An Interactive Online Course to Raise Awareness about Diversity

Guido Rößling
roessling.gu@kiva.tu-darmstadt.de
TU Darmstadt, CS Dept.
Darmstadt, Germany

Felix Broj
broj.fe@kiva.tu-darmstadt.de
TU Darmstadt, Pedagogy Dept.
Darmstadt, Germany

ABSTRACT

Diversity is sometimes understood narrowly, by viewing only gender and racial aspects. However, there are far more aspects to diversity that can affect the chances to study successfully, in some cases only indirectly or subtly. We present a small self-contained online course for raising awareness of some additional aspects of diversity, without admonishing users or prescribing attitudes.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Computer science education**;

KEYWORDS

online course, interactive, self-training, diversity, awareness

1 AN INTERACTIVE ONLINE COURSE ABOUT DIVERSITY

Diversity has, as the name indicates, many different aspects. Gender and racial background, while arguably the most common aspects, are only facets of diversity. Other aspects include, but are not limited to, disabilities, the sense of national, ethnical and/or cultural identity, religious backgrounds–both concerning the actual personal belief system and the degree to which one identifies with central tenets–, social and economical background, sexual disposition, and finally age.

In many cases, courses or programmes seem to expect an "average student" to which certain attributes are ascribed: not having a disability, a citizen of the university's nation, adhering to the predominant local religion, coming from a financially stable background, heterosexual, and of "typical age" for a student. In other words, the "average student" is essentially your average John or Jane, comparable to "all others of the same age". This is in itself a fallacy, and the reality is of course far more diverse than anticipated.

Our course presents a set of six personas–not actually persons, but fictional characters that however could easily be found on any campus. Each of these personas provides information on his or her background: given name, age, information about their relationship or living status, national, ethnical and cultural background, religion, parents, field of study, and a few lines of additional background information. Each fictional personal should feel like someone one could meet on campus.

The user is then randomly assigned one of these personas and asked to rate 20 questions for this persona with agreement, undecided or disagreement. Each answer is awarded 2, 1 or 0 points, thus up to 40 points can be achieved by a student that perfectly agrees with each statement. The statements are chosen based on a diversity study and indicate–though in several cases subtly–differences between students, for example based on financial backgrounds, the relationship to parents, or social obligations that cut into the time available for studying (or leisure). Both the user's persona's portray and six additional other persona–separate from those from which the user persona is chosen–progress from the bottom of the screen towards the top, depending on the respective answer score. In this way, the user can easily see that the "staging area" for students based on these questions is highly uneven: at the end, the six other personas will have a (predetermined) score between 7 and 17, with the user's persona typically falling somewhere between these extremes.

The course closes with a chance to reflect on the different chances for the diverse student body and a request to make sure that students–usually through no fault or decision of their own–have equal chances. We hope that this will encourage students to reflect on the different characteristics of other students, and open their minds to diversity aspects and the advantages–and disadvantages–that certain expectations or societal expectations convey.

The course is available at URLdisclosedforanonymousreview for viewing and commenting to anybody interested.