls.

Now we were getting to it. Also, I was regretting not going into the idea that each of the items in the binary antonyms from the previous list has characteristics and that the characteristics divided between the two members of each binary cause problems, not to mention the hierarchical assignment of greater value to each of the members and its characteristics. I decided to press on with this simplified version. So, again to emphasize the both/and values of BOTH the categories AND their transgression, I took a minute to illustrate Leach's (1976) discussion about other ways in which the categories were transgressed, particularly during times of transformation.

Leach said that another way that boundaries get crossed is during times of change, or transformation. He gave the example of getting married. Another example, one you are probably looking forward to, would be graduation. Leach says that crossing the boundary between categories means crossing the line. That is considered either sacred or taboo, and so it usually takes place in a symbolic ritual. Think ahead, for instance, of crossing the line between being a student to being a graduate. When will the exact moment be? We mark the moment by changing the tassel on your hat from one side to the other.

I lifted my forearm in front of my face and illustrated a grasping and then shifting of direction movement, though I was not sure I was moving it in the correct direction.

Any change means you are moving from one state to another. You have to go through a gray area. In some ways, that's why learning is difficult. You go from not knowing something to knowing it, and now you are different. That change of state, or change of identity, depends on our ability to go through this gray area, which in many ways is considered dangerous. In the old days, as the legend of Hermes or Mercury pointed out, traders were often afraid to cross the boundaries, or borders, between countries. So they'd put their merchandise next to a large stone marking the border, called a herm, and they'd come back and collect the items that were traded for it. They definitely risked getting ripped off, but they considered that a safer risk than actually crossing, and interacting with those on the other side of the border. Consider that our words commerce and merchandise, etc., come from this symbolic myth of exchange.

So crossing the border and entering into the gray area or "no-man's land" puts you at risk. Mary Douglas was another anthropologist, one who looked at the role that categories play in our understanding of safety and danger. She said that dirt outside is good, whereas inside it is bad—it is dirty. She coined the phrase, "Dirt is matter out of place." Like Leach, she said that because boundaries have no dimensions, they both create the categories themselves and they interfere with the ability of those categories to let us know that things are where and how they belong. Therefore, boundaries are necessarily ambiguous and a source of conflict and anxiety.

It is normal, therefore, to feel challenged and anxious when someone crosses the line between categories. I want you to remember about categories, and particularly how they are part of language. Some of you were uncomfortable with the newspaper article that Professor D had you read. The city manager doesn't fit into the traditional categories of male OR female but instead is in that gray area of male AND female. Hopefully our discussion today helps you to understand why people get upset when they feel these lines are crossed.

Another part of language to remember is that it is hierarchical, although not exactly in the way hierarchy works in organizations. Hierarchy in language has to do with classification schemes, and our ability to go metaphorically up and down a hierarchical ladder, which we can call levels of abstraction. Going down the ladder to more and more specific terms is an indicator of specialization, while going up is an indicator of

generalization. All concepts are so ordered. Some call this systems thinking. Think, for example, of your university. You are an individual, and you have a major that is within the College of Business, and the business college is part of your university, which is under the government of the state educational system, etc. Or you could go the other direction, in your major, there are specialties, such as are represented by the different courses in it, and each of those courses has different chapters and within those chapters are different processes and terminologies you need to learn. The more you are able to draw finer and finer distinctions among these terms and processes, the more expert you are in your field. In practice, mixing up the different ways or confusing the different types is considered to be a serious transgression.

That brings us back to Douglas's point that we are repulsed when something is out of place. As managers you need to know what is and isn't appropriate. But the problem is also that you are often responsible for helping your organization stay current, and even ahead of the game. Putting things together that don't, or didn't used to, go together is a key source of revenue for technology industries these days. We used to think that putting together a person and a machine created a monster—like in Frankenstein movies. But now we are quite used to mixing people and machines. Think of pacemakers, or teenagers with cell phones or blue-tooth earpieces “attached” to their ears. Similarly, mixing different machines, such as a movie screen and a telephone, used to seem ridiculous. Our ability to combine in new ways things that used to be separate is useful in technological innovations and in interpersonal understanding.

