

# Mediating Boundaries of Race, Class, and Professorial Authority as a Critical Multiculturalist

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*Despite the ongoing debate about the nature, goals, and politics of multicultural education, the discipline has taken hold in the minds and hearts of educators—prekindergarten through graduate school. However, for some of us who teach multicultural education, we approach our classrooms far more confident about what we want to teach, than about how we will teach it. Moreover, an examination of the assumptions underlying a multiculturalist discourse leads to questions about pedagogy; that is, what kind of pedagogy is necessary to teach multiculturalism, and how is pedagogy informed by a reconceptualization of the discipline's underlying assumptions. This article presents one professor's reflections on the challenges of mediating the boundaries of race, class, and professorial authority in an undergraduate multicultural education course.*

A precondition for change, however, is that we need to begin by admitting that we really do not know how to “do multiculturalism.”

(Hoffman, D., 1996, p. 565)

## FIRST DAY OF CLASS

*I enter classroom 232. The room is packed with young, fresh, early-to-mid-twenties faces—black faces with braids, naturals, dreadlocks, permed hair; white faces with long and blond, short and dark, blond-streaked, pony-tailed hair; more white faces than black faces. Male faces and female faces. More female faces than male faces. There are more than 25 bodies, which is the class limit, so I also see hopeful faces waiting to persuade me of their urgent need to overload this class. I already know I will say yes. I write my name on the board and hand out the syllabus. I go over each page of the syllabus noting the course texts, class requirements, and so forth.*

*I ask, “Are there any questions?”*

*None.*

*I state my expectations for the class: I expected that all of the readings would be completed, that they would attend class, participate in class discussions, and together we could make it a great experience for all of us.*

*“Any questions?”*

*None.*

*We began the lesson. I divided the class into small groups. Each student was given a copy of an article titled “Body rituals among the Nacirema.” After reading the article, students were asked to discuss their reactions among their groups. An interesting discussion ensued about the “strange” rituals of the Nacirema. However, the discussion became even more interesting later when students learned that they were reading about themselves, Americans; “Nacirema” is American spelled backward. Some students were embarrassed by the comments they had made about these “strange” people. The article did what I had intended it to do, which was to disrupt students’ notions of culture—their own, as well as perceived “foreign” cultures. I could see a look on some faces, perhaps a realization that the class was going to be different from what they had expected.*

*Time is up. Class is dismissed and only the bodies with faces hoping to sign up for the class remain. I sign the necessary papers. I was relieved that only 6 more students wanted to overload. (Reflective notes on “Education and Culture,” 1st day of class, 4/24/97)*

Multiculturalism is presently an established discipline in the field of education, with a body of knowledge, texts, and curricula (Banks & Banks, 1995; Bennett, 1990; Gay, 1995; Giroux, 1988; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Despite the ongoing debate about the nature, goals, and politics of multicultural education, the discipline has taken hold in the minds and hearts of educators—prekindergarten through graduate school. However, for some of us who teach multicultural education, we approach our classrooms far more confident about what we want to teach, than about how we will teach it.

This paper is a reflective study of one educator’s classroom. As a first year, African American, female educator, I discuss the challenges of developing a multiculturalist pedagogy while teaching a course that focused on multiculturalism, and, more specifically, the impact of cultural differences on the educational experiences of different groups in this society. In addition to multicultural perspectives, my teaching practices were also largely influenced by theories of critical pedagogy. In conjoining the theories that have informed the knowledge I teach and the pedagogy I utilize, I describe myself in this paper as a “critical multiculturalist.” This term conveys what I see as two parts of one whole: the theory and practice of multicultural education.

I begin this paper with a brief discussion of the current debates about multicultural education. Some of these debates are between those who support multicultural education and those who are against what they perceive as the divisive tenets of the discipline (Banks, 1995). Another debate exists among proponents of multiculturalism, who, although they support

the goal of education for social justice proposed in multiculturalism, argue that assumptions underlying the discipline need to be critiqued in the development of a multicultural discourse. An examination of the assumptions underlying a multicultural discourse leads to questions about pedagogy; that is, what kind of pedagogy is necessary to teach multiculturalism, and how is pedagogy informed by a reconceptualization of the discipline's underlying assumptions. I then discuss the usefulness of theories of critical pedagogy in addressing these questions. The above discussion serves as a backdrop to a reflective analysis of the events that occurred when I taught a course titled "Education and Culture" in the spring of 1997. I conclude my analysis with a summary of challenges that educators may face as the discipline continues to develop.

### MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Since the late 1960s, advocates of multicultural education reform have sought to challenge the Eurocentric foundations of the American school curriculum (Banks & Banks, 1993; Gay, 1992; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). Multicultural education as a reform movement has focused on practices in educational institutions, including, but not limited to, information conveyed in the curriculum. In particular, proponents of multicultural education have urged that education convey a comprehensive knowledge about the cultures and diversity in America.

In a review of the development and practices of multicultural education, Banks (1995) outlined five primary dimensions: (a) content integration, which describes a teacher's efforts to integrate examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups when they teach particular subjects; (b) the knowledge construction process, whereby teachers aid students in understanding how implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and bias influence the constructed knowledge within a particular discipline; (c) prejudice reduction, which highlights the teacher's focus on the characteristics of students' racial attitudes; (d) an equity pedagogy, as a goal of the teacher who prioritizes the academic achievement of all students; and (e) an empowering school culture, which is the attention paid by the entire school to issues of equity and interactions between members of the school community across ethnic and racial lines, for the express purpose of developing a school culture of empowerment for all students, in particular those students from disenfranchised groups in society (Banks & Banks, 1995).

In all of these dimensions, the teacher's work is pivotal to the enterprise of multicultural education. Indeed the teaching of an actual subject mainly serves as a backdrop to educating students on how to be citizens who respect and appreciate all members of society. In this way, multiculturalism, as outlined by Banks and Banks in these dimensions, resonates from an

earlier time in the history of schooling in America. Early in its history, the New World was engaged in creating an "American" identity because of its separation from the cultural framework of "subjects of the Crown." The main difference here is that, instead of ignoring the diversity that existed in society even during the earlier time, multiculturalism challenges Americans to accurately reflect the diversity in society in a nonhierarchical paradigm, one that reflects an ideal democracy.

