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10-31-2001

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Gwendolyn Guy
Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Gaetane Jean-Marie
Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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The "Foreigner": Pedagogical Practices on Teaching Cultural Studies Courses

Abstract

Black women scholars rarely get the opportunity to chronicle and critique their experiences as instructors in predominantly white institutions. When the black professor endeavors to teach cultural studies, there are immediate challenges that must be overcome for the engagement of critical discourse. This discussion will include ideas and recommendations concerning the issues explored by the presenters.

Gwendolyn Guy
Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Gaetane Jean-Marie
Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Black women scholars rarely get the opportunity to chronicle and critique their experiences as instructors in predominantly white institutions. When the black professor endeavors to teach cultural studies, there are immediate challenges that must be overcome for the engagement of critical discourse. The majority of our (white) students who enter our classrooms have never been taught by black women professors (Hooks, 1994). Cultural studies requires that students engage in critique and discourse that examine the interconnectedness between race, class and gender. Consequently, many of our white students resist, become defensive or simply become disengaged from the process of critical inquiry. Each semester the black instructor enters the classroom as the "foreigner". Existentially, she is consciously aware that she is "black". This awareness of being black heightens her sensitivity of who she is and how she is perceived by her white students. Immediately, she experiences a dialectic of the internal and external struggle of whether or not there can be engagement between teacher and student. As women of color in a university dominated by white men and women, our students' resistance does not surprise us. Yet, we must struggle to create spaces in the classroom where engagement and criticality are features manifested in our pedagogical practices. This discussion will include ideas and recommendations concerning the issues explored by Guy and Jean-Marie.

Recognizing that we teach who we are (Gatto, 1994), the instructor must allow her own frailties and fears to surface in order to begin healing the internal struggle. Part of the healing process involves affirming oneself through relationship with other black women in the academe:

> As (black instructors) and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another (Myers, 1980)... In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist (Hill Collins, 2000:12).

It allows for the instructor to deal with the external struggle or tension-classroom dynamic-that persists with the students throughout the semester. It is critical that the teacher understands the fragility of herself and her students. In the efforts to create a community of critical thinkers, there is always the possibility that this community will cease to progress in the quest to building relationships in order to engage in liberatory praxis in the classroom. Ultimately, the goal is to go beyond the classroom setting into the larger society.

The power relationship that exists between the teacher and the student must also be examined. A community of mutuality is possible only when this relationship is reversible:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exit and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself (herself) taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught also teach (Freire, 1997: 61).

This flexibility to adjust and respond creates a fluid syllabus that is subject to modification. The reason why this is important is because it leads to a more engaged pedagogy and community of critical learners for both teacher and student.

Once the foundation of the community has been implemented, the work begins although the professor is aware that the foundation is not firmly grounded. There is no reason to be cautious because the community is always a work in progress. Community allows us to come together to examine our diverse experiences as we engage in this critical discourse of race, class and gender. Often times, we will struggle to understand each other because of the tendency to essentialize our experiences. The professor in teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994) must allow the students' experiences to become a teachable moment that can lead to a meaningful connection with others in the classroom community. This connection would not have occurred without the willingness of students to share and sometimes painful experiences. Because the instructor is constantly reflecting on her internal and external struggles, she is sensitive to students' dilemma of experiencing similar struggles. The struggle is always ongoing and it shifts for both teacher and student.
Over time, the classroom is transformed into a community of caring, trusting and engaged learners (teacher and students). The professor who was once a "foreigner" finds a place of refuge with her students.

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Presenters

Gwendolyn Guy is a third year doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. As a non-traditional student in academia, she has over twenty years of experience in community outreach and service related projects. In her professional work as a part-time research associate, she serves as a focus group moderator and report writer. Ms. Guy spent two years as the community outreach coordinator for a medical facility actively recruiting minority women for The Breast Cancer Prevention Trial. Her educational studies at the university are guided by her strong sense of community involvement and the need to apply action and praxis. Ms. Guy's research theses will examine contemporary African American women's groups with a particular focus on issues of class. It is her desire to work with young women of color in her community who are presently underachieving in their educational and professional areas of their lives as single parent.

Gaetane Jean-Marie is a third year Haitian-American doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundation in the School of Education at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is also the assistant director of Teaching Fellows and Student Advising and Recruitment Center. Ms. Jean-Marie advises education majors (elementary, middle grades, special and deaf education) in addition to teaching a freshman seminar course to Teaching Fellows which is an introduction to the world of teaching. In the fall of 2001, she will be teaching an upper level course to education majors, "The Institution of Education" which will examine educational practices and its connections to social justice issues (gender, class, race and economic) affecting the larger society.

Her dissertation will analyze the social justice discourse of black women administrators (Caribbean- and African-American) in higher education. Other inquiries will include (1) what pedagogical themes and patterns emerge in these women's leadership style? (2) what conceptual framework of leadership do they adopt? (3) what barriers have they encountered in higher education as well as ways in which they cope? It is her hope this research will help amplify the voices of black women administrators in higher education. She anticipates finishing her doctorate in May 2002.