Dialogue on Diversity Teaching: Reflections on Research, Pedagogy, and Passion for Social Justice

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CHAPTER TWO

Dialogue on Diversity Teaching
Reflections on Research, Pedagogy, and Passion for Social Justice

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INTRODUCTION: MULTICULTURALISM AND MARGINALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Gollnick and Chinn (1986) argue that the concept of “multicultural education” is not new but draws on educational elements in development since the 1920s. Among these concepts are the international and intercultural contexts of curricula, the foregrounding of various ethnic histories and cultures, and an emphasis on intergroup or human relations, especially the reduction or elimination of stereotypes and prejudices (Sleeter and Grant, 1993). Multicultural education emphasizes a range of strategies for increasing student achievement that includes teaching within the cultural contexts of diverse students and providing a dialogue between teachers and students that honors students’ experience and “voice” (Hill Collins, 1986). Multicultural educators actively inquire into communication differences between students and teachers, and attend to the mismatch between teaching and learning styles that occurs in a classroom that privileges those who are White, male, middle class, and heterosexual.

Gollnick and Chinn (1986) also identify formal curricular issues that highlight cultural pluralism nationally and internationally, enhance critical thinking, and help students gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality and examine their own and others’ biases and stereotypes. “To educate in a pluralistic society for a pluralistic world” goes beyond dealing with diversity as a “problem” (Smith, 1990, p. 29) and moves toward creating a multicultural campus as its central educational purpose.

One of the most critical elements of the multicultural education definition involves the “hidden curriculum.” This concept includes classroom demonstrations of unequal power through institutional rules, the privilege of White, male, heterosexual, and middle-class values and norms in noncurricular dimensions of schools, and systematic efforts to reinforce conforming behaviors. Multicultural education looks to the empowerment of teachers and students as
actors even as their strengths are suppressed or exploited (hooks, 1994) through hegemonic curricular structures. This emphasis creates a highly politically charged curriculum which takes place in “a complicated and tense period intellectually” (Sleeter, 1996, p. 3) for both academic faculty and graduate students as struggles continue over what is considered legitimate knowledge and pedagogy inside their disciplines and inside the classroom. Obidah (1999) talks of the “reawakening” to dangers in graduate school “similar to the one in my old neighborhood that threatened my survival” and the danger of “imposed invisibility” (p. 44).

A “diversity” requirement was added to the liberal arts undergraduate curriculum in most colleges a decade ago; at our large Research I campus it is called the “Area H” requirement of the comprehensive education program. As part of our sociological and pedagogical inquiries, we launched a research project to reflect on the experiences of faculty and graduate instructors who teach “Area H” diversity courses. Our goal in conducting and analyzing some sixty in-depth, face-to-face interviews is to understand how intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality intertwine with instructors’ classroom teaching experiences.

As we teach multicultural elements that encourage educational transformations, instructors collide against a curriculum in which students lack systematic linkages to multicultural scholarship before or after this specific course requirement. Instead, it is experienced by both students and instructors as an “add on” that often clashes with the worldviews of the students themselves and those of their other university instructors. As such, 117 hours of hegemonic curricula prepare students for three credit hours of resistance to the scholarship and instructors engaged in “Area H” work. For graduate students and faculty of color who enter a racialized academy, the assignment to teach diversity courses can be a particularly difficult career pathway. Our dialogue seeks to explicate themes within our teaching and scholarship that speak to that hidden curriculum and invisibility of identity within “diversity” education.

**DOERS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION**

Multicultural education theorists often include a structural critique of the White, Western, and male dominance of the educational labor market itself. “For multicultural education to become a reality in the formal school situation, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education” (Gollnick and Chinn, 1986, p. 29). This structural multiculturalism includes the pluralistic composition of the faculty, administration, staff, and students: the inclusion of the contributions of all cultural groups in the curriculum; unbiased instructional materials; and the development of faculty members who “understand the influence of racism, sexism and classism on the lives of their students” (p. 33).

Jimoh and Johnson describe teaching in a classroom in which racialized behavior “has now gone underground within the dominant culture” (2002, p.
For the instructor of color in a predominately White institution, this poses the “palpable” reality of classrooms as sites where “students might expect to find their intellectual comfort zones challenged and whose Black and female presence potentially may double a student’s conflicted response” (p. 288). Gititi (2002) discusses the series of myths that include the “death and disappearance of race as a central and controlling issue in American daily life” as the repeated mantra of White undergraduate and graduate students in his classrooms (p. 180). These myths erase his contributions in the minds of students and colleagues, who assume that he will teach diversity because of his racial identity rather than his scholarship credentials. Other researchers have noted that female instructors “stand in a different relationship to knowledge from men and that makes every difference in education” (Pagano, 1990, p. xvi) as feminist educational praxis assumes a critical-thinking process (Bunch, 1983). The additional legal vulnerabilities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students and faculty, who are not protected by even the thinnest veneer of job discrimination laws, highlight the difficulties in teaching from the academic margins.

