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**Teaching across borders: A collaborative inter-racial "border" pedagogy  
in adult multicultural education classes.**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative action research study examined how power dynamics were manifested between and among instructors and students in two graduate level classes team-taught by a black and a white female co-instructors where diversity and equity issues in education was the primary course content. The study also attempts to identify adult education practices that lead to growth and social change among participants in such classes that are at times both uncomfortable and controversial.

The role of adult and higher education in responding to the educational needs of a multicultural society is being discussed in many adult education circles. In discussing these issues, many recent authors are influenced by a variety of theoretical orientations with social change as its goal, including critical theory and pedagogy (Brookfield, 1995; Giroux, 1993; Shor, 1996; Welton, 1995), feminist theory and pedagogy (Hart, 1992; hooks, 1994; Tisdell, 1993,1995), the wider multicultural education literature (Banks, 1993; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Ross-Gordon, 1994), Africentric perspectives on education (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Sheared, 1994), and postmodern theories about ways of teaching across borders of race, gender, class, culture, and sexual orientation. While there is more and more discussion of these "border pedagogies" that deal with how to teach in ways that challenge power relations based on such factors, most of these discussions are conceptual or theoretical. Implicit in these discussions is the recognition that to teach in such ways is at times controversial and uncomfortable, particularly in classes where the examination of diversity and equity issues is the primary course content. But there is a lack of research based literature that actually examines what these border pedagogies look like in practice, and how their use affects classroom dynamics, particularly in classes made up of adult students where the examination of such issues are the central course content. Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the way power dynamics based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation were manifested between and among instructors and students in two graduate level classes where diversity and equity issues in education was the primary course content. In conducting the study, we also attempted to identify adult education practices that seemed to lead to growth and social change among participants in such classes that are at times both uncomfortable and controversial.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This was a qualitative action research study of two different classes of adult students in a graduate level course entitled "Diversity and Equity in Education." One class was taught in the summer of 1996, one in the fall of 1996. Both classes were co-taught by the same African American (Clarice Perry) and White female (Libby Tisdell) co-instructors, who are the co-authors of this paper. There were 15 students (3 men, 12 women) in the summers class, including 5 students (3 women, 2 men) of color (3 identified as multiracial). There were 12 students (4 men, 8 women) in the Fall class, including 3 students of color (1 man, 2 women), and one white, hearing impaired male student. All of the fall classes were signed, and two interpreters alternated in signing. One woman and one man in the Fall class openly acknowledged being lesbian or bisexual.

This study was informed by a postmodern feminist and Africentric feminist action research theoretical framework. A basic underlying belief of these feminisms in regard to research and education is that the positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation) of researchers, teachers, and students affects how one constructs knowledge (both affectively and cognitively), how one views knowledge, and how one determines whether types of knowledge claims are valid or not. In keeping with this theoretical framework, we taught the class together, specifically because we represented different positionalities, particularly different racial and sexual orientation groups, which would broaden students' examination of diversity and equity issues and would broaden their own and our own possibilities for constructing knowledge. Several aspects of our positionality were discussed with the students in the sharing of our own cultural stories the first day of class.

As an action research project, the study attempted to document our own (as instructors) and students' practice and ways of constructing knowledge as the class was going on, and focused on ways of improving practice while making use of these border pedagogies (critical and feminist) in teaching across boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. We incorporated both affective and cognitive activities, and the curriculum was partly pre-designed and partly negotiated with students. As an action research project and as instructor-researchers, we made use of Carr and Kemmis's (1986) four pronged approach to action research (planning, acting, observing, and reflecting), and each class session was planned in light of the data that were collected at the prior session. Data collection methods included daily journals kept by each of us as instructors, daily open-ended questionnaires filled out by students at the end of each class session, student papers (including a portion of their final paper where they discussed classroom dynamics in this class), and informal conversations with several of the students after the courses were over. Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

There are three major interrelated categories of findings of the study relative to classroom dynamics, that are also related to the fact that the course content and the readings for the class focus directly on an analysis of structural systems of privilege and oppression. The curriculum

foregrounds the voices of those who have been historically and culturally marginalized in education through traditional curricula and pedagogical processes. The pedagogy of the class included experiential and affective activities, encouraged student participation, and in the last quarter of the class, student collaborative groups did a final group presentation based on a book of their small group's choosing. While these categories of findings will be discussed separately below for purposes of organization, it is important to bear in mind the interrelationship of these categories, and their relationship to the course content, and the "border pedagogies" (critical and feminist pedagogy) that emphasized both cognitive and affective forms of knowledge.