So where does this leave us? It sounds in some ways like the original problem that Leach described. We have two imperatives, or things we need to do, that contradict: We need to BOTH understand and preserve the distinctions AND to cross the line to foster change, creativity, and relationships. I suggest that this isn't an impossible task after all if you are willing to be flexible with language and levels of abstraction. If you get stuck or anxious finding yourself facing an instance where you or someone else either has or needs to cross the line, then try moving up or down the ladder. If I have a takeaway for you to understand diversity, it would be . . .

I then wrote the following advice on the board:

Where you see difference, look for similarities.  
Where you see sameness, look for differences.

## Conclusions and Opportunities for Further Reflection

Ours is and is not a unique story. The number of transsexuals in the workforce is relatively low. However, anxiety can result any time we deal with others perceived as different, when people are not where we think they belong, or when we cannot easily categorize someone, particularly in terms of race, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, class, job title, and so on.

Douglas (1966/2002) identified one strategy that is used for dealing with anomalies: naming it as a member of a different class of phenomena, as our student did when he called the city manager a “thing.” Organizational members also struggle with understanding others who do not fit into the neat categories they are used to using. For example, the public’s outrage and the city’s decision to fire the Largo city manager illustrate the uncomfortable feelings and responses people have when boundaries between categories are crossed. A deeper understanding of the usefulness and shortcomings of binary oppositions can help us engage in discourse among and between those with marked differences in status and culture (Carrillo Rowe, 2005).

Successful workplace interactions depend on our ability to understand the many cross-cutting similarities and differences between self and others (Litvin & Betters-Reed, 2005). Some problems we have in education and in the workplace occur because of the limitations of our language and our uncertainty as to how to approach others viewed as different. Transgressions of our categories are often uncomfortable and viewed as “strange, inappropriate, or even stupid” (Antal & Friedman, 2008, p. 366). Issues of political correctness, hate speech, and discomfort at not knowing the best words to use come into play. Someone who is neither male nor female (or is both), became a “thing” when the student had no other descriptive word to use. As noted by Professor R, part of the problem in dealing with diversity is the power of categories and our fear of uncertainty. Many of us struggle when referring to someone of a different race, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. Is the preferred term *Black* or *African American*? Should we say gay or homosexual? Why is it that a derogatory term can be used as a term of endearment by those perceived to be in one’s in-group and an insult when used by others? Our discomfort with words sometimes leads us to avoid interacting with others who do not fit in the categories we know.

One aspect of our story that deserves further investigation is the role of technology and social networks. It may be that the cultural expectations

regarding politeness and respect are changing as language (at least spelling!) and norms for disclosure change in social network sites and Weblogs. In a related caveat, Professor D's ability to look at the asynchronous blog and have time to think on how to respond means reconsidering what "in the moment" and "kairos" mean in hybrid and online classroom settings.

Broadly, then, we hope to normalize the acknowledgment of one's own limitations and boundaries (Foucault, 1998), such as when we want to dialogue but find ourselves at a loss for words to do so (Downs, Durant, & Smith, 2008). Focusing on our own boundaries and being patient with our own and others' transgressions are ethical and ultimately spiritual endeavors of community and humility. We suggest that teaching and managing diversity requires attention to boundaries, as well as a willingness to suspend them, to better understand one another and ourselves. As Freire (1970/1993) noted,

Consistent with the liberating purpose of dialogical education, the object of the investigation is not persons, but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which generative themes are found. (p. 78)

### *Professor D's Takeaways*

This experience and Professor R's lecture opened my eyes and provided an opportunity to learn for me too. As a professor, I will likely have more moments during or even outside the classroom when a student will make a comment that I find disrespectful. By having a greater awareness of my emotions at these times, I hope to be able to think through how to make such a moment into a teaching moment. I was angry and upset by my student's comment. My student was angry and upset by the actions of the city manager. However, as Warren (2008) notes in his article, "Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom," it is the teacher's responsibility to both help students learn something from the moment and care for and protect all the participants, perhaps particularly the student who has generated the hot moment, even though learning about hot topics is often difficult and uncomfortable.