The following reflections occur among three seasoned graduate instructors (with a total of eleven years of teaching experience including teaching in “Area H” courses) and one faculty supervisor of graduate professional development (with thirty years of classroom teaching experience, who edits the American Sociological Association journal, Teaching Sociology, and regularly teaches “Area H” courses). As we launched our qualitative interviews for the research project, we stopped to identify our own worldviews on diversity, multiculturalism, and pluralism in the academy. The bridge between our teaching and our research scholarship endeavors is set out in the following dialogue.

Transforming the Academy

Helen A. Moore, professor of sociology: Over the past decade, our graduate program in sociology has worked to recruit, retain, and fill the pipeline of future sociologists with people from diverse backgrounds. We have successfully created a demographic profile of race, gender, and sexual orientation that reflects our future as a discipline, rather than our past. However, this shift occurred at a time when the landscape of higher education was expanding rapidly to create new teaching demands. These demands include: more general education courses that emphasize diversity curricula, increased expectations for the documentation of teaching excellence by incoming faculty members and graduate students seeking academic employment, and the recognition that predominately White campuses can be sites of agony (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1998) and oppression (Paludi, 1992) for students and instructors from diverse backgrounds.

Sonia Nieto argues that all good teaching is about transformation (1999, p. xvii) “on a number of levels: individual, collective and institutional.” The dialogue in this chapter revolves around the experiences of several graduate
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instructors, doctoral students who are learning the craft of teaching in this changing landscape of higher education, and one senior faculty member who hopes to encourage their, and her own, growth toward critical consciousness in the classroom. Because higher education is a microcosm of even larger societal shifts in demography and politics, we hope to use this dialogue to identify our reasons for “doing” our diversity scholarship projects.

My impetus to join the project evolves out of personal, scholarly, and programmatic (collective and institutional) frameworks. Since teaching in my first classroom in sociology in 1974, I have learned about and reflected on the differences and similarities in my classroom position, compared to other instructors with more or fewer privileged statuses than my own. My background in the sociology of education and my commitment to critical pedagogies leads me to systematically think about how we allocate work in the academy, and the role of faculty and instructors from diverse backgrounds who teach under conditions of resistance, whether that resistance comes from students at a predominate[ly White institution (PWI), from colleagues who ignore the implications of diversity as an attempt to be color- or gender-“blind,” or from discipline standards which relegate diversity topics to the margins. My commitment to social change and social support has led me to seek out programs such as Preparing Future Faculty and MOST (Minority Opportunities through School Transformation) as focal points to critique our processes of teaching and learning by, for, and about diversity.

Over the past two decades, I have worked with our campus American Association of University Professors and our Faculty Senate Committees on Academic Rights in faculty appeal processes. In every instance in which a faculty of color or woman faculty member came for a consultation, at least one element of their concerns involved the classroom teaching dimension of their scholarship. They often cited student resistance and low scores on formal evaluations that are mandated at the department or college level. They believed that their pedagogical goals and practices challenged colleagues and students and were misunderstood and misrepresented as they toiled in the classrooms designated to “teach about diversity.” In our own department, we have systematic quantitative evidence that both faculty members and graduate instructors are evaluated differently in classes that meet our university general education requirements for diversity content. This has particularly held true for African American graduate students (both women and men), whose student evaluations rise when they teach in more “generic” sociology courses. What are the politics of assigning “diversity” education responsibilities to members of oppressed groups and then evaluating these instructors on the basis of norms and standards calibrated from more “traditional” classroom settings? My own review of the literature on the evaluation of teaching shows that we have little scholarship on diverse teachers teaching diversity topics that can inform our current assessment of colleagues and future faculty members (Moore, 2000).

Research and theory in critical pedagogies place in the foreground the contradictions of teaching critical-thinking skills within conservative institutions
such as universities. From the intellectual frameworks set out by Pierre Bourdieu (1988), Freire (1970), and hooks (1994), we learn that class-conscious, antiracist, and feminist educational practices become intertwined with abstract analyses of oppressions carried out in our scholarship. The curriculum is not a “neutral assemblage of knowledge” (Apple, 1993) that sociologists and other college faculty members pass on without sifting through their own biases. How do graduate students working as (cheap) classroom instructors balance ensuring their futures as faculty members with enacting the critical theoretical models that drew them into graduate education? The pedagogy of the college classroom is too often based on a “banking model” of education as knowledge that is received by a passive student body (Freire, 1970). How might these future faculty members help us to envision new models of higher education and enhance student learning?

We are also challenged by intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and other stratification dimensions which are entangled and layered in our classroom lessons. We labor to learn the theories and literatures that edge us toward fully reflexive scholarship and that make us impatient with the hierarchical nature of our work setting. Our own pedagogical positions often generate contradictions and privileges that make this emotional as well as intellectual work.

