Navigating Controversial Topics in Required Diversity Courses

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Abstract: Required undergraduate diversity courses often expose students to topics and worldviews which may push them out of their comfort zones and prompt dissonance and even resistance. This paper reports on interviews with 68 faculty members across 16 humanities and social science disciplines at five predominantly white institutions in the Southern United States, detailing how they navigated discussion of controversial topics in required diversity courses. Most instructors aimed to expose students to critical social issues yet were concerned that resistance could disturb the learning process. We identified 20 unique strategies for handling controversial topics in class that included proactively establishing community and safety and normalizing conflict, and reactively acknowledging and surfacing multiple perspectives, as well as connecting content to students' lived experiences. Some instructors also reported a lack of controversy or conflict in their classrooms, which they variously attributed to student characteristics or their own disinclination to promote heated discussion—which, we argue, calls into question the breadth and criteria of many institutionally defined diversity course requirements. We conclude the paper with implications for faculty, educational developers, administrators, and institutions.

Keywords: diversity course, controversial topics, student resistance, faculty, pedagogy

Diversity courses have increasingly become a common element of U.S. undergraduate curricula. In fact, 60% of the membership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities report having a required diversity course as part of a general education program (Hart Research Associates, 2016). While some colleges craft a single course or course sequence that faculty across the institution teach, most institutions use a distribution model to create a broad requirement that can be satisfied by an array of courses across humanities and social science disciplines (Bowman, 2012; Goodstein, 1994; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Humphreys, 1997). Diversity course requirements date back to the 1970s (Fitzgerald & Lauter, 1995) and have evolved in their scope and content, yet many requirements still focus on some combination of "1) cultures and their interconnections; 2) power, prejudice and the sources of inequality; 3) participatory engagement in service and community issues; 4) the social construction of identity, including one's own; and 5) negotiating difference, especially difficult difference" (Schneider, 1997, p. 52). Given these foci, it is not surprising that controversial topics which ignite heated discussions often arise in diversity courses (Humphreys, 1997; Perry et al., 2009).

Scholars have begun to explore how instructors design diversity courses, introduce material that can elicit emotional responses for some students, and navigate microaggressions and incivility in

the classroom (Ahad-Legardy & Poon, 2018; Cheung et al., 2016; Hirschy & Braxton, 2004). Researchers have also documented the benefits to students' learning in required diversity courses, with outcomes including increased understanding of white privilege (Case, 2007), reduction of racial bias or prejudice (Chang, 2002; Denson, 2009), and awareness of structural oppression (Case, 2007). However, within a broad, diffused diversity course requirement — the type of requirement most common on campuses — course content and pedagogy will vary (Humphreys, 1997; Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011; Owens, 2005). Institutions may claim the presence of courses focused on diversity and bundled into a requirement will yield positive outcomes among students, but closer attention is warranted to the ways that difficult conversations about contested topics may play out in diversity courses (Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011). For instance, one course in a requirement may be a survey course taught as a large lecture with minimal opportunities for active student learning and engagement, while another may be a small intergroup dialogue where the focus is squarely on active learning and discussion. Thus, it is expected that the way instructors introduce controversial topics and facilitate discussion will vary.

Given this background, this paper addresses one research question: How do faculty members navigate discussions of controversial topics within required diversity courses? In this qualitative study, we drew upon interviews with 68 course instructors across 16 humanities and social science disciplines at five predominantly white institutions to better understand how they addressed these discussions in their classrooms. The purpose of this study was to identify the approaches and strategies used by required diversity course instructors. While we ultimately identified 20 strategies instructors used, we also found that a minority of instructors did not engage in discussion of controversial topics within the classroom, which may call into question the outcomes diversity courses are thought to foster.

Relevant Literature

In this section, we briefly review research relative to the context of diversity courses and the teaching of controversial topics. Diversity courses are required on many college campuses because they benefit students' development (Bowman, 2009). Bowman (2009) found that students who took at least one diversity course during their college career experienced gains in their cognitive development as their exposure to this content provided them an interest in ideas and the topic. Students taking diversity courses became more aware of their white privilege and were less likely to deny blatant racism exists (Cole et al., 2011). Diversity courses often impact students differently based on their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, with white students experiencing the most growth cognitively after taking a diversity course as these courses are often designed as introductory courses to engage white students (Bowman, 2009).

Diversity courses have the potential to bring out emotions and heated discussion requiring instructors to manage and facilitate challenging dialogue (Roberts & Smith, 2002). Despite the positive benefits to student development, some students, particularly white men, often resist these courses and the course instructors, particularly when the courses are taught by people of color the faculty of color that teach them (Vianden, 2018). Learning about power, privilege, and oppression were topics often resisted by white men as they often associated these topics with being shamed by diversity course instructors (Vianden, 2018). This resistance is often a burden for faculty members of color who disproportionately teach diversity courses (Perry et al., 2009). Mayhew and Grunwald (2006) found that race was a strong determinant for whether faculty would choose to incorporate diversity-related content into their courses. Faculty of color, women-identified faculty, and LGBTQ faculty members were more likely to connect their courses to diverse content than white men faculty members, who often felt they didn't have adequate expertise to incorporate diversity-related content into their courses (Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006). Faculty that participated in diversity workshops often felt more

comfortable with incorporating and teaching diversity-related content and felt that these types of workshops and training should be mandatory experiences for faculty members (Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006).

