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Teaching Effectively in Racially and Culturally Diverse Classrooms

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Abstract. *Issues of racial and cultural diversity and racism pose particular challenges for effective teaching and learning in diverse theological classrooms. In this essay the author outlines specific strategies to confront racism and engage racially and culturally diverse students. Through the use of a model for understanding multicultural dynamics of teaching and learning, the author helps readers consider four epistemological categories: knowing our students, knowing ourselves as instructors, knowing how we teach, and knowing what we teach.*

Introduction

While some scholars have long called for stronger efforts to confront racism in classrooms and in institutional practices, confronting racism is now a growing concern for theological faculty. For mid-career faculty, this concern may well have autobiographical as well as pedagogical urgency. Many of us were likely educated in classrooms segregated by law and then in college and graduate classrooms largely if not completely segregated in faculty leadership and assumptions informing core content choices and pedagogical strategies. Moreover, in many parts of the U.S., housing, recreation, and worship remain largely segregated.

As noted in several of the essays in this issue, mid-career faculty are often situated to provide positive influences among colleagues when encouragement is needed to adopt institutional emphases for confronting racism. Such encouragement may well be needed since one effect of segregation is a difficulty in talking about race across racial and cultural lines. Another prominent difficulty in largely Euro-American faculties is the distorting effect of inadequate definitions of racism often held by Whites that obscure the fact and effects of racial privilege. For example, many seem to hold operative definitions that describe racism as a system of disadvantage based on race. This definition assures concern for confronting racism only as someone else's problem. Moreover, if one is not actively racist, this definition gives a false peace of mind to most Euro-American faculty concerning our own complicity. A more adequate definition describes racism as an interlocking system of advantage and disadvantage based on race (Wellman, 1997). By including the fact of racial privilege or advantage in the definition of racism, Euro-American faculty have to confront our often unwitting complicity in racism by failing to resist or confront practices and assumptions that reproduce it. This aversive or more *polite* racism may be the most destructive. A few minutes reviewing the reading lists or topics in syllabi often disclose a privileging of Euro-American sources and practices as normative in a majority of contemporary classrooms. They may also disclose pedagogical strategies that do not include the range of learning styles present in the racial and cultural diversity of students.

Several Euro-American participants in the mid-career workshop increasingly focused on the challenges created for our self-understanding and practice as educators by confronting racism as an interlocking system of advantage based on race. We found that the interlocking effect of racial privilege at individual, group, institutional, and cultural/symbolic levels creates a powerful barrier to lifting the veil of privilege that obscures racism. In diverse classrooms, a significant initial challenge for members of the dominant culture is to become de-centered culturally and racially. De-centering describes the process of discovering and assimilating that one's racial or cultural experience is not normative but particular and therefore provides a partial rather than complete perspective. Such a claim may seem commonsensical, but the U.S. is one of the most highly racialized cultures in the world; hence, the defenses of denial are pervasive. Moreover, racism as racial privilege in this

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country exists under the cover of what many describe as the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea of a level playing field for all, the beloved national claim that here anyone can succeed by pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. Racism as a system of advantage discloses the lie of this national ideal and the complicity of those who enjoy racial privilege. Clearly the distortions of racism are powerful and pervasive. Even this brief review of the challenges accompanying effective teaching and learning in racially and culturally diverse classrooms suggests the need for helpful resources.

Resources

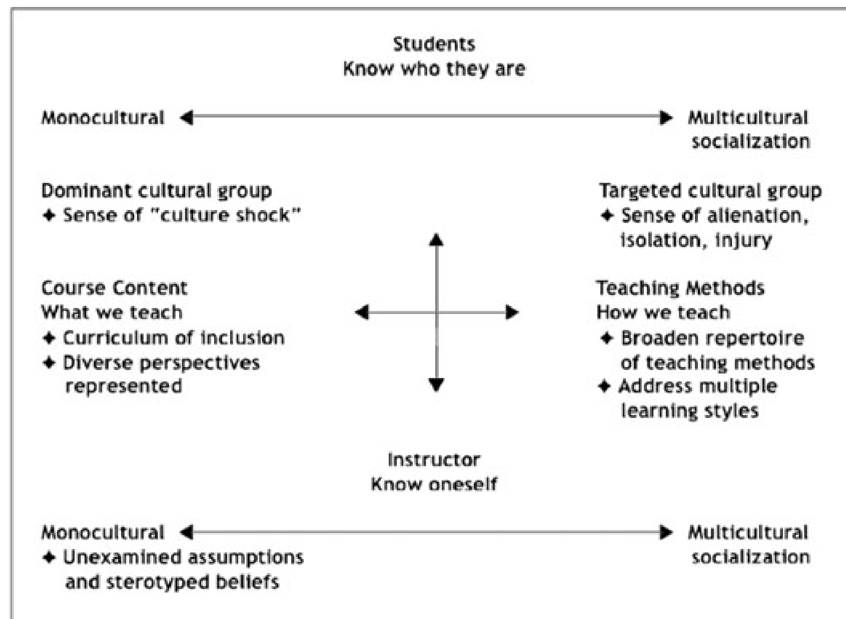
This essay describes a model that has proven useful in a process that frequently feels like peeling an onion because pulling back a layer of privilege and revising practices for one aspect of teaching seems to lead to the discovery of yet another necessary step. As we examine the usefulness of the model, other theoretical resources will be introduced. The model described below for better understanding the multicultural dynamics of teaching and learning was developed by Bailey Jackson, III (1988) and adapted here by Linda Marchesani and Maurianne Adams (1992).