As a White woman from a fractured class background and a subordinated sexual orientation, I observe and participate in these intersecting inequalities from shifting positions across privilege. Are my emotional responses about teaching as an “outsider within” and as an “insider without” parallel to those of instructors of color, gay men, or heterosexual women? Do I work differently when I teach within my affiliated programs of women’s studies or sociology or ethnic studies? What forms of support can I expect from colleagues and what mechanisms of support can I create for others? In my early profession, extending feminist and antiracist analyses to my own classroom work was exhilarating and challenging. Important faultlines occur in the disciplines (Smith, 1992), which create new academic identities and practices as we experience and teach paradigm shifts.

My reasons for this research project stem from my scholarly analysis of several concepts: teaching as “devalued” in the world of grants and higher education bureaucracies, work within oppressed groups who are tantalized by the “liberatory” possibilities of education, and empathy for individual instructors who are too often dashed emotionally by the passive resistance of their disciplines and the active resistance of their students and colleagues. These acts of resistance are often micro events that are invisible in the larger academy, but they grind incessantly at the professional identity and self-esteem of those who “deliver diversity” for the core curriculum.

My own typical “sink-or-swim” introduction to teaching in graduate school provided no training in pedagogical strategies, no notion that “teaching” was a dimension for growth in professional career work, and no framework for linking the arenas of stratification and the sociology of education to my
everyday classroom experiences. Instead, the teaching we did as graduate instructors was signified as “this is how you earn your keep; this is the work you do in order to have access to scholarship and scholars.” As apprentices, we started at the “bottom” to work our way past academic gatekeepers who took little notice of our struggles with diversity. This is a strong message that leaves a residue throughout the academic career: teaching is measured as time spent against research opportunity, and student learning in the classroom is the residual left after putting in your time. Diversity teaching is to be treated by evaluators as if it is a curriculum “without difference,” even as it stratifies and often marginalizes the academics who work in this field.

At the peak of their intellectual enthusiasm, I want graduate students to approach teaching as a dignified setting for student learning and a journey for themselves and their colleagues to delve into the complexities of their scholarship. I do not want teaching to be the minefield or the latent excuse that “cools out” the impetus behind ethnic/women/disability/GLBT studies in the academy. Too many instructors of color have been dislodged from the academy because of student evaluations taken out of context, a lack of support for teaching from colleagues, and questions about the “seriousness of their scholarship” when they value teaching and outreach activities. Too many women instructors from all backgrounds have labored in classrooms that are negatively gendered, with gendered pay, gendered promotion, gendered authority, and gendered work (Acker, 1992). Gay and lesbian faculty members and students are still seeking a safe haven in the academy from which to do their work.

Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) is a national initiative to provide graduate students with information and insight into the academies they are entering. Minority Opportunities through School Transformation (MOST) is a program sponsored by the American Sociological Association to transform the discipline of sociology by reflecting on our pedagogical practices in a more diverse landscape of teachers and learners. I want the diverse students on campus and in our programs to have a fighting chance to find the best workplace for their potential growth. This research project grew from the same roots as PFF and MOST, and it offers those involved an opportunity to share the visions, hopes, and agonies of their colleagues and their advisors as gifts to a new generation of scholar teachers. My hope is that these gifts will stoke their sociological imaginations well into their academic careers and contribute to the transformation of the academy toward critical pedagogies that enhance our students and communities.

In the following narratives, the graduate instructors reflect the arguments by social reproduction theorists that structure is a key determinant of social action in the classroom, while joining the critical education theorists in emphasizing the importance of human agency and resistance by themselves and their students and their supervising faculty. As sociologists, we begin our scholarship project assuming that the social construction of reality accounts for the contested terrain of diversity education. Berger and Pullberg (1966) identify
the duality of social life that involves both structure and individual agency by concluding that “social structure is not characterizable as a thing able to stand on its own, apart from [the] human activity that produced it [but] is encountered by the individual as a coercive instrumentality” (p. 178). Thus, teaching diversity courses through a multicultural education lens is an individual endeavor that we anticipate will be akin to “dancing through a minefield” (Kolodny, 1980).

At the same time, multicultural education theorists look to the empowerment of teachers and students as actors even as their strengths are suppressed or exploited (hooks, 1994) through hegemonic curricular structures. In the essay that follows, Gary Perry highlights this “minefield” as an African American diversity-centered scholar and teacher of multiple minority identities. His pedagogical work at a predominately White institution is full of challenges and scrutiny that lead him to a deeper understanding of both paralysis and privilege.

