



USC Race and
Equity Center

**HOW CAN WE EMPOWER
STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE
TO AND GROW A FIELD OF
STUDY, RATHER THAN
SIMPLY EXPECTING THEM
TO REINFORCE THE STATUS
QUO?**

Bhawana Mishra

***Humanizing, Caring, and
Supporting People's
Identities***

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BIOGRAPHY



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Bhawana Mishra currently teaches at Evergreen Valley Community College in San José, CA. Witnessing the transformational power of higher education on a person and family's economic and social trajectory has inspired her to dedicate her career to helping all students thrive. She is interested in using technology to creatively engage students, incorporating active learning strategies, supporting equitable access to quality educational resources, and finding ways to center the voices of her students in the classroom. She received a BS in Chemistry from the University of California, Berkeley, and an MA in Philosophy from San José State University. Her graduate thesis was entitled "Toward a Single Consciousness: Challenging 'Un-American-ness' of People of Color."

She is married to her best friend and together they have two wonderful children. She volunteers with various community organizations, including her children's schools, Girl Scouts of Northern California, and the Muslim American Society. Bhawana loves to travel - or at least plan trips she may or may not ever take - and loves the smell of wet forests.

FROM TEACHING PHILOSOPHY TO TRAINING PHILOSOPHERS

DELEGITIMIZATION

I took my first philosophy course while studying abroad in Cairo in 2004. Having just received an undergraduate degree in Chemistry and then converting to Islam a few months later, I was excited to see that the tradition of Islamic philosophy was one of marrying critical analysis skills with spiritual inclinations. Up until that point, my entire education had been in the United State and squarely Eurocentric. Other perspectives within various subjects were rarely presented, let alone affirmed. Within the hard sciences, the existence of varying points of view was not even acknowledged. For the first time, I saw my identity valued and affirmed within an academic field. Inspired to think that my unique perspective could be a valuable contribution to academia and society, I decided that when I returned home I would pursue graduate work in Philosophy.

During my graduate program, interested in incorporating my personal experiences and background, I often chose to write papers on the intersection of Islamic concepts and philosophy. While my professors gave me positive feedback about my analytical abilities, they were unable to comment on the content of those particular papers because they had no familiarity with Islamic philosophy. I found this particularly ironic since it was through Muslim and Jewish philosophers that Europe rediscovered ancient Greek philosophy, setting the stage for the European Renaissance.

When intending to pursue further graduate work in Islamic legal and political philosophy, I was told by my mentors to apply instead to Ethnic Studies programs because Philosophy departments would not consider

those topics to be “real” philosophy. Alternatively, my thesis advisor, who specialized in African-American Philosophy and the Philosophy of Race, suggested I do a PhD in standard European M&E (metaphysics and epistemology), and then use my professional career to pursue my actual interests - as he had done. Initially inspired to pursue Philosophy as a means of injecting my own perspective into the field, I was disappointed to see that my perspective was not welcome. Simultaneously, I saw that teaching at a community college level had a tremendous effect on the trajectory of students’ lives - students who were often also told that their perspective, and their very lives, were not valuable. I fell in love with teaching and felt I could be of more benefit on a community college campus than pursuing the PhD.

*“Since at least the 1990s, philosophy has been among the least demographically diverse academic disciplines in the United States, with substantial and well-documented imbalances at least in race and gender...”*¹ The dearth of diverse perspectives and contributions is a problem that not only plagues Philosophy, the other humanities, and social sciences, where the problem may seem more obvious. From earning a degree in Chemistry, I know the “hard” sciences similarly suffer from this problem. Women and people of color are glaringly absent from textbook images and narratives of scientific history, similarly giving students the impression that White men are the standard in the field and most welcome as its future. However, the content of the hard sciences are also subject to the biases of human scientists. For example, Black patients are underprescribed pain medication because many physicians have an implicit bias about Black people either having higher pain tolerance or “exaggerating” reports of pain, or an explicit bias that Black people have *literally* thicker skin than White people.²

Over the years, I tried to gradually include more of what I did know of female and non-European philosophers. Given the recent push for both diversity and inclusion in all academic fields, my own desire to challenge white supremacy and patriarchy in academia, and my campus’ efforts to make curricula more student-centered, I decided that I had to do more to make the college’s Philosophy courses more diverse at their very core, not just as an afterthought or an addendum.

