

After the Crash: Moving from a Discourse of Deficit to a Discourse of Potential

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We enter movie theaters or push play on our movie viewing equipment, with an anticipation of fulfillment, pleasure, sadness, laughter, or any combination of expectations that we perceive will be gained from glaring at a screen of colors and depictions for approximately two hours. Many movies guide us through scripts that represent our realities and/or encompass our promised futures. C.L.R. James noted that “American popular cultural texts—popular film, popular music, soap operas, comic strips, and detective novels—offered sharper intellectual lines of insight into the contradictions and tensions of modern life in postindustrial society than the entire corpus of academic work in the social sciences” (as cited in McCarthy et al., 2004, p.164). One movie recently released not only captures our social reality and brings to the surface those ideas, conceptions, and acts we often dismiss, but it also parallels our discourse of deficit and the ongoing human crashes occurring between differing races, differing expectations, and differing ideals. These crashes create ongoing struggles and inevitable conflict.

It is now our responsibility as critical thinkers and democratic citizens to recognize the social and educational crashes that occur every day. We must then step forward to analyze the discourse of deficit under which our society operates and discover ways to model a discourse of possibility and potential. Finally, all unique human beings should work together to build a community of virtue that echoes through educational systems and society alike.

The Social and Educational Crash

While many movies depict social construction and interactions, *Crash* does not focus on surface realism, but instead it provides what appears to be an unbiased portrayal of various races and perspectives. A series of events unfold with numerous human crashes that capture what is below the surface but not often discovered. Not

only does the movie highlight the idea that we all carry racial baggage, but it also reminds us that often our greatest fear is of the “other” (Orbe, 2005). It is this fear and our cultural stories and scripts that cause us to become actors and only recognize ourselves as a character whom learns his/her lines and performs for the external social world. In the words of Paul Laurence Duneier,

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With town and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties. (Duneier, 2000, p.211)

We wear our masks and become our characters to avoid revealing our true identities and beliefs. We try to all become the same; we buy into a morphed understanding that everyone is alike and differences do not exist.

It is this perception and a lack of respect for and understanding of the “other” that further promotes discrimination and never allows individuals to truly cross borders (hooks, 1994). These factors contribute to a society in which individuals lack compassion for others and seem to be driven by capitalism and individualism. In society we experience discrimination and oppression. Within the educational system, we experience tracking, inadequate assessment tools, and a lack of response to human needs, rights, and desires.

In short, we have created a society that shuns critical thinking and social responsibility. We no longer recognize the needs of students and of our fellow man/woman. We have become so immune to feeling, empathy, and compassion that our interactions with others are not cordial, not magical, but instead- a devastating and inevitable crash. As our educational system mirrors our society, we find that violence in school rises, children fall farther behind, and teachers and educational leaders are handed the responsibility of saving our children and building a stronger future community and society.

Current Discourse of Deficit

The American society currently operates on what Pruitt (2004) terms a “discourse of deficit” (p. 236). It seems that everyday we are handed directions and ideals that encourage the minority to focus more on the world of the majority. The minority is expected to fit into the dominant system. I believe that individuals of all races are often treated as if they will struggle to find a fit in the greater system. The greater system is praised and held on high, providing a plateau that individuals must reach for and into which they must assimilate. The acts of discrimination, colorblindness, and underrepresentation are forms of discourse that are continuously spreading a message of deficit.

Discrimination and Colorblindness. Banks (2000) reminds us that racism and

sexism are indeed “unconscious ideologies and integral parts of the American identity” (p. 222). Because discrimination is not just a surface level occurrence and it often stems from cultural beliefs and fearful perceptions of the other, the crashes are often not even recognized as racial conflict, but instead they are accepted as standard social interactions. The fear and oppression helps us to see that neither blacks nor whites in the United States are open to discussing race honestly when in the presence of the other (Duneier, 2004).

In an effort to oppress the diverse voices and calm the sorrow, society began to adapt an attitude of colorblindness. In a study considering six desegregated schools in the late 1970s, researchers found that students and staff decided it would be wrong to discuss the very thing that had been a separator and factor of conflict for so long. Colorblindness therefore became a goal for many desegregated schools of the time (Revilla, Wells, & Holmes, 2004).

The practice of colorblindness assumes that all individuals are alike and does not allow for diversity of experience, or perception. Although colorblindness does allow the individual to approach the subject of race with little investment or responsibility, it does not encourage people to take a vested interest in the uniqueness of the other. Revilla et al. (2004) recognize that “the color-blind ideology left many things unsaid, many misunderstandings unresolved, and many feelings deeply hurt” (p.291). Colorblindness in these schools did not encourage a greater understanding of race and its role within the community (Revilla et al., 2004). Instead, it promoted a passive approach for handling and viewing the interaction of numerous races.