**Learning to Navigate and Negotiate the Academic Minefield**

**Gary K. Perry, doctoral student:** Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, institutions of higher education continue to experience profound changes. As previously noted by Professor Moore, the subtle and not-so-subtle transformations within the academic curricula, campus demographics, and cultural climate are in part symptomatic of the movements for multicultural and diversity-centered education. At this historical juncture, institutions of higher education have become analogous to “postwar” battlefields, areas wherein hidden pockets of resistance and sinister alliances have emerged to undermine such progress.

Learning to navigate and negotiate the academic landscape of higher education is an arduous process. This endless process is the result of the immense sociopolitical changes that have produced today’s institutions of higher learning. As bureaucratic structures, many institutions of higher education are composed of multiple roles and varying statuses, all of which are accompanied by a number of written and unwritten obligations. In a social context, an individual’s experiences within academe will reflect these sometimes overlapping social identities that one both brings into and acquires within the academy. While everyone, regardless of his or her social statuses and identities, must develop the means for navigating through higher education’s minefields, this journey may become debilitating, if not detrimental, for members of many socially disadvantaged groups.

As a twenty-six-year-old, African American, gay male graduate teaching assistant, my journey through academe has been no crystal stairway. More often than not, learning how to navigate and negotiate the academic landscape is *fundamental* to my existence in academe. Unlike more privileged individuals, my journey is inherently underscored by a perpetual state of conflict and vulnerability. Such confusion is primarily the result of my multiple oppressed identities.
Having such stigmatized identities, within the context of a predominately White college, may often present a threat or an affront to the existing social order. In other words, the ongoing struggle between my oppressed selves and the status quo of the academy is what perpetuates such contentious experiences. Another way to view this phenomenon, as discussed by Johnella E. Butler (2000), is to envision predominately White colleges and universities as a boundary-filled or territorial space, which is seemingly resistant toward forces of (progressive) social change. Although this may be an accurate image, aspects of social change are occurring throughout the academy, and with that change comes the need for many oppressed groups to be ever so vigilant of the academic minefields.

Given the previous discussion, it may be apparent why it is central that I learn to navigate and negotiate the academic landscape. What is less apparent, however, are the means by which this process manifests itself. By using my experiences as a graduate teaching assistant of a diversity-centered course at a predominately White college, I aim to capture the essence of this process and to highlight the context in which this otherwise invisible phenomenon may occur.

Teaching diversity: Working from a vulnerable position

Since the beginning of the movement for multiculturalism, particularly in higher education, the classroom has been one arena of the academy where change has resonated (see, e.g., Morris and Parker 1996). As a graduate student and teaching assistant of color, I feel honored to be a part of this metamorphosis. I perceive the classroom, unlike most other arenas of the academy, as having the greatest capacity for inspiring and cultivating social change and cultural enlightenment. My optimism, however, is repeatedly insulted by the reality that such change often comes with severe costs and many unavoidable risks.

While I embrace my role as a graduate teaching instructor, who happens to teach a diversity-centered course on race and nationality, I am also aware that I work from a vulnerable position. My vulnerability, as suggested earlier, stems from a variety of issues: (1) my stigmatized identities; (2) my marginalized presence within the academy; (3) the negative perceptions that my students, fellow colleagues, and faculty/administrators have about me; and (4) my nontraditional ideologies and critical worldviews.

Race continues to matter in U.S. society. As a graduate instructor of a course wherein race and related issues are the central focus, I am constantly reminded of the tension surrounding U.S. race relations. As a minority professor, I sometimes feel as if I have to walk on eggshells. This perception is a result of both the resistance I encounter from most (White) students and my vulnerable position in the classroom.

To begin with, my credibility, as an instructor, and the legitimacy of the course content are often suspect and highly scrutinized by students. More specifically, it is not the authenticity of the material that is brought into question, but, rather, the motives or intentions of the presenter. Such suspicion generally
poses a fine line that I must walk. On the one hand, it is my goal to challenge my students’ comfort zones and existing worldviews about race. While, on the other hand, I assist my students in becoming more informed and transformed by their classroom experiences. This is not to say, however, that I aim for a “value-free” or an “objective” classroom. Instead, my ultimate goal is one of enlightenment. This task is made problematic when both the message and the messenger are brought into question and deemed dogmatic.

_Teaching diversity: Strategizing to survive_

Because of my tenuous position in the classroom, I have learned, and am still learning, to become quite savvy in my approach to teaching. Given my experiences with teaching a diversity-centered course, I have learned that there is more than one way to “skin a cat.” To this end, my biggest struggle has come from having to learn to see the world through the eyes of my students. If my goal is to help move my students toward a more empathetic and informed understanding of race and nationality, it behooves me to become aware of how they see and approach such issues. This is aided through my use of a student-centered approach to teaching. Unlike more traditional styles, or what Paulo Freire (1970) calls the _banking model_, the student-centered approach often allows the students to feel “safe” in expressing their positions about issues surrounding race. Through gaining such awareness, I have become more equipped to both interrogate and deconstruct many of my students’ worldviews. As a result of using their viewpoints and personal experiences as a context to build on, I often challenge the students’ positions in ways that are subversive and efficacious. It should not be assumed that student resistance and hostility are eliminated through this approach. Instead, engaging in such a confrontational pedagogical style often breeds more hostility. However, the contentious atmosphere of the class enables us (i.e., the students and myself) to transcend our otherwise polar positions. In other words, by allowing the students, and myself, to struggle with controversial issues in an often nonthreatening and nonposturing demeanor, common grounds and syntheses are more likely to be obtained.

