

Textual Analysis in the Service of Diversity Work

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Introduction

In her 2012 monograph *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed warns that “We might want to be cautious about the appealing nature of diversity and ask whether the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge” (1). To hone diversity’s “critical edge,” Ahmed regards it explicitly as “a sign” and traces a “genealogy of the term ‘diversity’” by interviewing administrators at universities in Australia and the United Kingdom (1). Additionally, she analyzes the documents that these administrators produce in the service of promoting diversity at their respective institutions. *On Being Included* is an important work of critical university studies that inspired me to task my students with serving as what Ahmed calls “diversity workers” by analyzing Statements of Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion from the University of California Board of Regents and California State University, San Bernardino. In conducting this “ethnography of texts” (12), we try to define the genre of such statements and interrogate the language of these documents to measure how invested universities are in diversifying the academy.

Assignment Part I

In preparation for the assignment, students were asked to read a selection from Ahmed’s *On Being Included* alongside the “University of California Diversity Statement.” This statement claims that “The State of California has a compelling interest in making sure that people from all backgrounds perceive that access to the University is possible for talented students, staff, and faculty from all age groups.” The students recoiled from the document’s privileging of the “perception” of access rather than explicitly guaranteeing access “for all groups.” Similarly, students found problematic the statement’s insistence that “Diversity aims to broaden and deepen both the educational experience and the scholarly environment, as students and faculty learn to interact effectively with each other, preparing them to participate in an increasingly complex and pluralistic society.” The University of California’s definition of diversity suggests that in predominantly white institutions (like some within the UC system), diversity is something to be instrumentalized to prepare students of European descent to enter an increasingly globalized workforce—in which case, “diversity” means teaching white undergraduates (particularly men) how to manage subordinate employees who are people of color, women, living with disability, or queer, without being accused of racism, sexism, ableism, or homophobia. Moreover, when the University, as it does in this document, “particularly acknowledges the acute need to remove barriers to the recruitment, retention, and advancement of talented students, faculty, and staff from historically excluded populations who are currently underrepresented,” it frames diversity initiatives in academia as a quasi-affirmative action response which, in California, is no longer lawful. However, what my students found most concerning about this claim is that it pretends that “acknowledg[ing] the acute need to remove barriers” is tantamount to eliminating them.

Assignment Part II and Learning Objectives

After their critique of the “University of California Diversity Statement,” I then asked the students to examine the “CSUSB Statement of Commitment to Diversity” before collaborating with each other to revise or draft their own stated commitment to furthering diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. The goal of the assignment is to encourage students to take ownership in reshaping the landscape of CSUSB, to take up space discursively here, and share with administration their ideas for actualizing our common goals. One of the guiding questions that I pose to students is borrowed from Ahmed who asks, “What does diversity do?” (1). In completing this exercise, it is hoped that students will recognize that diversity is the engine of innovation; it is the necessary friction that ignites a spark. Consequently, students will understand that diversity is a public good for everyone.

References

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

“University of California Diversity Statement”

<https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/governance/policies/4400.html>
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