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Pygmalion in the 'hood: Reflecting on Enhancing Job Interview Performance at an Urban Community College

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Abstract: Self-presenting effectively at job interviews presents significant challenges for students at urban community colleges, especially those identified as low-income Black and Latinx. Current practices provide minimal support, if any, for enhancing the self-presentation of these students at job interviews. Too often, instead, students simply do not perform well, fail to achieve their job objectives, and remain marginalized by society. This article describes the experiences of urban community college students involved in an innovative effort to enhance their performance in job interviews. This innovative approach features identity work and highlights the value of role play and improvisation in a range of dramatic activities. It utilizes insights gained from research into Freirian conscientization, critical pedagogy, and critical race theories as well as participatory action research (PAR) methodology. This study highlights the eloquent voices and dramatic concerns of the students involved in two vignettes, "Acting White" and "Acting Phony," expressing the plight of these students. Providing insights for teachers, the article reviews identity work to facilitate successful self-presentation conducted by a wide range of educators dealing with similar challenges involving racial and ethnic minorities. Concluding observations are presented and future debate and research is encouraged.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical race theory, self-presentation, job interviews, urban, identity, race, reflection

"I feel threatened sometimes because job interviewers expect me to be one way and I know I'm not that way, but I don't even really know what way they want me to be."

-Tristan, urban community college student

Tristan's dread and uncertainty about the expectations of potential employers are, unfortunately, not unique for many urban community college students, particularly Black and Latinx students, participating in interviews for semi-professional jobs. Failing to decipher just what job interviewers want in a candidate is an obstacle students of color often face as they run a gauntlet of prejudice and discrimination in the job market and are systematically denied access to social mobility and, as such, denied social justice.

As a Latinx teacher at an urban community college, I have become particularly sensitive to this problem. When I have had students participate in mock job interviews in my classes, a troubling number of them showed weak aural, oral, and verbal skills, displayed high levels of anxiety, and lacked self-confidence and self-esteem. Many students could not provide adequate answers to basic interview questions and displayed inappropriate gestures and other nonverbal signals that significantly detracted from the efficacy of their presentations. Little sense of their present selves—and even less of their possible selves—emerged and they demonstrated scarce evidence of self-reflection or reflexivity. As Joel, another urban community college student, explained after his first mock job-interview: "I know it seemed like I didn't know myself. I just didn't know how to answer those questions the right way . . . . I don't know myself that way, I never have. I just wanted to be done!" Hearing this response, I recalled the comments of my mentor, Dorothy Heathcote: "Before

we can relate to people successfully, we must first come to terms with ourselves. To keep my teaching in trim, I must first be able to look straight at myself and take my own measure" (1984, p. 22). In their characterizations, the anxieties expressed by my students seem to have come not only from their own inner struggle to calibrate a selfhood to the expectations of the professional world, but also from a sense that the "otherness" they displayed linguistically and visibly possibly stirred up prejudices on the part of mainstream job interviewers.

But these anecdotal reflections on the formidable challenges of the job market exemplify a much larger problem. These reflections on the woes of navigating racial identity and feeling the need to perform a racial role are part of a social complex of race, and social, cultural, economic, and linguistic capital. My students' deficits, particularly their low levels of linguistic capital and language acquisition, mean they are operating at a disadvantage. These deficiencies may also have a negative impact on the quality of their self-presentation (Roberts & Campbell, 2005–2006). Many students hold part or fulltime jobs, some are single parents, and several are non-English dominant. For many, poor quality K–12 educational experiences have ill-equipped them for later academic challenges, much less for the fierce competitions of the 21st-century job market. In addition, outside of school, few have role models to emulate in corporate America (Deil-Amen, 2006; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

Current practices in many community colleges, particularly those in disadvantaged urban environments, indicate little awareness of the need to prepare students with professionally relevant social skills, such as self-presentation. Many community college administrators and teachers view teaching social skills as outside the college's pedagogical mission and consider social skills "an innate personality attribute, rather than learned" (Deil-Amen, 2006, pp. 406–407).

