

Promising Practices

"Standing in the Right Place": Engaging Affirmative Action¹ in the Classroom

By Jonathan Gayles

Introduction

In preparing this article, I discovered that others have developed strategies to address issues of racism and discrimination in the classroom (Brezina 1996; Davis 1992; Eells 1987; Lucal 1996; Miller 1992; Orbach 2000; Powers 1987; Shirts 1969; Storss 1992; Toll 1969). Dorn (1989) provides a thorough review of these strategies. Future administrations of this exercise will certainly be impacted by this work.

Although these exercises are provocative and no doubt meaningful for students, they generally do not address the impact that racial group membership² has on student response to provocative issues like affirmative action. In my experiences, students suspect that other students engage what Cornell West calls "racial reasoning" or something similar to it (West 1992). That is, members of a particular racial group are *supposed* to think a certain way because they are members of a particular racial group.

This is problematic for the classroom instructor in a number of ways, with two being most critical. First, students are encouraged to think in a way that does not reflect their own experiences but rather in a way that reflect their group membership. This negatively impacts their ability to sincerely engage other students.

Secondly, other students are encouraged to regard the opinions of "out-group" members only in terms of their membership which, too, negatively impacts their ability to engage other students. It is important to encourage open and honest discussions about race and affirmative action in our classrooms. It is important to assist

our students in moving beyond "resistance, paralysis and rage" (Davis 1992). This exercise is but another attempt to do so.

Affirmative Action as Provocation

Discussions of affirmative action are often the topical "deal-breaker" for my courses that engage race. The manner in which the battle lines are drawn almost instantaneously and with such clarity and emotional intensity never ceases to amaze me. Unfortunately, race is most often the demarcating and unifying factor. Indeed

affirmative action excites strong feelings, passionate responses. An observer of the contemporary political climate cannot help but be struck by the intensity of many people's feelings about affirmative action. It is far from a rare experience to witness that people become agitated when discussing racial quotas or preferential treatment. (Sniderman & Piazza 1993:100)

In my experiences, students and their opinions are ultimately racialized, which again, decreases the degree to which students can sincerely engage each other as equal individuals.

Reversing Reverse Racism

I also developed this exercise in response to the "reverse racism" and "two wrongs don't make a right" critique offered by commentators too numerous to cite here. One of the more successful critics of affirmative action has been D'Souza (1995, 2002). Consider his simplistic and decontextualized treatment of the policy in his *Letters to a Young Conservative*:

Consider two virtually identical scenarios. A white guy and a black guy apply for a position. The black guy is better qualified; the white guy gets the position. That's racial discrimination.

Here is the second scenario. A white guy and a black guy apply for a position. The white guy is better qualified; the black guy gets the position. That's affirmative action. Now, in what sense is the second result a remedy for the first? It is not. All I see are *two instances* of racial discrimination. (emphasis mine, 2002:93)

Although the suggestion that the purpose of affirmative action is to place less-qualified individuals in positions because of some personal characteristic is clearly limited and problematic in itself, the power of this analogy is in its simplicity. It does not encourage considerations of historical context or the manner in which being qualified itself is a "contested social meaning" (Prager 1986).

Many of my students offer the reverse racism critique in our discussions of affirmative action as well. This was articulated by George W. Bush on the eve of the University of Michigan Case affirmative action case (*Grutter v. Bollinger, et al.*) "as we work to address the wrong of racial prejudice, we must not use means that *create another wrong*, and thus perpetuate our divisions [emphasis mine]" (Bush 2003). I agree with Stanley Fish (1993) that such assertions are both incongruous with the nature of racism and the nature of the intent of the policy. In using an analogy of chemotherapy, he suggests that:

Reverse Racism is a cogent description of affirmative action only if one considers the cancer of racism to be morally and medically indistinguishable from the therapy we apply to it. A cancer is an invasion of the body's equilibrium, and so is chemotherapy; but we do not decline to fight the disease because the medicine we employ is also disruptive of normal functioning. Strong illness, strong remedy: the formula is as appropriate to the health of the body politic as it is to that of the body proper.