Given that many of my students are White and from racially homogenous and isolated communities, I find visual aids and stories to be a very effective means of challenging their worldviews and ideologies. Although I take pride in preparing and equipping myself with research, facts, and even personal stories to share, I admit that much of this can become lost if not ignored by the students. I have thereby relied heavily on thought-provoking videos and guest presenters, all of which have contributed credibility and support to many of my class discussions. Moreover, these alternative means of teaching have allowed me to expose my students to worlds and lived experiences that they would never have imagined.
Teaching diversity: A source of empowerment

Thus far, my discussion has focused on the challenging experiences associated with teaching a diversity-centered course. These challenges, as already noted, stem from a variety of issues. Nonetheless, my journey through the academic minefield does have its places of relief and excitement. In a word, navigating and negotiating the academic landscape requires that I reconstruct my oppressed selves. This process does not end with mere identity politics, but, rather, entails a process by which I learn to be subversive and ingenious as it relates to teaching from a marginalized and vulnerable place. In some instances, this goal has been achieved by me constantly reaffirming myself that what I am doing is noble and needed for the betterment of humanity. At other times, putting myself in the place of the privileged other often enables me to see potential pitfalls and conflicts that I may experience. Finally, understanding that being an oppressed person does not mean you are paralyzed has allowed me to search for and engage in my human agency. All of these factors, and others, allow me to effectively navigate and negotiate the treacherous terrain of academe.

For most instructors of diversity-centered courses, learning to navigate and negotiate the academic landscape is an "on-the-job" experience. Because so few resources addressing the perils of, and strategies for, navigating the diversity-centered classroom exist, I was drawn to this project out of necessity. At one end of the spectrum, this research project gives me voice and validates my "unique" experiences as a minority instructor of a diversity-centered course in a predominately White environment. At the other end, this project, in my opinion, will place a much-needed dialogue and body of scholarship into the academic discourse.

As the instructor of a diversity-centered course, I have also been forced to learn a process for navigating and negotiating my emotional landscape. In the following essay, Katherine M. Acosta highlights the emotional labor and emotional investment associated with teaching diversity-centered courses. Acosta reflects on the intersections of her experiences as a female, Latina graduate instructor of a diversity-centered course(s) and the trials and triumphs associated with being a minority graduate student in an academic environment that is often hostile and treacherous.

Passionate Pedagogy: The Emotional Component of Teaching Diversity

Katherine M. Acosta, doctoral candidate: My motivations for studying the experiences of those teaching courses that focus on inequality and diversity are varied and complex. To talk about them requires talking about emotion in a setting where it is devalued and intellect is privileged. I am motivated by my own personal disillusionment in the classroom. By resentment at our lack of training to do this work. By anger that so much of this demanding work devolves onto graduate students. By fury that the university’s nod at “diversity”
often extracts unrecognized personal and professional costs from those who actually do the work.

But I am also motivated by hope, by the belief that social change is possible, that this work, teaching these kinds of courses, is crucial to building the kind of society I want to live in, and that there are, there must be, effective ways to do it. My hope is that by documenting the experiences of those in the trenches; by making visible their challenges, obstacles, and successes; and by analyzing their ideas and understandings about the work of teaching diversity, we can contribute to creating an environment where this mission can flourish.

When I first entered the classroom as an instructor, the emotional component of the pedagogical process was not a conscious concern. Certainly, I was motivated, as many are, by a passion for social justice. An idealist, I thought that if I simply explained inequality to students they would share my outrage. Instead, I ran into a brick wall of resistance. Like the social scientist I was training to become, I responded with ever more facts, figures, studies, charts, and graphs. I created beautiful slide shows illustrating the increase in the CEO-to-worker pay ratio, wage disparities by race and sex, and unequal educational resources, and I meticulously cited each source. The wall became more impenetrable.

What was happening? I looked out at a sea of stony-faced students, their body language screaming resentment and fury. When they spoke, it was to express cold indifference to the plight of those less fortunate than themselves, stubborn adherence to the American credo that capitalism is the best economic system and gives everyone an equal chance at the "American Dream," and disbelief in the statistics presented. They seemed to really dislike me, too. I often walked away from my first introduction to sociology class feeling as though someone had punched me in the stomach. How could they not care?