¹ <https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/244-the-diversity-of-philosophy-students-and-faculty-in-the-united-states>

² <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1516047113>

BARRIERS TO DIVERSITY CURRICULA

In the effort to diversify Philosophy curricula there are two large barriers to include ideas and work from diverse philosophers:

1. Lack of faculty expertise:

This is a vicious circle. Faculty lack expertise in diverse philosophers because the faculty who trained them also lacked the expertise. Like many other new graduates and professors, I created my curriculum based on what I was taught because that is what I felt confident teaching. But the overwhelming white male-ness of the field, required curriculum, and available teaching materials continued to frustrate me. I did not have the skills or confidence to overhaul the curriculum, so I made sure that one of the first discussions the students and I had in the course was why the field of Philosophy tends to be so white and male.

2. Lack of teaching materials and resources:

Teaching any subject is facilitated by quality teaching materials and resources. While some introductory Philosophy textbooks are starting to become more diverse, most of these are readers (collections of primary readings) and lack the ancillary resources which facilitate textbook adoption, such as suggested activities, assessments, discussion ideas, etc.. The development of these ancillary materials requires expertise and time that many teaching faculty do not have. This lack of expertise and time may also explain why faculty do not simply try to learn more about diverse philosophers on their own, and then incorporate this knowledge into their courses.

STRATEGIES TO DIVERSIFY CURRICULA

While facing these barriers in my efforts to overhaul my own Philosophy courses, I was reminded of various pedagogical strategies I had learned about in workshops and conferences focused on equitable, enjoyable, and effective education. Some of these strategies include:

1. Centering student voices:

Diversifying curriculum demands more than simply including sources that a faculty member considers representative of her students. It means letting those students speak up and say who speaks for, and to, them. Instead of mediating the students' identities in the classroom, centering student voices allows them to assert the identities which are most meaningful to them and represent their lived experiences.

2. Active learning through creating content:

Many studies have shown that active learning strategies help with retention of educational material. It also lends itself to authentic learning activities that are more connected to the real world or professional field. One such strategy is to ask students to create content for the course. This is often done in the form of creating assessments, but can include other material as well. The process of creating assessments forces students to deeply engage in the subject matter, determine what are the most salient points of a topic, and formulate questions that ask their peers to critically assess the content and their own learning.

3. Training philosophers, not teaching philosophy:

No academic field is static, so why teach it as if it is? All fields are (or should be!) constantly evolving to include either new empirical data or broader perspectives. In order for students to be part of that change, faculty can engage them as scholars in the field rather than vessels to be filled with information. Students can see, early in their academic careers, that they can contribute to a field of study, and that their unique perspectives make for valuable contributions. Faculty should be training the future leaders of the field, not just robots who can reproduce what has already been done.

If a Philosophy graduate student were interested in pursuing research outside of mainstream European philosophy, perhaps she, like me, would be encouraged to pursue her studies in a different department. This may explain why, while a racially representative population of undergraduate students is interested in philosophy, white students are overrepresented among graduate students.

“In its membership data from 2018, the APA finds 80% of respondents identifying as White/Caucasian, compared to 60% in the general U.S. population. Also in 2018, White students received 84% of PhDs in philosophy, compared to 70% of PhDs overall (excluding temporary visa holders). However, the racial composition of philosophy undergraduates was close to representative of undergraduate degree recipients overall...”³

The impulse to engage in the activity of Philosophy is a human characteristic, instinctual to all genders and cultures. It is therefore unsurprising that incoming undergraduate Philosophy students are representative of the general population. However, non-White students are effectively weeded out before moving on to graduate work and, ultimately, faculty positions. How would a department become populated with a critical mass of faculty members who are well-versed in diverse philosophical traditions and could include these diverse perspectives in all the courses they teach if these traditions, and those interested in them, are not welcome in the field?

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE: THE BROADEN AND BUILD PROJECT

When I decided to finally take large steps to reinvent our college's Philosophy curriculum, it was also the first time students would be back in a physical classroom since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. While I was able to create effective online courses, one of the hardest things to achieve online was student collaboration. Therefore, I wanted to create a project that was collaborative in nature, which would also address the dearth of diverse readings, textbooks, and teaching materials.

In the creation of the project, given the aforementioned barriers and strategies, I was guided by the **following goals**:

- **Lowering the barrier to diverse curricula adoption.** The project would result in material that could be used by Philosophy faculty to teach diverse philosophical traditions, thereby lowering the barrier to adoption.
- **Student-driven content.** Content creation of the project would be driven by students, driven by their cultures, backgrounds, and interests.
- **Centering student Identities.** The project should show students that (1) people of diverse identities can be vital and legitimate members of the field and (2) the field is living, evolving, and growing from new and diverse perspectives.

The result was a group project called **“Broaden and Build”**. Groups would choose a philosopher and topic from a non-European tradition, or a topic from any female philosopher, and create a comprehensive learning module with ancillary material to be used by a Philosophy instructor.

