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Women of Color on Teaching Race

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Abstract: *Women of color discuss issues of race in a teaching and learning context. In doing so we will include discussion of the differences in the philosophical approaches to teaching about race in academe and the barriers encountered in the classroom.*

As women of color engaged in teaching courses on race and gender, focus on these topics has caused feelings of trepidation, frustration and excitement not only for us as educators, but for our students as well. When we as women of color engage in teaching courses on multiculturalism, equity, social justice, culture, race and gender we often encounter resistance by Euro-Americans. While Euro-Americans tend to act out of resistance, students of color have traditionally responded fully in the dialogue -sharing experiences and ideas - or they have grown silent. In as much as we believe that institutions of higher education should allow people to reflect upon and engage in discussions about social inequities and injustices due to racism and sexism, we find that these issues continue to create tension and frustrations in the classroom. Moreover, we find that race and gender remain elusive topics in the classroom environment.

Never the less there is a commitment to ensuring that race and gender are understood within the context of the social, cultural, political and historical reality which they affect. We know that this particular space was not designed with women of color in mind. We enter draped in a garb unlike that of others in the professorate. For our wear resembles that of a shield - a shield of confidence, patience, knowledge, and understanding. While teaching courses that involve topics of race and gender have informed much of our understanding about how complicated and challenging these issues remain, we as women of color have a commitment to creating social change. Through our experiences on teaching about race and gender, we have come to understand the importance of talking to each other, engaging in a dialogue and sharing the ways in which we have used race as the unit of analysis in our discourse.

The purpose of the roundtable discussion will be to offer an analysis of how race and gender factors into the classroom dynamic of teaching and learning. The methodological framework that guides this work is grounded in Afrocentric, womanist, feminist and critical race theory. The Afrocentric paradigm is a philosophical approach grounded in African Tradition (Flowers, 2003). It is more inclusive of the sociohistorical, political, race, class and gender contributions made in the learning development of African Americans. The womanist perspective acknowledges the intertwining realities that human beings experience within society where race, class and gender are interwoven (Sheared, 1994). The feminist pedagogy is defined as a method of teaching and learning that employs a political framework which attends to and/or encourages the following: 1) consciousness raising; 2) activism; and 3) a caring and safe environment. Implicit in this form of teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is an understanding of the universality of gender oppression and a critique of Western rationality, andocentric theories, structured inequalities, and unequal societal power relations (Lee & Johnson-Bailey 2004). Critical race theory is rooted in an understanding that race is the underlying unit of analysis used to deconstruct the ways in which racism affects our society. Moreover, it views racism as an outgrowth of oppression as a result of one groups exerting power and control over another

because of the color of their skin. In our approach to present dialogue around this topic, the discussion is organized to share our experiences as educators who teach about race. In doing so we will include discussion of the differences in the philosophical approaches to teaching about race in academe and the barriers encountered in the classroom.

Philosophical Differences

On teaching race and understanding racism, women of color in the classroom find themselves to be a significant part of the equation. Women of color teach race and racism from experience in that we tell a story that is inclusive of many other voices at the margins. This is particularly significant for women of color as the knowledge construction for many of us comes through our own lived experiences (Sheared, 1994). Therefore, by shifting the center to include all, we allow for a better understanding of the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (race, class, gender, etc.).

When teaching race, a major conflict in academia is in how race and racism is constructed. The philosophical differences in how race is taught often interfere and offer another level of resistance for engaging one another in constructive dialogue. Many euro-centric academicians grounded in postmodernist social perspective, often see experience as a matter of competing discourses, personifying “voice” as if the voice or discourse itself constituted lived experience (Anderson & Hill-Collins; 2004, p 4). This perspective objectifies the reality of those experiences, rendering them as social data.

Race Barriers Encountered in the Classroom

The resistance of learners to engage in discourse that acknowledges the existence of white privilege and the myth of meritocracy is a barrier that renders learners motionless and ignores racism and gender biases. This is reflected in learner behaviors such as guilt, blame, accusations of prejudice, anger, and other forms of resistance. While this appears to be forms of powerlessness, this is really a demonstration of power so that those in the center can remain in the center and issues of oppression and social injustice become irrelevant topics of discussion.

Transforming Thinking and Perspective

In teaching about race and gender, we approach this endeavor with an aim of transforming perspectives and thinking. While this framework seeks to give voice to the experiences of those who exist on the margins and those who are silenced, it most emphatically recognizing and analyzes hierarchies, systems of domination and privilege that restrict full participation/true democracy and social justice within this society. As a result, learners are exposed to the conceptualization that race and gender inequities affect all individuals and groups in this society—whether they reside in the center or exist on the margins (Anderson & Hill-Collins; 2004). Women of color in the classroom who approach race and gender within this framework assume the responsibility of not only analyzing race and gender but also reconstructing knowledge to encompass the learner—their experiences and their experiences with engaging in the dialogue of race and gender.