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Rhetoric like reverse racism provokes division and reduces the ability of students to see “across” racial lines and look “into” the issue without vitriol. This does not mean that students must agree with the policy, only that students should consider their opinions without framing them racially.

It is here that I should make one thing clear: this exercise adopts no stance on affirmative action. For the record, I am in support of preference-based policies and this support may be apparent in the manner in which I frame this exercise. I willingly acknowledge this and yet I did not develop this exercise for the purposes of convincing my students to support preferences.

This exercise primarily encourages the discussion of affirmative action without the use of racial group membership as an explanatory or interpretive device. Despite the feelings elicited by discussions of affirmative action, I agree with Freire (1998) that avoidance of certain topics or, silence is pedagogically counterproductive. It is his “conviction that there are no themes or values about which one cannot speak, no areas in which one must be silent. We can talk about everything, and we can give testimony about everything” (1998: 98). Within this exercise, this “testimonial process” (Freire 1998: 99) provides a shared experience from which students can engage each other as equals.

An additional reason that I developed this exercise was because many of my students, regardless of ethnicity, have no *personal* knowledge of racism or more generally, discrimination on the basis of some biological characteristic over which they have no control. Despite my efforts to show them that racism consists of much more than interpersonal exchanges, students are apt to say that “I never did that” or, and perhaps more damningly, “That never happened to you.”

In their minds, racism is something that *has* happened, not something that *is* happening. Consequently, affirmative action appears to be an attack on innocents that has no place in a democracy of meritocracy. Affirmative action itself is therefore regarded as racist rather than a *response* to racism. I never discount the distaste that students have for affirmative action since many of them are not “active racists” (Tatum 1997: 11), thus it is quite understandable that they feel unfairly victimized by affirmative action. Indeed, “the argument that affirmative action is ‘discrimination’ cannot be countered by simple denial” (Zinn 1998: 395). The exercise allows the facilitator³ to complicate the meaning of dis-

crimination and connect it to historical precedents and present-day practices.

Thinking About Feeling— Feeling About Thinking

Boler identifies four primary “discourses of emotion” (1997:205-226). She asserts that the political discourse of emotion offers “the most promising direction for education studies” (222). This exercise follows in this tradition in that it directly engages the reality of student *feelings* about affirmative action. While Boler engages shame as a reference for discovering the context of determining the “rationality” of this shame, the exercise demonstrates the power of experience for students. In this sense, their powerful *feelings* about affirmative action are not irrational and certainly not bound to a particular racial group. Feelings, when placed in the appropriate pedagogical context of discussions of personal experiences rather than personal opinions, have value for all students.

In contradistinction, D’Souza asserts that “black shame...camouflages itself as Black indignation” (2002: 91). Indignation, when racialized in this matter, is illegitimate. The purpose of this exercise is to allow *all* students to express indignation without the possibility of having their membership in a particular ethnic group disqualify their feelings on this particular issue.

This exercise removes the racial context (at least to a degree) and allows students to share an experience that they might not have shared previously. It is important to note that I did not develop this exercise to “protect” black students from any negative stigma, or as D’Souza might put it, “black shame.” In fact, this exercise is directed at no particular group of students—a point that will be revisited later.