By their nature, diversity courses often include discussion of controversial topics. A controversial issue is one that might deal with questions regarding different values, cultures, and beliefs (Sudha, 2018). These issues are often complex and do not have clear answers due to the strong beliefs that people hold surrounding these issues. To increase overall preparation, and quality of conversation, additional preparation must be provided for faculty members for them to effectively broach difficult topics, and successfully lead conversations that could be considered controversial (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2018). Navigating controversial topics and difficult conversations can be sites of tension for both students and instructors. The ways in which instructors choose to enter these conversations or in some cases, are forced into them, vary, as do their reactions. What is important to note first is "authentic conversations...are critical" (Murray-Johnson, 2019, p. 4) for students learning as well as a pedagogical basis for moments of tension; "both conflict and harmony (or collaboration) are normal in our society and in our collegiate classrooms" (Pasque et al., 2013, p.13). While these conversations can potentially promote deeper engagement and learning, there has been a gap in literature that expressly addresses instructors' strategies to mediate and address critical conversations. Emerging literature demonstrates the emotional labor and other emotional responses the instructors manage are taxing and sometimes can be anxiety-producing, especially for faculty of color (Miller et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2011; Schueths et al., 2013).

Griffin and Ouellett (2007) state many faculty members' initial reactions to conflict is to "shut down any disagreement, ignore the emotional and affective tone in a class, and keep a tight focus on intellectual and informational content" (p. 105). This may also be because most university educators are unprepared for addressing these difficult conversations in the classroom and avoid or end the conversations entirely (Pasque et al., 2013; Vacarr, 2001). While these strategies may seemingly shut down contention in the classroom, research shows ignoring incivilities can have lasting negative consequences on the classroom climate, students' perceptions of their own academic development, and can cause more damage than no response or a fully formed response (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004; Souza, 2016).

There are studies that have posited frameworks and pedagogical approaches to help equip instructors as they navigate these topics. Some of those include frameworks to manage their own emotions and tensions during discussions of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2011), politics (Miller & Pouraskari, 2019), using interactive or experiential workshops (Harlap, 2014), and much of it addresses race (Murray-Johnson, 2019 Quaye, 2012; Pasque et al., 2013; Ray, 2010). Disciplines have also developed their own "signature pedagogies," or the characteristic ways in which professional fields socialize future practitioners, especially as it relates to teaching and learning development (Shulman, 2005, p. 52). Wall (2013) suggests using a balanced learning model that includes creating safety in the classroom and using small group learning, community visits, in-class activities, and reflection. Incorporating readings and activities that produce cognitive dissonance for students is another strategy instructors can use to push students in their understanding of diversity courses (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001).

Theoretical Frameworks

We used and adapted a combination of two frameworks on conceptualizing student resistance and instructors' strategies for handling racial conflict in the classroom.

Conceptualizing Student Resistance

Winkler and Rybnikova (2019) conducted a systematic literature review of 134 studies between 1999 and 2018 to determine how student resistance is conceptualized. Resistance is not characterized as fundamentally negative or positive but is instead conceptualized differently depending on one's paradigm. Winkler and Rybnikova organized literature around student resistance into three paradigmatic perspectives: 1) functional-instrumentalist, 2) critical-emancipatory and 3) critical-functionalist. The authors asserted these perspectives "can also serve as a self-reflexive tool to help university teachers [become] aware of underlying assumptions regarding student resistance, its multi-layered reasons and unavoidable links to the aims of higher education as well as society" (p. 531).

      A functional-instrumentalist understanding of student resistance largely views student resistance as a negative behavior that interferes with course learning goals and is ultimately destructive to the classroom learning environment. Reasons for student resistance in a functional-instrumentalist classroom largely rest upon perceptions of the instructor and their influence on the class climate and student relationships. In this paradigm, authors posit students are responsible for the resistance, due to student characteristics such as negative attitudes, lack of experience of understanding as it relates to course content, cognitive development, age, or gender.

      In direct opposition to the functional-instrumentalist perspective, in the critical-emancipatory paradigm, "resistance is considered as an emancipatory practice in the classroom" and "resistance is theorized as teachers' and students' mutual capacity to reflect and change social conditions" (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019, p. 527). Reasons for student resistance are reflections of unequal power imbalances between students and instructor.

      The critical-functionalist perspective simultaneously holds aspects of the critical-emancipatory and functional-instrumentalist perspectives at once. In this paradigm, the instructor's goal is to encourage students to critically engage in issues of social justice, surface alternative viewpoints, and resist traditional conceptions of worldviews. However, the way in which the instructor interprets acts of resistance aligns with the critical-functionalist perspective: resistance is prohibitory to students' learning and reflection. Reasons for students' resistance relate to the broader learning goals of introducing students to issues of oppression and inequality; students may resist these topics because they may feel pressured to do so by the instructor or if topics challenge their preconceived worldviews. It should be noted that Winkler and Rybnikova's (2019) framework does not distinguish between resistance from privileged or minoritized groups; resistance from any group may be interpreted differently depending on the instructor's paradigm, which we attempt to analyze in this paper.

Pedagogical Approaches to Racial Conflict

To examine specific examples of how instructors approached discussion of controversial topics in their classes, we also used Pasque and colleagues' (2013) pedagogical approaches to student racial conflict in the classroom. Pasque et al. (2013) interviewed 66 faculty members recognized for teaching excellence across disciplines and racial and gender identities, finding that faculty strategies for addressing race included:

> avoid conflict through attempts to control the classroom environment; to minimize such conflict; to divert or distract students' attention from conflict; to react to the conflict in a way that attempts to incorporate tensions for further learning; and to proactively design course activities to normalize and surface conflict in ways that enhance students learning about race and racial interactions (p. 1).