However, Banks (1995) also elaborated on the limited conception that many schools and university practitioners have about multicultural education, that they view it "primarily as curriculum reform to include content about ethnic groups, women and other cultural groups" (p. 4). He noted that despite the quest for sound definitions and clear disciplinary boundaries within the field of multicultural education, the debate about the extent to which the histories and cultures of women should be incorporated into the study of Western civilization has predominated in the general public's opinions about multicultural education. In recent years, criticism has been leveled at this perceived thrust of multicultural reform efforts (Bloom, 1989; D'Souza, 1991; Ravitch, 1990a, 1990b; Schlesinger, 1991), and these opinions extend beyond the academy, and are touted in the popular media (Kermode, 1992; Menand, 1991). For example, some adversaries of multiculturalism claim that it will divide the nation and undercut its unity. Banks (1999) responds that such a claim assumes that the nation is already united. He notes that "while we are one nation politically, sociologically our nation is deeply divided along race, gender, sexual orientation and class lines" (p. 7).

Despite the continuation of these debates, multiculturalism has become an accepted (though at times reluctantly so) paradigm in curriculum formation in all levels of education, and the establishment of this discipline has now led to other issues and concerns. Some of these concerns focus on the underlying assumptions upon which conceptions of multicultural education are based (Gibson, 1984; Hoffman, 1996; McCarthy, 1994; McLaren, 1995). Of particular focus are concepts such as culture and identity, which are integral to multiculturalism.

Hoffman (1996) utilizes an anthropological approach to her analysis of multicultural education. She effectively argues for the symbolic disruption of central concepts of multicultural discourse: namely, concepts of culture, self, identity, and difference. The author's critique of culture and identity is particularly relevant to this paper. After noting the centrality of the concept of culture to multicultural discourse, Hoffman (1996) highlights the various uses of culture in this discourse. Hoffman (1996) writes that current representations of culture in multicultural education—for example, culture as a "recipe for social behavior" (p. 550); culture as essentialist, particularly in portrayals of non-Western cultures; and culture as categori-

cal (for example, how notions of culture are portrayed in attempts by some scholars to aid teachers in developing multicultural curriculum)—present static and limited views of humans as cultural beings. She describes such representations as “simplified and reified . . . [to] support visions of personal, ethnic, or national cultural identities that are fixed, essentialized, stereotyped, and normatized” (p. 549). Additionally, she argues that such representations ultimately limit the opportunities for transformative teaching and learning to occur. She advocates instead that the teaching of culture be approached from a holistic perspective, thereby allowing students to draw their own conclusions and abstractions from the evidence. This approach, she argues, reduces a pervasive tendency in so-called multicultural texts to “forcefeed proper attitudes or principles without a grounding in knowledge base or context” (p. 555).

Hoffman (1996) also critiques the linkages between culture and identity established in multicultural discourse. She discusses assertions such as identity as a cultural universal, identity as property and choice, and identity as individual and unique. The author asserts that the construction of concepts such as “self” and “person,” which undergird multiculturalist discourse of identity, subvert the fact that such concepts “are simply not the same in all cultures or ethnic groups, and differences in concepts of self are among the most profound influences on cultural and social phenomena” (p. 556). For instance, she contrasts the themes of a Western concept of self—which include individualism, autonomy, and independence—with other cultural understandings of self that stress social relatedness, interdependency, and collectivism.

In addition to the problematic assumptions underlying multiculturalism are concerns regarding the teaching of the knowledge. Pedagogical and teaching practices should cohere with, not contradict, the goals of multiculturalism. One area of focus in the debates about teaching practices that also reflects the concerns of critical pedagogists is the negotiation of authority in classrooms where multiculturalism is taught. Recall the five dimensions of multicultural education earlier cited. All of the dimensions specify the role of the teacher in transferring this knowledge to students. The arrangements between teacher and students embedded in these dimensions present certain dilemmas for educators when we consider Hoffman’s assertions. For example, how would it be possible to teach culture as a dynamic interaction between people in the midst of integrating texts from specific cultures? In other words, since the predominant assumption about the concept of culture underlying multicultural discourse is its static composition (e.g., black, Asian, white, and so forth) a dilemma arises for the teacher who would choose to teach about culture differently.

Placing myself in this analysis, I can say that in my lived cultural experience, a static view of culture resonates in the answers to questions about my culture. In replying to queries about my cultural background, I inevi-

tably begin with an identification of myself as a black female, with all of the implications (stereotypical and otherwise) that statement implies. I am also aware that my interpretations of the world are framed in the contexts of blackness and femaleness. The challenge for me as a multiculturalist teacher then becomes one of moving beyond my lived experience and, in teaching multicultural education, finding ways to discuss the dynamic elements utilized by people to construct notions of culture, as well as the power structures that exist in society and influence these constructions. As will be shown later, this is much easier said than done. Nonetheless, such challenges allow teachers to critically examine their pedagogy as effective for their goals, particularly in the field of multicultural education. Toward this end, a focus on what the teacher's "self," his or her pedagogy, and his or her teaching practices bring to the enterprise of multicultural education is essential, and theories of critical pedagogy are helpful in beginning this discussion.

### CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND MULTICULTURALISM

Theories of critical pedagogy and liberatory praxis have become a focus in university teaching (hooks, 1995; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Mohanty, 1994). In a meshing of theoretical explanations, I have defined critical pedagogy as a systematic interrogation of schools and schooling processes that enables educators to see these terrains, not simply as sites of instruction or as arenas of indoctrination and socialization, but also as cultural terrains that promote and/or negate student empowerment and teachers' self-transformation. Giroux and Simon (1988) write that critical pedagogy "takes into consideration how the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide the basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences and voices" (p. 10). This type of pedagogy begins with human agency, with a view of teachers as transformative intellectuals who usurp traditional notions of power and authority in the classroom and allow intellectual and critical spaces to exist wherein students may make meaning and find power for themselves.