I might add that I need to continue to look beyond my own first responses in a situation such as this. Professor R helped me to see the situation from the student's perspective as to *why* he reacted the way he did. I learned the importance of detaching from the need to control how the other person understands the situation. Detaching means remaining aware, but rather than reacting, allowing time and space to frame a chosen response. As I let go of

at least part of my desire for the “ideal,” I gain a better perspective of what is real. In this way, I trust that as I manage my own perspective and actions at the “line,” I model for students how to “walk the walk,” not just “talk the talk.” Thus, Professor R helped me to formulate my own adage for teaching diversity: *When topics get too emotional, move to theory to explain why this happens.*

### **Professor R's Takeaways**

In both my teaching and in life, I am committed to practicing invitational rhetoric; thus, I try to refrain from giving advice on how others should conduct their business or solve their problems. However, I will say this experience has been a learning experience for me also. First, I am pleased and surprised at how helpful the anthropology theories of Mary Douglas and Edmond Leach were at helping Professor D and I talk about her frustration. Even though “there is nothing as practical as a good theory,” actually seeing the application of theory to frame an important and difficult conversation was amazing to me.

In addition, I am continuing to work at being okay with not knowing. This has a couple of classroom implications for me as it allows me to be a little less defensive when students question and/or challenge part of my class. I also believe that if I am willing to admit I do not know, I model openness to learning. Some things will always be “lost in translation” in attempts to communicate with others. If I claim my own fair share of uncertainty, I open up a space in which to cocreate a shared meaning for a given purpose. When I come to uncharted territory, I can stop and admit that I do not know how to proceed. I can ask for help and listen for guidance—from others and from my own heart.

The aphorism, “Where you see differences, look for similarities; where you see similarities, look for differences,” came to me as I was wrapping up the lecture in Professor D's class. However, I think this approach is useful and would suggest it as a way to invite others to share their stories when dealing with interpersonal encounters that seem to cross the line.

### **Professor D: Epilogue**

The question we get from colleagues (as well as the reviewers for this journal) when we share our story is, “What happened to the student?” At the end of the semester, I asked all the students to give feedback on the class on their Weblog. Most of them wrote comments that were powerful and showed personal growth from grappling with diversity issues.

I clearly remember this moment. I was giving my opinion about a race issue, I think it might have been the video we watched from Primetime Live on racism. But as I was commenting I heard what I was really saying. And it sounded like my father. I love my dad dearly but I am not always happy with the things that I have learned from him . . . I feel as if some of his prejudice has rubbed off on me. (Male student)

I feel like this class has given me the chance to re-evaluate my subconscious thoughts. I said last week that this class has meant a lot to me because tolerance is kind of different from intelligence. My “light bulb” moment came when I realized that my intelligence would not make me do well in this class but that I would have to start rethinking how I felt about other people. That day I went to lunch with a friend and I remember how I could not stop talking about our class, I just got “it.” (Male student)

Another overall and cumulative “aha” moment is seeing the benefits that can occur when people feel safe to talk about diversity. Before this class, I often felt that somehow it was inappropriate to talk about certain diversity issues. I don’t know if I didn’t want to offend someone or if I just didn’t know how to broach the subject. I think our society falls into this trap all too often. We all want to be safe under the umbrella of being “politically correct.” I think a lot of change has happened this semester for the students in this course. How can our society change if we can’t communicate the issues effectively? (Female student)

And my student who “crossed the line” and started this discussion?