Sniderman and Piazza (1993) raise an interesting question about the response of many white students to affirmative action. Are negative feelings about affirmative action *caused by* “deep-seated, often denied, negative feelings about blacks” or could negative feelings about affirmative action *cause* more negative feelings about blacks? The results of their “mere mention” experiment indicate that the latter is the case (102). Students that were first asked about affirmative action agreed with more negative characterizations of blacks than those that were first asked about blacks. It is clear that

Affirmative action is, manifestly, an issue about which many people have

strong feelings, and it is tempting to infer that the reason the issue arouses such intense emotions is because it excites deep-seated, often denied, negative feelings about blacks. (Sniderman & Piazza 1993: 98)

Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) research on aversive racism similarly reflects the manner in which race is related to individual opinions on affirmative action. Aversive racism characterizes “the racial attitudes of many whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalizable ways” (Dovidio & Gaertner 2000, see also Gaertner & Dovidio 1986). This exercise reveals that which is subtle and makes rationalization of these “racial attitudes” more difficult.

Again, the purpose of this exercise is to provide students with a shared, concrete and high-stakes reference point for discussions of affirmative action by:

- ◆ Selectively creating advantage and disadvantage in the classroom;
- ◆ Using common arguments opposing affirmative action to defend this advantage and disadvantage; and
- ◆ Encouraging students to consider solutions.

This exercise can be facilitated with class sizes up to 50. Although I suppose that it is possible that this exercise would be successful with larger classes, I have not yet attempted to do so because of the initial backlash that this exercise engenders. To date, I have only facilitated this exercise with undergraduate college students.

The Exercise

This exercise requires that the facilitator selectively assign advantage and disadvantage to students in the class. In this sense, this exercise is quite similar to those described by Eells (1987), Orbach (2000), and Miller (1992). This exercise is distinct because students are given no indication of the advantage. I believe that students do their best work when they are not distracted by an overt act of discrimination. This is useful in terms of the exercise because their performance reflects their undistracted best effort on assignment which, I believe, increases their emotional investment.

The facilitator may assign disadvantage in any way she chooses but students must believe that their group assignment is the result of random choice (unlike rac-

ism). As with most classes, some students are more vocal than others, I attempt to make sure that there are vocal students represented in each group. Additionally, I try not to divide students that are obviously friends as they are more likely to use their friendship as a basis for interpreting the exercise.

Starting Points

This is not the kind of exercise that is done early in the semester. A degree of trust must be fostered in the classroom. The facilitator should maintain a classroom culture in which student perspectives are actively "authorized" (Cook-Sather 2002: 1). This trust extends beyond teacher-student trust but must include trust among the students. To the greatest extent possible, all of the students must believe that the classroom is a place where all involved are invested in opening doors of understanding rather than closing them.

This exercise requires that the facilitator has created a classroom climate that allows students to critique an idea without attacking the person offering it. Since I often act as "the devil's advocate," my students are comfortable with being challenged and held accountable for that which they say to the class. I have no doubt that this contributes to the success of this exercise.

Additionally, I have struggled with how much awareness of racism is required for this exercise to be successful. Since the reference point is not race and something that has practical and shared value for all students, I am tempted to convince myself that it may be possible to successfully facilitate this exercise with little such awareness. Still I am more inclined to agree with Tatum (1997: 115) who says that "Whenever possible, I defer the discussion of affirmative action, at least until a basic understanding of racism as a system of advantage has been established." I imagine that having a meaningful discussion about this exercise would be extremely difficult if one must *teach* students about racism while attempting to discuss the exercise.

Furthermore, this trust is critically important because the facilitator, for a time, will betray this trust with an act of discrimination. Without an initial atmosphere of trust and collegiality, it will be difficult for this exercise to end without critically compromising student trust. Additionally, the purpose of this exercise is *not* to discriminate against a particular group of students. This is a critical point. If certain students interpret this exercise as an

attempt by the facilitator to purposefully expose *them* to discrimination, they may resent being singled out in this manner and initiate a context shift that will make it difficult for them to appreciate the exercise. In fact, it may be more useful to assign students that seem inclined towards beliefs and behaviors that reproduce inequality to the advantaged group. It will become clear that this exercise will reveal the impact of their beliefs in concrete and localized terms to them and their classmates.

