

# My Class Is Diverse! (And That Means What, Exactly?)

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The first thing I do when I walk into a seminar room or lecture hall is to glance around and register if the class is diverse. If, to the naked eye at least, there appears to be a good mix of genders and races, and perhaps a headscarf or a turban, I'm satisfied.

But what exactly does this mean, and where does it lead?

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois in the early/mid 1990s, I remember a professor saying that he maintained an online chat room for one of his courses because he found that Asian and Asian-American students who did not participate in class discussion asked questions and made comments online. He made it clear that organizing this online forum was an inconvenience to him (this was right at the start of the Internet era, when this practice was not yet *de rigueur*) but he wanted to be ethnically/racially sensitive.

And then his eyes rested ever so briefly on me, a second generation Indian American.

What was he communicating with that glance?

This, at least, is what I received: Hey brown kid, because of your culture or your family or your religion or the way you have been treated by teachers or any number of other things distinctive to the brown kid worldview and experience, you may be too reserved to speak up in a physical setting with other human beings, so I have gone out of my way to create a special space for you to feel comfortable.

I wasn't that brown kid then, and I'm not that brown guy now. Since elementary school, I've viewed discussion-oriented classes as opportunities to give my vocal chords a good workout (apologies to other people's ears).

I do not doubt what this professor said – that, as a general pattern, Asian and Asian-American students participated less in class and more in online forums than their white peers. I'm glad he noticed the pattern (does it make him unusually observant? Woke?) and that he went out of his way to create a space that met what appeared to him as the distinctive needs of a particular racial/ethnic group of students.

But how should one go from an aggregate pattern to the individual student?

The glance I received was a "soft assumption," by which I mean the kind that is relatively innocuous and easily changed. In this case, after three comments in class and no participation in the online forum, I'm pretty sure the professor got a different idea about me. Still, my skin color created an expectation in someone else's mind that I did not want to live up to.

Question: would it matter to you whether the professor himself was Asian or Asian-American, or black or white? In other words, does it matter whether it is an Asian making certain claims about other Asians? How much does it matter that the category Asian covers something like three billion people and nations that range from Pakistan to China, several of which have been to war with each other?

Here is the thought experiment I do whenever I find myself glancing across a roomful of students and making a quick determination about how "diverse" the room is based solely on obvious physical attributes like race and gender:

What if I had to submit in writing to each student the "soft assumptions" I was making about each of them based on obvious physical attributes. Because you are black or white, male or female, I am going to assume you ...

- Have had good or bad experiences with police/teachers/coaches;
- You read a lot of novels or play a lot of video games;
- Your parents were strict or lax;
- Your family prayed together before meals or never ate together at all;
- You like school or you hate it;
- You pay attention to politics or you ignore it.

It is extremely uncomfortable, I find, to put such assumptions in writing and imagine myself handing them to a student.

Still, I am happy when I see a lecture hall full of people of different races and genders.

Tell me, am I crazy?