Faculty engaged with a spectrum of possible strategies for addressing racial conflict, ranging from avoidance and minimization to reactive and proactive activities for leveraging discussions of race. While many of the examples of controversial topics that instructors shared in the present study were not focused directly on racial conflict, we use the Pasque et al. (2013) pedagogical approaches as a starting point for our analysis, as many of the strategies discussed may also apply to other topics that generate conflict within classrooms. Though diversity courses have been shown, in many instances, to prompt student learning, engagement, and perspective taking, there has been little discussion in the scholarly literature of the specific strategies instructors have used to promote this engagement; there is a further need to outline these strategies beyond engagement with racial conflict.

Methods

This paper is based on findings from a qualitative multiple case study (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2014) employing a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014), as we attempted to understand instructors' perspectives and meaning making of their approaches to addressing controversy in diversity courses. Constructivism posits that there are multiple, subjective realities that individuals experience and construct; constructivist researchers "enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). Specifically, we frame this case study as instrumental, given our interest in generating practical rather than theoretical findings, and because of our interest "to go beyond the case" (Stake, 2006, p. 8) to generate transferable insights. That is, this analysis attempts to generate findings that can be used as instruments in other contexts beyond the specific cases where we collected data; we are primarily interested in this potential transferability rather than focusing on the unique characteristics of the institutions and instructors we have chosen.

The IRB-approved study examined five predominantly white higher education institutions with stand-alone diversity course requirements in the Southeastern United States. Criteria for selecting institutions included bachelor's degree-granting institutions with at least one stand-alone diversity course requirement. Criteria also included accessibility of the research sites (e.g., IRB approval, ability of the researchers to collect data in person). This paper focuses on a subset of data from a larger study and examines how faculty across the five institutions described their experiences navigating discussion of controversial topics in the context of teaching required diversity courses. In this paper, we examine themes common across instructors at all five institutions, as we found instructor strategies did not vary greatly across institutions.

This study primarily draws upon semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with faculty members teaching required undergraduate diversity courses. We purposely recruited information-rich participants embedded within each research site by personally contacting all faculty members via email who taught courses satisfying diversity requirements. Participants were information-rich because of our research purpose and questions focusing on the instructors of required diversity courses. Once we identified research sites, our sampling criterion focused solely on whether instructors taught courses that were part of an institutionally defined diversity requirement; we assumed that some, even minimal, discussion of controversial topics would occur in any such course. We did not create definitions of diversity or another layer of sampling to determine the presence or extent of discussion of controversial topics that occurred in class, but instead interviewed all volunteers who met the criteria (i.e., those who taught courses within the institutionally defined diversity requirement) at the institutions. The five institutions included public (3) and private (2) institutions, with enrollment ranging from 2,500 to 35,000. Admission rates ranged from 20% to 70%. All were predominantly white institutions, with the percentage of white students on each campus ranging from 55% to 75%. In total, 68 faculty members across the five institutions were interviewed. On average, interviews lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes each. The majority (56%) of participants were in non-tenure track

appointments, and most of the instructors (59%) taught required diversity courses within social science disciplines (e.g., anthropology, political science, sociology), while the remaining instructors (41%) taught within the humanities (e.g., cultural studies, English, philosophy); in total, 16 unique disciplines were represented. Most participants were white (including 25 white women and 17 white men), along with 15 women of color and 11 men of color. To promote participant candor and protect confidentiality, we use pseudonyms rather than real names of institutions and participants.

Specific questions from the interview protocol that often prompted discussion of student resistance, controversial topics, and conflict in the classroom included: "What do you do to establish an environment conducive to dialogue and disagreement?" "How have you handled instances of student resistance, or a particularly heated moment?" "What types of pedagogical techniques or teaching methods do you tend to employ?" We began data analysis by reading all interview transcripts and identifying the excerpts that addressed those topics of interest given our research purpose and question (i.e., discussion of controversial topics).

Once relevant transcript excerpts were identified, we engaged in several rounds of coding and analysis to identify the instructors' perspectives and strategies revealed through their examples. We began analysis with a subset of 15 of 68 participants' interview excerpts and used open coding to create initial categorizations and to classify how instructors navigated discussion of controversial topics, identifying codes such as silence, multiple viewpoints, normalizing, equal time, and debriefing. These codes informed our initial codebook. Subsequently, we applied concepts derived from the theoretical frameworks to all remaining transcript excerpts. Based on all excerpts, we identified how instructors appeared to conceptualize student resistance (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019), our first theoretical framework. Next, we grouped excerpts into five broad strategies for addressing racial conflict identified in Pasque et al. (2013), including no conflict, avoidance, diversion, reactive, and proactive. Then, we built upon these strategies by inductively recoding the examples within each of these categories, leading to 20 specific codes that more specifically addressed how instructors navigated discussion of controversial topics in their classrooms. (We noted that, while a few instructor examples of class discussions addressed race and racial conflict, the majority did not; in findings, we list the varied topics instructors introduced.)

We engaged in several strategies to promote trustworthiness of the study (Jones et al., 2014), including (1) member checking: all study participants were given their transcript and the opportunity to revise or add to their comments; (2) team coding of data (i.e., all transcript excerpts were coded by at least two team members) and reaching consensus on all codes, themes, and examples presented; (3) theoretical triangulation by using multiple theoretical perspectives to guide our analysis; (4) researcher triangulation by engaging in a research team approach to highlight divergent interpretations; and (5) researcher reflection on our own positionalities in relation to the topics under study to understand our perspectives and guard against misinterpretations or oversights in analyzing data. We engaged in individual written reflection as well as group discussion during research team meetings. Briefly, we share some salient points regarding researcher positionalities:

I (first author) am an assistant professor of higher education and approached this study informed by my formative training in intergroup dialogue techniques (Gurin et al., 2013) and with a disposition toward believing that introducing controversy and conflict into the classroom can be productive. I now recognize that, while valuable, sometimes these approaches can reinforce dominant modes of emotional expression (e.g., minimize anger or sadness), and these "rules" have largely affirmed aspects of my socialization as a person with a variety of privileges (identifying as white, cisgender, man, Christian, middle class, able-bodied).

