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Creating the Conversation: When the Classroom Tells All

Dana Livingston

As students of color became middle class, the criticism of persistent American racist practices declined. In a mid-level sociology course originally designed to empower black women students' evidence of discomfort, using materials that challenged racist practices, provoked a redesign of the course structure. This allowed for in-depth understanding and acceptance of history and the present day. Giving access to the ways that racism is viewed in America, a number of texts were reviewed and discussed throughout the course that expanded upon the idea of there being only one black America. This journal will present the analysis of the interaction between the twenty-one students of the State University of New York at Geneseo's sociological course Black Women in American Society. Furthermore, their research project and the redesign of the 2011 fall semester course, which implemented a new classroom approach by creating a space in which discursive connections, brought social transformation of academic institutions.

Student Demographics

In the State University of New York at Geneseo, only a handful of courses are offered that focus on the history of African Diaspora and the effects it has had on the current racial practices of the United States. These courses intend to expose what textbooks neglect and open the minds of all students to create a safe haven for discussion and interactions. The 201 sociology course Black Women in American Society consisted of twenty two students; five African American students, three Asian students, one Hispanic student, and twelve Caucasian students; one of them the only male in the course. All the students ranged from freshman to seniors. All students came from different states and cities of origin; metropolitan cities, small rural towns, and suburban communities. The economic status of the students ranged from lower class to upper-middle class. At the start of the semester the students were asked two questions; "What does it mean to be black?" and "What does it mean to be white?" the stereotypical

answers highlighted the link between experience and consciousness, thus, paving the way for course reform.

Course Texts

Course (reading) material was assigned by Elaine Cleeton, Ph.D, professor of the course and an Associate Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at Geneseo, who has been with the university since 1997. Having previously taught this course, Dr. Cleeton assigned the reading material each semester with the course focus being black women and their status in the United States. The texts paved the foundation of the study of education, law, family, and the social norms that support the majority. The required texts included Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Pablo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Janell Hobson's *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, and Eugene Robinson's *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. Robinson's *Disintegration* provided the groundwork to the students' research project "but I'm not a racist..." modeling Theorist Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography which explores the relationship between two parties beginning with interviews and observations of everyday performance to discover America's racial stance. Robinson discusses the class division of black Americans generation gap, stating that instead of one black America there is now four (Robinson 2010):

1. Mainstream middle class
2. A large abandoned minority
3. A small transcendent elite
4. Two newly emergent groups: individuals of mixed race and immigrants.

Each student interviewed a friend or family member with a list of questions the class developed as a whole, using all texts that covered areas of racial emergence; socio-economic class, education, the law, and current stereotypes which were to be presented at the college's annual research symposium.

Beginning of Semester Student Interactions

New semesters equal a new group of students who come together to discuss the subject being studied, which for a course like Black Women in American Society, could be considered uncomfortable to those who are not used to talking about race; its history and present day.

Entering the “colorblind” era and making sure that the United States is “politically correct” when discussing race acts as a shelter from the uncomfortable conversation. Therefore, it was no surprise to witness the lack of verbal communication.

Learning is hard to do without emotion; consequently, the lack of emotion gave no way for the class to grow together. The classroom structure consisted of a circle, where each student faced the center. This was done with the hope that students would be more likely to interact. Each class, there were assigned readings that would be discussed; the conversation was left open to relate the text to whatever the students wanted to.

For example, on September 14th 2011, the class discussed the text of Eugene Robinson’s *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. Robinson believes there is no longer one black America and the problem no longer lies in the fight to “overcome”; it now lies in the individuality of reaching the American Dream. The stereotype of black people sticking together is diminishing; many are trying to deviate from the negative connotation and stereotypes that are assumed to come with black America. The attempt to get a group of students, the majority of who did not know each other, or never had to discuss subjects like this was demanding.

When considering the discussion of challenging text and the force the classroom setting put upon the students, many still did not engage in conversation. A hypothesis was developed as to why the students did not speak:

1. The students did not want to say something offensive
2. The fear of not being politically correct
3. Not being able to relate to the text
4. Believing they did not have the right to say anything.