### **Foregrounding and Recognizing the Voices and Experience of the More Traditionally Marginalized Students**

In large group discussions the voices of the more traditionally marginalized students, especially the students of color and the hearing impaired male student, tended to be in the foreground. In general, all of the participants (both the white students and the students of color) wanted to understand what it meant to be African American, Native American, multiracial, Creole, or to be hearing impaired. These aspects of these more traditionally marginalized students' experiences were foregrounded both in the curriculum and in who participants seemed to allow to have a good bit of "air time" in the class. In both of these classes, these traditionally more marginalized students either tended to talk a lot and/or most of their contributions were treated with genuine interest. There were some times, however, when some remarks by the more verbose students of color, particularly the more confrontational remarks, were more tolerated than appreciated. But in general, the students of color and the hearing impaired student were seen as being very articulate in both classes. In the fall class, when this point was raised, Sam, the hearing impaired student, suggested that graduate level students who have been traditionally marginalized in the curriculum throughout their schooling experiences are articulate because they have had to be in order to survive and make it in the educational system. Melinda, a white woman, in addressing this point in her final paper wrote: *"...Sam's point, about those who are marginalized having to learn to be effective communicators, I did see evidence of this during the class.... It did appear as though the white members of the class had more trouble communicating. Is it due to not having to or not really want to? Do we (I include myself) not want to let others know us because we don't have to? Is that part of our privilege?"* These are important and insightful questions.

All the males in both of the classes were also quite vocal, both the white males and the males of color. There were actually only three non-disabled white males in the study as a whole, all of whom were quite vocal. Two seemed to be viewed (in their verbal contributions) as advocates for those who have been traditionally marginalized, and thus their contributions also appeared to be appreciated by the class as a whole. The third white male, who was in the fall class, tended to talk a lot and defend the status quo. While students and instructors allowed him a lot of "air time", his comments were more tolerated rather than appreciated by the group, and he tended to be confronted in gentle and subtle ways. A verbose white woman, on the other hand, in the summer class was eventually confronted by another student in a very direct way.

By contrast to the students of color and the males, the voices of white women and lesbian students tended to be in the background. The white women students as a group (with one exception) were quite quiet, and tended not to claim much "air time" in the large group. Many of them in the summer class actually felt silenced and discounted by other students in the class for questioning their silence. One white woman student wrote in her final paper: *"...the voices that were not heard were perhaps those of white women. Yet each of the white women in the class has achieved in the work place and has stood up for injustice... I think it was a matter of weariness. A greater understanding of their contributions rather than attacks for keeping silence would have been more profitable."* In speaking about silence and voice in her final paper, another white woman from the summer class wrote *"white women are socialized to be quiet and not express opinions, it can be dangerous to speak out, especially if you're not expected to."* In spite of the fact that the voices of students of color were more in the foreground, gender issues, were clearly an important underlying issue for the summer class. Two (out of three) of the males in the summer class also discussed this in their final papers. Other relatively silent voices were those of the lesbian students, in spite of the fact that Libby made several references to her own sexual orientation. The identity of one of the lesbian students was briefly referred to once in the large group; another never referred to her sexual identity in the large group but did so in her paper. Whether due to nervousness, apathy, or total acceptance, sexual orientation wasn't an issue that either group dealt with very much, although in the summer class, a couple of "straight" students indicated in their writing that they wanted to discuss this more, and one of the women of color wondered in her final paper if the gay and lesbian students felt silenced. In the fall class, the hearing impaired student referred a few times to his bisexual sexual orientation, and in referring to his experience in the fall class wrote: *"I never felt marginalized because of my sexuality. It seemed to be not a factor."*

**Dealing With or Avoiding Conflict:**  
**An Underlying Fear of Being Viewed as an Oppressor**

Conflict is inevitable in classes where issues of privilege and oppression are a central part of course content. While there was some conflict in both classes, the summer class was more conflictual than the fall class. In both classes at times conflict was dealt with directly by students and instructors, and at times it was avoided. A dynamic that seemed to be underlying some of the discussion was a hesitancy or fear of both students and at least one of the instructors (Libby) of being viewed as an oppressor (or silencer of marginalized voices). This appeared to be manifested in several ways. First, it was very directly manifested by Libby the first day of the summer class and documented in her journal. One African American woman who was a guest of one of the students at one point was dominating the discussion. Libby wrote in her journal: *"I was trying to decipher how to deal with her when she kept interrupting... but then Clarice intervened and I was very glad, because I didn't want to be a white woman silencing an African American woman...."*