Too frequently, practices of community college administrators, faculty, and staff focus on "blaming the victim", the students in this case, for their weak self-presentation in situations such as job interviews (Deil-Amen, 2006; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). As such, "inequality becomes legitimated," and the disadvantaged fall further behind (Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008), reinforcing existing biases. This cycle raises the question of whether open access to under-resourced and lower-status institutions, like community colleges, truly represents genuine opportunity for all students (Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005).

The neoliberalism that now pervades the political and social order is increasingly making its mark on policies and positions in education. As Giroux (2014) has explained, the gospel of neoliberalism preaches acceptance of the primacy of the corporate state, including deregulation, privatization, disinterest in social needs, and a lack of concern about the growth of inequalities in power and wealth. In the educational realm, neoliberalism promotes the stifling of critical thinking so as to produce passive learners who blindly yield to antidemocratic ideology.

Because current practices were failing to solve, or even address, the challenges my students faced, I decided to develop a pedagogy that could enhance the job interview competencies of students in my speech and diction courses. I sought advice from Pedro Noguera (2003), a leading authority on learning strategies for racial and ethnic minority students. Noguera drew my attention to George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1912/1999), later transformed into the musical *My Fair Lady* (1956, 1964). On a wager, Professor Higgins, an innovative phonetics scholar, convinces a Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to participate in an experiment whereby Higgins would transform Eliza into a lady accepted by the upper classes. Higgins believes that changing Eliza's speech and demeanor will prove the power of phonetics and bearing in shaping people's impressions. After assiduously coaching Eliza in behavior, dress, and speech, Higgins successfully presents Eliza as a mysterious noblewoman at an aristocratic ball, proving the efficacy of the transformation and the power of education in fostering social equality (Holroyd, 1989). For Noguera, the struggles Eliza had to undergo to become "accepted" highlight the difficulties

disadvantaged students have to face to succeed. Noguera also reminded me of the problematizing reality of race, he added, "Remember how hard it was for Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* to get out of her neighborhood and succeed. All the work she had to do, the abuse she received. And she was White!"

Noguera's words called to mind Rosenthal and Jacobson's book *Pygmalion in the Classroom* and what has been dubbed the "Pygmalion Effect" (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). The "Pygmalion Effect" describes the phenomenon produced where expectations, such as those held by Professor Higgins, affect performances, such as those carried out by Eliza. Despite the difficulties and obstacles my students might face achieving their goals, I took a leap of faith as an educator. My decision was supported by the experiment described in "Pygmalion in the Classroom", where the teacher's belief in students' abilities helped them achieve success. I embraced Higgins' unflagging faith in the potential of his student, Eliza, to transform herself, while keeping in mind Noguera's warning that issues of race and ethnicity could complicate my efforts.

I first examined the literature on job interviews, focusing on the semi-professional job interviewers expected of candidates. I then turned to Freire's (1970) work on conscientization and its influence on the development of critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on social justice for disenfranchised and marginalized people. Then I turned to those whom Freire had influenced: scholars of critical pedagogy, including Boal (1979), Giroux (1983), Grady (2003), McLaren (1994), and Kincheloe (2004). Adding further to my own course of learning, I studied the critiques and adaptations of critical pedagogy, including the work of critical race theorists, feminist critical pedagogues, and Foucauldian poststructuralists.

Moving from theory to practice, I scrutinized identity work involving dramatic activities to enhance students' performance at job interviews. Defined as "people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising their identities" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 10), identity work portrays how acting and looking the part enables effective display of the desired identity. According to Watson (2008), "Theoretically, we might say, everyone engages in identity work" (p. 130).

Too infrequently are the voices of students heard on their experiences in such interventions. My study gives prominence to the voices of the students in describing their identity work involving Boalian-inspired dramatic activities, including role play and improvisation, supported by video, specifically aimed at enhancing self-presentation skills at job interviews. Their identity work was followed by reflections capturing the eloquence of student voices in two vignettes: "Acting Phony" and "Acting White."

Theoretical Framework

Critical Pedagogy

Considered the forefather of critical pedagogy, Freire offered a pedagogy to help liberate oppressed populations in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In this work, Freire called for *conscientization*, interpreted as social consciousness, challenging students as well as teachers and other educators to view learning as a dialogical process fostering reflection and critical awareness of the social reality, and encouraging learning as a tool to foster reflection and liberation.

