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USING DIFFERENTIATED LITERATURE TO PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL THINKING

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Dr. Kaufman's dilemma is how to make a course relevant to students with uncommon backgrounds and diversified professional needs. She suggests that a focus on common issues using uncommon literature both differentiates and unifies learning. I suggest that this model can be extended in two ways and that the gains in student learning go beyond content mastery. Kaufman's model is applied to a class comprised of a diverse student population from several disciplines. Because there is often great diversity among the members of what seems to be a homogeneous population from within a discipline, her solution has relevance to those populations. Also, the concept gains momentum and value when it is applied across a number of courses within a single program. When applied to a program of study, this approach develops the ability to think in ways that are new and necessary in today's world.

What follows are the observations of a student enrolled in a leadership studies program in which Dr. Kaufman currently teaches a number of courses. Ours is a cohort of public-school educators, which seems to be a rather homogeneous group. However, a closer examination reveals the professional roles of teacher, curriculum director, special education coordinator, mathematics supervisor, transportation director, educational consultant, special programs coordinator, technology coordinator, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. In addition, there is great diversity in our work situations. School sizes range from very small to very large. The schools are situated in rural, urban, and city environments, and financially these districts stretch from dangerously poor to wealthy. Thus, a single concept may or may not be relevant to a number of cohort members or it may differ vastly in its application. For instance, poverty might be a greater factor in an inner-city school than it is in a wealthy suburban district. In addition, the problems and solutions for rural poverty may be significantly different from the problems and solutions for the inner-city poor. For our cohort, which is diverse within a discipline, there is great value in using uncommon literature to explore a common issue in order to broaden the conceptual understanding of the learners.

To illustrate this, let us consider the topic of managing cultural change in a school system. Assume a class where students are seeking the answer to how best implement theories related to managing change. A superintendent's view might be to develop a team of administrators who understand cultural change, who know how to capitalize on the common beliefs and values of an organization, and who have the ability to implement the necessary change. The relevant literature may be Jim Collins's (2001) work describing the common culture of great corporations, Kouzes and Posner's (2007) work on follower expectations, or Michael Fullan's (2005) work on sustainability in educational settings. All the administrators could adopt the Army's model of structure and its method of systematically
developing transformational leadership (Center for Army Leadership, 2004). A building principal might draw upon Sergiovanni and Starratt’s (2007) model for supervision, or Senge et al.’s (1999) concept of developing a learning organization to manage change. A curriculum and instruction director might use Danielson and McGreal’s (2000) framework to effect a change in the culture of instruction. In this learning situation, giving students the option of choosing from a literature list allows them to explore those areas most directly related to their professional situation. Subsequent classroom presentations and discussion exposes students to all of these viewpoints and literature. It is important to note that this approach becomes interdisciplinary in that it incorporates leadership literature from the corporate world, education, the military, and other areas.

When Dr. Kaufman’s approach is used in multiple courses, the leadership program becomes innovative and the impact on student learning intensifies. Students eventually become adept at broadening their conceptual development by seeking diverse literature on an issue. They understand that there are learning opportunities not only in the diversity of the literature, but also in the diversity of experience and professional situations of the cohort members, as well as other forms of diversity. This eventually can become a habit of mind, one which seeks knowledge through a variety of literature and across a variety of disciplines. In courses within the program where this approach is not used, it is common in our cohort to hear students discussing additional readings they have independently sought and which go beyond the requirements of the course.

This type of learning and thinking contains elements of both the “disciplined Mind” and the “synthesizing Mind” as described by Howard Gardner (2006) in *Five Minds for the Future*:

> Students must see information not as an end in itself or as a stepping-stone to more advanced types of information, but rather as a means to better-informed practice. For their part, teachers acting to some extent as coaches must provide feedback on their students’ abilities to pick up the distinctive habits of mind in the behavior of the professional (p. 30).

This refers to thinking within a single discipline and the development of the disciplined mind, but Gardner also discusses the synthesizing mind. The synthesizing mind has the ability to knit together information from disparate sources into a coherent whole. Gardner suggests that this is a vital skill in today’s world. He describes interdisciplinary synthesis as the most ambitious form of synthesis, leading to an understanding that cannot be achieved solely within a single discipline. It is a true integration of disciplines, not just different disciplinary approaches to the same topic. It leads to what Friedman (2006) describes as the ability to put previously unrelated ideas together to find solutions for problems we have never seen before. Daniel Pink (2005) calls this symphony “the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze; to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad patterns rather than to deliver specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair” (p. 130). Using uncommon literature for uncommon or common student populations promotes professional thinking within a discipline, as well as interdisciplinary thinking, and leads to new and innovative approaches to concepts and issues.

Based on my experience, I believe that Dr. Kaufman’s model goes beyond addressing the needs of a diverse student group. It can also address the diversity within seemingly homogeneous student populations. When used in multiple courses within a program, Kaufman’s model becomes more than an innovative instructional approach. It also becomes a learning strategy for the students. When repeatedly exposed to Kaufman’s approach, students move beyond just learning the important concepts of the subject. The acquired strategy becomes a habit of the mind, a way of thinking. This is a way of thinking and learning that authors such as Gardner, Friedman, and Pink deem essential in order for individuals to be effective both personally and professionally in today’s global economy. Evidence that this model becomes a habit of the mind may be best illustrated by a comment from a cohort member. He said, “The biggest change I have experienced from being in this program is that I have become a reader. I never read before and now I find myself picking up books that I am not required to read” (James Smith, personal communication, June 20, 2008). Did I say that the model also promotes the habit of reading?
References

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