Second, this "fear of being viewed as an oppressor" was manifested in other ways. As instructors, we tried to facilitate the discussions to try to give all students an opportunity to come to voice. However, when a dominant voice was to be confronted about their tendency to

monopolize the discussion, it was actually carried out (probably unconsciously) by a person in the class most like them by the categories of analysis of the class (gender, race, class). For example, in the summer class, an extremely verbose white Jewish woman was confronted by another white Jewish woman, and an African American woman student by Clarice, the African American female instructor. Other examples would be the fact that in the Fall class, one white male openly disagreed with the white male who tended to defend the status quo on a number of occasions. Third, at no time in the class in the large group did any white student initiate any kind of disagreement or confrontation with a student of color. There was a couple of times where a white student and a student of color were in conflict, but the stated disagreement that resulted in some conflictual interchange was initiated by the student of color, and not the white student. This leads us to wonder if the more privileged students, particularly the students that have white privilege fear being viewed as "an oppressor". By contrast, there were number of occasions where students of color would disagree with and/or confront each other. An African American woman confronted the multiracial male student who identified as "Creole" about some of his attitudes and remarks about African American women. Students of color would disagree with and challenge white students, and white students would overtly disagree with and/or occasionally challenge each other. In the summer class, the white women were challenged or disagreed with on several occasions, but on only one occasion did a white woman disagree with another white woman. In referring to the fact that the verbose white Jewish woman was confronted by another white student, one woman wrote in her final paper: *"I think conflict was primarily managed by the group through subconsciously choosing a woman in the class as the scapegoat. Whether realizing it or not, much of the anger the class was experiencing was expressed onto this one person."* While one of the African American woman in the summer class was extremely vocal and used a lot of "air time", no one ever openly confronted her about this, perhaps out of fear of being seen as an oppressor.

Finally, this potential fear of being viewed as an oppressor may have been manifested in the relative silence of some students, While all of us have experience of both oppression and privilege around some category that informs our identity, the students of color and the hearing impaired student more openly discussed their experience in the large group. The fact that the white women and the gay and lesbian students discussed this only in small groups or their papers, may also be indicative of a propensity to put a hierarchy on the experience of oppression, or the fear that this would not be taken seriously by others in the learning environment.

### **Maintaining or Deferring to Those with More Power & Privilege**

In spite of the fact that the voices of students of color were generally relatively unchallenged in discussions, there were nevertheless some ways that those with more systemic power and privilege by virtue of race, class, gender, position, physical ability, were deferred to and/or their power and privilege was maintained. This was manifested in a couple of ways.

First, students tended to be somewhat more deferential to Libby (as the white instructor) who appeared to be viewed as the intellectual content expert, while Clarice (as the African American instructor ) appeared to be viewed as the practice-based and experiential expert. Students

directed questions related to course requirements and assignments more often to Libby than to Clarice. Also, many of the students in their final paper also referred to "you", which clearly by the context and statement was often a reference primarily to Libby, and secondarily to Clarice. However, nearly all students from both classes, but especially the students of color, noted the significance of having a person of color as an instructor for a higher education class. Most of the students had never experienced being taught by an African American woman. A male student of color from the summer class discussed in an interview the fact that he assumed on the first day of class that Clarice's position (as a woman of color) was "instructional aide." He discussed that he was ashamed that he found himself surprised at how competent and capable Clarice was as an instructor and facilitator. In their final papers or final course evaluations, particularly from the fall class, many indicated they wanted to hear more from Clarice. One white male student wrote in reaction to the question regarding future recommendations: "*Clarice should talk more. Not Libby less.*" Perhaps he was trying to be polite in his "not Libby less" remark.

While Clarice was recognized as a full teaching partner, the fact that students from both classes were more deferential to Libby could have been for several reasons that are both related to aspects of our positionality as well as our behavior in the classroom. Libby is white, has a doctoral degree, and is a full-time core faculty member in the department. Clarice is African American, has her M.A. from Antioch, is an adjunct faculty member, and is working towards her PhD. In society, Libby has white privilege as well as higher educational status. As a full-time core faculty member and advisor to several students in the classes, she also has greater institutional power than Clarice does. This greater institutional power may account in part for why the students were more deferential to Libby. One male student of color in the summer class noted this and he wrote "*...I caught myself continually directing my questions to Libby on a regular basis. I do not think it was her color of skin or ethnic background... I believe that I have been conditioned by society to respect people a little bit more who hold important titles...*".