The creation of critical spaces is fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice. This goal for society is, as I noted earlier, a shared goal of multicultural education. McLaren (1992) elaborates on the concept of critical pedagogy as one that "should conceive of reality—most importantly classroom reality—as a multiplicity of social relations, embodied metaphors, and social structures which cohere and contradict, some of them oppressive and some of them liberating" (p. 201). Perceiving the classroom reality in this way creates an avenue for each

individual teacher to address how his or her “self” potentially becomes an embodied metaphor in the course of teacher-student interactions. In terms of implementation, I found Grossberg’s (1994) models of a progressive pedagogical project helpful.

The first model is a hierarchical pedagogical practice that assumes that the teacher already understands the truth to be imparted to the students. While Grossberg (1994) acknowledges that this practice has a place in emancipatory struggles, he notes a problem with this type of practice, namely, that the educator assumes that he or she understands the real meaning of particular texts and practices, the real relations of power embodied within them, and the real interest of the different social groups brought together in the classroom and in the broader society. The second type of progressive practice is a dialogic practice that aims to allow the silenced to speak, and only when absolutely necessary does it claim to speak for them. However, a pitfall to this practice is the assumption that students are not already speaking, simply because we as educators do not hear them. The third type of practice, a praxical pedagogy, “attempts to offer people the skills that would enable them to understand and intervene into their own history” (p. 17). One pitfall in the use of this type of practice is assuming that people are not already trying to intervene in their own history and, more importantly, that we as educators know the right skills to utilize in the process every time. Grossberg (1994) cautions that “there are no universal skills which we can offer independent of the context into which we want to intervene, and, more important, into which our students want to intervene” (p. 17).

Grossberg (1994) offers the possibility of a fourth model of pedagogy that he calls a pedagogy of articulation and risk. He comments that

such a practice while refusing the traditional forms of intellectual authority, would not abandon claims to authority. Refusing to assume ahead of time that it knows the appropriate knowledge, language or skills, it is a contextual practice which is willing to take the risk of making connections, drawing lines, mapping articulations, between different domains, discourses and practices, to see what will work. (p. 18)

This model delineates a pedagogy that keeps the practice of teachers on its toes, and is inclusive of all of the moments when we, as teachers, falter, hesitate, and come face to face with our own limitations. A pedagogy of articulation and risk also seems to include the moments when teachers assert their knowledge, but with space in the assertions for students’ questions, contestation, and even, resistance. Student responses then inform and/or alter teachers’ knowledge.

In summary, the previous pages have outlined current debates about multicultural education—debates between opponents and supporters of multicultural education, as well as debates among supporters of the discipline. I've discussed how these debates lead an educator like myself to question my pedagogy in terms of its influence on, and effectiveness in, conveying the knowledge of multiculturalism. Questioning my pedagogy led to my investigation of theories of critical pedagogy and models for implementing practices based on the theories. In the remainder of this paper I present a reflective study of myself as a critical multiculturalist. I will attempt to convey the moments of resistance, reflections, and revelations that occurred in the spring of 1997 during my Education and Culture course.

#### THE COURSE

The course, titled "Education and Culture," focused on relationships between culture and power as they pertain to people's experiences in educational systems. The class introduced students to various perspectives about education and culture and pulled from numerous theoretical perspectives, including theories of social and cultural reproduction, ideology, hegemony, critical pedagogy, and multiculturalism. One of the primary goals of the course was to encourage students' critical reflection on their well-formed ideas and beliefs about education and culture, ideas and beliefs that have been developed over their many years as students in schools, and as members of a race- and class-based American society.

#### THE STUDENTS

There were 29 students in the class, 5 males and 24 females. In terms of ethnicity, 11 of the students described themselves as white, 9 were self-described black or African American, 2 were biracial (one was a male of Japanese and German parentage, and the other was a female of African American and Mexican parentage) and 1 student was self-described as bicultural (half Irish-Canadian and half Brazilian). Six students were absent on the last day of class when the profile forms were completed, but I perceived these students to be white. Religion was also an important marker of identity for a number of these students. Of the 17 students who identified that they were Christian, 1 student specified her Mormon faith and 4 students identified themselves as Catholic. Five students identified themselves as Jewish and 1 student described himself as an agnostic (6 students were absent on the last day of class when the profile forms were completed). Of the 29 students, 21 were Educational Studies majors (source: University student evaluation forms, May, 1997).

Twelve of the students wrote that they were from upper-middle-class family backgrounds and eight were from middle-class family backgrounds. The three students who identified themselves as belonging to working-class families were all African American female students. One of these students grew up in a suburban area and the other two grew up in urban areas, and one describing where she grew up as “ghetto, very urban.” Students who took the course were all between the ages of 19 and 23, although most of them (a total of 17) were 20 and 21 years old. The majority of the students were juniors (18) and seniors (10) with one sophomore in the class. All of these students stated that they were going on to graduate school and 74% of them wanted to become teachers. By the end of the semester, some of the seniors had already obtained teaching positions. Only 10 missed three or more classes all semester (source: University student evaluation forms, 1997) even though no penalty for absences was specified by me, the professor.

#### THE PROFESSOR

The 1996–1997 year was my first year as a teacher in a university, although I’ve been a teacher for over half of my life, both informally and formally. Prior to my faculty appointment I was a teacher at a middle school in northern California. I also cotaught undergraduate courses with my advisor during the course of my graduate studies.

In more personal terms, I am a self-described African American female who is very influenced by the West Indian heritage of my family. Despite my post-secondary education at two prestigious universities, I’m very much tied to my working-class roots in the inner-city neighborhood where I grew up. These roots are reflected in my language, my “attitude,” and my ethos, the ways in which I interpret the world. My position as the professor of the class was not neutral, but rather, reflected my personality, my “self,” as an African American female, with my pedagogy and my teaching agenda, which was to teach a multicultural conception of the influences of culture on the educational experiences of different groups in American society.

#### PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS

I employed a wide range of pedagogical tools and practices. These included critical reading of written texts, whole class and small group dialogues and exercises, viewing and analyzing relevant films and documentaries, e-mail exchanges, in-class debates and presentations, and conferences with students—spontaneous and by appointment—in my office. The most stimulating form of classroom interactions, however, was the dialogues.

