

Teaching Diversity: The Impact Of Race And Gender On Our Experiences As Educators

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Abstract

To date, little attention has been given to the ways in which college-level instructors' gender, class, race, and ethnicity impact their experiences as educators. While some authors have acknowledged the impact of their location within this matrix of identities, both upon the subjects they choose to teach as well as upon the ways in which students respond to them, this is still an aspect of tertiary education that is rarely explored in pedagogical training or when decisions regarding tenure and promotion are made. Drawing upon the experiences of two college professors who share different demographic characteristics and life experiences and who teach an array of courses at a large Midwestern university, this manuscript explores the ways in which an individual's identity impacts what they choose to teach, how they teach, and how students respond to them. Implications for instructors as well as for administrators within institutions of higher learning are discussed.

Gender, class, and race all have significant implications for human experience, including the experience of college-level teaching. Collins (2000) first introduced the notion of intersectionality and the ways in which individuals' location within the matrix of race, class, and gender impacts not only their experiences, but also their value systems. In relation to teaching, this intersectionality impacts what is taught, how it is taught, and students' reactions towards both the instructor and the material. However, in spite of the significance of such factors as race and gender to teaching and students' experiences, this is an aspect of tertiary education that is rarely fully explored.

Notably, these factors have been extensively discussed in the literature regarding secondary education. Extant literature has emphasized both the

impact of teachers' race and ethnicity upon their experience of themselves as authority figures and educators, as well as the ways in which students' race, social class, and ethnicity impacts their experiences within the school system and their interactions with teachers (e.g. 2008; Drudy, 2008; Mogadime, 2008; Morris, 2005; Dee, 2004; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994). A review of this literature thus strongly suggests two important topics that must be acknowledged and discussed: 1) that an educator's location within the matrix of intersecting identities has significant implications for their own experience of teaching, and 2) this matrix has implications for how students concurrently react to teachers.

In contrast, at the tertiary level, the impact of diversity and identity upon teaching is often explored from a singular

and utilitarian perspective. In this case, the importance of having students enrolled in programs where they are trained to work with people (e.g., teaching and counseling) become familiar with the realities of intersecting identities whereby related experiences of privilege and discrimination are emphasized. Students in such programs may be actively encouraged to explore these issues and to confront their own understanding of diversity and the nature of social power and privilege in order to ensure that they are best prepared to interact with individuals of diverse backgrounds, identities, orientations, and attitudes (e.g., Au & Blake, 2003; Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007; Williams & McBain, 2006). Incongruously, rarely is the impact of the instructor's race, class, and gender on teaching explored.

Even so, some acknowledge that this lack of awareness is problematic. As such, educators acknowledge that they struggle not only with students' resistance to modifying their stereotypical or discriminatory beliefs, but also that students' indiscriminate statements may be difficult for others who are of minority heritage or disempowered genders to hear and/or respond to. This may consequently have a negative impact upon student participation and on the classroom atmosphere (e.g., Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gillman, 2001; Housee, 2008; Tummala-Narra, 2009). Additionally, in at least one known case, authors report that a reflexive classroom environment resulted in students' backlash against them as instructors (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gillman, 2001). Of most importance, in each of these cases an examination of the instructor's location in the matrix of identities is

neglected.

It is, however, important that we acknowledge that there exist some authors who discuss the impact of race, gender, and ethnicity on their university-level teaching; nevertheless, this focus is limited to a handful of known publications (e.g., Skerrett, 2006; Segal & Martinez, 2006). In both cases the authors focus on the role that their location within the matrix of intersecting identities plays in the material that they teach as well as their experience as educators (e.g., their experiences as individuals of color and/or women has impacted their perceptions of the world and thus their approach to teaching as well as the material that they teach). Skerrett (2006), in particular, discusses students' sometimes-negative reaction to her as an educator of color. These authors thus eloquently illustrate the significance of taking into consideration the impact of race, gender, and class upon instructors' experiences while making recommendations for others to follow.

This literature on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender is significantly limited in size. Hence, in this paper we seek to further contribute to the discussion on the impact of the matrix of identities on our experiences as educators within a particular socio-cultural context. Drawing upon our experience as educators, we argue that our location within the matrix of identities significantly impacts not only what we teach, but also how we teach. We additionally discuss the ways in which students respond to us as well as the content that we teach. We integrate the foci of the various literatures cited above, and we argue that, at the tertiary level,

an understanding of who we are as individuals cannot be divorced from what we do within and outside of the classroom.

We end with recommendations for other young (or not so young) scholars as well as administrators. These recommendations are intended to assist others in dealing with the realities of teaching within a context where evaluations of teaching have significant implications for promotion, tenure, raises, etc.

