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Positionality: Whiteness as a Social Construct that Drives Classroom Dynamics

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Abstract. When teachers and learners enter classrooms, they bring their own positions in the hierarchies that order the world. This study examines how one of those positionalities, Whiteness, drives classroom dynamics.

The idea of the teacher as a facilitator is a hallmark of adult education (Apps, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Knowles, 1992). This central principle charges adult educators to go beyond the role that the teacher takes in traditional classroom settings and stipulates the need to treat adults as equals in the classroom. Yet, it is clear that facilitation does not occur on a neutral stage, but in the real world of hierarchical power relations among all of the adults, including teachers and learners (Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Luttrell, 1993). When learners and teachers enter classrooms they bring their positions in the hierarchies that order the world, including those based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability. Because the social context is duplicated in the microcosm of the classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Tisdell, 1993), enacting the facilitation role will reproduce the power structures that privilege some, silence some, and deny the existence of others. (Tisdell, 1993; 1995). If all learners are to thrive, adult educators must go beyond the role of the facilitator and negotiate these positionalities that exist in the classroom. Race is a critical positionality around which classroom dynamics are contested (hooks, 1994). Nearly all of the research around race has examined classroom dynamics in relation to African-American learners (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Sheared, 1994), leaving uninterrogated the dominant positionality of Whiteness and its effects in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which the social construct of Whiteness played out in two adult education classes.

Theoretical Perspective: Are Adult Education Classes the Real World?

Nearly all discussions of teaching in adult education simply avoid the question of whether adult education classrooms are the real world (Knowles, 1992). In such a script, which presents the domain of ivory towers where all students are equal and all teachers are unbiased, we are presented with the unspoken assumption that the activity of teaching and learning must happen in a parallel universe to the real world because the power relationships that are omnipresent in the social and organizational settings of everyday life have been obliterated. By stripping learners and teachers of their place in the hierarchies of social life, this view assumes we stage adult

education where the politics of everyday life do not operate or matter. This view asks us to see teachers and learners as generic entities, unencumbered by the hierarchies that structure our social relationships.

Our view is that adult education must be the real world because the power relationships that structure our social lives cannot possibly be checked at the classroom door. There is no magical transformation that occurs as teachers and learners step across the threshold of the classroom. McIntosh, an educational theorist, (1995) also uses the baggage metaphor by discussing how privileges structure everyday lives. Specifically, McIntosh (a white woman) examines how white privilege and male privilege affect our lives in and out of educational settings; these privileges are an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes compass, emergency gear, and blank checks= that can be used in any situation in people's everyday lives. Some of McIntosh's examples that are relevant to educational settings include: 1) I can be fairly sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race, 2) I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group, and 3) If I have low credibility as a leader, I can be sure that my race is not the problem. This view asks us to see teachers and learners not as generic individuals but rather as people who have differential capacities to act (our definition of power) based on their place in the hierarchies of our social world.

The specific theoretical framework that drives this study derives from critical race theory (Omi & Winant, 1994; Tate, 1997) and, in particular, the recent scholarship on Whiteness (Giroux, 1997; McIntosh, 1995). As with all other racial categories, Whiteness is not a Anatural state@ deducible from physical characteristics, but rather is a historical, cultural, and political construction that is a social site of power and privilege. Although Whiteness is a social construct that is always context dependent and relational, it nevertheless shapes the lives of people differentially within existing inequalities of power and wealth. These effects have been shown in education by Maher and Tetreault=s (1997) reanalysis of their data from *The Feminist Classroom* (1994) in which they examined how assumptions of Whiteness shaped Athe construction of knowledge as it is produced and resisted in the classroom@ (p. 321) Our point is that to understand Whiteness is to assign everyone, not only black, brown, yellow, and red people, differentiated places in the racialized hierarchies of classrooms.

<center>Research Design and Data Collection</center>

The design of the study was a qualitative comparative case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) of two graduate courses taught by the authors of this paper. Each class was taught in the same university, was of the same length (10 weeks), and met one night a week. One class in which 12 students were enrolled, "Critical Perspectives on Adult Education," was taught by a White male professor and had White, Black, and Asian students. The other in which 19 students were enrolled, "Qualitative Research in Education," was taught by a Black woman assistant professor and had Black and White students. The five sources included: 1) students' (anonymous) evaluations, 2) each teacher's observations, 3) interviews with the students using an interview guide (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), 4) interviews with the teachers (immediately following the class

each teacher interviewed the other), and 5) conversations with similarly situated faculty members. The students who were interviewed were assigned pseudonyms and care was taken so that their identities were not revealed to the professor of record for the course. Immediately following the courses' completion, each teacher interviewed the other about the power dynamics in their classes. During the final class session, each professor went to the other's class to solicit students to be interviewed. Seven students from each class were interviewed after the course=s completion using a set of questions that indirectly addressed power issues. After each professor read the masked transcripts about their own classes, they interviewed each other again. Risk was inherent in this study not only for the students who volunteered but to the teachers who would hear what their students thought about their classes. Because risk was a dominant factor in this study, it was addressed at several points including at the solicitation for student interviews and in the human subjects form.