Underrepresentation. Deficit is also evident when instances of underrepresentation occur. Certainly many schools have underrepresented students and teachers. Within racial studies, there is an underrepresentation of research that focuses on the similarities of differing cultures (M. Orbe, personal communication, October 31, 2005). Women and people of color in educational leadership positions have been few and until the 1970s, both females and people of color were not included in the study of leadership (Banks, 2004).

One possible reason for the underrepresentation of minority groups in these and other social contexts, is the concept of role theory. Holding a particular role within society can define how individuals are expected to act, and how they perceive their duty and place within a larger social context (Banks, 2004). If minority groups are placed in certain roles, they may be excluded from other roles and thus denied the opportunity to be adequately represented in certain venues.

Moving from a discourse of deficit to a discourse of potential will not occur without the engagement of numerous individuals thinking critically and searching for a way to reduce and hopefully eliminate the human crashes. Adaptation to new, diverse perspectives will challenge many people and call them to question their character and current practices of disrespect and exclusion.

Future Discourse of Potential

After the crashes and a continuous discourse of deficit, we must turn to a discourse of potential and possibility. This allows us to focus on the person as a promising individual with immanent value and inevitable leadership ability. This individual does not need to accommodate to meet the needs of the majority, but instead he/she can focus on unique expectations, roles, and assets. hooks (1994) reminds us to practice dialogue as a means “to create a model of possibility” (p. 131). She encourages us not to just recognize the barriers and see the possibilities, but that “if we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate” (hooks, 2004, p. 131). One of the easiest ways for teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries is by engaging in dialogue (hooks, 2004). To create a discourse of potential, we must seek to discover our true character, and build cultural bridges.

Discovering My Character. Perhaps one of the most important starting blocks for a discourse of potential involves an exploration of self. Understanding society’s greater effect on us as individuals, allows us to see that we each play a character that is molded by our actions and endeavors, but also a defining factor in the way each of our human interactions play out. Goffman (1967) provides a clear definition and explanation of character.

And now we begin to see character for what it is. On the one hand, it refers to what is essential and unchanging about the individual—what is characteristic of him. On the other, it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments. In this latter view the individual can act so as to determine the traits that will thereafter be his; he can act so as to create and establish what is to be imputed to him. Every time a moment occurs, its participants will therefore find themselves with another little chance to make something of themselves. Thus a paradox. Character is both unchanging and changeable. And yet that is how we conceive of it. (p.238-239)

Empowering ourselves with the ability to change our character provides possibility. By making something of our character with every interaction, we become those who act upon others and not just those whom are acted upon. If we take the initiative to act positively towards others and build a character around this principle, we can slowly determine the traits that we hold, but also educate and lead others to adapt and implement these assets as well.

As researchers and investigators we can enable ourselves to step out of our skin, “consider how we conceptualize the skin of others, and how we confined our self-reflections—ignoring our positions as cultural actors and segregating our “lived” experiences from our experimental ones” (Morawski, 2004, p. 227). All studies must come from a perspective and understandably from the cultural scope of someone. When the researcher removes him/herself from the equation, we run the risk of creating distance and concentrating on only abstract findings. As researchers, stepping out of our conscious cultural perspectives is possible, but stepping away from the subcon-

scious ideals and beliefs is much more difficult. I believe it is important for the researcher to consider his/her cultural perspective, but equally important for him/her to participate in the research. By removing our ability to be cultural actors, we are labeling ourselves as the other and creating yet another hurdle to overcome. Recognizing our role in the research allows others to appreciate and respect our unique thoughts and ideas.

As a female Caucasian of English and Irish heritage, I attempt to approach my research from an unbiased perspective; yet I am aware that because I was raised in a southern Baptist two-family household, I attended a small private almost entirely Caucasian school, and I have survived Leukemia at a very early age, I will have a unique framework. My perceptions of the reasons for human crashes and the suggested means of working towards a community of virtue, all come from an open-minded premise and a desire to understand the other. Undoubtedly my cultural background will affect my studies, but without my background, I have no grounding and no connection to the threads we are attempting to weave together. As a researcher I want to be an insider, and not the other. My culture and character must be present and valued as another contribution to the ongoing discourse.

It is also important to note that even if we acknowledge and explore our cultural background as researchers, that should not in any way be a foundational perspective for all others with similar cultural beliefs. To assume that one female Caucasian can represent an entire group of female Caucasians leads to stereotyping and a language of deficit.

Bridging Cultural Differences. Cultural differences are beautiful ways that each individual is unique and different. Attempts to ignore cultural differences not only deny uniqueness, but also prohibit us from learning about who the other truly is. LeBaron (2003) says, "Cultures give our lives shape, definition, connection, and pleasure. Neither excavation nor aerial viewing reveals their full richness, for they are both within and without us, around and between us" (p. 18). We must be willing to recognize that culture is an influential and undeniable factor in most individuals' lives. Practicing enculturation and acculturation continuously encourages learning and compassion.