Without discussion, the students were not able to determine if they were in a comfortable setting, one in which they could freely discuss their opinions and thoughts. “Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (Freire 92-93). Therefore, something had to be done to create this setting.

Questions We Asked Ourselves

Ms. Patricia Gonzalez, a counselor for the Access Opportunity Program, a program designed to assist students who were previously under-represented in their earlier levels of education with the transition to the State University of New York at Geneseo, joined us in our goal to implement a new classroom design. Before we could begin, we had to ask ourselves a

series of questions before planning a course reform; how is knowledge produced and how, then, do we engage our students in consciousness rising?

Our goal was to implement pedagogy from a dialogical perspective while having the students develop their own educational experience; by teaching and learning through each other.

Course Reform

Dialogue is key. Dialogue:

1. Is an act of love
2. Cannot exist without humility
3. Requires intense faith in humankind
4. Engages the dialoguers in critical thought.

This resulted in the use of a strategy called “concentric circles.” This provides a “here and now” experience which fully engages the students with the material. The structure was intended to generate development in communication between the students in a cultural critique of racism and sexism.

“Concentric Circles” involved two circles of chairs, one circle inside the other. All the chairs of both circles face each other so each student would face the student in front of them. One student was to ask a question, comment on the answer of the other student, and then answer the question themselves.

The conversation and questions of this activity were used to create questions for the students’ research project and create the comfortable setting in which students could talk among themselves, getting to know each other with the hopes of increasing consciousness and class discussion.

As a result of this activity some of the questions the students asked were used in their interviews:

1. Do you feel there is a lack of diversity at Geneseo? Is it changing?
2. Do you think race/class affected how we responded to Hurricane Katrina?
3. Do you believe that the black community still has common ground even if race is the only thing that seems to unite them? What about Blacks of mixed race or immigrants? Do cultural beliefs, such as food or religion also come into play?

These questions proved their consciousness and awareness for the issues and topics in the readings.

What the Classroom *Now* Tells

This activity proved to be successful in acknowledging consciousness and creating a comfortable environment for students to engage in conversation of challenging texts throughout the remainder of the semester. At the end of the semester we were able to freely talk with the students and all students shared personal stories, experiences, and opinions. We were able to grow together as a class.

To take a course and be able to leave with a positive academic and social experience is what true education is all about. For some students this course was the first encounter they have ever had with a diverse group of students. In lieu of this the level of engagement and eagerness to make change as a result of our activities and discussions was an amazing accomplishment. Thus, it is prevalent to share our concept, activity, and accomplishment with others so together we can break racial barriers.

By Dr. Cleeton, Ms. Gonzalez, and I sharing our research and classroom experiences at New Orleans University's Race Gender and Class Conference in New Orleans, this gave way for this research to be further examined and provide an example of what dialogue does in an academic setting.

It takes communication and faith in humankind to learn from one another and make change happen.

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Creating the Conversation: When the Classroom Tells All

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- “[T]he dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the student-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks herself or himself what she or he will dialogue with the latter about.” (Freire, 93)

Creating the Conversation

- How is knowledge produced?
- How, then, do we engage our students in consciousness-raising?

Questions We Asked Ourselves

- “This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation.” (Freire, 48)

Facilitating Consciousness

- Is an act of love
- Cannot exist without humility
- Requires intense faith in humankind
- Engages the dialoguers in critical thought

Dialogue

- Objectives:
 - To provide a “here and now” experience
 - To fully engage students with the material

Concentric Circles

- Class research project
- Eugene Robinson's Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America
- Ethnographic open-ended interviews
- Research report

Course Structure and Content

- Have you ever felt out of place because of your race?
- Where did you grow up? Were you in the majority or the minority?
- Do you feel that there is a lack of diversity at Geneseo? Is it changing?
- What have you experienced with class/race that made you uncomfortable?
- Do you think race/class affected how we responded to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans?
- How is the mixed race perceived? Should Obama be considered the first Black president even though he is half white as well?
- Do you believe that the Black community still has common ground even if race is the only think that seems to unite them? What about Blacks of mixed race or immigrants? Do cultural beliefs, such as food or religion, also come into play?

Questions the Students Asked

- “Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” (Freire, 92-93)

What DOES the Classroom Tell?

Thank you
