

My Reflections on the Path to Uncovering my Whiteness and Unlearning Racism

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1. Abstract

Central to my identity has always been the perception of myself as a vigorous advocate for equality. My dedication to social justice issues began around the late 60s when I recall first reading Claude Brown's Manchild In The Promised Land. Now, after sixteen years of university teaching in sociology and justice studies, I realize an unexamined understanding of my Whiteness has resulted in my creating an environment of privilege and domination in my classroom. In this essay, I follow Tim Wise's (2007:36) advice and attempt to become aware of my privilege through the exploration of my collaboration with racism in the classroom. I, then, offer a testimony to how my gender, race, and class have influenced my pedagogy.

Key Words:

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2. The Course: "Restorative Justice, Teaching Tolerance, and Peacebuilding"

The impetus for this reflection came from the assessment of a university course I co-taught with a photography professor¹ entitled "Restorative Justice, Teaching Tolerance, and Peacebuilding". The principles of critical pedagogy and critical thinking laid the foundation for this course. My ideals for the course were democratic, liberatory teaching with social justice outcomes. I wanted students' voices to prevail resulting in a collaborative building of knowledge (Freire, 1970; Guyton, 2000) about differences; and, I wanted to devise a course that would answer Kreber's questions:

How can we create democratic learning communities that recognize and affirm diversity of all its members? How can we affirm and develop each student's individual and particular identity while also helping each of them to develop a commitment to a common good? (2005: 401)

The course consisted of ten high school and ten university students. These students came together in a Justice Studies' course to study restorative justice and (non-verbal) peacebuilding through photography. The overall goal was to visually illustrate their values in life, their identity, and their culture. In university-high school pairs, the students were to bring together these visual differences and eventually arrive at joint photo essays. In effect, they were negotiating any differences in their values to arrive at the

¹ I am profoundly grateful to my co-teacher, Professor Jerry Stewart. He was the ideal co-teacher; he willingly did his share, never complained, was always willing to regroup as we tried various strategies, and, he kept our spirits going. I am also appreciative to the Teaching Tolerance Program of the Southern Poverty Law Center for their grant to help purchase the cameras for this course.

creation of a joint photo essay. This process resulted in various levels of acceptance of differences ranging from tolerance, co-existence, to active peacebuilding.

Course exercises, assignments, readings, and discussions were based on principles of critical thinking (Paul, 1992), Bloom's taxonomy (1956), and Friere (1970) and hooks' (1994) concepts of democracy and engaged pedagogy. Consequently, the course focused on dialogical, explicitly reflective, deep thinking where all members were acknowledged and valued. Notwithstanding this deliberative, thoughtful, pedagogy, that was developed during a year-long faculty learning community, evidence from the course data suggest that this effect was not achieved. That is, the first-day free writing assignments, in-class debriefings; late-semester written artist's statements, and final reflection papers all confirm that the Black students, in comparison to the White students, in this course experienced enough discomfort in the learning environment as to render them silent in class.

The obvious empirical difference between the two groups of students was their educational setting: the university students attended a private four year university, while the high school students (except for this course) attended an at-risk high school. We purposely invited students from a high school, in a demographically low- to working-class neighbourhood, to join this special university course. We did not set any particular condition for enrolment; nevertheless, race became an obvious distinction with the students from the high school being all Black, while the university students were all White. Therefore, we began the course with two groups of students with obvious race differences and, somewhat less obvious, class differences. Various aspects of the teaching methodology were evaluated to determine its effectiveness.

3. Analyzing the Pedagogy: Silence in the Classroom

Four different measurements lead me to conclude that the pedagogy was not successful in creating a democratic learning environment: an analysis of free writing on the course concepts; statement made during the debriefings; evidence written in final reflective essays; and the obvious fact that over time the Black students repeatedly failed to verbally contradict other students claims that there were no differences among the students due to race or class, while at the same time writing the opposite.