Bridging cultural differences does not imply that we may simply be blind to differences and assume similarity. It does however, call us to reach for understanding and to strive to be educated by others about cultures. Rosenberg (2004) stated, "the tolerance of many White students for learning about those different from themselves in race, culture, and ethnicity appears to be dependent on the extent to which they can reconstruct those others in the image of themselves" (p. 359). I would argue that this is not just the case for white students. Instead, I believe this is true for every individual. Often, relevance and application to personal experiences is how we learn and create rapport with the other. As a researcher, or community member, the process of learning about others will be accomplished within a limited framework (Morawski, 2004). Each individual has perspectives and views of life that may or may not be culturally driven. It is important to recognize that the struggle to step beyond one's comfort zone and truly seek information and knowledge of the other is difficult for

all races and cultures. Cultural proficiency may not be the easiest route, but it is the path that leads us to a discourse of potential and a promising future of harmony, open-mindedness, and appreciation for all.

In educational settings, we may be tempted and even encouraged to deal with only surface matters and avoid that which is not immediately visible. Teachers must remember that “to continue to teach as though everything important lies in our awareness is [also] irresponsible” (Pruitt, 2004, p.242). Cultural values and beliefs often remain outside our circle of awareness, until we take the opportunity to reach beyond the surface realism. Reaching cultural proficiency requires depth and critical investigation. Ignoring cultural ideals not only disconfirms and rejects an individual’s feelings and perspectives, but it also often leads us to the crashes that humans experience daily.

Building a Community of Virtue

A discourse of potential may naturally lead to the development of communities of virtue. Greater communities should strive for moral and ethical beliefs and values, as should school communities. The community of virtue aids individuals in building and expressing character. We must then work to build relationships with students, care for others always, and take ownership of the character development and community purpose (Ryan & Bohlin, 2004). We must always focus on intragroup differences and similarities as not to deny variety and uniqueness within any group of individuals (Banks, 2004). Finally, we must remember to discover our allies and “make common cause with them, then use collective power to marginalize and defeat the enemy” (Palmer, 1998, p.157). A community of virtue does not tolerate a discourse of deficit nor any actions or ideas that continuously promote the human crash.

Within school communities of virtue, teachers must be committed to critical thinking and engaged pedagogy. Teachers and professors should recognize that they do “have the power to change the direction of our students’ lives” (hooks, 1994, p.206). Character education may challenge current expectations and duties of education, but it also provides students with an understanding of why it is so important to know themselves and appreciate others. Perhaps it is possible that through school communities of virtue we can continuously help students to see the world through their lenses and the lenses of others. In a community of virtue, these students will hopefully never feel the need to hide behind their mask, but instead, actively and continuously strive for an understanding of democratic character (Duneier, 2004).

Palmer (1998) believes that if we are committed to building “communities that are intentional about the topics to be pursued and the ground rules to be practiced—we need leaders who can call people toward that vision” (p. 156). Educational leaders must drive the discourse of potential and communities of virtue within the schools and consequently within the greater society. Although numerous types of leadership offer unique advantages, I too believe that “the leadership that counts, in the end, is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their

values, and responds to their connections with other people” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p.270). This leadership may come in various styles, however, servant leadership and authentic leadership are two forms of moral leadership that speak to the commitment to emulate equality and develop a community of trust and virtue.

Often, communities practice servant leadership, in which they entrust a few individuals to provide direction and “establish an overarching purpose” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p.274). Servant leadership allows communities to seek out and speak to ideals: spending less time focusing on leadership style or problems. In practicing servant leadership, we are able to speak to core values and ideals. Servant leadership allows teachers to guide children through the learning process and encourages principals to emphasize and commit to school values and principles (Sergiovanni, 2004).

Another form of moral leadership is authentic leadership. Integrity lies at the heart of authentic leadership. When individuals trust leaders based on their integrity, we begin to see transformation. As authentic leaders it is important to first analyze personal values and core ideals and then build outward to encourage others to engage in this process. This will enable individuals to define principles for the larger community (Evans, 2004).

A community of virtue is not only possible, but should be a priority for democratic citizens and educational leaders. When we recognize our responsibility to develop a shared vision and remember the little aspects of character that have such great consequences within society, we can begin to work towards building and maintaining virtuous communities through strong leadership and critical thinking.

After the Crash

The Motion Picture *Crash* depicts the human crash as being devastating, disturbing, offensive, and cold. As many of us experience these crashes on a daily basis, they may not appear to be life altering, but under the surface, deep scars are developing and wounds are opening and emitting racial baggage. After the crash we often experience confusion and despair. We are very lonely, terrified, deceitful, ashamed, and left without our masks.

We must take this opportunity to join together and rebuild ourselves, our confidence, and our characters. Perhaps this time all races can join to provide comfort, possibility, and affection. We all need human touch, love and compassion. The discourse of potential provides an opportunity for us all to build our houses side-by-side. We can learn to share our benefits, excitement, sorrows and challenges. It is with hope and confidence that we must begin to rebuild our community together; we will not crash, instead we will hold.

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