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Reaching African-American Students in the Classroom

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A recent American Council on Education report shows a sharp drop in the percentage of African-American students both attending and graduating from college from 1976 to 1987, while overall college attendance and graduation increased during the same period.[1] Since about half of all African Americans enrolled in post secondary education are in two-year colleges, the impact of this decline is even greater in four-year colleges (Fleming, 1981). One explanation for these figures is that African-American students are choosing in increasing numbers not to go to college, but instead to enter the job market directly or to get their training through the military. Another factor is the high attrition of African-American students, a revolving door effect, especially at "open admissions" institutions; only seven percent of African-American students, for example, graduated from the California State University system in five years (Richardson, Simmons, & de los Santos, 1987).

If we are counting on an increasing number of African-American faculty to better serve the educational needs of these students, the picture is even more depressing. African Americans make up only 4 percent of faculty nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 1989). Herman Blake (1989) reminds us that fewer than 350 African-American men received doctorates in 1987, and half of those were in education. Though the recruitment of African-American and other underrepresented faculty is an important goal, an academic environment more conducive to the success of African-American students will obviously have to depend for the most part on a change in the way white faculty (and administrators) think and act.[2] The changes will have to be major. Blake describes the discouraging results of a faculty workshop where participants were asked

to name three qualities to describe "minority" students. Ninety percent of the words given were negative!

Changing the Cultural Climate of Higher Education

American businesses and the military are well ahead of universities in understanding the need to change their cultural climate to be more hospitable to culturally diverse workers and customers. A recent advertisement by Southwest Bell Telephone Company pictured several children; those of color were in the majority. The ad's text stressed what was most required of this changing population: "We need well-educated employees to run our sophisticated, computer-based network." The economy, even national security, are seen by business and the military as dependent upon the education of people of color. As Southwest Bell puts it, "It makes good sense and good business."

Higher education, too, will need to make some radical adjustments, or else many institutions will not survive. With a decline of about 5 million in the overall youth cohort and an increase in the percentages of people of color to 33 percent of total population by the year 2000 (a majority in the industrial states), the enrollment and retention of students of color make both good moral and practical sense (Hodgkinson, 1985).

Conflict with other students in the dorms, dining halls, and campus organizations; a decrease in financial aid; a feeling of being ignored by counselors and advisers; the sense that the curriculum is not related to their lives or career goals—these are factors usually cited in the attrition of African-American students from white colleges. But as individual and group learning styles are better understood, it is clear that an important though more subtle contributing factor may be the structure of what transpires in the classroom, the dynamics of teaching and learning. Faculty are limited in the effect they can have on extracurricular life, but they can look at the points of contact they have with African-American students, particularly in their classes, and begin to face up to some troubling facts. The most critical role faculty development programs can play in the 1990s is to focus attention on these issues.

The Challenge of Diversity at One Public College

At the State University of New York's College at Old Westbury, with a student body that is 40 percent African American and Latino and with

a faculty and administrative composition almost as diverse, we have taught for over twenty years in culturally diverse classrooms. We pride ourselves on being the most diverse of all SUNY campuses. But we worry about the continuing problem of low graduation rates for entering freshmen, many of whom are African American and Latino, in constrast to acceptable rates for transfer students from predominantly white community colleges. In seminars sponsored by our Teaching for Learning Center as well as in other forums at the college, we have begun to discuss the learning needs of African-American, Latino, and other underrepresented students and some of their culturally-based learning styles.

It takes time and commitment for faculty to develop the trust necessary for a genuine sharing of frustrations, as well as successes, in teaching the culturally diverse. In give and take with African-American and Latino faculty, white faculty have been able to admit to stereotypical thinking about students and to see that some well-intentioned efforts may actually have negative effects. We have examined interpersonal dynamics that may have seemed insignificant previously, but now take on larger meaning. For example, learning that some Latino students may avoid eye contact as a culturally-based show of respect for those in authority has caused us to alter former interpretations of these students as shy or evasive (Serrano, 1989). We are now planning four-day intensive workshops where faculty from different departments and programs can come together to translate a new understanding of cultural diversity into actual course readings and classroom strategies.

In a society where "different" is often interpreted as "deficient," especially in relation to race, it is risky for faculty, particularly white males, to generalize about African- American learning behavior (Gordon, 1988). But, the alternative is business as usual, what many of us had been doing until recently: being attentive to these students, calling on them in early class sessions, then passing them over as the class began to gell, we moved on in the work, and they fell further and further behind. We ended up with a double standard on papers and fudged the final grade with a lot of credit given for even the slightest effort. Those colleagues whose primary pedagogical mode was and is lecturing (the most effective way to ignore differences in the classroom) administer equal treatment in grading and bemoan the insufficient academic preparation of many of their African-American students.