Finally, this exercise is unlike Jane Elliot's groundbreaking work (1996, 1997, 2001; Peters 1991) because the point of demarcation is not skin or eye color but rather some (relatively) arbitrary assignment of advantage or disadvantage. Consequently, *any* student might be disadvantaged. This is part of the strength of this exercise. Students that have no apparent philosophical or political common ground may suddenly find themselves arguing for or against the advantage/disadvantage created by the exercise. Ultimately, students are provided with a better opportunity to consider affirmative action when it is revealed as the intended frame of reference.

The Stakes — Grades

Unbeknownst to the students, two types of assignments are administered. One version should be much easier for students. I have had the most success with pop-quizzes that I may administer at the beginning of a class. Since there is a time limit on these quizzes, I create one version which has multiple choice questions and another that has short answer. This puts the students with the short-answer version at a distinct disadvantage. I have also used bonus questions on exams in the same manner: multiple choice versus short answer.

There are likely a number of assignments that might be used here but it is important that the disadvantage can be easily and *clearly* resolved. I rarely use pop quizzes but when I use pop quizzes in conjunction with this exercise, I simply award everyone the maximum available points as an "exercise credit" when I bring the exercise to a close. The impact of this exercise on student grades is greatly reduced or eliminated because these quizzes represent a minuscule portion of their grade as I do not particularly care for quizzes. Similarly on bonus questions, the available points are generally a small percentage of their test grade. Again, I simply give all students credit for the *bonus* questions since only the

bonus questions were administered unfairly. By limiting the value of the bonus questions, the possibility that students will claim to have been disadvantaged by longer bonus questions is greatly reduced. I emphasize that the facilitator must be able to resolve the inequality in the graded component easily and most importantly, overtly. Following the exercise, the students should *trust* that no advantage exists for any student.

When discussing the correct answers, the facilitator should offer a matter-of-fact explanation that there are two versions of the assignment with no recognition of the prescribed advantage. When some of the students begin to protest, this is when the real exercise begins. Remember, there should be no reference to affirmative action! The exercise will be transparent if the students recognize the covert reference point of affirmative action.

Throughout this portion of the exercise, the facilitator must behave as if she is oblivious. The students' protests should be treated as unreasonable. I often feign shock at the protests. It is at this point that the facilitator should defend the obviously unfair administration of the assignment. The following are defenses that could be employed:

"I'm the teacher and that's just the way it is!"

The locus of power (in this case the facilitator) supports a policy that not only discriminates against some but also benefits others.

Look at Famous Amos

This is what I call the "Famous Amos" defense. The fact that one "beat the odds" leads some to focus on that exceptional success rather than the odds themselves. Without using names (of course) the facilitator might hold individual scores up as evidence that the alleged advantage exists only in the minds of certain students. It is my experience that some of these students will speak up and offer support of this assertion, distancing themselves from those who claim to have been disadvantaged (Connerly 2000 and McWhorter 2000, 2003). Their success places the "failure" of those students that were disadvantaged squarely on their shoulders and not on the prescribed disadvantage itself. Complaints of this disadvantage (such as it is) is ultimately a form of "self sabotage" (McWhorter 2000).

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Try harder

Consistent with the “Famous Amos” defense is the exhortation that the “underachieving” students (using value-laden coded terms like this increases the impact of the exercise) should just “try harder.” Again, this cripples our ability to consider why *some* must try harder than others. The disadvantage vanishes and all we are left with is the notion that some do not work as hard as others (i.e. are lazier).

Same material

An additional point of defense is the argument that the exam was based on the same material and that if students studied sufficiently, this “injustice” would be irrelevant. Again, this defense reflects the disappearing of the disadvantage created and indirectly invokes the American “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” ideal. Certainly, no one promised the students a rose garden. By virtue of their work ethic alone, the alleged odds *against* them could have (should have) been overcome. Instead of complaining about how unfair things are, they should just try harder next time.