I (second author) work as an educational developer in higher education: I support instructors in their pedagogical practices and teach in the college of education. I was often uncomfortable (and at times, still can be) facilitating controversial conversations. I believe my various social identities and

background (white, cisgender, woman, middle class, daughter of educators) inform my perceived ability in those spaces, and I am committed to furthering my practice to support others who teach and my own teaching.

I (third author) work in residence life and came to this study with the experience of facilitating dialogue and leading discussions and training on diversity and inclusion. As a Black female educator, I am aware that in my work with students I have been confronted with some of the challenges faculty in this study expressed. And as a current doctoral student, I am aware of how some of these challenges continue to show up in my classroom experiences.

I (fourth author) serve as a case manager in Title IX within higher education. Throughout my time in higher education, I have connected with faculty members navigating complex compliance concerns related to student interaction and disclosures in the classroom. In facilitating these conversations, I have had the privilege of assisting faculty with managing the need to teach complex and controversial topics while maintaining an open and supportive learning environment.

Findings

Conceptualizing Student Resistance

In order to capture the broader, interactive relationship of student resistance in the classroom, we applied the three approaches of student resistance posited by Winkler and Rybnikova (2019): critical-functionalist, functionalist-instrumentalist, and critical-emancipatory.

Critical-Functionalist

Most of the excerpts (44) from instructors were representative of a critical-functionalist perspective: instructors aimed to expose students to critical social issues yet were concerned how resistance was disturbing the student-instructor relationship, class climate and ultimately, the learning process. In this category, many of the instructors couched navigating student resistance under the premise of maintaining a level of respectability in the classroom. Disagreements were acceptable, if they were kept civil. Eleanor, who taught history, said they allowed it "as long as it's not being disrespectful, to where people are getting really kind of angry or saying something hurtful" they went on to recall an incident when students were disagreeing about gay marriage. She remembered:

> It kinda got like, 'Okay, we're kinda arguing with each other.' So, I was like, shut it down…I tried to present on both sides and then let's kind of move onto a different topic, because we need to keep it respectful.

Functional-Instrumentalist

About a fifth of the instructors (13) adopted a focus associated with the functionalist-instrumentalist perspective, where they focused their energies on immediate teaching goals and largely saw student resistance as negative and to be avoided. Luis, who taught music, expressed a pragmatic and definitive view of how he believed resistance should be handled in class, as well as whether it should exist at all in a field like music:

> [A controversial subject] exists, it's here…I don't try to fix it. But I don't try to ignore it, either. Again, this is a music class, it's not a sociology class. Students can interrupt me and ask

questions, but it is not a discussion class. To put it bluntly, I talk, you listen, maybe we learn something along the way.

Critical-Emancipatory

The critical-emancipatory category represented the least number of excerpts (eight) from instructors, which may also be expected, considering this typology of student resistance is more elusive to instructors and students. Those whose classes aligned with this perspective spoke of intentional steps they took to cultivate a class in which resistance was a purposive component of the class. For example, Jeanne, who taught education at Regional College, described her decision making she considered when engaging in contentious course issues:

> I think it can get overheated...Watching somebody and trying to decide how far you can push them on something or allow another student to push them on something. That's in part why doing something like this is really helpful, this check sheet at the beginning. You can kind of see how students respond to it. If kids are hesitant to answer these questions. They're going to be really hesitant in class around harder questions, about belief systems. That kind of helps me know a little bit around which kids to push a little bit and which kids I need to be a little more careful about pushing so I don't cause the tears to burst, which is what happened the other day. I pushed somebody I maybe shouldn't have pushed.

Instructor Strategies for Addressing Conflict and Controversy

In Table 1, we present an overview of the strategies instructors identified for introducing and addressing controversial topics in required diversity courses, including definitions of each strategy and exemplar participant quotes. Some of the controversial topics named by faculty included criminal justice, electoral politics, gun control, immigration, marriage equality, prostitution, race (and the Black Lives Matter movement specifically), sexual assault/rape, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Aligned with five categories presented in Pasque et al. (2013), we identified 20 unique instructor strategies for introducing and addressing controversial topics.

Table 1. Instructor strategies for introducing and addressing controversial topics (adapted from Pasque et al., 2013).

Strategy: Definition (Frequency)	*Illustrative participant quote*
Lack of conflict	
Abstract or non-controversial topics: Abstract, theoretical, or historical course content does not lend itself to heated discussion (4)	"The issues are pretty much … black and white. ... The diversity, if there is any diversity in there, I would say it would be the diversity of students' perceptions as to whether they come down on the yes, no or sometimes they admit that they really don't know enough about the topic to really have an informed opinion. But other than that diversity, I wouldn't see where the diversity of opinion comes from." (Dev, tenured education faculty, white man)
Class size/format: Class size (e.g., large sections) or format (e.g., online) prevent or limit deep engagement with controversial topics (5)	"No, not really. … There wasn't too much debate.... I wish there was more ... I guess heated, or more active kind of back and forth between the students. Maybe I gave them too much time. Because, in the first two or three minutes, I hear a lot of chatter, which I like. ... But then, after five minutes it dies down, and you just hear people talking about what they did last weekend." (Cesar, non-tenure track part-time anthropology faculty, Latinx man)