Boal (1979) paid homage to Freire by entitling his work *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a work that probes the embodiment of conscientization, the social consciousness, that Freire had expounded. Boal used theatre as a tool for cultivating empathy and reflection and as a weapon for liberation and transforming society. Boal highlighted the need "to theatricalize and problematize everyday realities through embodied action", seeking to move audiences from passive onlookers to "spect-actors,"

thereby becoming active agents of social change. Boalian techniques include role play and improvisation, supported by games, interactive exercises, and reflection on the meaning and tensions inherent in participation in local and global citizenship (Boal, 1992; Medina, Weltsek-Medina, & Twomey, 2007). Joining Boal in the development of critical pedagogy, Giroux (2003), McLaren (1994), and Kincheloe (2004) offer a range of perspectives also including embodiment and performance.

For Giroux (1983), the mission of critical pedagogy includes making society more democratic by encouraging empowerment, facilitating thinking, and generating critical action. Giroux forged critical pedagogy into a theory of critical resistance (Giroux, 1983; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Gottesman, 2016; Grady, 2003). Through resistance by teachers and students Giroux argues, the oppressed contribute to deconstructing social inequality, giving educators a leading role in challenging inequities in schools and in society, and promoting liberation of the oppressed.

Giroux was joined in this mission by McLaren (1994), Grady (2003), and Kincheloe (2004), who played leading roles in bringing embodiment and performance into the nascent critical pedagogy movement. For Pennycook (2004), "The body has re-emerged not as a static signifier of identity but as a surface onto which identities are inscribed where our subjectivities are generated and embodied" (p. 163). Pennycook's re-emerged body inverts the dissonance of my student's experience, in which job interviewers, in his words, "expect me to be one way and I know I'm not that way." In the spirit of Pennycook (2004), I sought to have teaching, meaning-making, and sense-making come to the forefront, combining "acute physical awareness of one's kinetic and kinesthetic senses with candid and thoughtful consideration of the implications of those bodily sensations" (p.163). In this way, student awareness of the way they are comes from authentic, embodied experience.

Critiques of critical pedagogy. In the article, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," Ellsworth (1989) attacked the tenets of critical pedagogy, as represented by Freire and Giroux. Ellsworth's poststructuralist feminist orientation questions the narratives set forth by many of the critical pedagogues who call for empowerment and dialogue, asking, "Empowerment for what"? The critique Ellsworth launched in developing feminist critical pedagogy alleges some versions of critical pedagogy are unrealistic and might, in fact, be increasing prevailing racial and class tensions.

In an effort to redress critical pedagogy's alleged neglect of the deleterious effects of racism and racial oppression on the disenfranchised and marginalized, some critical pedagogues developed critical race theory and critical race pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, & Tate, 1995; Lynn, & Parker, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). To highlight the relevance of critical race theory, Picower (2009) argued for the need to consider critical race theory as a methodology, a pedagogy calling for the integration of forms of critical education across the curriculum. Lac (2017) and Wong, Eng, and Von Esch (2018) expanded this argument by calling for a "critical race pedagogy," merging critical pedagogy with critical race theory.

Countering the conception of racism as a by-product of capitalist oppression, critical race theorists analyze the primacy of race, gender, and sexuality through a lens of domination. Accordingly, promoting "Whiteness" can be a weapon of domination aiming at maintaining power and "White supremacy" (Picower, 2009). Such deficit theories perpetuate "White supremacy" by characterizing the "other" as unable to excel. From an initial focus on African Americans, "otherness" has expanded to include a range of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including Latinx and LGBT and, more recently, immigrants of color and Muslims.

Fanon (1963, 1967) warned of the pernicious effects of racism on the mental health of those labeled as "other." In *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967), Fanon engages a psychoanalytical lens to explicate the drama between the "Self" and the unidentifiable and inassimilable "Other Self" envisaged by supporters of colonialism. McGee and Stovall (2015) map the relevance of Fanon's insights onto experiences of cultural alienation and trauma by students of color: "Because these students are victims of stereotyping, racism, traumatic practices, and discriminatory policies and ideologies, their mental health needs should be of the utmost importance" (p. 508).