This kind of logic reflects outcome-oriented thought that essentially focuses on the way things are rather than any consideration of *why* things are the way they are — they are mystified (Freire 1970).

Clearly, all of these defenses deflect attention from the clear unfairness of two different versions of the exam. By the time all of the defenses are employed, students will likely sort themselves into two primary groups: those *vocally* opposed to the manner in which the assignment was administered and everyone else. There will be exceptions with some students agreeing with the defenses offered by the facilitator. Of course, many students, especially those benefiting from the advantage, will remain silent.

A Magnanimous Offer: Toward Solutions

At this point the facilitator should appear exasperated and succumb to the demands of the students — to a degree. The facilitator should grant that perhaps two versions are indeed unfair. This will provide some relief to protesting students. The next statement, however, will not. As a magnanimous solution to the protests from the students, the facilitator should apolo-

gize for the error and promise never to disadvantage anyone else *from this point forward*. With that proclamation, the facilitator should attempt to move on. When students continue to protest (as they should) the facilitator’s level of exasperation should intensify greatly. She did, after all, fix the problem! She was responsive and promised to be completely fair from this point forward! Why should these students still protest?

Clearly, the students should protest. The facilitator’s promise to never commit this error again does not, in fact, address the unfairness. As Lyndon B. Johnson asserted, “Freedom is not enough” (1996: 17). Some students have “earned” points precisely because the facilitator constructed unfair benefits for them while other students were denied the opportunity to earn points for the same reason. In discussing his exercise and the claim that this is a fair resolution, Orbach similarly states that “the class as a whole and the excluded students in particular reject this claim, and by this point begin to recognize effects of ‘institutional discrimination’” (Orbach 2000: 52). Martin Luther King also spoke to the emptiness of such a claim:

It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years... Whenever this issue of compensatory or preferential treatment for the Negro is raised, some of our friends recoil in horror. The Negro should be granted equality, they agree; but he should ask nothing more. On the surface this appears reasonable, but it is not realistic. (King 1963: 124, emphasis mine)

Of course, the analogies here are many but the best analogy that I have encountered thus far is offered by Deval Patrick whose essay, “Standing in the Right Place” initiated my creation of this exercise and forms the basis for my title:

The white team and the black team are playing the last football game of the season. The white team owns the stadium, owns the referees and has been allowed to field nine times as many players. For almost four quarters, the white team has cheated on every play and, as a consequence, the score is white team 140, black team 3. Only 10 seconds remain in the game, but as the white quarterback huddles with his team before the final play, a light suddenly shines from his eyes. “So how about it, boys?” he asks his men. “What do you say

from here on we play fair?” (Patrick 1996: 141)

Because of the two versions of the assignment, some students are able to *build on* the advantage created while others *must overcome* this advantage. Promising “to play fair” and end this practice does nothing but solidify this created advantage/disadvantage and encourage the mystification of potentially different outcomes within the class — final grades. Ultimately, all students may come to regard their grades as *earned* without regard to the impact of the preferential treatment. In this sense affirmative action is potentially regarded as a policy *against* anyone but rather a policy *for* a shared fairness.

Completely exasperated, the facilitator should begin to seek out and offer alternative solutions. At this juncture, many of the students that have been silent (because they benefited from the advantage created) will likely begin to become more vocal. In my experience, students will initially suggest the following solutions:

- ◆ That points be given to those that were disadvantaged by the facilitator.
- ◆ That points be taken away from those that were advantaged by the facilitator.
- ◆ That the entire assignment be thrown out.

For the purpose of this exercise, these suggestions should be dismissed because the facilitator’s integrity does not permit her to *give points* to any student. Additionally, some of the students will remind that class that it is a fact that no points were *given* to any student. The advantaged students still had to perform and essentially *earn* their points — albeit on a decidedly easier task. The facilitator’s integrity and the integrity of the university experience should be invoked. Of course some students may question this invocation in conjunction with the administration of an assignment that seems to lack integrity itself.