Instructor avoidance (planned approach): Instructors avoid heated topics in class to remain in their comfort zone – instructor plans not to bring up heated topics (6)	"By and large, what I am doing, I don't make specific political comments and I think my students ... my hope is that they'll be able to read what we're doing into the current political climate, but I think that I if bring it in, it will turn them off. My goal is to not lose anyone, so I'm kind of constantly thinking how will this content lose someone? I'm not terribly direct in anything." (Norah, non-tenure track music faculty, white woman)
Student characteristics: Student background characteristics (e.g., traditional college age, lack of life experience middle class norms) limit conversation (7)	"[Students] don't have life experiences. … Our students are almost uniformly 18, 22, never did anything but go to school all their lives. So, they don't have really the background of experience to say hey, I know something different because of blah, blah, blah." (James, tenured history faculty, African American man)
Student silence: Silence or non-participation of students limits or stops conversation; instructor is reluctant to "cold call" and risk being seen as tokenizing students (4)	"So, I find that some topics are frustrating in that it is hard to get students to engage in the conversation about them. And I think the one that appears to me to be the most difficult is the conversation about race, nobody really wants to have that conversation in the United States, or at least they do not want to have in the open, in a mixed-race classroom." (Joe, tenured anthropology faculty, white man)
Avoidance strategies	
Name and clarify: Identify and restate contributions from multiple members of the class (3)	"I wouldn't call it an argument. … It was just like a clear difference of opinion. Honestly, those two students were not listening to each other. I said, 'Honestly, stop what you're doing. You're actually talking about two different things. You're not even on the same page. You need to sort of check yourself and then come back to this.'" (Vicky, non-tenure track rhetoric faculty, white woman)
Instructor avoidance (in the moment, spontaneous): Instructors avoid heated topics in class to remain in their comfort zone – instructor avoids heated topics in the moment (6)	"They seem somewhat reluctant there [to discuss politics]. … I like to create a certain amount of controversy in the class but not to the point to where students feel uncomfortable. And maybe that's being chicken on my part." (Damien, non-tenure track part-time political science faculty, white man)
Diversion strategies	
Distinguish beliefs from facts (authoritative): Rely on discipline/field-specific standards for accepted facts, then separate facts from beliefs; using facts to shut down the conversation (exerting authority) (4)	"I take it as a fact that appropriation is a thing. I'm cool with there being a spectrum of beliefs and what is acceptable on that spectrum, but it is a thing. It does exist. You can't say that it does not exist. … There are certain things that are facts that they have to acknowledge, and I will try to use whatever limited authority I have in the classroom to put forth like this is a fact, but then once we get to that place, you can have your perspective." (Norah, non-tenure track music faculty, white woman)
Reactive strategies	
Acknowledge multiple viewpoints: Seek opportunities to recognize multiple viewpoints on a topic or issue; de-center instructor viewpoint (17)	"I ultimately ended up using [a web app] for anonymous feedback. … So, I used it to show people typing on the computer anonymous feedback that is displayed on the screen that we all see in response to certain questions." (Elena, tenure-track cultural studies faculty, Latinx woman)
Ensure equal time for "both" sides: Allow disagreement to play out as long as both (or multiple) sides of an issue are voiced (5)	"I try to articulate a range of points of view about political issues in which race is involved and I try to be respectful to all points of view that I present, not that I agree with them but I try to give it my best shot and I try to do that and I ask the students to do that and by assigning different points of view to the panel discussions and then the discussions that follow. I think there really is a range of viewpoints that comes out in the discussion, so I think it's a healthy way to do it." (Bill, non-tenure track political science faculty, white man)
Surface alternative viewpoints: Actively create opportunities for	"My primary goal is creating diversity and tolerance, without necessarily stomping on someone's religious ideas in an insensitive way. I do struggle