Judith Butler (1988; 1990) adds a poststructuralist interpretation to critical race theory, positing performativity as a leading element in her praxis. Butler builds on the theatrical concept of performance, envisaging performativity as the body in constant motion rejecting the concept of a permanent, core identity. Through this constant citation of norms, a body is qualified "for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 1993, p. 2). Butler envisions race as, "always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (1993, p. xxi), as an ongoing performance and process, produced, performed and embodied, rather than fixed. Created and performed through constant iterations, the body in constant motion, this performativity of race realizes social change and allows new identities to materialize and perform their selves. For Butler, such performativity can effect social change, and allow new identities to materialize, perform, and articulate themselves (Threadgold, 2003, p. 20).

Identity Work

Lessons from Fellow Educators

I culled further insights from a collection of educators adapting identity theory to their work with minorities. For example, Carbado and Gulati (2007, 2013) have argued that African Americans adopt a "working identity," constituted by "a range of racially associated ways of being, including how one dresses, speaks, styles one's hair; one's professional and social affiliations; who one marries or dates; one's politics and views about race; where one lives; and so on and so forth" (2013, p. 1). This reassured me the desire to assist my students to attain success in their job interviews was well grounded.

For Carter (2003, 2006), an educator specializing in African American youth, "cultural straddling" between academic and peer groups, and developing "know-how," the ability to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" of the dominant cultural capital world, facilitate success while maintaining one's self-identity. Carter highlighted a point that often goes ignored in discussions of the pressure to adapt to White bourgeois mainstream society: low-income African American students have cultural and social capital of their own to preserve their self-identity.

For Boyd (2008), pressure to play to dual identities derives from what W. E. B. DuBois (1989) notably referred to as the "Double-consciousness" of African Americans experience: "The sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1989 p. 2). Double consciousness pressures people of color to engage in "code-switching," moving back and forth between separate identities to adapt to cultural expectations, pressures, and demands. In the DuBoisian tradition of "twoness," research on disadvantaged Aboriginal youth in Australia led Exley (2005) to formulate the notion of "Double Power": "the power to operate in and negotiate between multiple cultures" (p. 2). Double Power works on maintaining respect for the non-dominant norms of the Aboriginal people while enabling them "to effectively operate in Western technological, financial, bureaucratic, legal and political systems" (ibid.). Thinking about DuBois' "Double-consciousness" along with Exley's

"Double Power", confirmed for me the importance of working with my students on the identities they had the power to choose or not choose to adopt.

For Urrieta (2005), a researcher in Latinx studies, "playing the game" refers to the performance of power and agency, an exercise that serves as a form of "infiltrating" and changing the system while avoiding inculcation into its belief systems (pp. 176-178). Urrieta also warned of the need to be cautious in navigating the "tipping point" between "playing the game" and "selling out." "Playing the game" means learning to switch roles, languages, and scripts as appropriate, a strategy that has been described as "productive and proactive rather than defensive and reactive"; in essence, a performance that enhances the agency of those involved (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005, p. 8).

To make this study work in the classroom context, and taking into consideration the limitations of time and space, I chose to feature identity work that featured role play and improvisation based on Boalian praxis and critical pedagogy, and supplemented by insights from critical race theorists. The setting for this identity work was a speech and diction course at an urban community college, designated as a "Hispanic serving institution," with a predominantly Latinx and African American student population. Participants included 20 self-identified African, African American, Black, Latinx, and White students. Special focus was placed on the experiences of six students, ages 18 to 25. All names used are pseudonyms. Participatory action research (PAR), a subset of action research, was especially appropriate for this study for its emphasis on the collaboration of people affected by an issue gathering information leading to social change (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; MacDonald, 2012).

Listening to the Voices of the Students

Testing the waters. The identity work began by having all of the students in the class participate in one-on-one, 5-minute videoed mock job interviews in which I acted as interviewer and each student as the interviewee, thus establishing benchmarks. Findings from this initial activity proved invaluable in helping students and teacher alike to understand the quality of their self-presentation and gain feedback about which areas needed work. Based on the results of these presentations, I sought to address concerns that had surfaced by devising dramatic activities largely inspired by Boal (1979; 1992). These activities sought to enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy, impart positive images of present and possible selves, encourage visualization, reduce anxiety and fear of embarrassment, develop critical thinking capability through reflection and reflexivity, and strengthen empathic skills.