My “aha” moment came from watching our class evolve and seeing the power of awareness through sharing our thoughts and stories on the blog. As we have become more aware of issues related to diversity, we have had class-wide “aha” moments. Now that we are aware of prejudices and difficulties associated with diverse people, we are better able to stop ourselves, adjust, and make better decisions than if we did not have this class. After one more class I will be finished here and I can say that the overall theme to business is not products or strategy but human relationships. How businesses interact with other businesses, customers, suppliers, and employees defines the success of the business. Our class has had an advantage through our exchange.

As you can see, his report of transformation is unconvincing. The student seems to be engaging in what he thought he should say to be politically correct without any real personal insight, as reflected in the frequent use of “we” rather than “I.” Professor R’s lecture on why we are uncomfortable with people and things that fit into the gray areas between categories helped me to understand *why* the student was uncomfortable with the class topic. She also helped me to understand my own emotional response. However, I do not really know whether her lecture, and the class itself, made any significant change in how this student sees others he perceives as different from himself. As with much of what we teach in management, even he may not know how useful the class discussions were until later in his life and career.

To me a big part of what we do in higher education is to create opportunities for epiphanies. This would suggest that it is not necessary to “correct” students’ politically incorrect or socially undesirable or simply conflicting-with-the teacher viewpoint but to encourage them to look beyond their original emotional responses to considering new perspectives. At any rate, I think this experience fostered respect for diverse viewpoints for the other students in the class and modeled for them a pedagogy of discovery rather than just “teaching” my own values and viewpoints. This approach should be useful for them as future managers in the 21st century.

## Appendix

### *Newspaper Article Used in Diversity Class Assignment*

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City commissioners ended one of the most tumultuous weeks in Largo history Tuesday night by moving to fire City Manager Steve Stanton following his disclosure that he will have a sex-change operation. A total of 480 people packed City Hall for a four-hour meeting during which one activist was arrested after police told her not to hand out fliers. After listening to about 60 speakers, mostly from Largo, a majority of commissioners said they had lost confidence in Stanton’s ability to lead. “His brain is the same today as it was last week,” Commissioner Gay Gentry said. “He may be even able to be a better city manager. But I sense that he’s lost his standing as a leader among the employees of the city.” Commissioners voted 5-2, with Mayor Pat Gerard and Commissioner Rodney Woods in dissent, to place Stanton on paid leave while his departure is made final. “I’m going to be embarrassed if we throw this man out on the trash heap after he’s worked so hard for the city,” Gerard said before the vote. “We have a choice to make: We can go back to intolerance, or we can be the city of progress.” Woods chastised fellow commissioners, saying he had a hard time accepting that they didn’t consider Stanton’s recent choice to become a woman when they decided he was unfit to lead. After the vote, Stanton, 48, left the meeting without

*(continued)*

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## Appendix (continued)

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comment. Later, he told the *St. Petersburg Times* that the “commission did what they felt was best for the community.” But, he said, commissioners voted before getting a full understanding of what a transsexual must confront when this kind of secret is disclosed. During the meeting, Stanton described the dismay of watching his professional reputation disintegrate in just seven days. Until last week, he had served 14 years as the city manager, generally to good reviews. Last fall, commissioners raised his salary nearly 9 percent to \$140,234 a year. But on Feb. 21, the *Times* reported that Stanton was undergoing hormone therapy in preparation for gender-reassignment surgery—a plan known only to a small circle of people, including his wife, medical team and a few top officials at City Hall. Stanton and his friends had written an eight-page plan to help make his decision known in June, when he said his 13-year-old son could be out of town and shielded from the publicity. Instead, the news came out before he told his son. Outraged residents swarmed commissioners, demanding he be ousted. “It’s just real painful to know that seven days ago I was a good guy and now I have no integrity, I have no trust and most painful, I have no followers,” Stanton said. But he also indicated he does not plan to sue the city. “In so many ways I am Largo,” Stanton told commissioners. “It’s like suing my mother.”

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Source: *St Petersburg Times*, February 28, 2007.

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