alternative viewpoints to be voiced (12)	with finding that kind of balance … it's just that unsure and me wanting to be sensitive to everybody and not force an agenda on someone, but have their eyes opened to other possibilities out there and understanding other people's experiences." (Eleanor, non-tenure track history faculty, white woman)
Introduce current events (reactive): Inject relevant current events into the conversation to encourage participation – introduce events in response to students or in the moment (not planned) (3)	"I found a great article that explained the whole Black Lives Matter movement and why you, as a person who is not African American, or Black, should not say 'Well, all lives matter,' and that you're missing the point. And I put that up on the screen and we read through it together. Again, you could kind of see people go 'oh, oh.'" (Nancy, non-tenure track rhetoric faculty, white woman)
Distinguish beliefs from facts (advances conversation): Rely on discipline/field-specific standards for accepted facts, then separate facts from beliefs; Emphasize analysis and evaluation of facts rather than attempts to change beliefs; affirm that evaluation is not dependent upon orthodoxy; facts advance conversation rather shuts it down (4)	"I just kind of reiterate that a few times in the beginning of the semester, that that's the goal of the class, is to generate debate, but respectful debate, and so we can all have our different ideas, and as long as you have your evidence, or you do, then we just respect each other as we agree to disagree and that's totally fine. So, you know, I think them knowing that that's part of the class allows them to think in ways that they can ask questions that aren't just sort of narrowly associated with whatever lesson theme for the day." (Flora, administrator teaching cultural studies, white woman)
Substantiate facts with resources: Introduce additional resources (articles, books, multimedia) to deepen the conversation (5)	"I read them things that other people have written, and I think are particularly affecting or poignant and that I think will grab their interest. And I try to be very, very contemporary with that stuff. So, I'm almost always reading from something that's been written in the last few months, even." (Alice, non-tenure track English faculty, white woman)
Connect to students' lived experiences (reactive): Attempt to connect course connect or controversy to students' lived experiences - In the moment or in response to students (11)	"I try to avoid like very controversial topics and I try not to be very nationalist in class because I'm talking about my own culture, so it is kind of natural tendency that you are praising your own culture and making people feel uncomfortable, so I'm trying not to do that and I'm trying to like play naïve in class telling students I'm not very familiar with other cultures, but if someone has more knowledge so I will be willing to hear from you." (Stephanie, non-tenure track foreign languages faculty, Asian American woman)
Proactive strategies	
Normalize conflict: Create expectation that disagreement will occur and develop strategies to work through disagreement (11)	"I just burn it all down, and people come out with real answers. There's nothing sugar coated. I don't want the sugar-coated response, I want the real deal. And in most instances, that's what they give me. … I'll allow them to talk about Trump and Hillary, and of course that generated a lot of discussion. Heated discussion. But everything was within the limits of a heated discussion without getting raucous, or angry, or teary. Or if it approaches that, I'll say well, let's take a moment to breathe. And just everybody settle down." (Mary, non-tenure track history faculty, African American woman)
Introduce current events (proactive): Inject relevant current events into the conversation to encourage participation – plan ahead to introduce current events (4)	"I addressed it head on. When we started talking about things, it kind of lined up perfectly. I teach the political geography part towards the end of the semester, and it was right around the election and during the election. We talked about it. I had several discussion days where we just kind of opened it up. … You're free to express how you feel. Respect others' position, but we're going to talk about it." (Leo, non-tenure track geography faculty, Latinx/white man)
Connect to students' lived experiences (proactive):	"Then they had to redesign a piece of currency. So, take the dollar bill and change out the symbols and things like that according to their values. One

Attempt to connect course connect or controversy to students' lived experiences – as a planned/ intentional strategy, mapped out in advance (3)	of the questions on that assignment was something to the effect of how do issues of gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, ableism impact people's beliefs about money?" (Vicky, non-tenure track rhetoric faculty, white woman)
Vulnerability promotes dialogue: Sharing personal experiences with the topic, particularly difficulties or failures, to promote engagement and discussion (5)	"First thing I do is I talk to them about stage fright. … If that's not your comfort level, that's fine. Everybody has to speak out and everybody has to do a presentation, and if you're uncomfortable with that, send me an email, come and see me. We'll figure out how to make sure you are comfortable because I don't want to put anybody in a bad situation. ... I have chronic debilitating stage fright myself. ... So, I really understand the student who is sophomore or a freshman struggling through some complex material." (Neal, non-tenure track faculty, white man)
Establish community and safety: Intentionally creating an open learning environment where contributions from all members of the class are expected and encouraged (16)	"I always try, in all my classes, I always try to create an atmosphere where the students feel welcome and safe to share their views or opinions. Most, in my experience over the 21 years that I've taught here, I have never had a situation where a student has disrespected another student. They seem to feel free to discuss their views and to get involved in a back-and-forth discussion with another student who has a different opinion or a different view of the topic." (Dev, tenured education faculty, white man)

Lack of Conflict

Though we expected required diversity courses would include frequent discussion of controversial topics, many faculty discussed a lack of heated conversation within their classrooms. Some faculty members discussed that topics in their classes did not lend themselves to heated discussions as they did not connect to social issues. Other faculty members described the class size or the format of the class making it difficult to engage students in challenging conversations. Faculty also expressed negative views about student identities and backgrounds; for instance, that students lacked life experience, were coddled, or were trained to abide by polite middle-class norms to avoid discussion of sensitive issues. For example, Aurora, a tenured faculty member at State University, described students in her classroom in this way: "Usually students nowadays, they don't allow themselves to get heated from each other very often." Faculty members also frequently got confronted with student silence when trying to engage their classes in discussions on issues. For example, Cheryl, a non-tenure track, part-time faculty member at State University, shared: "Yeah, nobody ever says anything about ... They can roll their eyes if they think we're overemphasizing diversity, they play along. They know if they just shut up, they'll get through a couple months, and then they can go back to being whatever."

Avoidance Strategies

Several participants disclosed that they intentionally avoided in-depth discussion of controversial topics in class. For instance, Max, a tenured faculty member at State University, said: "I'm not sure I want a heated discussion … Yeah, I don't think I would want anything too animated or too volatile." Indeed, the reflection of one participant, Glen, highlighted that surface level conversations might only serve to reinforce students' existing viewpoints:

> The political aspect of the course really did get under people's skin, and they almost saw it as an opportunity to reinforce preconceived notions about things rather than a moment of learning something new. There were long faces. The nonverbal cues all showed that people

were either just fuming inside or that they were just simply tune it out because they didn't want to hear it.

In addition, some faculty employed a strategy of naming and clarifying that resulted in regaining control of the classroom and minimizing conflict. For instance, Vicky told two students voicing a disagreement, "Honestly, stop what you're doing. You're actually talking about two different things. You're not even on the same page. You need to sort of check yourself and then come back to this."