In terms of my pedagogical agenda, I thought of myself as a border guide whose primary function, as noted by Levine and Toppin (1997), was to “encourage and equip people to negotiate unfamiliar terrain successfully” (p. 5). In part to facilitate my role as a border guide, I encouraged students to blend their life experiences in the discussions of the required readings. In this way dialogue became central to the goals of the course. Shor (1992) describes dialogue as “a mutually created discourse which questions existing canons of knowledge and challenges power relations in the classroom and in society” (p. 87). Among the qualities of classroom dialogue he outlined were three themes that I utilized in my class:

- [dialogue as] a formal learning group directed by a critical teacher who has leadership responsibilities but who codevelops the class, negotiates the curriculum, and shares decision making with the students, using her or his authority in a cooperative manner;
- [dialogue that is] situated in the conditions and cultures of the students so that their language, themes, understandings, levels of development, and needs are starting points;
- [dialogue that] frontloads [students’] expression and backloads teacher expertise and bodies of knowledge. (pp. 87–88)

Dialogues were important as a way to promote a learning context where knowledge was collectively constructed, taught, and learned by both the professor and the students.

#### DATA AND ANALYSIS

I view this paper as being based on a reflective study of one teacher’s multicultural classroom. The class was initially conducted only as one of the courses offered by the education department in the spring of 1997. My desire to study my class did not arise until we were about a month into the course. Still, for the most part, I continued to conduct the course from the arena of teaching, with my primary role as that of professor interacting with her students. However, after several pivotal moments occurred during the course, I started to discuss the possibility of writing a research paper about the course. Students responded positively to my initial broaching of the subject. Soon after my first proposing it, students’ permission was formally sought. Students signed consent forms granting me permission to use (anonymously) as a part of a research paper the materials they produced in fulfilling the requirements of the course.

Sources of evidence for this study were documentation written by me and the students and artifacts such as those used for students’ final presentations and from students’ presentations with me at the 1997 annual

Georgia Educational Research Association (GERA) Conference that took place in Atlanta. In addition, evaluations issued by the university and completed by students at the end of the semester were also used as data. Documents such as course papers, class notes, and in-class assignments were systematically collected based on due dates (for assignments) outlined in the course syllabus. These dates were also used to corroborate and augment evidence from the other data sources (Yin, 1994). In preparing to write this paper I also analyzed students' e-mail messages to me throughout the semester, personal conversations between me and particular students or groups of students during office hours—that were either recorded by me later or recorded during the conversation (all with students' permission)—and a student profile completed by each student on the last day of class (April 24, 1997).

The strengths and weaknesses of these sources are in keeping with those outlined by Yin (1994), particularly in terms of bias. Issues of bias prevail throughout this paper. Bias is embedded in the framework of this study (that is, a reflective project, pieced together "after the fact," with minimal qualitative research mechanisms in place at the actual time of the course); the issue of bias is also one to consider in a review of students' papers that were completed as course assignments since these assignments were completed for a grade, a goal that might beg elements of "response bias" (Yin, 1994) or, in other words, of "giving back to professor what students think the professor wants." However, a year later, I solicited feedback on this paper from students who took the course to ascertain the accuracy of my depictions.

In reference to this project as a reflective study, data sorting took the form of "discovering essences with sufficient context" (Wolcott, 1990). The essences presented in this paper are vignettes of interactions between me and my students that convey the following: students' responses to knowledge that caused them to reconsider their preconceived notions about what I was going to teach about culture; the challenges involved in teaching such knowledge; and how students' responses caused me to reflect on my pedagogical practices.

Reflecting on my pedagogical practices, I reexamined my syllabus, lectures notes, pedagogical tools, and other teaching materials I utilized in the class, as well as my teaching agenda. Using students' papers, presentations, and their questions and comments during the class and in private discussion, I analyzed the effectiveness of my pedagogy in offering students a different conceptualization of culture as integral to a multiculturalist discourse. I also analyzed my effectiveness in creating a liberatory environment where students' voices and experiences were legitimized as integral to the teaching and learning process of a multicultural classroom. Additionally, I studied student feedback, as well as my personal reflections on moments

of tension, conflict, and agreement, to determine the success or failure of my attempts to create an atmosphere of empowerment in the class. Finally, in reflecting on the pivotal moments of teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-student interactions, I conclude with an overview of the challenges of “walking the talk” for a critical multiculturalist.

I’ve chosen to focus on the voices of five students in particular, although the voices of other students will occasionally filter in my analysis. I chose these students’ experiences as representative of other students’ experiences that took place in the class. Additionally, these five students presented with me at the educational conference I earlier mentioned (GERA) in the fall of the same year I taught the course. Finally, I believe that reading the narratives of specific students from the beginning to the conclusion of the course and beyond shows how the process of learning that began in a classroom in the spring of 1997 continued in the lives of the students and professor alike.

Below are brief introductions to these five students, four women and one man. The young women are Jackie, Julip, Earthlyn, and Malinda (all pseudonyms). The young man is John.

#### JACKIE

Jackie is a white Jewish American woman, 20 years old. She grew up in an upper-middle-class household in New York. She was a junior at the university and an education major. In the semester after I taught the course, I was assigned to be her advisor and through this relationship we met often in my office. Additionally, Jackie took another course with me in the spring of 1998, just before she graduated. Jackie was very vocal in the class. She participated in every class discussion and easily volunteered for any assignment. Her companions in the class were two seniors, both female, who graduated in the spring that the course was taught.

#### JULIP

Julip is a white woman also 20 years of age. She grew up in an upper-middle-class household in Pennsylvania. She was a sophomore at the time she took the course and an education major. After presenting with me at the conference Julip spent her junior year at a university in Australia. She wrote to me often during her year abroad. At the time this paper was written she was completing her senior year at the university. Even though I was not her advisor, Julip asked me to be the chair of her honors thesis committee since her paper grew out interests that began in the course she had taken with me. Julip came to see me at least once a week just to chat, sometimes about the thesis, but often about her life in general. Julip was

also vocal in the class but not as vocal as Jackie. She sat at the front of the class in every session. She did not stand out to me in class the way Jackie did until I read her first paper. She wrote quite candidly about her experience of culture shock in the first assignment of the course.