Results

The concept of positionality addresses how the cultures, genders, races, ages, and sexual orientations of the teachers and students act and interact in the classroom environment. These positionalities more than any other factor dictate learning and patterns of classroom behavior (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Two salient examples of student and teacher positionality are reported here. In the seminar class, the professor had the students perform an exercise where they created a class hierarchy ranking their classmates according to their perception of how they were classified in society. One Black woman student recounted this incident as a very painful one for a White woman student who dropped considerably in hierarchical status when she revealed that she was a lesbian:

> After she came out in class she was always ranked with me. She lost her
> privilege and it bothered her. She told me that she would never have come out if
> she had known that it was going to put her down there with me. I told her, AIt
> was okay to be down here with me."

An incident that occurred in the research class involving the confrontation over an exam gives a clear example of how the professor=s positionality can impact the student/teacher interactions. One student analyzed the situation succinctly,

> ...if I had a problem I would definitely talk to the professor but definitely not in
> a confrontational manner...There are groups of people who are marginalized in
> our society. And we know that females are marginalized and of course Black
> people are. I don=t know if that was the person=s reason for doing that but I
> wonder if this person would have challenged a White male the way he
> challenged her.

This student's analysis is probably correct because it was corroborated by the student who confronted the Black woman assistant professor. He explained that he felt Akind of funny in class because he was surrounded by women that believe that feminism is something they have to go for." He further explained that the female professor was Adominant@ in the classroom and that in his culture women are Aornamental.@ Another analysis of this situation was revealed by

a third student who felt that it was wrong of the student to challenge the professor in an openly hostile manner but who also felt that the professor should not have been firm with him in front of the class. However, her sentiments reveal that she also felt uncomfortable with the woman professor=s reactions which were assertive rather than nurturing. The student's questioning of the Aappropriateness@ of the exchange placed the blame on the professor even though the male student was insistently confrontational and despite the fact that the teacher requested that they talk after class.

Analysis of the data revealed that the positionality of the professors more than any other factor affected the classroom dynamics. And among the factors that compose positionality, race was the most salient issue. Further study showed that it was "whiteness" that emerged as the factor specific dynamic for this factor. This theme was particularly apparent in the reflective analysis of the professors. The white male observed:

> I think it's a really interesting fact that I constantly mentioned race and gender in my course. The course really centered on those two issues perhaps more than any other and yet no one saw me as having an agenda. Whereas, you barely touched on race and gender in your research course and yet your students saw this as your agenda or platform in the course.

In contrast, students could not see past the race and gender of the Black woman instructor. Students frequently mentioned her race and gender as a factor that affected classroom discussions and dynamics. Yet the race and gender of the white male instructor was never offered as a factor that impacted the classroom. Whereas it might appear that her Black race and female gender were barriers to the classroom dynamics, a review of the student and faculty interviews in addition to conducting peer debriefing with other faculty revealed that it was "whiteness" (the male professor's and that of the various students) that was set forth as the standard and that it was the absence of whiteness that became the criteria by which the students assessed the Black woman professor.

Examination of student-teachers interactions further supports the contention that whiteness was the major factor shaping classroom dynamics. It was noted that the following interactions were commonplace in the Black woman professor's classroom: 1) challenge to knowledge dissemination, 2) teacher student confrontations, 3) classroom crosstalk, and 4) reinterpretation or disregard of classroom protocol. These issues were not seen in the male professor's classroom. Considerations such as teacher control, personal style and individual group student behavior were eliminated as contributing factors since member checks revealed that these issues consistently surfaced in the classrooms of Black male and female professors and conversely rarely surfaced in the classrooms of white male and female professors. In addition the peer debriefing also helped to remove gender differences as a possible contributing social construct since White women professor's experiences did not parallel those of Black women professors.