Analysis of the first day's pre-writing assignment made me realize that the course concepts of tolerance and racial and ethnic diversity had substantially different meanings dependent upon one's race. The high school students wrote about "tolerance" in more negative personal terms (i.e., "how much you can take" or "how much self-control you have"), while the university students wrote in more positive connected terms (i.e., "accepting or understanding diversity"). An even clearer distinction appeared in writing about the terms "racial and ethnic diversity." What did these terms mean to the high school students? "Segregation." "About being all Black or all White." Again, the university students saw these terms as positive, i.e., these words meant "uniqueness" or "celebration of differences." Thus, I realized that the Black students perceived these terms in relation to the effect it had on them, while the White students thought of these terms in a celebratory dis-connected manner. I have become conscious of the fact that being White, and the norm, has made it difficult for me to recognize the diverse constructions of these terms. As others (e.g., hooks, 1995; Rodriguez & Villaverde,

2000; Wise, 2000) have noted most White people see issues of race and ethnicity as having to do with “others” as White is not a “colour.” Thus, being White is being of no race.

The second sign that the students did not all experience equality in the classroom were comments made by some of the Black students during the debriefings. These were spontaneous discussions that emerged as a result of growing dissension from a few White students that eventually turned into very vocal, forceful, assertions. These latter students were frustrated over the content of the assignments (i.e., in particular the one about capturing your own identity on film) and the time spent on the assignments (i.e., there was a greater concern for outcome, rather than process). These complaints manifested after a while into an overall course criticism that there were no differences in values or identities due to race. Occasionally, some Black students and other White students attempted to interject in the conversation that there were real racial and class differences among the students. The few vocal White students dominated these discussions. I saw them parallel to what Davis (1992), in her research on students’ in courses on race and ethnicity, calls the “Resistance Group.” These students strongly resisted any views of racial or class differences. Moreover, if there were any differences they were due to individual behaviour. Thus, this group of students resisted the notion of racism. By this time the class was split into this vociferous group and a silent group.

The final evidence that students did not feel free to claim their diverse identity was in their reflective essays. Among other issues, they were asked to write on what they learned about the notion of differences and acceptance in the course. Several of the Black students and some of the White students wrote that there were significant racial differences: Victoria, a Black high school student, wrote, “our lives are so different they [the vocal group of White students] have no idea.” After all of these personal pedagogical reflections it became apparent to me that I had a good deal to learn about my role in creating a democratic learning community where all members are recognized and valued.

4. TESTIMONY TO HOW MY RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS HAVE SHAPED MY PEDAGOGY

I first really learned about racial inequalities in my teen years. Even though I grew up in a privileged (albeit, first generation), white middle to upper-middle class family, I gained knowledge of racial injustices. This awareness came as a result of a wide social circle. I learned not everyone had two parents, or even one parent, or could buy food when hungry, or had a place to sleep every night. During my last years in high school, I struggled for gender equality, while my Black male friend went to prison for two years for drug possession. This was my life and his life, and I thought they were both normal.

Gender expectations taught me to be polite and non-confrontational (thus, feminine).

In a similar vein, I learned not to discuss racial injustices because that would somehow suggest I was racist. Thus, silence became the evidence that I supported all equally and was not racist.

This behaviour informed my pedagogy. While teaching I spoke in general terms of racial injustices. In my efforts to “not speak for others” I relied on “native informants” (hooks, 1995) to reveal their oppression. When they failed to speak, or were not listened to (as happened in this class), their identity was not affirmed. My error was waiting for the “native informants” to speak, in so doing the “class culture,” of the private university (i.e., at the least middle-class) became the norm. In my silence of waiting for others, I reinforced the structure (and students) that dominated as the norm (hooks, 1995; Quist-Adade, 2007). hooks writes about why African-American youth may not speak up in class.

The experience of professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all “safe” in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged or lack of student engagement. (1995, 39)

Since my legacy of privilege taught me equality meant to be neutral, to be silent, race became invisible. Wise (2000) notes this is common behaviour among White people. Was this the message I was sending to the class?

These reflections have led me to many dialogues with many people. I have begun the process of a critical examination of my Whiteness and what it means to my pedagogy. Although my journey is just beginning, I now recognize my silence can be active racism. I also understand my failure to be aware of Whiteness as a race and culture is to say Whiteness is the norm. Is this not collaborating with racism? What will I do differently: speak from my position of Whiteness; help others become aware of their race, specifically their multiple identities shaped by their race, class, gender, etc.; practice mutual respect; and model intellectual humility and empathy. Would hooks say I am beginning to transgress my boundaries?

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