DEACON'S EXPERIENCES:

Being A Gendered Professor

As a woman who teaches college-level classes on gender, race, class, and social change, I find myself compelled to include a focus on intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. However, I am also faced with the awareness of the fact that I am not conveying this information to my students in a vacuum. Everything I choose to teach them is influenced by my personal value system and is closely tied to my own racial and ethnic identity, heritage, personal history, and socio-economic status. Similarly, students' understanding of and response to this material and my presentation thereof is deeply impacted by their location within this intersecting matrix of identities. Thus, as a scholar and teacher I find it necessary to be reflexive not only as a researcher, but also as an instructor. I believe that this is especially salient when teaching classes that include a focus on gender and other identities and forms of oppression.

Who I Am And What I Teach.

As a relatively young, White, immigrant woman who moved to the United States from South Africa, a

country with a notorious history of racial inequality and oppression, I find myself uniquely positioned and relative to this subject matter. As a heterosexual woman I am similarly influenced by those times when I have borne witness to the blatantly unfair treatment to which close friends and relatives who just happen to be gay and lesbian have been subjected as they seek to start families and to live out their lives. Finally, I am the product of a left wing, South African undergraduate institution and a graduate training program in community psychology that has allowed me to better understand the structural inequalities that are part and parcel of almost all societies. As a result, I believe that, as an educator, one of my responsibilities is to help my students understand privilege, oppression, the reality of relationships of power, and the consequences of disempowerment. My hope is, idealized, as this may seem, that this is one way in which I can bring some small measure of change to the world.

Who I Am And How I Teach.

However, as I alluded to earlier, I find that this process is neither straightforward nor simple. As a relatively young professor, I have struggled to gain confidence when faced with students not much younger than myself, and at times, older than I am. This, combined with the fact that I am a woman often seems to render it even more important that I establish upfront my legitimacy in the eyes of my students. I have encountered more than one, usually male, student who believes it acceptable to speak to me or act towards me in a way that I do not believe they would if I were a white male instructor. This is always subtle, and the feelings associated with these

experiences are always of mild discomfort and the strong sense that this is not okay (feelings that most women are very familiar with). At first I thought that I was simply imagining these slights, but I have since spoken with other female faculty whom have reported similar experiences. This renders it especially important and yet more challenging to establish myself as a legitimate yet approachable authority right from the start.

In these regards, I am a work in progress. I draw upon examples of strong women whom I have known in academia and attempt to model myself after them. As a result, I find that every time I teach I am more confident and more able to project the kind of image that I would like my students to have of me. I am learning to remain friendly but to also be a figure of authority. In short, I am learning to be aware of myself and the way my students see me. This approach seems to be bearing fruit as I find that my students are responding to me differently and more positively.

I also often find it complicated to discuss in my class different forms of oppression to which I am clearly not subjected myself. In fact, I obviously am the recipient of race, class, etc. privilege. This renders it imperative that I approach these topics with respect for what I do not know about the experience of oppression. For example, as a White person discussing the experience of racial oppression, I struggle to feel authentic. I will often frame these discussions by acknowledging my race privilege and owning my own place in the system of oppression. I will also tell students, up front, that I clearly have no experience of racial discrimination, but I can draw upon my experience as a

woman and as someone who has more than once been an outsider and a member of an obvious minority in a foreign land to attempt to make sense of this form of discrimination. However, I still struggle to feel comfortable and to ensure that my students are comfortable with this discussion as well. This is rendered even more difficult by the fact that I am an instructor at a predominantly white institution of higher learning. I thus often have very few students of color in my class, and it is a difficult dance to not make these students feel singled out by the discussion or to put them in a position where they feel compelled to speak for all members of their race or ethnic group. Thus far, my only solution to this situation is to make eye contact with all students in my class, to fully engage all students in the discussion, no matter what their race, and to continue to acknowledge the diverse ways in which individuals experience discrimination, oppression, and privilege.

Finally, the fact that the institution of higher learning at which I teach is located in a rather conservative part of the country also has important implications for how I teach and what I teach. As much as possible, I attempt to model for my students not only respect for others, but an awareness of the lens through which I see the world. My hope is that this will influence the ways in which they interact with one another. However, it is not uncommon to encounter students who are open and honest about the fact that they do not respect LGBT people or that they believe a woman's place is certainly in the kitchen and not the boardroom. I have also heard from colleagues that students have accused me of being feminist (in a context where feminist is somewhat of a swearword) or have cast

doubt upon my sexual orientation (revealing deeply entrenched heterosexism and homophobia). The topics that I choose to tackle as an instructor thus open me up to criticism and sometimes attacks by students that range beyond a focus on my ability as a teacher.