Upon reviewing the experiences of Black instructors and reflecting on his practice the white male professor remarked, "I cannot imagine having a student confront me about a question on an exam. This has never happened to me. This has never happened to anyone I know." He further observed that he is always seen as a disseminator of knowledge and as a power figure in the classroom. Indeed during the course of this class his attempts to share power by establishing self governance in the classroom was consistently thwarted and rejected by the students. Whereas, his colleague reported that she routinely experienced the opposite -- students actually gathered in cliches and attempted to determine the direction of the course.

Whiteness (the professor's and students') posits itself as a normative factor which is synonymous with competence, intelligence and power. Therefore "otherness" is seen as the direct opposite of whiteness and its accompanying virtues. So that a professor and/or student who possess "otherness" enters the classroom in a deficit mode. This was well illustrated in one of the student interviews in which the woman professor's performance was discussed,

I heard bad things about her. I know a person who had a negative experience in her classroom. She said you don't learn very much and she spends all of her time talking about her family. But that was not my experience. She was a great teacher. I learned a lot ... I guess she straightened up after she got bad evaluations.

Follow up questions revealed that it did not occur to the student that the report she had heard might have been false. In the exit interview the Black professor lamented, "That's the one thing I don't count on from my students or from society in general, >the benefit of the doubt.="

The isolation of the positionality of whiteness as the most major factor affecting positionality in the classrooms studied, holds significance for the power dynamics in the adult education setting because adults, who are more entrenched in their life roles are more likely than are children to be aware of their positionality, its attending privileges and hierarchial status. It follows that adults act out such entitlements consciously or subconsciously.

Discussion

This study showed the many complex ways in which the power relations in the larger society are played out in adult education classrooms and how they directly influence the teaching and learning process. Students in both classes were very conscious of how the classroom was organized around power relationships. They monitored both teachers= behaviors and exchanges with other students. This was typified by a student in the seminar class who felt that one student in the class attempted to always Asit next to him (the professor) as if that would give her a position of power.@ All the students interviewed in the research class talked about one student who took up more than her fair share of class time. One participant stated: Athere was one girl who took up quite a bit of class time and (the teacher) was conscious of that...and tried to balance it.@ A second student also took note of the teacher=s attempt to balance the vocal student=s class comments and observed that after a while the outspoken student understood what the teacher was attempting and would try to monitor herself and would make apologetic comments such as Awell this is my last question, but.@ The students= experiences evidence a tendency to want an interactive classroom where teachers attend to issues of who talks the most and who listens the most. The students interviewed were aware of how the classroom worked and where they stood in terms of power. In the seminar class the students expressed an interest in wanting more Amediating@ by the professor. Although the students in the research class described the overall atmosphere as positive and democratic where Aeveryone was allowed to express their opinions,@ they still said that they experienced uncomfortable moments that centered on whiteness and blackness regarding how the power was negotiated by the teacher.

Both classes clearly wanted direction from teachers and also wanted classroom power dynamics arbitrated, but varied along individual and race lines as to their definitions of the ideal. The traditional purveyors of power in classroom settings, White males, communicated a greater comfort level in a Afacilitation model@ than the White males in the research class where the dynamics were mediated by the teacher. This is understandable given that the Afacilitation model@ would reinforce their place of dominance in the classroom hierarchy. However, the element of positionality must be factored into the study. The students felt that the White male professor did not have an agenda in the seminar class which dealt with issues of race, class, and gender. Yet, they repeatedly referred to the Black woman professor who taught the research class as having a political agenda. Such an analysis does not logically fit the situations and thus we attribute this to the students= perception of the Black woman as a gendered and racialized figure and their perception of the White male professor as a traditional objective disseminator of knowledge without a race, gender, or class position in society. The students wanted more direction from the male professor yet referred to the attempts by the female teacher to make the learning environment participatory with negative comments.

This study showed that the adult education classroom is not the neutral educational site referred to in the literature. Instead it is a duplication of the existing societal relations of power replete with hierarchies and privileges conferred along lines of gender, race, class, sexual orientation and other status markers. The study also suggests that the perspective seen by the teacher is one that is visually impaired by their own viewpoint. During the study, the

professors involved practiced cultural therapy (Banks, 1994) by examining and discussing their own cultural assumptions and by providing an analysis of what was occurring in the classroom. While many of their suppositions proved consistent with students= views, especially regarding uncomfortable classroom issues, other incidents that seemed trivial to the professors were significant to the students. This would suggest that positionality is a critical lens for interpreting adult education classroom experiences. In sum, we conclude that the facilitation model does not account for the many power dynamics in these classrooms. We suggest further efforts are needed to better understand how societal power relations affect teaching and learning efforts and what responses educators can make to negotiate these issues

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