#### EARTHLYN

Earthlyn is a white Southern woman, also 20 years of age. She grew up in an upper-middle-class household in South Carolina. She was a junior and an education major. Earthlyn never took another course with me, but I saw her often because she was a work-study student in the education department the following spring semester after I taught the course. That was also the semester that she graduated from the university. She told me that she often recommended me to her friends as “a professor whose course you’ve got to take!” Earthlyn was an extremely quiet young lady in the class. She may have spoken once in class discussions all semester long. However, she wrote eloquently about her “cultural” upbringing on a farm in North Carolina and it was her writing that made me aware of her.

#### MALINDA

Malinda is an African American woman, 21 years old. She grew up in an upper-middle-class household in Kansas. She was a junior and an education major. Malinda came to my office for the first time during the semester before I taught the course. She asked me to read a paper she had written for another course because she thought it reflected my areas of interest, which she had become aware of through the internet. We met again to discuss my thoughts about the paper. During the second meeting I told her about the course I was going to teach the following spring and I encouraged her to take it. She did.

#### JOHN

John is a young African American man, 21 years old. He grew up in an upper-middle-class household in Georgia. He was a junior at the time of the course and an education major. John was also very quiet in the class and hardly spoke the entire semester. However, he made a point to have frequent one-on-one hallway conversations with me. Interestingly enough, John was very active in a number of student groups on campus, which I found surprising since he was such a quiet student. Even during the semester after the course was taught, we continued our hallway conversations. At times, he and another African American male student, Jason, who also took the course, would stop by to chat in the classroom where I taught while they

waited for their class to begin. John was still a student at the university at the time this paper was written and had already submitted his application to the teacher education program.

The remainder of this paper is framed as outcomes of the course: those outcomes I hoped would occur as well as others that evolved out of the nature of the course, but all of which now serve to continue the development of my pedagogy. The four outcomes I focus on are (1) reconceptualizing notions of identity formation in multicultural discourse; (2) teaching students about multiculturalism through an exploration of the impact of culture on educational experiences; (3) creating an atmosphere of empowerment in the class; and (4) discovering the challenges to becoming a critical multiculturalist, or to practicing what I profess.

### IDENTITY IN MULTICULTURALISM

Hoffman's (1996) arguments assert the interactional conditions in which a person's identity and culture are constructed. In effect, the author reinserts the dynamic, as opposed to accepting the reification of culture formation, which is often posited in multicultural literature. Students' writings about their own cultural identity in this class affirmed the arguments posited by Hoffman. Bryan, one of the biracial students, wrote, "I am a scrambled egg. I am neither white nor yellow, but a mix of both. To be more precise, I am half Japanese and half German." Another white, female student, Selina, wrote about the personal dilemma the class discussions made her feel because of her particular situation in relation to her fellow students who seemed so divided along racial lines. She wrote:

In our class I feel I have so many emotions and feelings sitting in my heart, but I feel I cannot express them in an appropriate manner. I feel I am alone in my own world. I was not raised as a White woman in a White community so I cannot relate to the majority of White students in our class. But on the other hand, I was not a Black woman raised in a Black community, for I am not Black. But I can say I was raised as me in my community which happens to be majority Black.

Selina had made a certain kind of peace with herself about her identity. She is a white female, who had lived in a majority black neighborhood all her life, and was engaged to be married to an African American man. Due to what she perceived as a racially divided class, she felt that she had no point of entry into classroom discussions about her identity formation.

Other students discussed their identity formation in lieu of the racial conflicts between blacks and whites in the larger context of society. Lanie, a white Jewish young woman, wrote a long essay that touched on the nuance of her identity and cultural formation. After noting that she has

been discriminated against because she was Jewish, she wrote that her being Jewish “does not compare to being Black.” She continues, “For me, the problem lies in one simple difference. If I chose not to raise my hand in class that day and say ‘Yes, I am Jewish,’ the class might have never known. You see, I have choice.” She also wondered about the opportunities she might have been given because she was white, and whether or not she treated people differently according to the color of their skin. However, she also asserted, “Just as I have heard Black people say ‘Don’t judge me because of the color of my skin,’ I feel that many Black people look at me and all they see is my color. I want to scream, ‘just give me chance! Learn who I am.’”

Lanie was involved in questioning and reflecting on her identity formation as a “white” person in America. She noted the nuance of her Jewish ancestry and how this is neutralized by the normalized whiteness (Carby, 1989; Giroux, 1992) in this society, which then gives her the power of choice. Yet she is astute enough to note the double-edged sword of this white identity, which also hampers interactions with black people, since she perceives that they hold her accountable for all of the negative aspects of this white identity as well. In short, any transformations in her sense of self, should they occur, would also be neutralized to some degree by normalized notions of whiteness in American society. Julip was on a similar journey, and in her assignment on culture shock she wrote about her first profound experience on otherness:

During my first semester here I volunteered at a battered women’s shelter. Overall, my experiences as a volunteer were positive because I was forced to put myself face to face with a reality strikingly in contrast to my own. However, because I was faced with barriers such as race, age, and economic status [the clients were all African American], and because I did not have the courage to attempt to break down these barriers, I decided to leave the shelter. Finding myself in the position of the “other” for the first time in my life, truly frightened me.

I learned later that this was the first time Julip had revisited this experience. She concluded that “in retrospect, I wish that I had tried and had had the fortitude to confront these barriers, perhaps by challenging and acknowledging them. But sometimes I wonder if perhaps there are some barriers, some confines that were to remain.” Thus, along with discussing how being in the position of “other” made her feel about herself, Julip also questioned whether barriers between people based on differences can ever be overcome.

From Malinda’s perspective, she wrote about her own feelings of otherness and how her identity as a black female was influenced by the upper-

class economic status of her family, which allowed her to attend private, predominantly white populated schools all her life. She wrote:

I look back and realized how much I struggled with my identity and understanding my difference in an all White environment. All I wanted was to be accepted since I always felt that I was different. I wasn't dare going to feel different and left out. I would work at dressing "cool" and having the "popular" girls like me and invite me over. I was liked because I was fun and made them laugh. I was "goofy" they said. I realized I had gained acceptance by painting on a black face and acting silly to make them laugh. When I got to high school I became involved through sports and leadership. I also learned once I attained leadership positions (like student government—the first Black) I was no longer really liked, but just known.