I often respond to persistent protest by saying, “That was then and this is now.” Since the advantaged students did indeed *earn* their points, it would be completely unfair and philosophically untenable for the facilitator to penalize these students by taking their *earned* points away. I attempt to provide advantaged students with an opportunity to agree with me in their efforts to protect what they indeed have earned but in doing so, they defend that which disadvantages the other students. Imagine!

It is critically important for the facilitator to encourage a temporary sense of cohesion among the two groups of students. As I indicated previously, the disadvantaged students will likely be the most vocal and therefore overtly cohesive. Still, the silence of the remaining students is potential evidence of their cohesion. I often ask the disadvantaged students, "Why are you the only students complaining?" Of course they are complaining because they have been wronged but it is important to take note of the silence of the remaining students because their silence is part of their own desire to defend the earned privilege bestowed upon them.

Advantaged students also protest but this does not invalidate the facilitator's authority. If there is majority agreement in the class that the assignment was unfair, the facilitator must defend the assignment with steadfast commitment. The facilitator should make note of the fact that the students that performed better on the assignment are not complaining as much as those that did not perform as well if this is the case. Great efforts should be made to deflect attention from the inherent unfairness of the assignment.

*An Individual Act of Faith:
"Can I give my points to them?"*

A particularly sensitive student offered this solution during my initial administration of this exercise. This was a wonderful teaching moment. If no student makes such an offer, perhaps the facilitator should solicit it, i.e., "Is there anyone that is willing to give their points to them?"

Eells (1987) includes a similar outcome in her exercise. This was a wonderful teaching moment because this student's offer is evidence of the systemic nature of racism. Although laudable, his individual act (giving up his points) is not nearly enough to offset the benefit his *group* received as a result of the injustice imposed on them. Furthermore, such isolated individual acts are ultimately inconsequential in the face of institutionalized and systemic discrimination. Finally, his act was not an act *against* a discriminatory system but rather an act *within* the system. He proposed no change to the system and therefore his act is of little ultimate consequence.

Debriefing and Discussing the Exercise

The benefit of the exercise is not in coming to a solution that is palatable to all students but rather in creating deracinated tension for discussing affirmative action.

When further discussion seems fruitless or when some students appear to be "at the end of their rope," the facilitator can bring the exercise to a close. Normally, I simply write the phrase "so what do you *really* think about affirmative action?" on the board and smile. If I have facilitated the exercise well enough, there is a great silence and then a variety of responses ranging from laughter, curses, gasps of awareness and even the occasional "What the hell does affirmative action have to do with my quiz grade!?"

I inform the students that the grades are indeed on equal ground and that this was an exercise to "help you think about affirmative action without first thinking about race." I reiterate and make explicitly clear that EVERYONE will receive full credit on the designated assignment. When I am sure that this is understood, I move to discussing the exercise.

Any fair *solution* will, essentially have to, on some level, provide preference to one group over another. We cannot throw the exercise out because, analogically speaking, we cannot blind ourselves to history. This allows for a more grounded discussion of the nature of this disadvantage in explicating that which affirmative action is and responds to. Is all disadvantage unfair? Can disadvantage be fair?

By using students' grades as the reference point, these questions take on additional weight but are, again, deracinated. They are forced into an either/or dilemma. Either they do nothing, thereby accepting what is clearly an unjust scenario or they do something. It is very difficult if not impossible to escape this dilemma. It is here that I reassert that *the exercise* is neutral.

The facilitator can then push the students to imagine an entire semester of consistently preferential grading criteria in every class. That is, that the experiences of advantage or disadvantage would be consistent for each student in every class. Simply stopping the preferential treatment is a woefully inadequate solution. Just as one's grade does not reflect only the last day of class but rather the entire semester, the life chances of groups of people are built, at least to some degree, on those that preceded them. Unlike interpersonal exchanges of prejudice, *institutionalized* discrimination cannot just be stopped, it must be undone.