Initial activities included practice presenting an appropriate and professional appearance at job interviews and developing pride in a neat appearance. Lively discussions followed, with students using chalkboards to depict desirable presentations. Many had little understanding of what was appropriate to wear or where to buy it. Subsequent activities engendered growing awareness of the students' present selves and of the steps needed to develop possible selves to meet the demands of job interviewers. These efforts included building awareness of, and fluency in, appropriate verbal and nonverbal signs and gaining an understanding of the impact of aural, visual, and kinetic/movement modes in order to "read" the interviewer. Activities included "Reading Signs" to enhance student self-awareness of messages they were sending aurally, orally and visually, and to develop their ability to interpret messages being sent by the interviewer. As Whitney, one of my community college students described the exercise, "This helped me to see that non-verbal communication is very important because it sends both intentional and non-intentional messages."

Fostering reflexivity and self-monitoring. I encouraged students to reflect upon their previous ways of thinking, to develop compensatory strategies to overcome some of the deficiencies they found, and to expand self-monitoring practices to ensure present and future success. Both Heathcote and

her fellow dramatic practitioner, Gavin Bolton, pointed to the importance of "the watcher in the head — the self-spectator" as a critical element of reflection in drama (Bolton, 1998, p. 266). Like W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness", "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1989, p. 7), further enhances the need for and the power of reflection.

Fostering quick thinking under pressure. Especially useful was "Interviewee-in-the-Middle," where students were forced to answer questions rapidly thrown at them in a pressured setting. One student, the "Interviewee-in-the-Middle," stood in the center of a circle while the other students, the "interviewers," took turns firing interview questions at them. This activity proved uncomfortable to some students, and they expressed their anxiety and embarrassment non-verbally and verbally during the activity; however, upon reflection, the students expressed unanimous appreciation for the practice and saw the importance of being sharply challenged. As Tristan reflected: "You basically have to be prepared no matter how many curve balls the interviewer throws at you. With positive answers and preparation you can always be ahead of the game."

Reducing anxiety. During their mock job interviews and other role-playing activities, many students displayed anxiety and embarrassment. Some students who had already attended job interviews admitted that apprehension had adversely affected the quality of their self-presentations. Among the many factors compounding their discomfort were self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, poor social skills, fear of failure, deficiencies in self-esteem, the pressure of striving to impress others, and nervousness about the power and status of the interviewers. "When people feel socially anxious, they manifest a variety of nervous responses. They often fidget, self-manipulate (e.g., play with their hair and touch their clothing), perspire, squirm, stutter as they speak, and generally appear nervous and jittery" (Schlenker & Leary, 1982, p. 654). Linked to anxiety is the fear of embarrassment (Goffman, 1956, 1959). For Goffman, the pressure to juggle multiple selves, a feat one might attempt during a job interview in order to project a professional self different from the self a person presented in everyday life, may provoke embarrassment. Improvisational activities encouraged students to think quickly on their feet, acclimatizing them to the tempo of an interview, mitigating their fear of interviews, lessening their anxieties, and increasing the self-confidence necessary for effective self-presentation.

By extension, when students took on the role of interviewers, they were able to see the process from a different perspective. They found themselves able to empathize with interviewers and realize that they are simply people trying to carry out their jobs and not antagonists or villains. As Maria, one of my students summarized, " I have greater knowledge of the problems interviewers are faced with. Understanding an interviewee is the greatest challenge an interviewer is faced with."

Debriefing. At the final debriefing, the students agreed that the activities had enhanced their self-presentation, enabling them to be more confident and better prepared for future job interviews. Data collected from one-on-one interviews, my teacher logbook and student journal entries, the digital audio recordings of in-class post-activity reflection sessions, and comparison of videotapes of students' first and last mock interviews, indicated growth of self-presentational performances on the part of students involved in this intervention. Moreover, every student participant mentioned in their final journal entries that they had improved their self-presentation compared to their initial mock interviews—and they believed that the improvement would positively impact future job interview performances. According to Autumn, an urban community college student:

> Number one, I know I will feel less shy and nervous about it (a job interview) because I know I've been trained . . . Two being that since I know what to expect in the interview, I can see that it's going like how I expected it to be and so I'm strategizing to stay a step ahead of the interviewer.