The two continua of this model (knowing our students/knowing ourselves and how we teach/what we teach) well describe critical lines of inquiry for effective teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. Even for more monocultural classrooms, these four issues highlight concerns for helping students be more self-aware and effective in an increasingly diverse culture and church.

Knowing Our Students

Knowing our students describes a category that becomes more critical in classroom settings in which students bring diverse racial and cultural life experience. When instructors are identified with the dominant culture, students from groups marginalized in relation to this culture may well worry that racism will be reproduced in their classroom environment through such alienating experiences as isolation, condescension, or extraordinary status. Students from the dominant culture may also find themselves anxious about how to respond especially if their experience has previously been largely monocultural. Frequently they and their instructors have only stereotypic knowledge of the life experience of those whose heritage differs from theirs. However, it is also the case that those who seem to identify as Euro-American may in fact bring experiences of difference that are subjectively marginalizing, such as working class or working poor economic backgrounds or religious differences. Marchesani and Adams suggest that there are three concerns particularly prominent for students whose heritage differs from their Euro-American instructor and many of their classmates: alienation, isolation, and vulnerability to their self-esteem. In my efforts to adjust my teaching and course content in light of more diverse classrooms, these several categories seem accurate.

For example, in one of the courses I revised as part of the Wabash Center's mid-career workshop, "Pastoral Responses to Aging," I found I needed to incorporate the vastly different communal responses to aging and strategies for care that arise in African American, Asian,



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and Latino homes and congregations. I needed to de-center the way mainline white congregations reproduce ageism and individualism as a normative definition of the problems faced by older adults. Similarly, Asian, Latino, and African American students often found the difficulty with aging described in white mainline congregations inconceivable.

Isolation is a regular concern in classrooms where Euro-American students sometimes form a large majority. In a team taught course that colleagues and I are revising, students who are not part of the dominant culture rightly complain that they do not hear their experience in the small group sessions where cases are brought from students' field education placements. How are those from outside the U.S. or from quite different ecclesial contexts than white mainline Protestant congregations able to contribute without feeling as if they are asked to speak for the entire racial and cultural group with whom they identify? This experience is exacerbated by the readiness of instructors and students from the majority to refer to those whose experience is other than theirs as a group, though we would readily admit we couldn't speak for all white Americans. My colleagues and I have determined to require students in each small group to become familiar with the ecclesial, racial, and cultural heritages represented in their small groups. We also are going to augment the cases used by including some cases that reflect ecclesial practices more representative of cultural differences familiar to students in the minority in the group.

Diverse classrooms in a racist culture, of course, include the likelihood of further painful experiences for students from outside the dominant culture. These usually occur due to the comments of students or faculty who speak out of stereotypical knowledge that has the effect of reproducing racism, however unwittingly. In a course I teach on gender, race, and class, I have found that this sometimes occurs around films I use to deepen awareness of and conversation about cultural and racial difference. Sometimes the choice of films or assigned readings themselves evoke the pain. In this class we begin with developing guidelines for our work together, including ways we hope to deal with conflict or unwitting injury. My goal has been to give permission to those who experience injury to voice their pain or complaint quickly and allow their classmates or me to apologize and seek reconciliation. It is naive to imagine that instructors can make classrooms safe for students. However, modeling a readiness to work through such experiences without allowing any one to be shamed is very important.

