

Diversity Literacy

Course conceptualised and developed by Professor Melissa Steyn at the University of Cape Town

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Critical Diversity Literacy OER Overview

This document will provide the overriding logic of the course and explain how various activities contribute to meeting those ends. In doing so, it will provide a very brief theoretical orientation. It will also provide some broad guidelines for the use of this OER.

A. General Description

A 2nd-3rd year, semester long, undergraduate course for South African universities, aimed at students from all faculties.

B. Rationale for the Course

Despite South Africa's tumultuous past and its persistent legacy, the majority of South African university students will graduate with undergraduate degrees having never encountered concepts of race, gender, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, disability, culture, and postcolonialism in meaningful ways. Even within Humanities faculties, where students have access to courses which address these topics, very few, if any, of these courses require students to engage with critical theory, much less demand that students consider how this theory applies to their everyday lives. It is this gap that *Diversity Literacy* aims to fill. It is designed to provide students with theoretical concepts which can be applied to everyday contexts and prepare them to function effectively and sensitively as professionals in social contexts characterised by diversity.

C. What is Critical Diversity Literacy? Theoretical Underpinnings

Melissa Steyn's (2010) notion of *Critical Diversity Literacy* is the conceptual foundation upon which the course was conceptualised. Steyn defines this concept as a 'reading practice' which perceives and responds to social climates and prevalent structures of oppression. Eight analytical criteria are employed to evaluate the presence of Critical Diversity Literacy in any given social context. These are:

- a. a recognition of the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities, such as whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, ablebodiedness, middleclassness etc;
- b. analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of privilege intersect, interlock co-construct and constitute each other;
- c. the definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems and not only historical legacy



- d. an understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices;
- e. the possession of a diversity grammar and vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism and antiracism, and the parallel concepts employed in the analysis of other forms of oppression;
- f. the ability to translate (interpret) coded hegemonic practices;
- g. an analysis of the ways in that diversity hierarchies and institutional oppressions are mediated by class inequality and inflected in specific social contexts; and
- h. an engagement with issues of transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening democracy/social justice in all levels of social organisation. (Steyn, M. 2010)

Critical Diversity Literacy as Conscientisation

The process of developing Critical Diversity Literacy is in essence the process of conscientisation, and our use of the term both in theory and practise is informed by Paulo's Freire (1970) notion of *conscientização*. Paulo Freire (1970) used the term *conscientização* to refer to "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19). According to Martín-Baró (1994) conscientisation "joins the psychological dimension of personal consciousness with its social and political dimension and makes manifest the historical dialectic between knowing and doing, between individual growth and community organisation, between personal liberation and social transformation" (p. 18). Montero (2009) argues that conscientisation is "a mobilization of consciousness aiming to produce historic knowledge about oneself and about the groups to which one belongs, thereby producing a different understanding, and giving sense to one's temporal and spatial place in the society, and in one's specific lifeworld" (Montero, 2009, p. 74). Martín-Baró (1994) further describes this as a "process of personal and social transformation experienced" where people become "literate in dialectic with their world" (p. 40) and defines this literacy as "learning to read the surrounding reality" (ibid.) Becoming Diversity Literate then, is about learning to read the surrounding political and social realities. Importantly, however, Martin-Baro (1994) notes, that it is not just changing one's opinion but it that *concientización* "supposes that persons change in the process of changing their relations with the surroundings, and above all, with other people" (pg. 41). For Montero (2009) this involves developing a "critical capacity allowing consciousness to be liberated from the dominant conceptions given by society" (p. 74) He adds further, that "It is not restricted to cognitive aspects for it also mobilizes emotion in order to attain awareness about the circumstances influencing one's living conditions" (ibid).

The "end point" of a Critical Diversity Literacy, then is reached by travelling the path of conscientisation, a process both cognitive and affective, and above all relational. It is this

path that the course attempts to guide students along, and the following sections will describe how we do that.

D. Alignment of Course Activities/Content with Critical Diversity Literacy Outcomes

Every activity on the course is designed with the outcome of Critical Diversity Literacy in mind. The following section details how each of the outcomes is contributed to through particular content and activities. This is not an exhaustive list, but is intended to illustrate how the outcome of Critical Diversity Literacy serves as a useful point of alignment for all content and activities.

First, one must be able to recognize “the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities” (Steyn, 2010) as they become manifested in social relations. Namely, being able to identify the ways in which whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, ablebodiedness, and middleclassness, as privileged hegemonic identities, are normalized and reproduced in a given context. Within the course, this criteria is achieved through the content of the course in which students are exposed to axes of difference and how each of these social constructions (gender, race, sexuality, embodiment and ableism, HIV/AIDS, culture, whiteness, and globalised power relations). Specifically students are introduced in Week One to critical approaches to understanding **difference, privilege and oppression** as theorised by Young (2000), Johnson (2001), Payne (2000) and Wildman and Davis (1997).