Looking back, I realize that part of the problem was my lack of understanding of the role of emotion in all this. Student resistance is, initially, an emotional response. Jagger (1989) argues that emotions are closely related to values. In challenging the worldviews of an overwhelmingly White, mostly middle-class student body, I was bound to provoke a wide range of emotional responses. In turn, as a feminist and a Latina, my students' reactions evoked in me what Jagger calls "outlaw emotions"; that is, emotions inconsistent with the beliefs and values of dominant groups, often experienced by members of subordinate groups.

Studying Jagger's work, and in particular, her insight that "emotional responses to the world change as we conceptualize it differently," but that "the ease and speed with which we can re-educate our emotions is not great" (1989, p. 170) would have been enormously helpful to me when I began my teaching career. However, like many graduate instructors, I received little training in teaching (Anderson and Swazey, 1998; Austin, 2002), and none at all in dealing with the emotional aspects of pedagogy. I was therefore unequipped to handle the situation in which I found myself. In that first course, I tried to maintain the illusion that we were engaged in a merely intellectual exercise, and
overwhelmed my students with ever more information. Over the years, I groped my way toward solutions, gradually developing some devices for avoiding my early pitfalls, without fully understanding the process I was struggling to master.

Interviewing teachers of diversity courses across disciplines for our study has provided some valuable opportunities for dialogue about these issues that I otherwise would not have had. In one of the earliest interviews I conducted, an experienced African American professor, who is warmly regarded by many students, explicitly articulated the importance of acknowledging and allowing for the emotional responses of students. For her, emotion is inextricably involved in the learning process and an effective teacher learns to channel this in productive ways. Her words expressed a truth I had known at some level.

But why had I not understood this sooner? Certainly, I had long recognized that emotion and reason cannot be neatly separated, and probably should not be. My best intellectual work emerges when I am passionately engaged with the subject. Of course, I try not to reveal too much of that. We learn early in our academic socialization to project that aura of rationalism, dispassionate analysis, and discussion. To behave otherwise invites doubt and criticism of one’s scholarly ability and professionalism. I myself was explicitly reprimanded by a professor in a graduate seminar for passionate stances and debate.

I deeply resented this professor’s attitude, yet did not allow for the emotional experiences of my own students. Perhaps I was fearful of what I might unleash and whether I could handle it. Certainly I had no role models for this kind of teaching. Teaching diversity courses multiplies the challenges for graduate students. We are not only learning to become teachers; we are teaching the kinds of courses that require us to learn new ways of teaching. We need to develop methods that are often quite different from those we have experienced as students. These pedagogical strategies must address the emotional component of teaching and learning. Laslett (1997) asserts that emotion can provide the energy to pursue our academic projects “even when the way to do so is not clear” (p. 66). For many of us, a passion for social justice fuels our work. However, that same emotional investment can also make us vulnerable to pain when students express racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic attitudes and comments. At the same time, if one goal of teaching diversity courses is to contribute toward the development of a more just society, we need to make constructive use of students’ emotions. For Jagger (1989) “emotions are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world” (p. 159). To critically reflect on emotions, and by extension, the cultural values from which they spring, is a political act that is “indispensable” for “social transformation” (p. 171). A key to successful diversity teaching and learning, then, would involve finding ways to allow for students’ emotional reactions, and to manage our own, through a process that promotes intellectual development.

These are the issues and questions that motivate me to take on an additional research project while I am trying to research and write my
dissertation. I want to find out whether and how others are handling this emotional component of teaching diversity. Further, I want to know who is doing this emotion work (Women? Instructors of color? Graduate assistants and other cheap labor?), and what kind of training, if any, they receive for it. I want to know how this work affects them, personally and professionally. Ultimately, I want to learn what we can do to become more effective teachers of courses I believe are crucial to building a better and more humane society.

In the following section, Crystal Edwards explores the challenge of developing political awareness and a sense of civic responsibility among students when teaching diversity courses. She considers the limited space in which diversity teaching is expected to occur, and the political consequences for instructors who carry out this work. Like Gary Perry, she is acutely aware that she is negotiating an academic “minefield.” Like me, she understands teaching as a political act and shares the goal of developing a degree of critical consciousness among students in the hope that this will contribute to the improvement of social conditions. Her concern is with the political nature of multiple aspects of this process.

**Political Awareness and Action**

**Crystal Edwards, doctoral candidate:** As a teacher of diversity, I have two goals for my students: To make them aware of how the political process creates and shapes society and to encourage the development of their civic responsibility to engage in the making and changing of society. Consequences of this strategy include student resistance and a heavy load of emotional labor for me. Balancing these consequences with my desire for professional advancement and my commitment to diversity is often painful and joyous.