Knowing Ourselves as Instructors

Knowing ourselves as instructors refers to the important and challenging task of becoming self-aware of the way we learn and participate in a racial and/or cultural identity. These beliefs, attitudes, and practices inevitably reflect the social constructions of race that predominate in this culture. Unfortunately, those constructions usually obscure more than they disclose. For example, enormous differences in history, language, and religion are collapsed by such terms as Asian-American. Hispanic refers to a term coined in the U.S. to describe persons bound not by skin color or geography but by the culture reflected in a common language. Euro-American includes multiple countries, histories, and so on, but the term White is even more vacuous since it basically describes what one is not, and across the course of several hundred years it has proven quite elastic depending on current political interests and economic privilege.

As noted earlier, given that this culture is at once highly racialized and also racist, racial and/or cultural identity refers to differences that are not benign. Whatever the racial or cultural identity of an instructor, he or she is keenly aware of the asymmetries of difference that accompany this aspect of identity and is probably anxious about them. In my experience, Euro-American instructors may be at a disadvantage in this category of self-awareness due precisely to the mis-definition of racism noted earlier that protects Whites from seeing how privileged we are. Ironically, Euro-Americans, by virtue of being the dominant culture, and especially those who are at least middle-class, can avoid considering race. For me this aspect of effective teaching included a sharp learning curve about the history of the construction of race in the United States. Once I came to define racism as an interlocking system of advantage based on race that functioned at individual, group, institutional, and cultural/symbolic levels, a veil dropped. But for my white colleagues and me, coming to terms with how pervasively privilege has and continues to shape our experience is an ongoing journey of de-centering.

In my teaching I have sought various strategies to help students, especially Euro-American students, understand how racial privilege functions to distort self-understanding. Jane Elliott's blue-eyed/brown-eyed experiment depicted in the film, "A Class Divided" (1997), for example, confronts Whites with a powerful demonstration of how early children internalize racial privilege as a part of their identity. Discussion around this film provides students a way to explore their own socially constructed racial identity. In my course on gender, race, and class, I use what is sometimes referred to as a "privilege walk" to provide kinesthetic as well as affective and intellectual understanding of how privilege protects Euro-Americans outside our awareness. Students begin holding hands in a straight line across a large empty space and in silence take a step forward or back depending on their response to questions that have to do with circumstances they did not create, such as

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whether their education included resources that regularly described their racial group. To such a question white students take a step forward while those of other races stay in place. When I ask if they have ever been denied a job due to gender or race, many women of every race and men who are not White usually step back. Eventually, few are able to continue holding hands and most students who are not in the dominant culture are behind the line at which the exercise began while white women and men are spread out in the front half depending also on socio-economic class considerations. While such an exercise cannot be done successfully apart from a context of trust and prior conversation, it has regularly transformed the experience of white students and confirmed the experience of those in other racial or cultural groups. Another level of conversation often becomes possible after such an experience.

How We Teach

How we teach refers to the pedagogical significance of diversity in classrooms. For example, current research suggests that Euro-American women and women and men of African American, Native American, and Latino cultures often seem to prefer a learning style that differs from that which seems to be preferred by many Euro-American and Asian-American men (Anderson and Adams 1992). The former seem to prefer a more relational style and are highly sensitive to the context or field in which learning takes place, while the latter prefer a more analytical style that is independent of the immediate context for learning. Without attention to such materials, instructors are likely to teach as we were taught. While a variable wider array of pedagogical strategies is instructionally wise in any case, it becomes even more important in multicultural classrooms that include students with a diverse set of experiences and practices. A range of collaborative and cooperative learning activities alongside more analytical learning and visual, auditory, or dramatic demonstrations is helpful. Adjustments that balance verbal and written expression, group and peer learning, and individual projects contribute to more effective multicultural classroom experiences. As I have begun to widen my repertoire of strategies to incorporate these sorts of balances, I have witnessed a better balance of achievement among diverse students with a much more significant investment in the classroom experience by those who are not from the dominant culture.

Assessment options are an extension of this concern for teaching strategies that are effective with those whose racial and cultural experience is outside the dominant culture. Once instructors build in a wider repertoire of learning modes, it is only logical to assess progress in diverse ways as well. It is also the case that students more comfortable with a traditional analytical approach to learning will also benefit because they develop a wider range of learning modes beyond their preferred style. The same can be said for instructors because we no longer unwittingly require students to adjust or assimilate to one preferred mode of learning. Charles Foster suggests that we view "the community of teaching and learning as an ecology of language processes, cultural patterns, and world views" (Foster 2002, 15). In addition to diverse assessment modes, he also insists on the importance of clear and fully described guidelines and criteria for learning and rules for participation that ensure all may participate. In this regard, Foster rightly notes that an instructor's intentionality about articulating these standards clearly may well help students outside the dominant culture access a wider range of intellectual thought while critically engaging such traditions from their own experience. Finally, Foster notes the importance of providing for classroom environments in which those who are marginalized by the dominant culture are able to claim their voices equally along side those more privileged in that culture. In my experience, students appreciate establishing guidelines early on, and quickly learn to monitor their participation.