Clearly, these institutional factors as well as the oppressed and privilege aspects of each of our identities, had an effect both on how we behaved and on how we were viewed by the students. But Libby does have a tendency to dominate the teaching space, particularly around issues related to clarifying cognitive or intellectual points in the readings. This propensity was particularly true in the Fall class, perhaps due to the fact that as instructors, we had just taught the class the prior summer, and didn't spend as much time preparing some of the details of the Fall class, so Libby had a tendency to "take over" at times. Janice, a white female student wrote about this in her final paper: "*...[O]ne instructor seemed to clearly hold more power, enforced the time structure of the class session and was readily able to voice her opinions/reactions during discussions. The other instructor did not seem to control so much of the structure and often appeared to be speaking only when addressed specifically. This concerned me but I was unsure if my intuitions were based on an evidencing of our society's power structure in this setting..., or if this was merely the differences in preferred teaching techniques of each particular instructor.*" We suspect that this is not one or the other, but perhaps both. Libby is also less comfortable than Clarice in dealing with conflict, and Clarice does a better job than Libby about coming up with and facilitating experiential activities in the class. This may be why Libby appeared to be seen as the intellectual expert and Clarice as the practice based experiential expert.

Second, the systems of power were also maintained was in the fact that male students tended either not to be confronted, or to be more gently challenged than the women students, especially the white women. With only one exception, the male students were seen as being on the side of those who have been marginalized, so in spite of the fact that they were quite vocal, their comments were valued. The male students also tended to verbally respond before the women in the class, when a question was thrown out by the instructors. This was especially true in the Fall class. The fact that power based on gender may have been maintained in some ways was generally not analyzed in the large group, though we understand that this was discussed by some of the women in small groups or in informal settings. To some degree, some male students were aware of this. As mentioned above, one multiracial male was confronted by one of the African American woman. In discussing this in his final paper he wrote: *"when people did finally give me strong feedback, it came only after Bob [another male student] and I said we wanted to hear it. I felt like a man giving permission to the women in the room to speak their mind."*

Third, some of the forms of deference and maintenance of the status quo were manifested in experiential activities in the class. However, group members were more open to critiquing the systems of power and privilege that were reflected in their behavior in the experiential activities. This was either because some of these activities were role plays, or because the level of emotional vulnerability and group safety (in the Fall class) was high enough to allow for critique. One of the ways this was manifested in the Fall class was in an activity around the theme of engaged pedagogy based on bell hooks (1994) work, which was facilitated by one of the student collaborative book groups during the final session. The activity centered on participants' discussion of their experience in the course. After going around the circle once, the student facilitator noted that all the people of color had spoken (including Clarice), the hearing impaired male spoke, and the 3 white students (all women) that spoke cried. She suggested that those that had spoken were more willing to be vulnerable, and suggested that in classes like these, it is always the students who have been traditionally marginalized that are more vulnerable, and that the white students that spoke and cried were more willing to share in their vulnerability. Clearly her observation indicated that those who remain silent at such times, may be doing so to maintain privilege. This is a point worth thinking about.

Lastly, a way that participants defer or maintain systems of power or privilege is in their reliance on individual or psychological analytic tendencies. A large part of the class focused on discussion of social structural systems (race, gender, etc.) and institutionalized forms of oppression and privilege. But in their final synthesis paper most of the students who benefited by more social systems of privilege resorted to almost a humanistic psychological analysis of difference and "otherness" as individual as opposed to partly socially constructed through social structural systems of oppression and privilege. Students who experienced more systems of oppression tended to focus more on social structures in their analysis.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In light of the findings discussed here, along with additional insights based on our experience teaching the class, we recommend the following practices:



1. The inclusion of practice-based and experiential activities (both in-class and outside assignments) that require an analysis of concepts in relationship to both one's own identity as a person of a particular race, gender, sexual orientation, as well as analysis of social and educational institutions. Some of these practices include writing one's own cultural story, role plays, interviews with educators and observations of learning activities about multicultural issues, analysis of gender and race issues in movies or the media, etc.
2. Guidelines for class discussion, especially clear discussion of both the role of instructors and of students in facilitating class discussion
3. An honest acknowledgment of tension in the classroom by the instructors.
4. Closing activities for each class session that take into account affective, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that leave participants with hope even though we will always be unfinished in dealing with these issues.
5. Requiring collaborative small groups of students to create and facilitate an experiential activity

While this study is limited to an examination of these issues in two adult multicultural education classes, it offers some insight about what "border pedagogy" looks like and therefore makes a valuable contribution to the adult multicultural literature.

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