Diversion and Reactive Strategies

Faculty teaching required diversity courses developed several strategies to actively engage students as they learned about and worked through controversial topics. Key instructional methods aligned with the reactive category included naming difficult topics and normalizing conflict and disagreement about these topics. Faculty also focused on acknowledging and surfacing multiple viewpoints on controversial topics. When conflict surfaced, faculty often highly prioritized making space for "both sides" (what some referred to as the "marketplace of ideas" or "range of viewpoints") or multiple sides of an issue and felt that tactic was sufficient. One faculty member, Elena, mentioned using technology—an anonymous polling tool—to display the range of perspectives present in class. Faculty also brought in outside resources to substantiate topics that came up in class; Nancy described sharing an article about the Black Lives Matter movement. Participants also described relying heavily on course content and accepted norms within a field or discipline to clarify and separate fact from student beliefs. This tactic—distinguishing belief from facts—was evidenced for two distinct purposes: either advancing the conversation by clarifying the facts (a reactive strategy) or shutting down by the conversation by authoritatively asserting the facts (a diversion strategy). Faculty, however, rarely stated explicitly that their strategies were informed by consideration of their own identities and positionalities, or those of their students.

Proactive Strategies

Some instructors embraced proactive strategies to intentionally surface controversy and engage students in passionate conversations about these topics. These instructors often laid the groundwork for their approaches at the beginning of the semester by establishing community and safety and normalizing conflict. Instructors also designed learning activities to connect with students' lived experiences and they infused current events as fodder for conversation and engagement. For instance, Vicky described a "money manifesto" assignment where students wrote about their relationships to money and were asked to redesign a piece of currency, informed by their values and identities. Vicky also admitted her own "money mistakes" to the class. To that point, instructors modeled vulnerability and shared their own weaknesses, thus encouraging students to take risks in class discussions. Neal's example of sharing his "chronic debilitating stage fright" with students was in part designed to put his students at ease before they were asked to prepare presentations; he encouraged students to meet one on one with them to identify strategies to successfully speak publicly.

Discussion

This study offers the perspectives of 68 faculty members for addressing controversial topics within required diversity courses at five colleges and universities in the southern United States, exploring both their paradigmatic approaches to handling controversy as well as their specific strategies for engaging (or not engaging) in such discussions in the classroom. From a paradigmatic perspective, we

found that instructors primarily operated from a critical-functionalist perspective (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019), in which they embraced the study of critical social issues yet established and upheld stringent guidelines for class discussions. Alternatively, in a critical-emancipatory lens, resistance is framed "as both an inevitable part of the learning process and the very objective of the learning" (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019, p. 530) and classrooms can be sites for "establishing dialogue between the students and the teacher, and between the social structures in the classroom and conditions of the broader society" (p. 530). While a few instructors in our study find inherent value in moments of student resistance, the majority did not appear to embrace a critical-emancipatory paradigm. Instructors also rarely discussed using conceptual frameworks or drawing on signature pedagogies from their disciplines (Shulman, 2005), perhaps indicating gaps in disciplinary pedagogies—or their use.

The study offers two key contributions, which we explore below: identification of 20 strategies for addressing controversial topics in required diversity courses and exploration of the lack of discussion of controversial topics that some instructors reported, which may raise broader questions about institutionally defined diversity requirements.

Strategies for Facilitating Discussion of Controversial Topics

First, we have applied frameworks addressing approaches and strategies for handling controversial discussions in the classroom resulting in the identification of 20 unique strategies instructors used, including and beyond racial conflict which previous research has explored (Pasque et al., 2013). These strategies emerged from a group of instructors teaching across humanities and social science disciplines within institutionally required diversity courses at five predominantly white institutions of higher education. The topics highlighted in instructors' strategies reveal that relatively little controversy within required diversity courses focused directly on topics one might expect to see covered in such a course (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation). Pasque et al. (2013) stated: "When handled well, classroom conflict can create the dissonance essential for significant learning, permit new and different voices to be heard ... and provide students with models for creative engagement and problem solving (p. 13-14)." Certainly, handling conflict can be an intimidating and elusive feat for instructors. hooks (1994) stated, "If we fear mistakes, doing things wrongly, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference" (p. 33). In essence, instructors who embrace these contentious moments as opportunities for self-reflexive praxis and thus, student learning, thereby open themselves and their student for deep engagement.

When faculty encountered controversy in the classroom, many in this study relied on techniques to counterbalance opposing viewpoints and equilibrize the classroom environment. Oulton et al. (2004) stated that although "balance" (p. 416) may be an instructional goal in these contentious moments, it is elusive:

> Even if the teacher thinks that they have presented matters as fairly as possible, others with different worldviews may still judge the presentation to be biased. An alternative ... is to be open about the fact that balance can never be fully achieved but counter this by developing in pupils a critical awareness of bias and make this one of the central learning objectives of the work. (p. 416)

This echoes Harlap's (2014) finding that when faculty encounter "hot moments" in the classroom, they tend to rely on instructional strategies like classroom management techniques, rather than addressing larger, structural issues that undergird the moment. Others actively avoided topics or took

"neutral" stances in these discussions. Kubota (2014) stated neutrality itself has "political value...when teachers, as role models, perform this position, it might problematically suggest that refraining from taking any position on a difficult issue is a virtue in a democratic society" (p. 234). In a context like diversity courses, it seems antithetical to course goals for students not to form an opinion.

Lack of Discussion of Controversial Topics

The second key contribution of this study emerges from the lack of discussion of controversial topics that some instructors reported. This is potentially concerning if diversity course requirements are to achieve their stated purposes; while some courses may have content relevant to diversity, there are often calls for active learning, introspection, and facilitated discussion to also be part of such courses to maximize student learning (Humphreys, 1997; Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011). This raises questions about the purposes, boundaries, and efficacy of institutionally defined diversity requirements.