Malinda began to reflect on her black identity as the basis of her always feeling that she was different in the all white environment in which she grew up and attended school. Her analysis included a reference to the historical vaudeville caricatures of black identity. In essence, Malinda wrote about a black identity that encompassed loneliness and ostracism above all else.

Earthlyn wrote about her identity in relation to being a white Southern girl who lived on a farm. Although she describes her sense of self as derived mainly from farm life, she also wrote about an experience she had when she attended school in town:

The atmosphere in town is one of hostility between the different races that live there, namely Black and White. When I entered the first grade, I immediately made a friend named Rebecca. She and I were in a small group that consisted of about five or six other girls. Lori, the "president" of our group suggested we all get together and have a slumber party. On Thursday night Lori called me . . . in tears. When Lori called Rebecca, a lady, presumably Rebecca's mother, answered the phone. Lori politely asked to speak to our friend. After a long pause, the lady asked Lori if she was White. Lori said "yes" and then the phone clicked. We never talked to Rebecca again. We were not allowed to be friends with Rebecca because Rebecca was Black. (What we did not realize at the young age of nine, was that if that phone call had been turned around and it had been Rebecca calling Lori, the same thing would probably have happened.) Lori, in tears, told her mother what happened. Lori's mother said that is was for the best because little Black girls and little White girls were not supposed to be friends.

Earthlyn was 20 years old when she took the course. The year was 1986 when Earthlyn was nine years old, and yet she was able to recount a story that resonated race relations in the post-Civil Rights era of America.

All of the students quoted here were from upper-middle-class families but their differences were more profound than their similarities. Lanie's Jewish background influenced her sense of identity in ways that were very different from those of Julip, who also identified as a white woman. However, Julip was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity was shared by Earthlyn, but her Southern origins created a perspective that was very different from Julip's Northern one. John was also Southern and upper-middle-class like Earthlyn, but his black, male "self" made his lived experience in the South very different from Earthlyn's or Malinda's. She was black like him, but unlike him in his Southernness, since she grew up in Kansas. These nuances, though simple on many levels, nonetheless created comparatively different ways in which these students lived, discussed, and wrote about culture and identity. The alternative theoretical framework offered by Hoffman (1996) helped me to better understand and identify, in hindsight, the pitfalls that developed in classroom discussions throughout the course where I and my students constructed and articulated notions of identity—our own as well as others'—as "a forced issue, a stance to be taken or a choice to be made" (Hoffman, p. 558). These stances greatly influenced the three other outcomes as well.

I also made mistakes that potentially could have destroyed the positive environment and learning experience I sought to create. For example, after noting that she had a choice about acknowledging her Jewishness, Lanie wrote that "however, when the professor said, 'that's funny I wouldn't have thought that you guys were Jewish' wouldn't have hurt any less." Even my focus on the topic of race could have backfired, as noted in Lisa's essay, when she wrote that "on many occasions people walked out of the class feeling truly upset, hurt and ethnically neglected."

I wrote my apologies to these students and others on their papers and I said it publicly in class, thereby becoming vulnerable with my students in those moments. I realized that there was so much I did not know—about whiteness, about being Jewish—and that I, too, as an individual, had to do what I professed my students should do; that is, move beyond my own ignorance of the "other." In reflecting on my childhood, I realized that I knew very few white people intimately when I was growing up in the inner city of New York. Back then, they were all "white people" to me with no lasting distinctions except the color of their skin. In the years to come my perceptions would change, but not as much as I'd thought, as seen by my careless remarks to my students about being Jewish. Additionally, there was the issue of professorial power in the classroom.

The task of scholars to critique the boundaries of ethnicity, race, and power in order to make visible how whiteness functions as a historical and social construction is particularly important in today's increasingly diverse society. However, within the confines of my classroom, I held a position of relative power, and my negotiation of power could lend credence or not to my critique of the colossal and often unseen power structures predominant in American society, which ranked and positioned people in relation to each other.

### TEACHING MULTICULTURALISM THROUGH EDUCATION AND CULTURE

The class took place twice a week for one hour and fifteen minutes each session. There were three required texts for the course as well as a course reader. Initially, there were four scheduled assignments: The first assignment was a personal narrative about culture shock; the second assignment was a critical essay, which involved students having to select an article from a list of supplemental readings and write a critique of the article; the third assignment was a documentary/film review paper; and last, students were required to complete a final course paper and presentation.

However, six weeks into the semester, I decided to modify the first assignment. This modification resulted from students' feedback about their discomfort with the readings as well as with the dynamics of classroom discussions. For example, the white students in particular were having a very difficult time with the focus on race in class discussions. Some, like Laurie, a white female student, constantly asked, "Why does everything have to be black and white?" Other students remained silent during class discussions but had conversations outside of the classroom, which I heard about later through e-mail or other students. All of the students who were expressing discomfort were white. At this point, none of the African American students objected to the class discussions nor the assigned readings.

I decided to give students the option of writing a paper on their personal impressions of the class so far to fulfill the first assignment. Four female students and one male student chose the alternative assignment, and a few other students mentioned the class dynamics in their paper even though they chose to complete the original assignment. Of those who chose the alternative assignment, three of them expressed their discomfort with the class dialogues and they wrote about the sources of this discomfort. For example, Robin, a white female wrote, "I presumed that I would be taught all about different cultures and how I, as a White female, should interact with people of different cultures in an educational environment." Another student, Lisa, a white female wrote, "One would think that an education class by this title would naturally discuss the cultural differences among

adolescent children and how these differences affect the educational system as we know it today.” Similarly, Jackie wrote, “I just assumed that the class would focus on things such as the different types of pedagogy in various cultures and the impact an individual’s cultural background has on the educational process.” She went on,

I expected this class to be just another class on the whole topic of multiculturalism. In other words, I anticipated the class to be another prolonged lecture that reiterated everything that I had heard before. Multiculturalism was shoved down my throat every step of the way throughout high school. The administration’s main concern was what looked good and that it appeared like everyone was getting along. It became a joke.