**Political awareness**

Exposing students to materials that challenge the validity of “Manifest Destiny,” ethnocentrism, and hierarchy enlightens them to the degree of critical learning that is often oversimplified or ignored altogether. When women and people of color began to enter and challenge the ivory tower during the 1960s, they were deliberately challenging the legitimacy of the power of White male academics to define and scientifically report in such a way that excluded women and people of color (Smith, 1987; Hill Collins, 1986). These political actions resulted in the addition of women’s studies and ethnic studies across the nation and eventually general education requirements focusing on diversity. Only a small number of departments and programs offer diversity courses and they remain segregated into humanities and social sciences. It is as if only sociology, English, and history can contribute to diversity.

The degree of progress minorities have made on campuses is arguable, but one thing is clear: Of the 120 credit hours required for a bachelor’s degree, diversity teachers get three hours to explain how the other 117 hours, and
students’ prior elementary and secondary education, promoted the political agenda of elite White males. What remains political about these courses is the almost complete isolation in which they are taught. In one semester I ask students to wrap their minds around centuries of political actions which have been either unexplored or presented in such a way as to dilute their meaning.

When I recast “Manifest Destiny” as genocide of Native Americans, I do not find that most students are particularly resistant to this new information. The responses vary and include outrage, acknowledgment, and disbelief. Students respond to this new information about inequality by engaging in a political dialogue. They express political thoughts and demand tools to make change. Some want revolution, some want legislation, and some want charity. As a young instructor, I often waiver from class to class, even day to day, on how best to help them create the change they desire. Sometimes I shrug my shoulders, because I simply do not know. Sometimes I talk about voting rights, lobbying, social action groups, and social movements. I often feel ill-equipped to deal with their demands because I myself lack faith in the current political system’s ability to be responsive to the needs of the less privileged.

What I find most offensive about the academy is the almost stupefied way people insist their research, teaching, and service are not political. Once a political science instructor told me that he did not express political opinions to his class; he gave them both sides and let students decide what to think. I wanted to tell him that showing students two sides of the same coin hardly qualifies as letting them think for themselves. He was simultaneously reinforcing the hegemonic paradigm and denying any connection to it. Ruth Hsu (2002) encourages us to use self-scrutiny to “recognize that academe is a politicized state apparatus and that the work we do is inherently political” (p. 195).

Diversity courses are political because we ask students to challenge the objectivity of science, explore multiple and simultaneous ways of knowing, and look at what is not there; all of which challenge the basic underpinnings of their education and clash with political agendas of those outside the classroom. Diversity teachers do not have to advance a political agenda to create dismay among students and outsiders. Student evaluations illuminate how perceptions about my politics are polarized. Some students consider me to be narrow-minded while others perceive me to be open-minded. The likelihood that I will be perceived as a raving, ranting political lunatic is directly proportional to how much they disagree with me.

While many students angrily disagree with me, questioning my sanity and my legitimacy, many more are deeply affected by the new critical and sociological perspectives to which I expose them. But either way I find myself in a bubble in which students really do not understand the complexity of creating solutions to social problems. For example, in a discussion about discrimination against homosexuals the students generally want to educate small children, but not challenge church doctrine. They tend to place responsibility onto the individual without challenging the institutions that those individuals
participate in. I remind them of the structural forces that extend the argument beyond the individual and link the past, present, and future.

Civic responsibility

I refer to Webster’s to demonstrate the connections between diversity courses and politics. Webster’s defines politics first as exercising or seeking power in the governmental or public affairs of a state, municipality, and second as pertaining to citizens’ political rights. I had to look this word up because diversity teaching is often referred to in the context of “political correctness” or “liberal political agenda.” The first definition applies to diversity courses because I wish for my students to go on to become community leaders. I know that one day many of my students will be exercising their rights to influence the affairs of the government. I seek to make them aware of how their social location can grant or deny them this access, and to make them responsible for humanity beyond themselves and their own social group.

In our democracy we have freedom to act as a citizen to influence the making of society. Each day we create society through specific actions which are legitimated by specific ideas. I am truly a symbolic interactionist in that I believe it is ultimately through social interaction that we create our own existence and change; we all have the power to choose actions that bring us closer to our goals. If encouraging students to move beyond their apathetic, individualized attitude of “My vote doesn’t count” is too political, I do not care. Only in a closed, undemocratic society could the encouragement of individual and social thought and action be considered threatening. Where do you live? Encouraging thought and action does not encourage the adoption of a specific political agenda. I never assume that my students will use the skills that I teach them to advance specific political actions I deem positive. Instead, I challenge them to define their own responsibility to themselves and to others. This encourages a thoughtful, informed, and contextualized democracy, in which students become aware that not only do they have a vote, they have a voice that can and should be used in many ways.

Consequences

As a graduate-student teacher I face a dilemma. I struggle to balance learning academic standards against fulfilling my teaching responsibilities. In addition to this pressure to achieve, reflect, and maintain legitimacy, which are probably normal processes of professionalization (Reinharz, 1992), I carry another burden. I step into classrooms that remain hotbeds of political drama. Diversity courses are the love child of 1960s and 1970s civil rights advocates, and they survive as the only concession to an otherwise intact White male middle-class environment.