The **end product** that each group created included:

- Background information for the philosopher or philosophical tradition
- List of the most important primary and secondary sources
- Excerpts from primary sources
- Lecture notes with suggestions for classroom activities and discussion questions
- A slideshow to be used with the lecture
- Homework/exam questions
- Suggestions for further information

Students also gave a short group presentation in class about their topic to show off their expertise and broaden their classmates' perspectives.

To **assist** with the completion of the project, I also did the following:

- **Allowed students to choose their own groups.**
- **Gave choices.** Students could either choose a philosopher or topic from a list I provided or pick their own philosopher or philosophical tradition.
- **Provided sufficient scaffolding for the project.** This included creating regular deadlines throughout the semester for each step, with complete text and video instructions and an example to follow.
- **Provided significant in-class time to work on the project.** I found that expecting students to complete the whole project outside of the classroom, when my students tend to have significant work and family responsibilities, was unreasonably demanding and stressful.
- **Asked students to assess their fellow group members' participation.** This was intended to address the "fairness" aspect that haunts any group project.
- **Asked students to provide feedback to other groups following the class presentations.** This gave the group feedback of their work from an outside, peer perspective, similar to how future Philosophy students would view their work.
- **Had students reflect on their own participation and completion of the project.** I wanted to ensure that in completing the details of the project, students did not lose sight of WHY they were doing this and how significant it was. Student reflection and assessment of their own learning deepens the education experience and strengthens metacognition skills. It also helps ensure that the lessons learned through the project will not be soon forgotten.

Results and Reflections

By the end of the semester, my Introduction to Philosophy course had created nine complete learning modules on topics ranging from “Sikh Metaphysics” to “Confucius and the Role of the Government.” The project proved to be valuable not only to the field of Philosophy, but also to the students and me.

During the process, I was pleasantly surprised by something that exposed my own biases and served to broaden my perspective. **Students signed up for topics I would not have expected.** While I expected most students to sign up for topics that matched their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, this was not always the case. Some students felt much more attracted to topics based either on a different identity (e.g. gender) or topic of interest (e.g. political philosophy). For example, two Asian-American female students signed up to work on a project about Enrique Dussel, a Latin American male. Even though this group only had two students and I suggested that they join a larger group, they were adamant that they wanted to stick with the project because they were keenly interested in Dussel’s Philosophy of Liberation! None of my Latinx students, of which I had many, signed up for this topic.

As for my students, knowing that they were the classroom experts on a particular topic increased their confidence in their scholarly abilities and sense of belonging in the class. They were happy to work with their classmates and engage in meaningful conversations with them. **Here are excerpts of the student feedback provided on the reflection assignment:**

“I really enjoyed the project! I was able to research and learn things I did not expect and I enjoyed creating the curriculum. It allowed me to more easily remember the content and felt inspirational, as it was a project focused on expanding the culture of Philosophy.”

“I felt good about participating in being a content expert and creator in the field of philosophy. It's nice to feel educated on a particular topic and have your work and findings speak for itself. I definitely learned a bunch in this philosophy class compared to when I stepped into it on the first day. I would say that all in all, I am pretty confident.”

One student in particular was deeply moved by the project. This is what she shared in the assignment:

“At first, I wasn’t so sure how I felt. With the rush of assignments from every class I felt like I just perceived it as homework/a project that needed to be done. But after presenting to the class I realized that this was so much more than that. After presenting, I truly felt a sort of peace knowing that some of my ancestors beliefs are now in my classmates heads and I hope that they further that knowledge by researching them a bit more.”

She also stayed after class one day to tell me that she’s actually considering changing her course of study based on what she did for the project. She worked on Nahua metaphysics, part of which included a study of the philosopher and ruler, Netzahualcōyotl. Being Mexican-American herself, she asked her father if he knew of the philosopher. He answered in the affirmative, though he had never mentioned it to her before or taught her anything of that history. He also pointed out that Netzahualcōyotl’s face is on the Mexican 100 peso banknote. She was shocked, having used the bank note throughout her childhood during visits to Mexico, by not having known who he was! She realized that he was a “really big deal,” but had never learned anything about him before. She told me that the project was so much more than a school assignment for her; it was really a life-changing experience.



SUMMARY

I teach Philosophy at a community college where most students have practical, vocational goals. I am not under any illusions that there will be a mad rush of students majoring in Philosophy after my courses. However, I hope that the experience that they take from this project – being shown that their voice, experiences, and perspective not only matters, but can change academia for the better – will carry through to whichever field they pursue. I know the field of Philosophy will be better for their contributions.

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