These students alluded to the presumptions and expectations with which they came into the class that were not being addressed in the ways that they had been accustomed to, and their discomfort settled in to one of two areas when these presumptions and expectations were not met. First, students’ discomfort became more evident as the texts moved our discussions toward the knowledge construction process and prejudice reduction—the second and third of Banks’ dimensions that were discussed earlier in this paper—and how these dimensions of multiculturalism related to education and culture. In short, illustrated especially well by Jackie’s comments about her high school experience, these students had learned about multiculturalism only from the simplicity of the first of the five dimensions outlined by Banks. Second, students’ discomfort was heightened when they were called upon to reflect and name their own beliefs and assumptions about the topics under discussion, in particular, race.

Importantly, these students had approached this class with the goal of acquiring a body of knowledge mainly for consumption, and not necessarily for changing their interpretations of the worlds in which they lived. Thus, in her paper, Robin went on to add, “Ignorantly I believed that a person’s culture was so stagnant that I could be taught all about it and how I should best interact with a person from that culture. Culture is something that is never complete or stagnant.” Lisa realized that “this class goes far beyond the monotonous teaching of educational theory. This class has opened my eyes, and made me see that culture, race and gender, are issues that I, as an individual, need to fully understand, experience, and learn on my own, well before I as an educator can nurture these so called ‘correct’ values in the students that I teach.” Jackie added, “it is enlightening to be in an environment where instead of making everyone get along we are dealing with why we are not getting along in the first place.”

Overall, the students remarked on how their perceptions and beliefs about culture were changed during the course. Their written responses

were reassuring to me because they reflected what I hoped was part of the learning taking place in class: the broadening of students' perspectives on multiculturalism as they pertained to education and culture; a broadened perspective that included an understanding of the influence of cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and bias in teaching and learning; and a development of students' abilities to examine and critique their own beliefs and assumptions about different groups of people in society. However, in the midst of these signs of success I still worried about students' discomfort, particularly since their discomfort had implications for the second outcome of the course.

### CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE CLASS

To promote a learning context where knowledge was collectively constructed, I attempted to create an atmosphere in the class where students felt empowered to freely express their views beyond the limits of "PC" protocol. A number of students, including Jackie and John, wrote about the opportunity for free expression offered by my class. Lanie, a white female, wrote that the class was one of the first opportunities she had to openly express what she felt about her "words, the rules, what to say and how to say them." She continued, "I have been programmed in my 21 years to tip-toe through racial issues, 'But don't dare be honest, you might offend someone,' they'd say. I am tired of being careful." Robin, another white female student in the class, also wrote about a new-found freedom of expression. She wrote:

From the first day of this class, I knew that this class was not going to be like any other class that I have ever attended. Students were allowed, encouraged, and even forced to speak the truth about their thoughts and feelings. I thought "does this teacher really, I mean really want to know my opinions and thoughts on all of the issues that will be discussed during her class this semester?" All of us were reared in today's politically correct society and have been trained to know which thoughts are proper or improper for conversation. This training has been completely thrown aside and discarded for the purpose of discussion in this class.

Jackie shared similar views in her essay:

Can we talk? The answer to this question is YES! I will admit that in the beginning of the semester I held back on making certain comments. What could I say? What was politically correct? What would offend someone and what would not? It also seemed that many of the African American students in the class had extremely strong, solid

views on so many things. My opinions seemed plastic and wishy washy for lack of a better term, compared to theirs. If I opened my mouth I would start to stutter, manage to get out some comment that was barely comprehensible, and then immediately get verbally jumped on. Now you tell me, do you consider that fun, because I do not.

John's perspective, though echoing some of Jackie's opinions, presented what he perceived as an interesting dynamic in the discussions, and especially, in the way the African American students responded. He wrote:

One thing which I find different and exciting about this class is the various ideas among and within the racial groups. What I mean by this is that usually the Black students sort of rally together sharing the same opinions about certain topics. That is not the case in this class. The Black students have so many varied opinions and ideas about the same topics. The same can be said of the White students. I have even noticed that many of the White students share the same opinions as myself about certain topics. I find that especially intriguing when the topic or issue is one in which Blacks and Whites are generally on opposite sides.

While a number of white students were uncomfortable speaking in class (as I noted in the first outcome), and the freedom to speak freely about racial and cultural issues seemed new to some of these students, the opposite was true for African American students. These students were empowered to speak more in the classroom forum about a subject they felt they knew quite a bit about if only from lived experience. I allowed people to object and critique (sometimes harshly) each other's comments. This dynamic was initially one-sided, with the African American students being the critics and the white students being the ones criticized.

The fact is, I had anticipated this dynamic. I expected that African American students would feel empowered by the presence of an African American professor and would participate more actively in discussions as a result. I expected that my challenge would be to create spaces in the classroom dynamics where the voices of white students could become empowered. In creating such spaces during class dialogues, I often issued assurances that students should not worry about "sounding racist." Also, as the dialogue progressed, if a number of students' hands were raised to comment, I would first call on students who hardly spoke in class followed by a white student and then an African American student. However, despite such efforts, many of the white students continued to feel very uncomfortable in the class, and some of them made me aware of their discomfort in private conversations during my office hours. It was during one such visit that Janet, Jackie's friend, told me vehemently, "my mother said that such

things (as race) were not discussed in public!" In effect, engaging in class dialogues required Janet to disobey rules of communication she learned as a child, and this was not an easy proposition for her. However, she and other white students soon became accustomed to these verbal interactions and started to participate as well. As Jackie later noted, "Basically I figured out relatively quickly that it did not matter if someone had something to say about what I had just said. If they were going to jump, I would jump right back. This type of luxury is something that I am not accustomed to but one I welcome with open arms."

Another interesting development that occurred was some African American students' resentment of what they perceived as my affirming the voices of the European American students and often devaluing their own voices. Malinda was one of these students and she was very loud in her anger against me. As part of her presentation at the educational conference in Atlanta she wrote:

The way that she treated me in the class made me look deep within. I had always been a student to speak and feel confident with the points or observations I made in a classroom. However, I had learned to be dependent on the responses or the validation of my feelings and comments by the professor. She did not do that. She almost ignored me and other African American students in the class. Then she would push and cradle her White students. I learned that she knew and understood we were different and pushed us in various and unique ways, but it hurt. I hated her for pushing me like she did. It hurt and at the time I hated it.

