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Working in the Trenches: Teaching Diversity at a Predominantly White College

Abstract

This presentation is twofold. We begin by examining the degree to which teaching diversity, at a mid-western predominately white institution, is disproportionately devolved onto academic departments and faculty who occupy devalued statuses within and outside academe. Finally, we highlight the hidden and unhidden challenges and obstacles that accompany this obligation.

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As most predominately white institutions (PWIs) make diversity a cornerstone of their academic curriculum, the responsibility of teaching "diversity-oriented" courses has become the obligation of a select few in the academy. While a number of scholars (e.g., Gollnick and Chin, 1990; Jimoh and Johnson, 2002; Sattler, 1997; Smith, 1990) have analyzed this educational phenomenon, the existing literature has not fully addressed how the diversification of higher education has prompted increased job segmentation and segregation within PWIs. At this juncture, scholarship in the area of multicultural education must begin investigating who is more likely to do this (devalued) work and highlight the challenges, if any, these individuals must navigate and/or overcome.

In beginning to understand the lived experiences of instructors who teach diversity-oriented courses, we relied upon the semi-structured interview method. Since January of 2001, we have interviewed a number of instructors who taught diversity-oriented courses at a PWI in a mid-western state from 1999 to 2001. Our participants occupied a variety of

social statuses (i.e., professional ranking, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, etc.) and were drawn from a number of academic program areas (i.e., Communication Studies, Curriculum and Instruction, English, History, Political Science, Psychology and, Sociology). Through the use of Ethnograph, a qualitative data analysis program, we individually and collectively coded the interview responses of our participants. Our research project, in short, centers around four primary inquiries. First, are minority instructors (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, graduate instructors, women, etc.) more likely to be assigned and/or feel obligated to teach diversity-oriented courses? Second, under what conditions do instructors of diversity-oriented courses labor? Third, what impact does teaching diversity-oriented courses have on an instructor's authority and credibility in both the classroom and larger academic environment? Finally, what impact does student evaluations have on the professional, emotional, and physical well-being of instructors who teach diversity-oriented courses, especially minority instructors?

Based on the interview data compiled thus far, we have noticed that the obligation of teaching diversity disproportionately devolves onto or is reserved for academic program areas and faculty who are often devalued and marginalized within and outside the academy. At one end of the spectrum, the bulk of diversity-oriented courses, which tend to be curricular requirements for undergraduates, are concentrated in academic departments and programs (such as the Women's Center, Multicultural Center, etc.) that are often under funded, understaffed, and lack wide-spread support or recognition. At the other end, our research finds that most faculty who teach diversity-oriented courses belong to social groups whose ascribed identities are marginalized both within the academy and the larger society.

In addition to who teaches diversity, our research highlights a number of hurdles instructors of diversity-oriented courses must overcome. For most of our respondents, "emotion work" is fundamental to their teaching experiences. Furthermore, many of our respondents acknowledged that their subject matter and/or their social identities have led students to attack or diminish their professorial authority and credibility -a point that is made apparent by student responses in the written teacher evaluations.

By building on both the existing scholarship and our personal experiences as teachers of diversity-oriented courses at a PWI, our research ultimately aims to integrate the lived experiences of instructors who teach diversity into the multicultural discourse.

Presenters

Gary Perry is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Prior to attending UNL, he received a B.S. in Sociology from Southern University and A&M College-Baton Rouge (1999) and a M.S. in Sociology from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville (2001). Within the discipline of sociology, his interests are social stratification, history of sociology, sociology of education, and sociological theory. He has presented his work and/or organized presentations at the meetings of the American Sociological Association, the Association of Black Sociologists, the Southern Sociological Society, the Midwest Sociological Society, and the Mid-South Sociological Association. He is the student representative for the Association of Black Sociologists.

Katherine Acosta received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Nebraska in August of 2003. Her dissertation, *Surviving the American Health Care System: Experiences & Strategies of Uninsured Women*, is a qualitative study of women from diverse backgrounds who lack health

insurance coverage. Her research interests center on social inequality, health, and social theory. She is a lecturer in the UNL sociology department for the 2003-04 academic year, teaching Introduction to Sociology and Sociology of Health. She was managing editor of the journal *Teaching Sociology* from July 2001 to July 2003. Katherine received both the UNL Alumni Association Graduate Teaching Award and the UNL College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Teaching Assistant Award in April of 2003.

Crystal Edwards is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her primary areas of interest are social stratification and family. Her dissertation is a mixed methods study of the patterns and processes that determine when a child will be removed from his or her home of origin for mental health related reasons. She has received funding for her dissertation from the Midwest Sociological Society Scholarship as well as the Nicholas Babchuk Memorial Fund. She received her B.S. in sociology from Nebraska Wesleyan University where she participated in an urban studies program called Urban Life Center. Based in Chicago, the program recruits liberal arts college students to the city where diversity is explored through politics, art, community participation and empirical observation. It is here that she developed an intellectual and spiritual commitment to understanding and exalting diversity.

Connie Frey is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Nebraska -Lincoln. In 1996, she received her BS degree from Middle Tennessee State University and her MA in 1998 from the same university. Her primary research interests are history of sociology and criminology. Her current research examines the role of Jane Addams in founding American criminology. She is a member of the Willa Cather Mentoring Circle and associate editor of *SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS*. She has presented her work at the American Sociological Association, Mid-South Sociological, the Midwest Sociological Society, the Western Social Science, and the Women and Power Meetings. She has published articles and chapters in the areas of criminology, gender, and history of sociology. She currently serves as the graduate student member of the ASA Section on the History of Sociology Council.

Helen A. Moore is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and is formally appointed to both the Women's Studies (Faculty Member) and Native American Studies Programs (Faculty Affiliate). Her research focuses on educational stratification, including race, class and gender issues across all schooling levels. Her most recent book publication is *The Sociology of Women: Intersections of Patriarchy, Capitalism and Colonization*. Her current research projects include a book manuscript on *Schooling Women* and a peer-interview project on stratification and diversity issues in higher education professions. She currently serves as Editor of the American Sociological Association journal, *Teaching Sociology*. In 2000, Helen Moore received the top teaching award for the four campus system of the University of Nebraska: The Outstanding Teaching and Instructional Creativity Award. She has also received the College of Arts and Sciences Outstanding Teaching Award and is named to the UNL Academy of Distinguished Teachers.