Second, a Critical Diversity Literate approach demonstrates analytic skill at unpacking how “systems of privilege intersect, interlock co-construct and constitute each other” (Steyn, 2010, p.60). Here, Steyn emphasizes the ways in which the positionalities of whiteness and maleness enhance each other’s power. Alongside the intersection of privileged identities, Steyn also points out that marginal identities also reinforce one another. For instance, the social construction of HIV/AIDS often reinforces and is reinforced by racism against black people. Within the first two weeks of the course students are introduced to the theoretical foundations and conceptual tools which prepare them to work with the ways in which axes of difference are co-constituted and intersectional. The concept of **intersectionality** is explicitly dealt with in Week Two by way of theorists like Crenshaw (1995) and Lerner (1997).

The **third** criteria is a reading of oppressive systems in terms of their current manifestation rather than strictly as objects relegated to history. For Steyn (2010), this approach requires analysis of how the oppressive legacies of colonialism and apartheid (in the South African context) continue to shape social relations in the post-colonial and post-apartheid era. Namely, the ideologies of white and male superiority, as they were entrenched throughout the past four centuries, must be acknowledged when considering the power relations which operate in a given context. In Steyn’s (2010) study of South African organisations, she notes the ways in which those in historically dominant positions continue to construct women and black people as “the problem”, while the later group become positioned as “trouble makers” when they identify how sexism and racism are operating in the work place. In order

to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which the historical legacies of racism and sexism continue to shape current social relations, students are presented with **“hot topics” each week in the discussion sessions**. Hot topics are typically topical social issues in South African and international media which demonstrate the ways in which the theory presented in the course ‘lands’ on the ground. Through class discussion in which students draw on theoretical content and personal experience, lecturers facilitate the unpacking of hot topics from a Critical Diversity Literate perspective.

The **fourth** criteria of a Critical Diversity Literate approach is that one have “an understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices” (Steyn 2010, p. 64). This criteria contradicts popular perceptions that race and gender are essential, biological, and fixed, rather than fluid, socially constructed, and contested. Steyn notes that “the tendency to essentialise race and gender [was] highly prevalent in the discourse within all of the organisations studied” (bid.). It is in the second week of the course that students are introduced to the **concepts of essentialism** and **constructivism**, as introduced by Lorber (1994) and illustrated very powerfully through Blackwood’s (1984) work on “third genders” and Toni Morrison’s (1983) powerful piece *Recitatif* which deliberately messes with racial signifiers and wonderfully illustrates the constructedness of race.

In order to be able to provide a diversity literate analysis of a social context, it is imperative that one is in “possession of a diversity grammar and vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism, and antiracism, and the parallel concepts employed in the analysis of other forms of oppression” such as those employed in critical class, feminist, and disability studies - this is the **fifth** criteria of a diversity literate approach. Here, Steyn makes the point that in order for one to understand the systems of oppression and privilege which structure our world, one must be able to name the relations of power which construct them. For instance, the perception and naming of sexism and racism as they function to marginalise and center individuals and groups allows one to enact a diversity literate approach to analysing social contexts. While students acquire this lexicon throughout the duration of the course, the clearest manifestation of this criteria is in the requirement that cooperative learning groups produce **glossaries** of these key terms at the end of the semester.

Sixth, Steyn’s (2010) notion of Critical Diversity Literacy requires that one have the “ability to translate or interpret coded hegemonic practices” (p. 68). Here, Steyn refers to the ways in which raced and gendered messages (in the broad sense of the term) are reproduced in ways that obscure their character, make them difficult to identify, and which ultimately function to reproduce existing power relations. Being able to identify the encoding of privilege and prejudice requires that one unpack or read between the lines of official organisational language which is usually carefully crafted to comply with organisational procedure and maintain its public image. As Steyn argues, a problem for those who champion diversity issues in any social context or organisation is that the operations of power that maintain the status quo are invisible, and perhaps outside of the conscious behaviour of those who perpetuate and collude with them” (Steyn 2010, p. 76). Students are provided with numerous opportunities to develop their abilities to interpret **texts (popular and mass media, images, films)** from this perspective. **Group response papers** allow students to collaborate in analysing films throughout the semester, while individual skill at doing so is required and assessed through two **individual essay assignments** and in

the final **exam**. The ability to interpret “coded hegemonic practices” is a central ability that all students must possess in order to receive a passing grade.

The **seventh** criteria is that one employ an “analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalised oppressions are mediated by class inequality and inflected in specific social contexts” (Steyn 2010, p. 70). This criteria rests on the notion of **intersectionality** and the ability to perceive the entanglement of various marginal and central social positionalities. This criteria speaks to the qualitative differences created by racial categorisation despite the similarities groups may share due to their class position. For instance, this requires that one examine the ways in which black working class women, for instance, experience levels of gender and race related marginalisation and hardship in spaces (such as the white dominant organisations addressed in Steyn’s discussion) where middle classness protects privileged, middleclass, white women. As the semester progresses and **various axes of difference** are introduced, students are constantly required to consider how each axis relates to the others, in terms of social systems as well as in their own experiences.