Who I Am And How Students React To Me.

Students' reactions to the classes that I teach represent a triumph as well as a challenge on multiple levels. In addition to the challenge of the subject matter itself, I am challenged by students' reactions. I have learned to not care as much about personal attacks students may make upon me; however, it is never easy to respond to students' expressions of racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic beliefs. In my teaching I attempt to show them a different way of thinking, and when made in a public forum, I challenge their discriminatory statements. However, there has been at least one instance where I invited students to write honestly about their beliefs, never guessing what some of them would write. In this context, where I promised no judgment, it is very difficult to have to turn a blind eye to some of what students have to say. This warranted a significant amount of self-examination, and I had to make a decision about what my role as an instructor should be. I decided to honor what I had told my students and to find other ways in which to attempt to get them to see the world in a different light. I also sometimes find it difficult to challenge students' beliefs without necessarily making them angry and hostile; my fear is that if they become hostile they will simply shut down.

However, it is not always possible to challenge discriminatory beliefs without making students feel angry. This may be counterproductive, but the hope is that not everyone will shut down and that some will question the facts behind their statements and beliefs.

Thankfully, in my experience thus far, students with negative reactions to topics related to gender and its intersections with other forms of oppression are in the minority. More often than not I have had the privilege of being approached by a young person who wants to share with me the fact that they feel more able to navigate their own way through the world and to feel empowered in the face of oppression. I am additionally heartened by those students who are excited to discover that there are other ways of looking at the world as well as those who are now more aware of issues of race, class and gender. This has made my job easier, but I always wish that someone had told me up front how difficult this would be.

Who I Am And How I Become More Effective As A Teacher.

At the end of the day I have learned to become increasingly reflexive in my teaching, and I strive to encourage similar reflexivity in my students. I believe that who I am cannot be divorced from what and how I teach. Similarly, I believe that if students are encouraged to become more reflexive, they may become more open to challenging their own beliefs.

BERT'S EXPERIENCES:

I am a 31-year old, married, biracial (of Black and White heritage), female Assistant Professor at a Midwestern university enjoying my third year of teaching at the collegiate level. As a

"military brat" raised on Air Force bases around the country, I was exposed to, and interacted with, various races and cultures throughout my childhood. Looking back, I cannot remember a time while being reared in such diverse cultural environments, that I was made aware of and/or ostracized *personally* because of my race. However, there were little hints here and there that the racial composition of my parents was viewed as problematic by others (e.g., a burning cross in our front yard; no form of contact with my White father's immediate family; or the racist comments graffitied across our car when we returned home from vacation one summer). Despite these horrible acts of discrimination, I grew up in a supportive and caring environment in which my parents instilled in me pride for who I was and made to believe that if I worked hard, I could be and do amazing things. I know now that my parents played an important role in "shielding" me from the hatred people had towards interracial marriage and its offspring in the late 1970's and 1980's. As a consequence, I was naïve and truly believed that my minority heritage played *no* role in determining how others perceived and interacted with me.

It was not until I enrolled in graduate school that I was made aware of my "Blackness." During my 4-year graduate career at a predominately upper-class White institution I represented one of only three graduate students of color within the Psychology Department (1 Biracial, 1 Asian, and 1 Latina). During the first week of class a colleague informed me that I was the "token Black girl" who was admitted to the program because of Affirmative Action, not based on my abilities. It was the first time in my life that I was forced to acknowledge my

race and the baggage it carries. Even though the majority of us were having a hard time transitioning to graduate school, it was subtly suggested to me through interactions with both faculty and peers, that black students did not have the wherewithal to succeed in a graduate program (Hooks, 2000). Determined not to quit, I felt as if I had to prove them wrong on behalf of current and future students of color. I dedicated myself to successfully completing the combined Masters and Doctorate Developmental Psychology program in 4 years, making better scores on exams and papers than my colleagues, conducting exceptional research in multiple areas, and oh yeah, along the way obtain a minor in Quantitative Statistics. I realized what it meant for a person of color to have to work twice as hard to achieve an equal status with majority-raced colleagues. This lesson resides within me today as a tenure-track Assistant Professor and impacts the ways in which I teach my courses, conduct research, and interact with both students and colleagues.

