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## "GIVE ME MY 'PROPS': RACE, GENDER AND AUTHORITY IN THE CLASSROOM"

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# "GIVE ME MY 'PROPS': RACE, GENDER AND AUTHORITY IN THE CLASSROOM"

**Sharon J. Washington**

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Springfield College

**This presentation addresses campus culture, challenges of establishing authority at predominantly white institutions, and strategies for establishing authority in the classroom.**

By virtue of being a professor there is an assumption of authority, including knowledge of the subject matter and competent teaching skills. As a woman of color at a predominately white institution I am constantly aware of the need to establish authority in the classroom in a non-threatening and educational manner. Before the beginning of every semester the ritual of establishing authority begins. The establishment of authority occurs through both structural (e.g., position, degrees, faculty handbook, college/ university catalog, name plate, etc.), and environmental supports (colleagues, syllabus, personal introduction and reputation). For the most part structural supports are conferred at the time of faculty appointment, while environmental supports occur over time and need to be consciously reinforced. This presentation will address campus culture, challenges of establishing authority at predominantly white institutions, and strategies for establishing authority in the classroom.

## **Campus Culture**

*Provost: "Given your work in the area of social justice and diversity, why would you want to be at a predominantly white male institution?"*

*Applicant: "What other kind are there?"*

When the Provost asked me this question during my interview I immediately thought two things; she had a desire to tell me about the campus culture, and at the same time I felt she was questioning why I would want to subject myself to that environment. I hoped that by formulating a question as a response, my spoken response would convey the idiocy of the question. I went on to respond that there are not enough positions at all the Historically-black, Hispanic-serving or Tribally-controlled institutions in this country to employ all the people of color in the United States. Has the Provost ever considered that the nature of higher education in the U.S. is white and male dominated? Was this a question asked of all applicants? Because I knew the Provost, I'm fairly sure this white woman was trying to convey that she could look critically at the institution. What she did not take into account was it's not much different at other predominately white institutions.

The small private New England college where I am employed as an associate professor, especially in my department, has an established culture of addressing faculty by their first names. Faculty refer to other faculty by their first names when speaking to students, students address faculty by their first names, and the administrative assistant will often

address faculty by their first names when supervising the student workers. So the questions here are: who most often gets addressed by their title, and by whom? The one person most often addressed with the salutation of "Dr." or "Professor" is the one older white man in the department. Being addressed by my first name by students or by faculty when talking to students is like fingernails on chalkboards to my psyche - I don't like it.

### **Challenges of Establishing Authority**

The challenges of establishing authority at predominantly white institutions is that in the process of establishing authority, people of color will be perceived as uppity, rigid, demanding, incompetent, angry and/or threatening. I know from personal experience with white folks that my desire to be addressed as "Dr." or "Professor" has been transited as snobbish, distant, unapproachable or "scary". So to stave off some of those reactions I need to do some education of my colleagues and students.

### **Strategies for Establishing Authority**

#### Structural Supports

The establishment of authority and respect occurs through both structural supports and environmental supports. Structural supports are those often conferred before or at the same time of faculty appointments, such as degrees earned, faculty position, rights and responsibilities as outlined in the faculty handbook and college or university catalog. The wording of your office door name plate also serves as a structural support for your authority.

#### Environmental Supports

Environmental supports are not as concrete, nor is there a handbook for how to establish them. My strategies for establishing them have changed somewhat from when I first started teaching in higher education in the mid-1980s as a graduate teaching assistant to the present. I consciously draw upon my knowledge of teaching assessment, racial identity development and communication skills for cross race/ethnic dialogues.

Within the first couple of semesters at my present institution I had several conversations with my department chair and colleagues regarding their understanding of my responsibilities and how I could support them and the institution, as well as, how they could best support me in establishing authority. First, I shared with them the history in the U.S. of Black people having to address white people with Miss, Mrs., Dr., etc. and the common practice of White adults and children calling Black people by their first names. Second, I conveyed that often I will be the first, if not the only Black teacher these students have ever had and the importance of contradicting the stereotype that Black people are not the holders of academic knowledge or doctorate degrees. And for those combined reasons, it is important to me that I be addressed as Dr. Washington to students and visitors.

I introduce myself to my students at the beginning of every semester by sharing my educational and teaching history, as well as similar information regarding how they may address me. I have come to think of it as "the introduction" and am always trying to determine how students are taking the information.

The course syllabi are another environmental support strategy that can be used. I remember as a student appreciating the teacher who had a well-organized syllabus that

clearly specified course description, outcomes, requirements and how students would be assessed. As an instructor myself, I try to be as clear as possible, especially regarding assignments, class participation and my grading policy. So, over the years when I have been asked to defend a grade or my course content to either a student, department chair or the Dean, I have been able to cite my syllabus for clearly stated descriptions and expectations. In hindsight, those difficult experiences which questioned my authority in the classroom were helpful, because they reinforced for me the necessity of an explicit syllabus.

Establishing a reputation on campus that is grounded in truth (rather than stereotypes) takes years. It takes students and colleagues alike, getting to know you by your actions and then talking to each other. Even in my early years of teaching, I would tell students that I was aware of my reputation of being a challenging instructor, but as long as students thought that I was fair, I felt the reputation was accurate. I knew what reputation I wanted, so in addition to teaching in a challenging manner and having high expectations of students, I decided to fertilize the proverbial grapevine.

### **Conclusion**

Establishing authority as a woman of color in the classroom is an ongoing negotiation of my needs with the culture of the campus. Making explicit requests of my colleagues when it comes to how I am addressed and why is an important support to my authority and at the same time educates by making explicit the legacy of race in the United States, the history of addressing people by name, and the offering of contradictions about who are the holders of intelligent on our higher education campuses, until they are no longer perceived as abnormal.

### **Presenter:**

**Dr. Sharon J. Washington** has been actively involved in social equity work for over 15 years. Sharon Washington has spoken internationally at conferences, universities, school and non-profit organizations. In addition, she has been conducting adventure-based interpersonal and group dynamics workshops since 1983 and draws on a wealth of experiences from working with young people, educators, higher education administrators, park and recreation professionals, allied health associates, corporate executives, and non-profit organizations.

Sharon is currently the Coordinator of the Education Graduate Programs and an Associate Professor in the Education Department at Springfield College. For three years prior she was the founding Director of Project S.P.I.R.I.T., a grant-funded program to increase the number of teachers of color in urban public schools at Springfield College. Before coming to Western Massachusetts, Dr. Washington was a tenured faculty member at Kent State University in the School of Exercise, Leisure and Sport. Her research and writings focus on three general areas: 1) the impact of courses with a social justice theme on students' attitudes and beliefs about multiculturalism; 2) the impact of social identities on teaching and research; and 3) the restructuring of classrooms for student empowerment.

Sharon Washington received her Ph.D. from the Ohio State University, where she

completed a dual major in Adventure Education and Leisure Management, with a minor in Adult Education. Additionally, she had completed Equity Institute, Inc. Trainers program, and was awarded a faculty development leave to study in the graduate Social Justice and Diversity Education Program at the University of Massachusetts.