Likewise, Joel, also an urban community college student, recorded:

> The interview is like a game of chess, because in their mind the game is finding the right candidate, and in your mind the game is making them believe that you are the best candidate. Things like attire and self-presentation are pawn moves, while answers to tell me about yourself and why should I hire you are those big moves that help get you checkmate.

Reflections on the Identity Work

Although the students reported that they believed the dramatic activities had significantly improved their self-presentation at job interviews, two students indicated their changed behavior made them feel like they were "acting phony." Also, an incident with a colleague made me feel that promoting these identities for the students to meet the expectations of interviewers could be considered encouraging them to "act White." The following two vignettes comment on these concerns.

Voicing concerns over "acting phony." Two students indicated that learning to present themselves in a professional manner, putting forward their "best self," made them feel a bit phony; however, they also expressed a belief that being phony was necessary. One of the two students noted, "Feeling 'phony' doesn't matter to me as long as I land the job. Every one puts on an act to land the job they want. I am fine with being phony as long as I get the job." The second student, Whitney, added:

> It just shows that you will do whatever it takes to land that job. It would be stupid if you don't act 'phony' or put on that version of yourself to get the job because it shows you like money and the other person behind you is probably being phony also to land the job. So why not do it yourself?

Autumn angrily responded:

> Just 'cause I don't wear everyday clothing to an interview does not mean that it is not "me." I wore a wedding dress to my wedding and that was "me," right? That wasn't someone else's wedding. But you are different at your wedding just like you're different at your interview.

Tristan noted that some of his neighborhood peers tried to make him feel phony for being "a Black man trying to get a good job." He saw these attacks as impeding him from reaching his potential. Tristan explained:

> I'm not trying to hear that, 'cause anything like that is just to slow me down. . . . I realize that I have heard this kind of thing in movies and such: that some character from the 'hood gets busted-on by his boys for acting 'phony' when he is just trying to better himself. But it's a big problem (He makes a big gesture with his hands out and up, arms spread wide) and it can come from jealousy.

Voicing concerns over "acting White." When I mentioned to a colleague at a conference that I was teaching students at my urban community college "to speak and act properly at their job interviews," my colleague angrily attacked me: "You can't do that! You're teaching your students to act White!" This encounter led me to wonder: is teaching Black and Latinx students how to effectively present themselves at job interviews an inherently racist act? Responsible educators must be cognizant of the kind of unintended racism DiAngelo (2018) described in her book, *White Fragility*. To be wary of this possibility, I decided to check in with my students upon my return from the conference.

At the next class meeting, I wrote the charge this colleague had leveled at me on the chalkboard. In a neutral tone, I described the context and asked the students for their thoughts. Instantly, several hands shot up.

> Joel: Okay, that's just insulting! Why is speaking properly acting White? Why's it gotta be a White thing? (Several students laugh) When Obama speaks properly, no one says he's "acting White," right?
> Tristan: (Looking at the chalk board) That line does sound a bit racist, Professor.
> Joel: (He taps Tristan and puts on a voice) S 'cuz we from da' hood, son!" They wanna be able to recognize us so they can keep us in the 'hood.
> Tristan: No, seriously, what they're implying with that (He points at the statement on the board) bothers me.
> Me: How so?
> Tristan: Why can't they just say, "acting professional"? What your colleague means with that is full out racist.
> Whitney: I don't think your colleague meant it that way. When I answer the phone at work my friends sometimes say things like that, like I "sound White." It's hard sometimes but it's my work voice. I'm not trying to be White.
> Me: (pointing to the board) I think she meant to say that I was being racist.
> Tristan: Oh "she." This was a White girl?
> Me: A White woman. Yes.
> Joel: Ohhhhhh!
> Tristan: You tell this little White woman, professor, okay, next time you see her, tell her that actually she is the one being racist 'cause she's implying that a Black man can't act professionally without acting White.
> Joel: You tell her from us!
> Me: (Laughing) Okay, okay, I'll tell her if I ever see her again. (Maria's hand has been up for a while) Maria?
> Maria: I don't care what you call it, "acting White" — that doesn't bother me. I just want to speak in the way that gets me a good job. Everything you tell us is about being professional. She may not be really-really a racist because, maybe because, no offense, so many people with good jobs are White. Maybe your colleague, this woman, thinks it's easier to understand if you call it "White."
> Tristan: Proper is proper, it doesn't have a race.