As a person of minority heritage, I am astutely aware of the fact that for many students my race precedes my training and credentials as a professor. Depending on the type of course I am teaching, this fact can either serve to hinder or assist student's trust in my ability to teach. I have noticed that students more quickly share, participate in class discussions, and ask questions about the lecture material when I teach courses related to race, culture, and gender issues. As a "Black" professor, I innately have the credentials necessary to teach these types of courses and therefore I am an authentic source of information. Whereas, class participation begins as nonexistent at first

and then steadily increases in my courses on Human Development and Research Methods as students gain respect in my abilities and become more comfortable interacting with me as a source of authority. Hooks (1989) mentions that more recent hiring practices have resulted in more Black professors teaching at predominantly white universities; however, our presence only moderately mediates the racism and sexism on campus. I have come to expect that when I teach these types of classes, some students test me out on a "trial basis" in which I am given the opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge of the subject and my ability to teach. Moreover, as I teach Statistics and Methods courses, the fact that I am biracial becomes more confounded by the fact that I am female teaching a course generally taught by white men.

Through research, and extensive academic training and certifications, I have become an expert on the subject matters that I teach. Through mentorships, teaching assistantships, conference presentations, teaching workshops, and seminars on teaching, I have been given ample opportunities to practice and improve upon my pedagogical techniques and abilities. Despite all these accomplishments, upon entering a classroom for the first time, I still must "prove" myself to several students because of the color of my skin, gender, and/or possibly my age (i.e., at times I can pass for someone in their mid twenties). I have had students who refused to talk in class and/or inappropriately drilled me with questions throughout the lecture to determine whether I was a credible source of knowledge. It is interesting to me that for the subjects that I am most certified

to teach (through my Doctorate) I tend to feel self-conscious of my abilities. However, I have never myself, nor have students, questioned my authenticity or creditability as a source of information in my courses on race and identity issues, courses I have less "academic" creditability to teach.

My most recent negative experience with a graduate student stemmed from the combination of what I believe was my race, gender, age (or lack thereof in her eyes), and feminist perspective. At the conclusion of a graduate seminar I taught on Psychosocial Development, this particular student turned in a hand-written letter addressed to my Department Chair stating over 20 reasons she felt that I was "unfit" to teach at the graduate-level. The student had also provided examples of statements (taken out of context) that I had made in class lectures, as well as with students on a one-on-one basis making it clear to me and the Chair that she had been critically observing and analyzing my behavior from the first day of class. Statements ranged from accusing me of displaying favoritism towards black students to my unprofessional "giddy" manner. Every aspect of my being, except for the quality of my lecture material and ability to convey this information, was critiqued.

Due to the amount of time and effort I had invested into preparing and teaching the course, I was devastated to read the first and only negative evaluation of myself. I felt blind-sided because at no point during the course did I ever get the sense that this particular student was not enjoying the course. She did not engage in the traditional challenging behaviors that I have come to expect and feel comfortable in handling. She did not show her discomfort with me in her

mannerisms and in fact received one of the highest grades in the course because of her ability to convey course material in her writings and class presentation. A colleague of mine gave me sound advice, "Go read the teacher evaluations and see how others viewed you. Do not let this one student's opinion determine your worth. If you do, she has succeeded in what she set out to do." Taking this sound advice, it became obvious to me that the problem was not within me, but the student herself. Every other evaluation was positive and highlighted the positive aspects of my pedagogy and interactions with students. Reading the evaluations was therapeutic and reminded me of why I teach on a daily basis, to instill in others the love I have for learning and knowledge.

On the other end of the spectrum are the few students of color, particularly blacks, (i.e., there are generally 2-3 minority students in each of my courses) who have taken my classes and stood out because of their class participation and quality of work. I have come to notice that in every course that I teach, the majority of students of color sit within the front two rows, meet with me to ask questions before and after lectures (even stopping by my office during non-office hour times), fully participate in class discussions, and usually ask me to write recommendation letters on their behalf. I have even had several students ask me to serve as their mentor and/or aid them in the process of applying to graduate school. It is important also that I mention that many non-minority students have participated in these same behaviors.

At times I find myself wondering if these particular students are showing respect to me as a professor of color or do they feel the need to work twice as

hard, as I had felt when I was in graduate school. In actuality, it could be a combination of the two reasons. Either way, I am honored that I am in a position to assist students of color in their quest to achieve a higher education. I am a tangible example to them of what is possible for a person of minority heritage when we set goals for ourselves and put in the necessary work to achieve them.

As a result of my experiences to date (who I am, what I research, and where I am from), I have an awareness of issues of race, class, and gender issues. The one thing that I can suggest to teachers who may be experiencing what I experience on a daily basis is...to be honest with yourself and your students. I begin each new class with an introduction of myself that includes a listing of my academic training and research interest. Students can then decide for themselves whether I am a credible (authentic) source of information. I am not naïve to the fact that my race colors (both good and bad) how my students perceive me; however, I do not let this influence my teaching. No matter what subject I am teaching, I challenge myself to: (1) provide a stimulating learning environment, (2) develop an interest among students for life-long learning, (3) support students displaying difficulty, and (4) reach those less motivated to learn.

