

Exposing Cultural Bias in the Classroom: Self-Evaluation as a Catalyst for Transformation

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Abstract: The 21st Century finds institutions of higher education struggling to meet the challenges created by a global society. One of those challenges is graduating students who are prepared to function effectively in a multicultural society. To assist students, some institutions seek to introduce them to as many cultures as possible by adding programs to the curriculum. The difficulty with this approach is that although our globalized society demands a broadened cultural competence, logistic constraints make it impossible to have a curriculum that is all-encompassing.

In this essay I examine how, with the support of institutions, teachers and students should: engage in self-examination, become aware of societal biases and privileges for and against certain groups, and familiarize themselves with cognitive dissonance –all essential to the educational process of cultivating cultural competence. Self-awareness plays a prominent role in the development of cultural competence, improving classroom dynamics, and the results of classroom discussions. After conducting a self-evaluation, faculty and students will be more conscientious of personal biases and more open and receptive to differences of opinion. A conversation that is free and allows informed dissent brings about intellectual growth and subsequent transformation. The kind of dialog that makes it possible for teachers and students to engage in an open discussion has been characterized as “encompassing” and “liberating” by scholars such as Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (1987). The “liberatory class” is the place that allows “thinking critically about the things that interfere with the critical thought” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 14).

Theorists such as Paulo Freire (1993), Ira Shor (1992), and Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991) argue that teaching is a biased and political endeavor. Teaching is biased because teachers are not impartial entities. Rather, they embody a reality that has been shaped through personal experiences and, more importantly, teachers incorporate in their lessons intangibles like past influences, values, and traditions inherent to their cultures. If we consider culture as that set of traits and values intrinsic to a particular group, it is easy to see that everyone belongs to several cultures. This is no less true for educators, even among a seemingly homogeneous staff; the circle of teachers who adhere to any particular set of values is going to be diverse, given the number of different groups that influence the characteristics and beliefs of each individual. In a sense, each teacher is unique because of the diversity of his/her cultural affiliations.

If it is true that culture shapes the beliefs and values of every individual, then it stands to reason that teachers should also engage in self-examination. The final result of this self-analysis should be an awareness of the values and beliefs acquired through cultural affiliations or other life-changing experiences. By being cognizant of the cultural nuances and values influencing their lives, teachers are more likely to bring an authentic approach to classroom exchanges. A teacher who recognizes his/her own biases is more likely to incorporate various sides of an argument into the conversation, thus encouraging students to think more critically. Without critical thinking there is no intellectual growth (which is ultimately what we want to accomplish in the classroom). Furthermore, a teacher should become self-aware and uncover harmonious and/or contradicting beliefs and values intrinsic to the different cultures with which he/she identifies or traditions to which he/she adheres, and realize the effect of those values, beliefs, and rituals on current group interactions. This awareness will allow teachers to be more relevant to the lives of their students because the classroom discourse will be more inclusive. Students are

less likely to freely discuss topics when they know the teacher struggles with contradictory points of view. The inflexible professor is the one who receives back the answers he or she predicted.

Educators should never underestimate students' contributions or their ability to bring their personal experiences to bear on academic topics. If the students' opinions are taken into consideration they will be more willing to bring them to the classroom discourse. In my experience as a university professor, I have observed students come to life when the subject area becomes pertinent to their realities. Establishing connections and validating students' ideas result in a higher level of engagement and much more meaningful interaction.

Moreover, while it is important for teachers to be aware of cultural biases and other external influences in order to be effective, it is the responsibility of higher learning institutions to provide opportunities for continuous education on these matters. This is especially true for institutions that house a seemingly homogenous faculty, for deliberate effort is needed in order to raise the consciousness of faculty on issues of cultural and societal biases, providing strategies to neutralize the impact of such biases in the classroom. These efforts may include hiring professionals to conduct a workshop or a series of workshops in diversity training. But whatever efforts are taken, we should realize that we need a variety of different means to facilitate exposure to cultural diversity.

One example of societal bias usually overlooked is the concept of white privilege. While not overt, white privilege affects the way people relate to each other. Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes white privilege "as an invisible package of unearned assets" (McIntosh, 1988, 4). Examples of white privilege, according to McIntosh (1988), include having one's race represented in the curriculum when addressing heritage and founding people, not being harassed when shopping alone, being able to rent or buy in the neighborhood of one's choice, and even having the color "flesh" of a bandage more or less match the color of her skin.

Knowledge and understanding of white privilege prevents communication hurdles by equalizing the balance of power in the classroom. A teacher cognizant of society's biases will be able to bring the race or group not represented into the discussion. In this manner, students will feel represented and validated. Likewise, being more self-aware of society's biases and cultural codes enables the teacher to realize that words convey messages that are powerful, and that sometimes their meanings could be misconstrued depending on the teacher's intonation, body language, stance on issues, and the words' contexts.

