

FINE POINT

Racial Diversity

Thinking Environment

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## DIVERSITY

### The Original Context of the Thinking Environment

*In February in South Africa we focused the two Collegiate Days and the Faculty retreat on our desire to increase the proportion of people of colour in the Collegiates. To introduce the topic, I told the story of the role of diversity in the earliest unfoldings of the Thinking Environment. Many people were surprised. And they asked me to write about it.*

*Here are my current thoughts.*

Diversity has from the beginning, as early as 1986, been one of the Components of a Thinking Environment. That means it is a 'without which' for the conditions for independent thinking. And this is because we cannot think for ourselves until we can think as ourselves. And to think as ourselves, we must feel respected for all of our group identities.

My own commitment to diversity, therefore, has been at the heart of the Thinking Environment always. I also am deeply committed personally to a world free of identity oppression; and it was thrilling to begin to understand through the early years of noticing the conditions for independent thinking that without real diversity of identity there could be little diversity of

thought, and that without diversity of thought, there could be no Thinking Environment.

In 1996 it became clear that the key block in a person's thinking is usually an untrue assumption lived as true. And soon we noticed that untrue assumptions are also the driving force of group oppression, the killer of diversity. 'Women are weak', 'people of colour are stupid', 'real men should not feel deeply', 'LGBT people are sick', 'Muslims are violent', 'disabled people are a nuisance', etc. We know the assumptions all too well.

But the uplifting insight was that these untrue assumptions are what drive exclusion and wipe out diversity in groups. And so, simply and happily put (and possibly idealistically as well), if we can get rid of untrue assumptions about group identities, we can get rid of oppression. Even institutionalised oppression.

Establishing a Thinking Environment as the culture of a group is one way to do it. The Ten Components can dismantle group prejudice, exclusion and marginalisation, and they can generate the best thinking in a group.

Which is also why from the very first day of teaching in South Africa we determined to populate all courses, and eventually the Collegiates, with a representative proportion of black and coloured people. For about five years, we did that. But gradually the number of white people has grown disproportionately. So we are correcting that. Not just because it is the societally right thing to do. But because a Thinking Environment depends on it.

That's the story. From my very first impulse to pursue the question, 'What does it take for people to think for themselves?', diversity has been a vital part of the journey and of the emergent answer.