The **eighth** and final criteria in Steyn’s notion of Critical Diversity Literacy is “an engagement with issues of transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening social justice in all levels of social organisation” (Steyn 2010, p. 74). Having a commitment to changing the unequal status quo is the result of being authentically diversity literate in one’s approach to understanding society. While enrolment in the Critical Diversity Literacy course does not guarantee that all students will be deeply committed to transforming unequal power relationships which structure our world upon their exit, it is our hope that they will *at least* have reached a level of conscientization which will prevent them from reproducing these structures.

Even though we envisage Critical Diversity Literacy as the desired outcome of this process/course, we are not guaranteeing any particular outcome. Processes of conscientization are not linear or predictable.

Students will all engage at different levels and experience different things. What the criteria of a Critical Diversity Literacy provide are particular theoretical benchmarks 1) which can guide the course design (activities and content) and 2) particular theoretical capacities which are identifiable through assessments of assignments and presentation.

E. How to Implement Diversity Literacy

Course Structure

The course runs over 12 weeks (one semester) as follows:

- Week 1 Orientation and some framing concepts: Difference, Privilege & Oppression
- Week 2 Orientation and some framing concepts: Social Construction & Intersectionality
- Week 3 Embodiment and Ablism



- Week 4 Gender
- Week 5 Sexuality
- Week 6 HIV/AIDS

MID TERM BREAK

- Week 7 Culture
- Week 8 Race
- Week 9 Whiteness
- Week 10 Post-Colonialism & Xenophobia
- Week 11 Poverty and “The Poor”
- Week 12 Student Presentations

Each of these weeks typically consists of five 45 minutes sessions:

- **Monday** - Lecture
- **Tuesday** - Discussion of film
- **Wednesday** - Lecture
- **Thursday** - “Hot topic” discussion
- **Friday** – Film

This is different in the first two weeks when the groups are still being set up, and the last weeks when the group assignments are complete. The Tuesday and Thursday lectures are then dedicated to other exercises. See the Course Outline for further details.

On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the class are all together. Mondays and Wednesdays are lectures (conducted by the Lecturer), whilst Friday is the weekly film. On Tuesdays and Thursdays the class is divided into smaller groups of no more than twenty students per group. These groups are facilitated in separate venues by Assistant Lecturers.

The Team

1. Course Coordinator & Lecturer

One course coordinator manages the implementation of the course. The course coordinator also lectures two/three times per week and be the first port of call for the Assistant Lecturers.

2. Assistant Lecturers

Assistant Lecturers are responsible for facilitating discussion and cooperative group work two days per week. One Assistant lecturer is required for every twenty



students. It is necessary that cooperative learning sessions are managed by Assistant Lecturers with a background in cooperative learning pedagogy/diversity studies.

NOTE: It is important that the Lecturer and Assistant Lecturers are themselves Critically Diversity Literate. To facilitate the development of a Critical Diversity Literacy in the students they require not only a solid theoretical foundation, but facilitation skills and most importantly, active self-reflexivity.

3. **Guest Lecturers**

The inclusion of guest lecturers is important in facilitating interfaculty participation. It is important that the students recognise the relevance of “diversity” in all contexts, and also that students from faculties outside the Humanities encounter the application of “diversity” to their respective fields.

F. How to use this OER

This OER is available in an open site on UCT’s VULA facility, and through the Open Content Directory. It is organised by week and all the materials from a given week/topic are provided in separate folders. The successive weeks, cover different topics, but also build on each other, developing the theoretical foundations laid in the first two weeks. The course can be used in its entirety, but each week can also be used as stand alone.

Materials provided in this OER are:

1. The **Course Outline** outlines the details of each week. It provides the **structure** as well as **reading** prescribed for each week. It also outlines the recommended **break-down of assignments and evaluations** and **assignment hand-in and presentation dates**.
2. **Lecture Slides** for each week
3. **Thursday Discussion Group Material (including outlines)** for each week
4. **Friday Group/Film Assignments** for each week

Other materials provided are:

5. **Individual Assignments**, one short mid-term assignment and one longer end of semester assignment.
6. **Group Presentation Assignment**
7. **Assignment Assessment Guides (for group and individual assignments)**
8. **Presentation Assessment Guide**
9. **Exam**



10. **Self Reflexive Exercises (including outlines)**
11. **Co-operative Learning Exercises (including outlines)**
12. **An Overview of Co-operative Learning**

The materials are not intended to be used simply as is, although that is, of course, possible. Ideally a lecturer would use the material we provide and adapt it to suit their students needs of their own interests. Please note that due to copyright, all images have been removed from our materials. We have however, provided descriptions of the images in question, with links to online images.

REFERENCES

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