For the most part, teachers are willing to embark upon analytical processes wherein they are able to argue, question, and even change their position on specifics related to a familiar content area, but very few are even aware that similar analysis should occur when teaching a subject that is new or falls out of their comfort zones. When planning a course, a teacher should go through a process of evaluating his/her emotions towards the topic. The targets of the scrutiny should be the feelings and emotions brought about by the content area. An in-depth examination and understanding of the emotions and values rooted in cultural beliefs are important. For example, a teacher developing a new course in Latin American Studies should understand his/her feelings toward different ethnic groups and revisit class, power, and political struggles and their impacts on peoples' lives. Whereas traveling to Latin America would be the best way to connect with the people behind the text, connections are possible through different means such as movies, documentaries, one-on-one exposure, and the arts. Teaching out of the comfort zone could become the best opportunity for a teacher to learn about him or herself. During the process of examining and evaluating personal attitudes and behaviors, faculty and students may experience cognitive dissonance. Cognitive Dissonance Theory was developed by Leon Festinger in 1957. According to Festinger (1957), individuals strive to maintain a consistency between pieces of knowledge. When there is a discrepancy between attitudes and/or behaviors it is called dissonance. The discomfort produced by dissonance urges the individual to make some adjustments to remove the discomfort. Festinger (1957) argued that whenever cognition or beliefs are in conflict with behavior, the tendency is to modify or change behavior but that is not always the case. In some circumstances individuals continue to gather knowledge (or rationalization) rather than confront the dissonance.

A person is able to get to the root of personal biases through the process of analyzing and validating conflicting attitudes and behaviors that result from cognitive dissonance. By recognizing biases, attitudes, and emotions towards others or certain issues, teachers will allow themselves to be open to grow and change with their students. What this means, is that in order to transform students, teachers should be open to their own transformations by challenging their own biases and assumptions. Throughout the educational process, “teacher and students both have to be learners” (Shor and Freire, 1987: 33) and respect each other’s points of view. Allowing students to pose questions and genuinely search with the students beyond the surface of an argument will open doors to new knowledge and growth. Teachers need to confront the ever-present philosophical perplexities of questions like, “Who am I?” “Where do I come from?” “What do I believe and why do I believe it?” which are crucially relevant to being an effective and transformative teacher. In summary, it is important for teachers to be aware that sometimes culture, society, and/or attitudes toward a given subject area could obstruct teaching, not only in terms of the depth and breadth of an issue, but more importantly in terms of intellectual growth for themselves and their students.

Another important point to consider in regard to these issues is the standpoint of the first year student and the extent to which general education and the humanities play a significant role in the transformative education that will contribute to the development of freshmen students into global citizens. As it occurs with teachers, students have biases when they arrive at the university for the first time: they come with preconceptions, prejudices, assumptions, and expectations. The “ritualized conversation” (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995) to convert students into citizens often uncovers a disconnect between students’ interests (shaped by their biases and expectations) and the subject of study (shaped by the teacher’s biases and values). For the most part, students arrive at college filled with curiosity and an appetite for learning. Soon after arrival, many students find themselves sitting passively in one classroom after another, listening while the teachers lecture to them. Teachers accustomed to lecturing to students might not realize how futile the exercise actually is. The practice wherein teachers deposit knowledge into students’ brains to be retrieved later has been called the “banking method” (Freire, 1993). For scholars such as Mezirow (1991), Banks (1966), Freire (1993), Shor (1992), Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) and others, the “banking” method of learning is not a responsible form of pedagogy because students accustomed to receiving knowledge passively (in order to regurgitate it upon being prompted) are not transformed through the process. These students are not actually learning but collecting information that most likely will never be critically analyzed, but simply used again in the same form and shape as it was originally received.

A transformed student is one that has gone through several experiences that have provoked a self-assessment process. This self-assessment is an analytical process that results in an attitude or value change. Students that have gone through this process are more likely to be open to change, unafraid of challenges, respectful of others, and overall better leaders. Part of the job of the faculty, then, is to facilitate that transformation. The conscientious teacher should challenge conventional norms and knowledge by engaging in “problem-posing” (Freire, 1993) and genuine acts of critical thinking. Students and teachers should engage in critical analysis through discussion of key issues, seeking to act in order to change society. Education, as proposed by Freire (1993), Shor (1992), Aronowitz, Giroux (1999) and others, is not only political, but it is also radical, liberating, and transformative because it challenges the status-quo and seeks to effect positive social change.

For Shor (1992) and Freire (1987), the teacher that takes into consideration the students’ cultures and includes the students’ voices in the discussion will learn with the students. Students bring their perspectives to the classroom and are able to construct new, meaningful knowledge if empowered and encouraged to do so. By identifying groups and engaging students in the teaching and learning process (for example, through becoming aware of cultural biases) teachers and students will hopefully discover the hurdles that impede growth and transformational learning.

It is clearer than ever before that teachers’ attitudes, biases, and prejudices can negatively affect not only the learning process, but can also add to some students’ isolation. It is obvious that bullying and a lack of sensitivity and empathy for students’ differences may push students to seek desperate measures. The problem-

posing approach to teaching and learning not only makes sense, but is transformational and promotes growth for teachers and students.

Transformational learning confronts cultural and political hurdles that affect teachers, students, and the institution. In this day and age information on any subject is readily available through the internet, and so memorizing information in a subject area is no longer as necessary. Anyone can become “knowledgeable” on a topic within a few minutes by gathering information from different sources. Nevertheless, only the student who is able to think critically will be able to process such a plethora of information in an efficient and competent manner. What’s more, we also need to recognize that transformative education does not occur overnight; it is a process. I argue that for real (authentic) transformation to occur, both the teacher and the student must engage one another in a dialogue within the classroom that examines long held assumptions on a variety of issues. This transformation will not occur unless teachers engage in posing problems to students in a way that enables them to also recognize the extent to which education itself can be used as a means of simply reinforcing political ideologies and promoting cultural hegemony. To do this effectively, teachers should examine and evaluate their own biases, engage students in open and respectful dialogue, and be willing to allow opposing views as part of the discussion.

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