Conclusion And Lessons Learned

Both of our experiences as educators have been significantly influenced by our location within the matrix of intersecting identities. This is true not only for what we teach and how we teach, but also for the ways in which our students respond to us. Martin (2003) argues that academia is still an inherently masculine

domain, and that this has significant implications for women's experiences. In this manuscript, we have chosen to focus on our experiences as teachers. Admittedly, this is only one part of what we do as academics, however, it is an important aspect of our work that requires a thoughtful approach. We believe that in highlighting and discussing the ways in which our locations within the matrix of identities (which includes our gender) impacts our experiences as well as that of our students, we will become part of a larger dialogue about ways to both improve our teaching as well as to alter the ways in which institutions of higher learning approach teaching and the evaluation of teaching. To this end, we have distilled some lessons learned from our experiences.

Lessons Learned For Instructors

- (1) Anticipate the fact that including a focus on race, class, and gender in your teaching may raise questions in your own mind about your identity, your access to privilege, etc., and these may be uncomfortable and difficult to deal with. You may need to confront aspects of yourself that you have never dealt with before. For some, this may be difficult.
- (2) Anticipate that students' perceptions of you as an "authentic" source of information will be significantly influenced by your race, gender, etc. and anticipate the challenges that come along with this. This may require that, for example, female faculty and/or faculty of color work extra hard to "prove" themselves to their students or may mean that these faculty members are treated with greater disrespect by students. These may be difficult realities to face and overcome. Women and/or people of color may have to do more upfront to "neutralize" students' reactions and to establish themselves as a credible source of information.
- (3) Anticipate the out-of-classroom consequences that your location within the intersecting matrix of identities and/or the material you choose to teach may have for you as an instructor. For example, students may unfairly target you for complaints and/or negative teaching evaluations. If you are housed within an institution in which such complaints and/or evaluations carry significant weight or an institution that is particularly unsympathetic to the nuances of race, gender, etc., this may have negative implications for your progression towards tenure and promotion.
- (4) Be reflexive in your teaching. An awareness of your own location within the intersecting matrix of identities will not only make you a better teacher, but will also allow you to better handle the challenges inherent in teaching. Your own reflexivity will also allow you to help your students become more reflexive as well. Such reflexivity may assist students to shed their own racist, sexist, etc. points of view.
- (5) As much as is possible, draw upon a supportive network of colleagues who are able to share with you advice and support.
- (6) Focus on the positive impact that you have on students. Those students whose lives you change

may not be as vocal as the ones who are resistant to your teaching, but this does not mitigate the significance of such an impact.

Lessons Learned For Institutions Of Higher Education.

- (1) Institutions of higher education should alter both how graduate students are prepared for future careers in academia as well as the ways in which instructional faculty are prepared, evaluated, etc.
- (2) Graduate schools should prepare students for the challenges they may face as a result of their location within the intersecting matrix of identities. Many graduate schools offer opportunities to students to improve their teaching, however, rarely are the realities of the challenges they may face as a result of factors such as their race, gender, and/or topic of instruction addressed. This leaves many students unprepared when they first encounter these kinds of challenges.
- (3) Institutions of higher education frequently provide opportunities for instructional faculty to learn from their peers and to develop their teaching skills. These opportunities are often focused on topics such as developing better online classes, engaging students in classroom discussion, small-group learning, and dealing with difficult students. Rarely, if ever, do these opportunities for learning and support focus upon the realities faced by women, instructors of color, disabled instructors, etc. or on the impact that class topics may have upon students and

instructors. Individuals who face challenges in their teaching that result from their location within the intersecting matrix of identities and/or topic of teaching thus have to surreptitiously seek out others who have similar experiences in order to obtain support or may have to forego peer support in this regard.

- (4) Institutions of higher learning should take into consideration the realities of identity in the classroom and the impact that a focus on teaching social justice may have on the ways in which students respond to instructors. Such factors should be considered when teacher evaluations and other related factors are considered during tenure and promotion decisions.

CONCLUSION

While the faculty at institutions of higher education is becoming increasingly diverse and a focus on social justice is increasingly included in college curricula, discussions of instructors' identity and/or topic-related experiences are largely absent from the literature. It is still the case that these issues are rarely openly discussed and taken into consideration. In this paper we hope to contribute to this nascent dialogue and to emphasize the importance of both being reflexive in our teaching as well as being aware of the impact that who we are has for how and what we teach.

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