Encouraged by this discussion, Whitney stated that some people in "the 'hood" did label acting in a professional manner as acting White:

> I have a cousin who I met just a few years ago who seemed to get offended when I spoke to her using the business and professional dialect. She is a true south Bronx girl, what some people would call "ghetto," she speaks using a lot of slang and has a heavy Bronx accent. When we were first getting to know each other she didn't seem to like me much and called me "White girl." But, as we got to know each other, now, as she's maturing, she actually turns to me to help her learn new words and pronunciations and how to compose herself in front of people.

When some students nodded and stated they had had similar experiences with their own friends and family, Whitney stated:

> Some people who grow up in urban neighborhoods and are not exposed to too much of the world outside of their borough may have certain perceptions of people who come from those same neighborhoods but don't speak with that accent or slang. My cousin told me when she first met me she thought I was stuck up. I guess to some people who don't ever speak that way that dialect may come off as arrogant or condescending. I'm not sure. I still don't know.

Concluding observations

As the words of my colleague echoed in my head "You are teaching your students to act White," I realized that some educators believe my students should never need to learn to act "properly", and others question what it even means to act "properly". Some believe corporate America will never treat my students with proper respect no matter how "properly" they act. In Pygmalion, Professor Higgins treats all people with equal disrespect regardless of class, because he believes class to be a sham. His friend Pickering treats all people with equal respect regardless of class, but believes in the innate nature of class. Higgins believes anyone can become a lady. Pickering believes one must be born into the "right" family to be a lady. Educators must treat all students with respect, like Pickering. However, like Higgins, they must believe that students of any race, ethnicity or socio-economic status, have the ability to succeed. Providing students with training and the tools to compliment that training is critical, but so is the expectation that dreams can be realized.

Like Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion,* the urban community college students in this study realized that, to meet the expectations of mainstream job interviewers and gain the prized social mobility they desired, they would have to learn self-presentation. But, there are consequences. Urban community college students negotiating their identities in a neoliberal climate that fosters educational inequities, intentionally or through neglect, confront myriad challenges. Learning to meet expectations of interviewers exposes the participating urban community college students to "a process both exhilarating and painful" (Menard-Warwick, 2005, p. 269), with positive and negative social and psychological consequences, as the dramatic activities and the two vignettes make clear.

This study has described problems one encounters teaching and learning in an environment fraught with complexities. The struggle of disadvantaged and marginalized students to attain social mobility, particularly those of color, presents formidable challenges to these students and their teachers. The task is made especially difficult by the need to balance acquisition of the self-presentation skills demanded by the cultural mainstream with respect for one's racial and ethnic self-identities. The required identity work can prompt alienation from peers and family or feelings or allegations of "acting phony" or "acting White." The issues raised in this discussion challenge us to continue to conduct research and investigate active learning formats appropriate for diverse groups across gender, racial, and sociocultural lines.

By listening carefully to the voices of community college students and using empathy and skill, educators can meet the challenge of ensuring that such students maintain their sense of identity in their own cultures even as they develop and perform new identities, often under social pressure (Lee, 2004). Such empathy calls for transcending barriers and listening with one's heart (Lanzoni, 2018). Roland G. Fryer Jr., the first Black winner of the John Bates Clark medal, articulated the deeply personal nature of the struggle thusly, "How you create structures so that people don't just beat the odds, but so that you change the damn odds. It's not, like, a 'them' thing, for me. This is my family, dude" (Ehrenfreund, 2015). Lamentably, empathy for the plight of community college students is in short supply today.

As educators, we have a responsibility to offer urban community college students the tools to improve their self-presentation skills. Ultimately, each urban community college student must be

allowed to decide for themselves if they are acting authentically. But to neglect to offer them the tools is a racist act. If they have the tools to improve, then these students have the freedom to decide how to present themselves.

Thinking of Tristan's comment "Proper is proper, it doesn't have a race," we can support his decision, and any student's desire, to manage their own identity. Despite the frustrating judgments of others and the petty jealousies of peers, Tristan proclaimed, "No one can tell me when I'm acting phony but me, it is up to me." Every student has the right to choose the skills they want to develop. We must not deny them that choice.

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