Malinda saw the class as an opportunity to finally tell her white counterparts all that she had ever felt about white people, power, and privilege in society. She also felt that the discomfort of the white students was "their problem." However, as the professor, I felt responsible for all of my students, and discomfort that led to silencing (Fine, 1987) was antithetical to a critical multiculturalist pedagogy.

Reflections about both sets of student responses, as well as students' writings on the theme of identity discussed earlier, comprise my discussions of the final outcome of the course in terms of this article.

### PRACTICING WHAT I PROFESS

When I began teaching this class, I made conscious efforts to reflect on what would occur during the course, but only as it pertained to my agenda as a critical multiculturalist. Delineating issues of identity was an unexpected and valuable outcome of this course. As an intellectual enterprise I could discourse about "otherness" as it pertained to social structures of power and

group identity, but as a teacher I had to be responsible to the individuals before me. I had to mediate the boundaries of students' collective and self-identities (along ethnic and racial lines) as we sought a deeper understanding of the issues of race, class, and gender.

Also, as I noted earlier, I expected that African American students would feel empowered by the presence of an African American professor and would participate more actively in discussions as a result. I expected that my challenge would be to create spaces in the classroom dynamics where the voices of European American students could become empowered. These expectations did not occur as I had predicted, and I was forced to make adjustments throughout the course in my endeavor to legitimize students' experiences as integral to the teaching and learning that took place. Modifying course assignments to create another space for students' voices was one example of how I sought to create an atmosphere of empowerment in the class. I did this along with "creating a forum for someone to speak whatever is on his/her mind" as Jackie mentioned, "having a policy of being totally open" as Robin, Jackie, and John mentioned, and de-programming students about the idea of tiptoeing around racial issues, as noted by Lanie. These efforts also moved students' understanding of multiculturalism toward the more complex dimensions of the discipline as outlined by Banks (1995).

As noted earlier, it is imperative that the *teaching* of multiculturalism also support the goals on which the discipline is based. Pedagogy and teaching practices are as integral to multiculturalism as is conveying knowledge of the discipline. In a discussion of the development of her own critical, feminist pedagogy, Mohanty (1994) writes that one important aspect of this process is the decolonization of pedagogical practices, that is, in part, "taking seriously the relation between knowledge and learning, on one hand, and student and teacher experience, on the other" (p. 152). She argues that integral to this project is "the theorization and politicization of experience [especially if] pedagogical practices are to focus on more than the mere management, systematization, and consumption of disciplinary knowledge" (p. 152). As critical multiculturalists, it is important to determine what are traditional or standard notions of teaching and learning in the academy, as well as to critically examine the politics and the effectiveness of the teaching practices derived from these traditions. Thus, for example, I had to question whether students' discomfort, which I discussed in the second outcome, thwarted or enhanced their learning about multiculturalism.

Additionally, even as I subscribed to a view of schools and classrooms as sites of struggle, I realized that I found it extremely problematic and threatening when one student challenged the idea that knowledge was being coconstructed in the class. For example, I encouraged students to question and challenge what the "text-perts" had to say. However, I experienced

moments of ambivalence when I was the expert being challenged. Katrina, the young white woman who challenged me, ironically invoked my effectiveness in creating spaces where students' voices and experiences are empowered. After we had reached some measure of agreement, she wrote in an e-mail: "In so many classes, I feel I have to conform to what the professor wants, and hence am not free to write what I feel. I like that you have given us the opportunity to risk offending others just so that we can express what is on our minds and get the subject out in the open." Thus, I also had to reflect on my responses to students when I was the authority being challenged. In effect, the impact of this class, both on the students and on my beliefs about my pedagogical practices, has made me more aware of the challenges of mediating and disrupting socially reproduced norms of teaching and learning in university classrooms, especially as they pertain to race, class, and professorial boundaries.

#### FINAL REFLECTIONS ON CRITICALLY TEACHING MULTICULTURALISM

Due to the pioneer work of scholars such as Banks, Grant and Sleeter, Gay, and Nieto, among others, multicultural education is an established discipline in America's schools. In K-12 and university classrooms across the nation, multicultural education has at least reached the levels of content integration, where the histories and cultures of women and people of color are taught. In some schools, teachers have even moved beyond content integration and developed curricula that examine the power structures that exist and maintain the social and political inequities among groups of citizens in society. These teachers lead the way in developing an equity pedagogy and an empowering school culture for all students, and the positive results of their work evidence the importance of multicultural education.

As I've discussed in this paper, the teacher's work is central to the goals of multicultural education. Moreover, examining the ways we teach multicultural education is pivotal to the advancement of the discipline. As educators, even as we ask students to examine their assumptions and long-held beliefs, we must continue to interrogate our own beliefs and assumptions, as well as the assumptions of the discipline. I have tried to capture the teaching and learning processes that occurred when I taught an undergraduate course titled "Education and Culture" during the spring of 1997. I've reexamined my pedagogical practices in light of the students' responses from the course. As I've reflected on the combined elements discussed above (multicultural discourse, pedagogy, practices, teaching agenda, student responses, and teacher-student interactions) I've concluded that there is some evidence of my success in accomplishing the outcomes I had set

forth for the course. However, I have learned that this process is not without its pitfalls and moments of risk and failure for both students and professor.

The experiences in my classroom seem to indicate that, in teaching multicultural education, all of us—teachers and students—must allow ourselves to enter uncomfot zones where we challenge our beliefs. For students, the act of challenging their own long-held beliefs may be a challenge in and of itself. For educators, critiquing the underlying assumptions of our discipline and examining our pedagogy in light of such critiques may be the entry into our own uncomfot zones. Entering these zones does not undermine the importance of the discipline. The importance of multicultural education to the struggle for social justice is unquestionable. On the contrary, such efforts, as part of a reflective practice, prevent the creation of a new form of academic rigidity. As Freire (1998) points out, teaching and learning not only revolve around understanding, “they also revolve around the very production of that understanding” (p. xxiv). Thus, even as we interrogate the discipline’s underlying assumptions and admit that we don’t always know how to make our pedagogy reflect the goals of the discipline, these efforts simultaneously herald the start of honing a more effective craft.

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