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Too Mean For Our Own Good

By William C. Levin



I don't understand what the huge flap is about multicultural education. As far as I can understand, multiculturalism is merely an effort to include in our course materials information about a range of people and experiences. So why did Dinesh D'Sousa warn in his book *Illiberal Education* that multiculturalism was already undermining the foundations of Western Culture and would, if unchecked, lead to the abandonment of our greatest cultural expressions? There is no room for William Shakespeare if we also study Langston Hughes? And why have some communities attempted to ban languages other than American (Lowell), or teachers with foreign accents from their schools (Westfield)?

This Spring I attended a conference on multiculturalism sponsored by the National Education Association. I was eager to hear not only what was being taught around the country, but also where all the sensitivity came from. There was a good deal of preaching, of course. In this case, the overwhelming sentiment was that multicultural education is desperately needed. Despite his absence from the meetings, Mister D'Sousa took it on the chin more than a few times. But despite all that I learned, the cause of such sensitivity to multiculturalism was only marginally raised, then quickly dropped.

I would like to suggest a possible explanation for these strong feelings about multiculturalism which developed out of discussions begun at that conference. I have since realized why the issue seemed at once so familiar, and so confusing. It comes from my teaching of statistics. (For those of you who are about to stop reading because I have used the "S" word, please give me a few more sentences. I promise it will work out fine.)

Almost always the study of statistics, at least in the sociology department, begins with a discussion of distributions. Information about people, which is what we deal with, can be presented in ways that make sense or don't. For example, imagine see-

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ing a page on which the yearly incomes of 15,000 men and women were printed in no particular order. You would have to start digging through the data somehow to make it coherent. But how? Now imagine that the same income figures were printed on two separate sheets of paper, one for women and one for men. If, in addition, each list of incomes were arranged from lowest to highest, the data could not help but make more sense. Voila! Distributions.

Statistical procedures allow us to make sense of data, to arrange it in ways that reveal its characteristics. Once this beginning idea is understood, it is a short step to understanding that distributions have two underlying sorts of characteristics, central tendency and variability. Central tendency is simply the extent to which the data points (usually numbers, but not always) have something in common. What, for example, is the most commonly appearing income in a list of incomes? This is a measure of central tendency called the mode. Another, more broadly used measure of central tendency (the mean) is the arithmetic average. Add all the scores and divide by the number of scores. You have been doing this with your grades since you were a child. Once you have calculated a measure of central tendency you know something about the nature of the distribution, but really only half the story, as it turns out.

The other major characteristic of distributions is variability, or the extent to which the data points differ from one another. Measures like the range (the span between the highest and lowest number) and the mean deviation (the average difference of all the numbers in a list from the center of that list) are indicators of the variability of a distribution.

For those of you who are wondering if I have lost my way from the topic, it is here that the fundamental usefulness of multiculturalism becomes apparent to me. Knowing what central tendency and variability are, it seems clear to me that we have limited our educational focus to the measures of central tendency and short-changed variability. The great works of Western cultures, what critics call the

"canon", or the accumulated production of eminent, dead white men, is like the mode or the mean. By studying them we do learn who we are, but only in part. We discover what sorts of things are characteristic of the most powerful and influential producers of ideas in America and the West. But what is missing is the work of people who differ from the mode. It would be like presenting the mean of the distribution without attention to its variability. So what? Well, let me illustrate the danger of doing so.

Take two countries with the same average income of \$50,000 per year. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it. You could live happily in either place. However, here are the lists of the incomes of the seven citizens of each country. (Small countries.)

Citizen #	Equalia	Differentia
1	\$50,000	\$ 1,000
2	\$50,000	\$ 2,000
3	\$50,000	\$ 3,000
4	\$50,000	\$ 4,000
5	\$50,000	\$ 5,000
6	\$50,000	\$ 6,000
7	\$50,000	\$329,000

The average incomes of the two countries are the same, but the variabilities are wildly different. If I weren't the one rich person in Differentia, I wouldn't want to take the chance of living there. Making do with information about central tendency without information about variability can be a big mistake. And the mistake gets worse the more differences there are in a country. Perhaps in relatively homogeneous countries like Japan, where an ancient isolation of the islands from other cultures has led the Japanese to develop few differences from one another, multiculturalism is less needed. However, in the United States, which was built on a series of immigrant populations, and continues to diversify, ignorance of differences may be suicidal. And once one takes a global view, increasingly made necessary by the changing nature of the way business is done today, failure to account for variability is double dangerous, even for the Japanese who have become serious students of the cultures of those with whom they wish to do business.

So, with apologies to those who would do a great deal to avoid statistics, I remain confused about the failure of some people to see the value, the need, to increase the multicultural content of our education at all levels. Perhaps our general affinity for measures of central tendency is as simple as the appeal of the familiar. We know in sociology that it is comforting to be in the company of those perceived to be the same as oneself. However, in a diversifying country and world, we do so at our peril.

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