The very liberal cast of most academics may make it even more difficult to recognize what Lisa Delpit (1988) calls "the culture of power" that thrives in classrooms:

> For many who consider themselves members of liberal or radical camps, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is distinctively uncomfortable. On the other hand, those who are less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power variable most acutely. (pp. 283-284)

A good place for faculty to start is with an understanding of our own preconceived ideas of the "norms" of teaching and learning. Some definite changes in our classrooms must occur if we ever expect the circle of power to be extended beyond those raised and trained like ourselves.

African-American Students in the Traditional Classroom

A pattern in our classes by midterm, we have found, is for far too many African-American students, particularly males, to be at a grade level of *C* or below and increasingly absent. They might be doing well enough in class discussions, but they are failing miserably on papers and exams. Often they straggle in late, after we have finished talking about assignments, and group together at the back of the class. Of course, there are clear exceptions: well-prepared, for the most part middle-class African-American students who are at the top of the class and who seem to distance themselves from the others. But these are the exceptions in all but the elite colleges and universities, and no amount of rationalizing or covering up will alter the picture.

What might have been suitable for an elite, well-prepared, largely white and mostly male student body of the past has serious disadvantages for nontraditional students coming to colleges, especially for many African-American students. A traditional college definition of knowledge and its attendant pedagogy conflict with much of the world view generally associated with African-American culture. The participatory, self-assertive, subjective approach to ideas common to this culture would wreak havoc in the traditional classroom (Anderson, 1988; Kochman, 1981). Indeed, behavior associated with this approach is often seen by white teachers, particularly in secondary schools, as aggressive, hostile, threatening. Discipline, "keeping cool," and taking turns are learning goals that take precedence over creativity and critical thinking for these teachers, especially in the low-track classes. This effort at control, perhaps more subtle but no less devastating at the college level, links slow learning with unmanageability.

Emphasis on conformity in the classroom is a not so subtle and a highly effective way to assure that academically less prepared students,

many of whom are people of color, continue to occupy places at the bottom of the social and economic ladder (Oakes, 1985). The overall effect of the academic experience is an "impoverished intellectual development" for African-American students, according to Jacqueline Fleming's study of African Americans in white colleges (1984, p.78). African-American men, more than women, suffer under this system, often showing less energy and motivation as seniors than they did as freshmen (Fleming, 1984).

New research is showing us how traditional expectations about education discriminate against various groups according to gender and class, as well as race. Judgments about language are a good example. It is customarily taken as a sign of weakness when a woman raises the pitch of her voice in a question at the end of statements rather than answering questions or stating opinions in firm, confident declarative sentences. Yet in conversation, especially with other women, it is clear that the motivation for this questioning is not tentativeness, but friendliness, an invitation to her listeners to join the conversation (Maher, 1985). Similarly, the self-esteem of African-American students may not be lower just because of lower academic achievement. In African-American culture self-esteem is more peer-related, based not so much on academic success as on standing in a social group (Epps, 1980).

The traditional classroom ignores this peer-relating dimension, except to foster competition. To want problems explained rather than figuring them out in one's own may not be just laziness, but a desire for social interaction in learning (Cross, 1976). Sitting quietly until an appointed time to ask questions or make comments at the end of a lecture would be inconceivable in an African-American church or community meeting. So too, we can imagine the disruption in a traditional classroom if students were to "amen" the lecturer in a call-and-response mode, accompanied with demonstrative body movement as particular points inspire the audience.[3]

Faculty interaction with students outside the classroom has proven to be the activity most widely shared by effective teachers, more important than any of the various pedagogical techniques faculty might use in class (Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Baury, 1975). Yet the amount of faculty-student interaction outside class is shockingly low on most campuses, with African-American students even less likely than whites to approach faculty in hallways or offices (Fleming, 1981). When personal contact initiated by the white faculty member does occur, it may be an overzealous attempt at familiarity through the use of first names, a loan of money, or some other

gesture to prove friendship. These efforts are too often seen by most African-American students as patronizing, further distancing them from genuine contact with faculty (Exum, 1979).