An article appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education challenging a
women’s studies professor’s right to create a safe environment for her students by developing discussion guidelines (Bartlett, 2002). Seeing this senior scholar accused of restricting her students’ rights to free speech by her own department chair validated the fears I have held since I began my first class. Inexperience combined with the controversy of diversity courses (and sociology in general) lead me to fear litigation from students. I often feel unsafe in the classroom because generating “critical thought” is often interpreted as “anti-American,” “anti-male,” “anti-Christian,” “anti-White,” and “anticapitalism.” One student told me “love it or leave it” to which I had no immediate answer, but I stewed for weeks before realizing the fallacy of his logic. Another student told me in a written evaluation that the classroom “wasn’t the front steps of the capital building.” This student resistance challenges my perceptions of my own legitimacy. It is vital that students respect the teacher as a legitimate source of knowledge, otherwise classroom control becomes tenuous.

Professionalization processes often involve a wavering sense of mastery. One day, I am reasonably sure I am a good teacher. I experience my teacher identity as secure and I feel confident in my development as a teacher. I am aware of academic freedom, but have heard informally about those whose use of freedom left them unemployed. Insecurity is the result of my own lack of political power. What remains unclear to me, as an educator, is why in this great land of freedom, asking students to become informed, engaged, and critical citizens is radical.

I joined this research team because we were all concerned about the toll these courses take on our vulnerable minority instructors (myself included). Like the others, I recognized a trend. While I was mired down in the emotional bog we call diversity, my peers were focused on developing their research skills. The more acclimated I have become to the university, the clearer it is to me: A desire to critically examine the discipline and the institution results in less pay and more heartache. I needed to know if my hunch was right.

Dialogic Endings and Beginnings

Our overlapping concerns around issues of teaching diversity motivate us to pursue our research project. A major goal for Helen is to usefully mentor and retain the minority graduate students and professors recruited by our institution. She wants to see due consideration given to students’ reactions to minority faculty and the content of diversity courses in teaching evaluations. These concerns directly impact Gary as he searches for ways to negotiate questions of legitimacy that minority instructors inevitably face, and for ways to accomplish his aim of interrogating students’ worldviews and developing an informed and empathetic understanding of race and inequality among them. Katherine recognizes that the process involved in developing the understanding that Gary and others seek has an emotional component, requires a significant degree of emotion work by instructors, and receives insufficient attention in an environment in which emotion is conceptually divorced from intellect and
devalued. Crystal concentrates on the political implications of a burgeoning critical consciousness among students. How should diversity teachers respond when students ask for advice on taking political action, and what are the political consequences for these instructors?

We have few opportunities for dialogue about these issues within the conventional academic structure. Very little time and few formal mechanisms are built into most graduate programs for teaching development. Consequently, most graduate students receive minimal training and feedback on teaching. In addition, the heavy demands of graduate coursework, preparing for comprehensive exams and writing theses and dissertations, leave precious little time for "extracurricular" activities like teaching development.

The message Helen received as a graduate student, that teaching is something you do on the side, to earn your keep, while focusing primarily on your research, remains substantially the same message graduate students receive today. Our mentors teach us what they have been taught, and what they know to be true of the academy, that we should privilege research over teaching, and that success will be measured by research accomplishments. Material experiences support these ideas; our funding is dependent on our “progress in the program,” and future job opportunities on publications, not the time we put in to develop quality teaching. This project, then, has been the major opportunity for many of us to have these dialogues, both through the research interviews with teachers of diversity, and among ourselves as we develop the project and analyze our data.

If rewards in academe accrue primarily through research, and the structure of academic programs provides few opportunities for teaching development, how might we build a “community of teachers” (hooks, 1994)? And why should we? hooks suggests that building such a community begins with “cross[ing] boundaries” to “engage in dialogue” (p. 130).

One idea that emerged from our research is to create a program that would allow graduate students to interact regularly with professors teaching diversity courses in a variety of disciplines. Graduate instructors would have the opportunity to observe experienced teachers in the classroom and to converse about teaching diversity. Our project provided many of us with our first opportunities to meet such professors and to access their insights. Too often we remain sequestered in our various departments, interacting primarily with scholars whose perspectives, though diverse in many respects, are structured by the same disciplinary boundaries as our own. Cross-disciplinary exchanges both expand the community from which we can draw inspiration and offer us different vantage points from which to consider the concepts, ideas, and methods of our disciplines and the ways we teach them. As to why we should build such a community, some answers for those of us committed to diversity teaching might be that it is necessary for sustaining multicultural education, for developing methods to promote critical thinking among students, and ultimately, for contributing to the development of a more egalitarian and humane society.
NOTE

1. The notion of a “crystal stairway” is borrowed from the poetry of Langston Hughes.

REFERENCES