Though we expected required diversity courses would include such discussion of controversial topics, many faculty discussed a lack of heated conversation within their classrooms. Thus, we also identified the barriers some faculty expressed toward having these discussions in class, some of which were attributed to students (instructor perceptions that students did not want to or could not engage in such discussions), institutional and structural factors (large class sizes seen as not conducive for discussions), subject matter (abstract or historical content seen as not lending itself to disagreement), or the instructors themselves (unwillingness, lack of preparation, or personal discomfort with engaging in controversial topics).

From a functionalist-instrumentalist perspective, instructors may view student characteristics as prohibitive to substantially engaging, either in their attitudes or behaviors and detract from course learning goals (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019). In our study, several instructors decisively shut down or avoided student resistance; they stated their courses were not sites in which these conversations should occur. In a critical-functionalist understanding of student resistance, the course content itself serves as the means by which students' worldviews are broadened. However, when student resistance occurs, instructors see this as prohibitory to achieving course goals, not as opportunities for deeper learning. Most of our participants were represented in the critical-functionalist frame and as Winkler and Rybnikova (2019) note, those aligned with this frame are in a "contradictory stance" (p. 530): instructors' goals are to address issues regarding social inequality; yet they meet student resistance as barriers to students' learning and something mostly to be avoided. Our findings echo this tension many instructors encounter as well.

Taken together, evidence of instructor avoidance of controversial topics, as well as many topics not being explicitly linked to structural issues of equity and diversity, should cause concern for the overall project of required diversity courses, at least at some institutions. Interestingly, some instructors lamented the lack of heated discussion in their classrooms, yet simultaneously reported the stringent guidelines for class discussion they enacted, aligned with critical-functionalist and functional-instrumentalist perspectives (Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019). Even faculty who do intentionally promote disagreement and spirited discussions in the classroom may over-rely on simplistic strategies such as surfacing "both sides" of an argument, when merely voicing or making space for multiple viewpoints may not be sufficient for deep learning and student engagement, much less for nuanced understandings of diversity issues. Simply put, diversity course requirements may not be fulfilling the purposes that their advocates imagine, and these topics and contexts warrant further investigation. Future studies could explore how and why instructors enact these strategies, where they learned them, and what consequences and alternatives exist. If diversity courses are espoused as sites to introduce and explore critical social issues and for students to engage in spirited discussion of these issues, this

study points to potential gaps between the ideals behind diversity course requirements and how they are taught in practice.

Limitations

We note several limitations of this investigation. First, our study relied upon faculty retrospective self-report; while this fit our constructivist approach and allowed us to answer our research question about how faculty claimed to address controversy in the classroom, other methods (observation, student evaluations) and perspectives (namely, student perspectives) could add additional complexity to our examination of this phenomenon.

In addition, diversity course requirements at the five institutions under study were broad and a variety of courses met criteria, leading to instructors' strategies voiced in this study about dealing with a range of controversial topics and issues. This variability, and the fact that some courses classified within institutional diversity requirements may not, in fact, address controversial topics is accounted for within the "lack of conflict" findings category, which includes factors such as abstract topics, class size and format, student silence, and instructor avoidance. One limitation is that our sampling strategy was not focused on or limited to courses we knew had discussion of controversial topics; rather, we used institutional diversity requirements and assumed that some discussion of these topics would occur in every diversity course, which our findings refute. Future studies could attempt to parse which courses within a diversity requirement aim to include discussion of controversial content. While required diversity courses are typically offered by humanities and social science departments, and future investigations could focus on how controversy is addressed in other disciplines, we contend that the strategies identified in this study may be relevant to instructors across various disciplines.

Implications and Future Research

While this study is most directly applicable to instructors teaching required diversity courses, consideration of these strategies also holds promise for instructors of other courses and in other disciplines. University educators often feel unprepared for difficult moments in the classroom (Vaccar, 2001). It is crucial for faculty to have access to professional development opportunities and trainings to continue their teaching development throughout their careers (Humphreys, 1997). University centers for teaching and learning play a fundamental role in bridging those gaps. Harlap (2014) remarked, "praxis cannot start and end with a single workshop; yet university educators rarely reflect with colleagues on their teaching" (p. 226). Creating space for faculty to be vulnerable and open to sharing these moments with each other is crucial. Traditionally, higher education spaces for faculty, especially those who teach in diversity courses, are not compatible with an ethos of vulnerability or exposing areas for growth. Open dialogue and facilitated discussion between faculty peers needs to take place if faculty are to be equipped to lead students' learning through difficult topics as they grapple with a broader worldview, which is what many of these diversity courses were intended to do. These implications also offer opportunities for future research on these topics from students' points of view, and more research on diversity courses and the role of the institution in articulating learning goals as well as for supporting instructors to teach them.

This study offers several contributions to literature addressing controversial topics in the classroom and is unique in its context — required diversity courses at multiple colleges and universities — as well as uncovering that many controversial topics discussed in such courses do not relate substantially to social identities such as race and gender that one may expect to be discussed within diversity courses. The findings point to strategies that faculty, educational developers, and academic

administrators may adopt to prompt faculty to take risks in their classrooms and dive deeper in exploration of controversial topics with their students.

Faculty members' identities are inextricably connected in the way they teach and in turn, the classroom environment in which students learn (e.g., Perry et al., 2009). Although instructors' consideration of their own identities and positionalities, or those of their students, were salient in relation to their status at the university and emotional work performed (see Miller & Struve, 2020; Miller et al., 2019), it was not nearly as prevalent in relation to course content and the research question we examined in this study. Future studies could explore the nexus between instructors' social identities and how they address controversial topics in diversity courses. This study was also conducted in the South and these phenomena may vary by regional context.

Acknowledgments

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