I have found this to be a particularly fruitful exercise because it provides a fertile ground for discussing a number of provocative questions that critically engage inequality. Many of these questions are raised by the students in their continued attempts to resolve the dilemma posed by

the exercise because, I believe, this is a safer reference than race.

Frequently students will hold each other accountable when their comments on affirmative action contradict their sentiments expressed when their grades were the reference point. I am able to ask, "What kinds of preferences preceded affirmative action? Have they been undone?" This question, and many of the questions that direct my discussions of affirmative action take on new, personal and shared meaning.

The Exercise and (on?) Whiteness

The growing body of literature that is attentive to whiteness is important for educators that engage issues of race. It is important because it allows stakeholders in the process of learning to engage what Manning Marable calls a multicultural democracy which is "a critical project which transforms the larger society" (1996: 98). This transformation is not pursued by multicultural thinking that is simply oriented around an anti-racist agenda that ultimately pays "less attention to the deep-seated structural racial conflicts endemic to U.S. Society" (Winant 1997: 47).

Although whiteness is not the articulated focus of this exercise, it is clearly a potential correlate. During this exercise, many of the solutions (most frequently by advantaged students) offer mirror the "confusing metaphor" of color-blindness (Fair 1997: 109). To willfully remain blind to what is readily apparent is dangerous, to do so in matters of social inequality is convenient for those that benefit from this inequality.

*White Privilege
and Reverse Racism Revisited*

White privilege (McIntosh 1990) is also a correlate of this exercise. It is easy to use this exercise to consider the "hidden knapsack" of white privilege. Responding to or attempting to undo this privilege is ultimately described as reverse racism which has been addressed earlier. In terms of whiteness and white privilege, those who make this claim assert "whiteness as disadvantage, something which has few precedents in U.S. racial history" (Winant 1997: 42). In short, such claims are completely absent of "racial realism" (Fair 1997: 169).

Through this exercise, it becomes clear that accepting the premise offered by reverse racism simply solidifies the racism (and consequent privileges) that preceded this premise. Such "white innocence" is "disrupted" (Griffin 1998).

Caveats and Alternatives

This exercise presents a dichotomous view of affirmative action which weakens its analogical value. Groups are either advantaged or disadvantaged. The complex intersections of class, gender and immigrant status are not easily represented in the exercise as presented here:

- ◆ Should *all* women benefit from affirmative action?
- ◆ Should recent immigrants that are "minorities" be eligible for these policies?
- ◆ What about poor whites?

The facilitator may construct *degrees* of disadvantage to provide reference points for considering these intersections. Instead of having two groups, the facilitator may create three groups (or more). Within the context of the exercise as presented above, the three groups would include one group that is advantaged (multiple choice), another that is disadvantaged (short answer) and a third group that is assigned equal numbers of both multiple choice and short answer questions. This third group might assist the facilitator in encouraging the class to see beyond dichotomous constructions of affirmative action.

I hesitate to complicate the exercise in this manner because affirmative action is generally viewed by students as an either/or proposition. I use the proposed alternatives as "what if" scenario to encourage further discussion of the topic.

Conclusion

Clearly this exercise is, at its essence, simply an analogy. Lyndon B. Johnson offered a similar analogy when he asserted that "you do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair" (Johnson 1996: 17).

Since affirmative action provokes such intense feelings and remains a key symbol of race relations in this country, educators must not ignore it. I believe that affirmative action is problematic only in the sense that race relations in this country remain problematic. By helping students think about and feel the issue separate from a racial context, they are better able to think about affirmative action and by extension, and ultimately most importantly, racism in this country.

Notes

¹ Affirmative action is generally defined here as policies that provides preferences for particular groups.

² By "race" I am referring to the socially constructed and scientifically untenable categories that separate people primarily on the basis of skin color.

³ "Facilitator" is a more appropriate term here than instructor.

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