Teaching Strategies for the Culturally Diverse Classroom

There is a growing body of research on culture-based learning styles and the academic problems of underrepresented students. But, as usual, there is much less that is practical and helpful in the way of suggestions for changing teaching and learning. What follows are some strategies we have been talking about in Teaching Center workshops and trying out in the classroom at Old Westbury. I concentrate on my own teaching experience.

1. Awareness of our own culture-bound learning style

Although we can read about and observe firsthand the different learning styles of the individuals and cultural groups in our classrooms, we do well as faculty to start out by looking at our own predilections. It is always more difficult to be self-observant and to act upon what you see of yourself than it is to observe others and respond accordingly. We will have to struggle constantly to avoid the quite natural tendency to encourage and reward students who act and think as we do. After all, our way of learning made us successful students in the eyes of our teachers, and we have the support of colleagues in bemoaning current students' lack of ability to reason abstractly, their personalizing of argument, their lack of discipline.

Most faculty tend to value analysis more than description, to push themselves and students constantly to ask "so what?" As a white male from the midwest, I am restrained emotionally and am uncomfortable when arguments seem to be overly heated and almost out of control. I work best when scheduled, task-oriented. And my experience is mostly in working independently, with competition on tests or papers acting as an important motivation. I am visual, rather than oral, and often feel my midwestern geographical roots have me at a disadvantage among voluble, articulate New Yorkers. Although I retain a midwestern accent, I have certainly never experienced biculturalism or bilingualism, not even bidialectalism.

2. Tolerance of "disorder" and emotion

When I saw the film *Stand and Deliver* about Jaime Escalente's success in motivating Latino students, I knew with some feelings of regret that my own classrooms would have to get even more messy, more emotional than they already had become. Perhaps the biggest hurdle for white faculty is the acceptance, even encouragement of what seems to be disorder and lack of control in the classroom if students are to be invested emotionally as well as intellectually in their work. Some of us might long for the days when we delivered polished lectures that "covered" the subject, even if some students dozed, and then held them responsible when they could not recall the salient facts on the exam. How do I feel about a classroom where the emotions run high, where two or three students might be talking or arguing at the same time, where some of the finer points I had hoped to make are lost in the fray? Or, at the other extreme, what is my tolerance for silence, my willingness to wait after asking a question if I really do expect a thoughtful answer rather than a quick game of "guess-what's-on-my-mind"?

This new, messy, more disorderly kind of classroom will take some getting used to by the students as well as teachers (Elbow, 1986). Students have conspired with faculty in the traditional classroom to keep the focus of attention on the instructor, with very little required of students beyond note-taking. A shift in responsibility for learning away from teacher to students means more work, more personal exposure, more commitment for students. In my experience, older white students, especially, will at first express impatience with their fellow students and a yearning for the teacher's wisdom. At this point it is essential that the faculty member be clear about objectives; although it is refreshing to have a lively classroom, learning, not audience applause levels, is the main purpose. Faculty must show that it is appropriate for students to be more involved in the class because they have something valuable to contribute.

3. High expectations

Every student in the class has the ability to learn the material and in the exchange of ideas to offer new meanings to his or her fellow students and even to the teacher. This kind of confidence in students on the part of the teacher is contagious, and rather than diminishing the teacher's authority, it ultimately expands it.

For African-American and many other students of color, a classroom with more give and take, with the opportunity to test an opinion in

argument with peers as well as teacher, is also a more familiar and genuine mode of learning. By the way, I still give short lectures from time to time and often ask students to prepare reports on an issue that has come up in class, but these are not the meat of the class, only background material for our discussion. All students know the difference between abdication of a teacher's role and a firm, guiding hand behind the scenes.

4. Friendly intervention

In addition to high expectations, a teacher must offer support both in and out of the classroom. In the past I simply posted office hours, but my occasional student visitor was usually an *A* student who wanted reassurance of the *A*. Now on the bottom of a paper I ask a student to see me after class, and we move to my office right then, if possible. Showing up in class a few minutes early is very effective, especially in a college where the majority of students are commuters with limited time on campus. Stopping to talk to students in the hallway, joining them for coffee or lunch, or giving an informal talk in a dorm are all ways to show that learning overlaps with living. We might chat about personal matters, but I try to find links to ideas and assignments from the class to show that I take it all seriously and expect them to do the same. If possible, I will comment about a point the student made in class, ask if he or she was surprised at the reaction of classmates, and explain how it helped me see the subject in a new light.

