UMDLI Reflections 2014

Theresa McMannus

Coming from a small, rural, Maine town I would classify my life experiences with diversity as minimal. Our town population is largely white, largely impoverished and of course aging. We don’t have families of color, gay and lesbian relationships are hidden from public sight, the Jehovah Witnesses worship on the out skirts of town - rather than in the middle of town where Christians worship. We don’t have a native population, but rather a large Canadian-American population due to many migrating from Canada to work on the railroads.

As a member of the 2014 UMDLI cohort I have learned that all those populations are a diverse culture of their own. UMDLI has taken me from the depths of poverty to the emotional tribulations of transgender issues. We have explored classism, gender, race and religion. I found hope in learning about Restorative Justice practices and found refreshment in student discussion panels.

This journey has helped me to begin building a toolbox rich with utensils to help scaffold not only my own understanding of diversity but also tools to share with others. Our campus, our towns and our state has populations rich in cultural, of all ages, of all incomes, and of all backgrounds. If we all can just add a small piece to the foundation and framework, our finished structure would be that much stronger.

William D. Osmer

My immersion into UMDLI began one year ago. Over the course of this past year I have experienced numerous emotions and tremendous personal growth. Now as I sit and attempt to reflect upon my time with UMDLI, the emotion I feel most strongly is a sense of gratitude. I am grateful to the individuals on campus, especially Lu Zeph and Devon Storman, and to the advisory committee whose passion and commitment to diversity has helped the program thrive. I am extremely thankful to each of the facilitators for giving their time and knowledge at the immersion and at each of our monthly sessions. However, I feel the most gratitude to the fellow members of my cohort who found time in their busy schedules to come together to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Diversity, by definition, is the quality of being composed of many differing parts. It is opposite of homogeneity. The key to understanding diversity begins with looking inward and discovering what makes us each unique. I know that my personal story is different than that of everyone else around me. I think most people would have an easy time coming to a similar realization about their own uniqueness. What is harder, is to look at a group of “others” with a shared skin tone, language, age, or dress and conclude that there is diversity in that group.

As humans it is normal to view the world and categorize what we see. It is a way to simplify our environment and make sense of complexity. Surely this is a trait that gave early humans an evolutionary
advantage. But, there are also disadvantages. If we group things by their similarities we have to ignore the qualities that make them different. When we put enough things together in a group we start to view the group as an entity and cease to see the individual components in it. We make assumptions that things in one category are all the same. If you put enough people into a group, you can more easily ignore the value of each individual in that group. That is when classism and sexism and ageism (and all the other “isms”) can rear their ugly heads.

I would like to share a couple of quotes that help to expound upon this idea. The first from Chad Lambert’s Beppo’s Blog is attributed to someone known only as Buster B. and was written in the USA in 2010.

“Isn’t it comforting to fit people into little boxes and categories, so that you can stop caring about what happens to them? I’m as guilty as anyone. ... There’s no shortage of little boxes to put people in, either. Marxists think there are financial classes. Feminists think there are sexual classes. Blacks think there are racial classes. I think there are classes of ... politics. It’s the human way of dealing with millions of people, with meeting hundreds of people every day. You can’t get to know everyone individually. ... We just toss them in boxes. This one’s a feminist. That one’s a leftist. That one’s a conservative. That one’s a skinhead. This one’s a single mother. That one’s a divorced father. And for every box we have a list of ready-made qualities we ascribe to it. Self-absorbed. Angry. Annoying. Petty. Self-righteous. Dogmatic. Immature. Cold. Heartless. Vicious. Greedy. Victim. Oppressor. Throughout all of this we forget the one great truth: that there are no boxes. That all there really is are individuals. But, as I said, and as the conversation illustrates, nobody is immune from bigotry and prejudice, not even those, like the left-wing revolutionaries at the next table, who claim to hate bigotry and prejudice.”

~ Buster B

This second quote was written in 2004 by a woman from the other side of the world on the Indian subcontinent. It was published in the Hindustan Times. These two authors differ in gender and culture and geography (and likely many other ways) but they make very similar observations.

“there is a real danger of relinquishing the possibility to imagine ourselves beyond categories. We simply accept to align with certain identities – ‘us’ as outsiders, ‘them’ as locals – using a language that is distinctly polarised. [...] Categories dehumanise. We might apply them to rocks and plants, but when we slot human beings into [them] we crush the infinite complexities we are capable of harbouring... Categories create convenient distance. By removing them, all you are left with are people. Flesh, blood and bone.” ~ Janice Pariat, Hindustan Times

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1 http://chadlambert.wordpress.com/tag/putting-people-into-boxes/
2 http://paper.hindustantimes.com/epaper/iphone/homepage.aspx#_article042981a7-11b3-474d-bd89-8f81bfa82c2c/2waarticle042981a7-11b3-474d-bd89-8f81bfa82c2c/042981a7-11b3-474d-bd89-8f81bfa82c2c//true/janice+Pariat
Hate and bigotry have their root in ignorance. By making assumptions about people and classifying them into groups, we are choosing to ignore individuality. When you don’t view someone as a person it is easy to not treat them as one. Evils such as war and racism can’t happen unless people are lumped into groups and dehumanized. It can be easy to treat a strange faceless group harshly but quite difficult to look an individual person in the eye and be cruel to him.

There is a misperception that UMaine is not a diverse place. It is essential that we recognize the variety of heritage, culture, education, wealth, gender, religion, and beliefs in our community. We must fight the temptation to place people into neat little boxes and lose sight of the uniqueness...the diversity...of each individual.

Daniel Smith

Not being directly in the academic field I thought that I had a pretty good feel for what was going on campus. After going through the UMDLI training program I truly found how little I knew about the things going on campus and in the community. I also found a new and better evaluation of myself and of others. The biggest change that came in the course was finding really true friends that I know will be there for each other in the future if we ever need some guidance in future undertakings. All I can say is that whether a person is in the academic or in the facilities department, I would highly recommend that you consider doing the program and truly learn who you are and what is going on around you every day.