One final pedagogical resource that my students and I have found effective is described as racial development theory (Tatum 1992; Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2001). This theory presumes that racial identity is an aspect of every person's identity, and as such is internalized by each of us early in life. As it continues to be a dynamic process across the lifespan, it is especially sensitive to the fact and effects of racism. The value of this theory lies in providing students and instructors with a conceptual map for understanding their experience in deconstructing the internalization of racial stigma or privilege and internalizing a positive racial or cultural identity. Certainly, this theory does not chart a necessary or irreversible process, but it does help students understand and normalize the emotional and intellectual processes they experience as they seek to confront the distortions of racism in their own self-understanding and behavior. I have found it helpful for understanding the experience of students in their class participation and discovering ways for me to respond to them more appropriately. It has helped me avoid personalizing some interactions while also helping me frame responses more appropriately.

What We Teach

What we teach describes the crucial link between curriculum and institutional transformation at one level or course content and personal transformation at another. As Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992) suggests, it is unethical to teach students to recognize the distortions of racism and not help them to interrupt that racism. For

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my colleagues and me, asking what we teach discloses the particularly challenging normative dimensions in education. Whose intellectual tradition is taught? Whose definition of a field shapes a syllabus? Whose experience shapes situations presumed in a course or as outcomes for student competencies? For example, most of us have experience with syllabi that deal with difference by a class session or week devoted to Feminist Theology or Black Theology as if the rest of the course is about *real* theology. A similar difficulty emerges in Pastoral Care courses that include a class session on care with African American families that provides the only reading not by a Euro-American author and where there is no special attention to distinctive aspects of ethnicity among Euro-American families.

In abstract, this attention to the importance of decentering the hegemony of the dominant culture or tradition from course content sounds easier than it may prove in practice. In one team taught course on Practical Theology, my Euro-American colleagues and I gradually realized that embedded in the course were the assumptions of our mainline, Protestant, white experience. We saw that more clearly, though, only by venturing into literature on ecclesiology from other racial and cultural ecclesial traditions. We also immediately confronted our racism in acknowledging to ourselves what literatures we had failed to consider for reading lists and course preparation. Now we are engaged in restructuring the course. We are bringing a wider range of ecclesial perspectives and practices to bear on the practice of religious leadership in a racially and religiously plural context. There are smaller "aha" moments. I recognized, for example, that a panel in a class on aging to discuss care for older adults in different racial and cultural groups was unwittingly reproducing racism because I had not also included the issues particularly pertinent among various Euro-American families and religious communities. I had treated white experiences as normative. Especially for instructors in the dominant culture, confronting the evidences of racial privilege in course and curricular decisions can be humbling.

I have found a curricular model by Marchesani and Adams to be a helpful way to track progress in course or curricular transformation. It describes a gradual shift through qualitatively different ways of understanding one's relation to perspectives that begin on the margins but eventually inform a curriculum of inclusion (Marchesani and Adams 1992, 15–16). The process of change involves the following steps. (1) Typically Euro-American instructors and faculties begin with an "exclusive" course or curriculum that reproduces the intellectual hegemony of the dominant culture and its European academic perspectives. (2) The next step typically involves a shift toward including the contributions of "exceptional outsiders" to add a different point of view that broadens understanding and helps marginalized students feel more included. (3) The next shift seeks to "understand the outsider" and seriously engage their ideas, though any change contemplated would be assimilated into the dominant perspectives. (4) The multiplicity of perspectives emerges as a hermeneutic of generosity that allows those in the dominant culture to value the authentic insights of the other as helpful and truthful. (5) Finally, a "transformed curriculum" is possible because the cultural hegemony present in the exclusive curriculum or course is exchanged for a mutually respectful engagement with the knowledge and scholarship of multiple perspectives that will necessarily shift epistemology and widen sources of authority.

Conclusion

Racism poses a daunting challenge for effective teaching and learning in diverse theological classrooms. But models such as the one described here are providing a helpful compass especially for Euro-American instructors. Finding conversation partners of various racial and cultural heritages is truly necessary for the journey. Cultivating the ability to laugh with each other and at ourselves while taking the work seriously also helps a great deal. One of the insidious effects of racism is the lie that it is too big to confront successfully. My colleagues and I are finding a freeing grace in realizing our teaching is a medium for challenging ourselves and our students to take responsibility for contributing to communities of justice and inclusion.

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