Our Registrar now prints out students' phone numbers on our class rosters, making it easy to call a student who has missed class twice or one who seemed to leave the class confused or hurt by something someone said. The point in all this is not to be the student's *friend*. What the student needs, particularly an African-American student whose contacts with whites have probably not included having ideas taken seriously, is a *teacher/mentor* who believes he or she can succeed and who is not about to let him or her slide by.

5. Class sessions on cultural diversity

With 45 hours of class time in a three-credit course spread over 15 weeks in a typical semester, it is well worth taking the time early to talk about the opportunity for using the classroom experience as a model of what multicultural living and learning can be. An article by John Condon (1986), "The Ethnocentric Classroom," or James A. Anderson (1988), "Cognitive Styles and Multicultural Populations," gets students thinking about how academic culture, classroom structure, the high value placed

on individualism, and related issues might affect a student not from a mainstream, Anglo-American culture.

The goal of such a discussion, whether in a homogeneous class or one that is culturally diverse, is to make all students (and the teacher) more aware of different learning styles and needs. The specific content of a course can usually be included by a demonstration of how traditional texts exclude the experience of African Americans or Latinos in, say, psychology or how women authors have only recently started to get recognition in texts in English courses. Setting an atmosphere of trust and openness early by taking time for such a discussion is, I find, rewarded with greater attentiveness and more efficient learning for the rest of the semester.

6. Frequent class evaluations

Focusing attention on the class itself and its process near the start of the semester also makes it natural to pause at various points during the semster for evaluation or "pressure release" sessions. I am always amazed in these sessions to learn how much of the personal dynamics going on in the classroom has passed by without my noticing: from a student's response being taken as a putdown of another student to perceived racist or sexist comments muttered just loud enough for other students to hear. I have also learned that I do not have to do much in these sessions but listen attentively and note those comments that recommend sensible changes in the pace of our readings or something else I have control over. At the end of such sessions there are usually several voices raised in praise of the class's diversity and the class's ability to live and learn together. Personal clashes are sometimes settled with the antagonists talking things over calmly outside the classroom or at least keeping a respectful distance for the next few weeks. There is generally relief after these sessions that matters have been brought out in the open.

7. A pedagogical mix

To achieve the kind of participatory setting that would be more congenial to African-American and other "new student" cultural styles, I use a mix of classroom activities. This approach would seem obvious to primary and secondary teachers but is, for the most part, resisted by college teachers who see their role as dispensing "truth." Small groups working collaboratively on highly structured tasks in class and then reporting back to the full class is a technique proven effective over the years. Debates, simulations, games, theatrical productions (I had students stage Plato's allegory of the cave this past semester to make sure they got the

final step, the philosopher's necessary return), community "living history" research, personal journals charting reactions to reading are some other activities that work. A colleague of mine gives multiple options for a final project in her Shakespeare course; in addition to an objective exam, students can choose a final paper, a recitation of a prescribed number of lines from a play not read in class, or a costume or scene design. We need a clearinghouse for classroom activities of these kinds that faculty have found effective. Several organizations have collected and published model syllabi for courses addressing issues of race, gender, and class, but these are heavy on content, very short on pedagogy.

A Mandate for Faculty Development in the 1990s

All of these strategies have in common a concept of teaching that involves much more than coverage of course content. Sensitive to various cultural learning styles, including their own, faculty members needed in today's increasingly diverse classrooms will be tough negotiators seeking agreement between the mostly conflicting worlds of academic life and students' lives. Although "institutional resources" are important, "stronger interpersonal supports may be the essential ingredient for solid intellectual development," Jacqueline Fleming concludes in her study detailing the grim prospects of African-American students in white colleges (1984, p. 106). White faculty, in particular, will have to care enough about the success of these students to take risks in their teaching, always an unsettling prospect, especially when it involves venturing across racial boundaries. A well-designed, supportive faculty development program is the appropriate place, maybe the only place on most campuses, for the kind of training in cultural diversity that faculty need.

Notes

[1]In spring, 1990, the United States Department of Education reported a reversal between 1986 and 1988 of this long decline in enrollments of African-American students in higher education. But it is too early to know if any increases in enrollments can be translated into better retention and graduation rates.

[2]One step toward better communication is sensitivity to names of groups: African American and Latino are currently favored, at least in the New York area. "Underrepresented" replaces "minority" here. One colleague told me that as soon as people of color are in the "majority" in the

industrial states, he is sure "minority" will be banned since whites (really European Americans) will surely want to avoid that label.

[3]My colleague, Richard Harper, makes this point dramatically.

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