

A Letter of Thanks to Students in Room 312

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Introduction

When my department chair called and asked me if I would like to teach EDFD 609, *Cultural Contexts of Education*, I jumped at the opportunity. I thought to myself, "I finally have the opportunity to teach a class that delves into my research and writing interests." I was so excited about teaching this class because I knew it would be a chance to explore how the principles and ideas of our forefathers of education—Jefferson, Mann, Dewey, etc.—still impact our educational system today, especially when considering how minorities and women have been educated historically and are still educated.

As I pulled together a variety of resources: articles that explored best practices for educating minority groups, the achievement gap between African American and White students, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), issues of resegregation, and the prevalence of White privilege and White male privilege and how it impacts how minorities and women are educated, as well as gathering different DVDs to utilize within class, I thought to myself: "I am going to open the minds of these students at this very Southern university" and expose them to how the historical perspective of education still permeates what we do in education today in spite of the positive changes that have been made over the years.

What actually happened in the class was unexpected. As we moved through the summer term, I not only opened the students' minds but also reopened my own mind. This letter is written to them to explain in detail how they renewed my passion for teaching future educators the importance of providing an equitable education to all students.

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June 21, 2007

Dear Students,

I am writing this letter to thank each of you. When I first saw you all in Hume Hall gathered in those desks screwed down to the floor, I wondered if I'd have the courage to carry through all of my big plans for introducing, exposing, and beginning conversations that I hoped would at least open your minds if nothing else. As we moved through the summer term, it seems at lightning speed, from the:

- Icebreaker activity on the first day.
- Our debate on White privilege and White male privilege.
- Discussions on resegregation, Oprah's schools in South Africa, NCLB, and various other "hot topics" regarding education.
- Viewing Freedom Writers.
- And, finally, our trip to the two opposite entities on our campus (The Civil Rights Monument and the Civil War statue and memorial)

and so many other activities—I saw so much of who you are not just as graduate students and professionals—but as individuals (parents, wives, husbands, friends, etc.).

My biggest goal was to challenge you to reflect on your personal belief system and teach you to begin to think outside of the box with respect to educating all children. As Williams stated in Teaching as an Act of Love, I wanted us to create an atmosphere of "comfortable uncomfortableness," but as I saw this taking place, what was happening to me in the process was unexpected and surprising.

As I challenged each of you each class session to look beyond the obvious, I also began to challenge and push myself. I began to question my own belief system, my prejudices, and my hang ups because, yes, I had formed my personal opinions about each of you based on what I heard the first day in our icebreaker activity. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was wrong in those assumptions I had made as the semester moved forward.

In my attempt to open your worlds and minds, I reopened parts of my own that I thought were open but had been subconsciously closed for a myriad of reasons. As we viewed Freedom Writers and saw the evolution of the students and teacher in room 203, I instantaneously knew that the instructor and students in room 312 had also been through an evolution, beginning with a room change that forced us to sit close and face each other during intense discussions about sensitive topics.

What I noticed is that the more I let go of my fear and really shared with each of you who I am as an African American woman, teaching in a predominantly White male environment at a Southern university, and not just your instructor, the more you let go of your fear and shared who you are as professionals and people.

Over the course of four weeks, we became a family—a community—and this closeness allowed me to share with each of you what's most precious to me, my son Prentiss. By allowing him to speak with you all, I was attempting to break-down so many of the stereotypes that exist about teen-aged African American males, especially those who are raised in single-parent homes.

I think I did this, but again you all challenged me to do more and be more than your instructor after reading your heartfelt reflections about viewing Freedom Writers and interviewing Prentiss (See Appendix B).

So, as our time together comes to a close, I feel a little like Ms. Gruwell (the teacher in Freedom Writers), wishing that I could loop with you all for a few more semesters, knowing that if we spent a little more time exploring our differences and sameness that we might find a solution to some of the ills in our society and educational system. Knowing, instinctively, that our conversations would eventually turn into activism.

I must thank you students of room 312 for reminding me of why I am so passionate about providing an equitable education for all students and meeting their individual needs, for pushing me to question my own belief system, and for making me see and accept that maybe I do fit somewhere in higher education.

You all made me step outside of who I am so that I could be effective in reaching you, and for that I will always be grateful. Thank you, students in room 312, for reviving my spirit and passion for helping others to see the value in accepting and embracing all of our cultures: minority and majority. I have learned as much, if not more, from each of you, as I hope you have learned from me and my "antics" this summer term. Thank you students of room 312.

*Sincerely,
Your Instructor*

Conclusion

Addressing sensitive issues of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender can be daunting for any instructor, and add to this teaching at an institution in the Deep South with a long history of racial tension beginning with the integration of the University and the not so popular emblems it has been known for—and the daunting task is compounded by ten. I was apprehensive at best that first day of class, but as the term moved forward, and I realized that I did not have to be the “angry Black woman” taking on all causes

for African Americans and women, what evolved was honest and intense conversations on such topics as: Is there any validity to the terms “acting White or Black.”

I noticed that when I was really willing to share who I was as a mother, daughter, sister, friend, instructor, woman, and last, but not least as an African American, my students were more willing to share who they were as real individuals. My hope is that I can reinvent that “comfortable uncomfortableness” with each class that I teach, every semester. I feel that if I can achieve that feeling each class then I am actually being effective in developing teachers who will not only understand the value in providing an equitable education to all students, but who will actually implement the type of teaching in their classes that will ensure that an equitable education is provided to all of their students.

In the wake of the Imus incident as well as other incidents, it is imperative that the spirit for us to investigate race relations is renewed. We must begin to reengage in critical dialogue about how to move forward in these relations. As the students in room 312 and I discovered, these relations, or lack of them, greatly impact the education of minority students and girls in pre-K-12 education, as well as their opportunities to extend their education in institutions of higher learning.

Appendix A

Demographics of Class

Instructor – African American female.

Class:

- 1 African American female
- 1 Korean female, who spoke English as a Second Language
- 2 African American males
- 7 Caucasian females
- 4 Caucasian males

Appendix B

Excerpts from Student Reflections on viewing Freedom Writers and Interviewing Prentiss

◆ At first glance, it can be assumed that the similarities between Prentiss and *Freedom Writers* are seemingly endless. Both involve minority students who were raised in a single-family home and attended inner-city schools. Such factors could quickly lead to the assumption that success was nowhere in sight. However, Prentiss sat in front of our class and spoke with words of wisdom, intelligence, and

a resounding demeanor that said: “My mother taught me well.”

Our entire class took something from Prentiss—that is, before forming a conclusion, listen to the story because everyone has a story to tell. On the exterior, he matched the criteria: Black student who attended an inner-city school and grew up in a one-parent home. On the interior, his story is completely different. He’s educated, disciplined, respectful, and quick to acknowledge his grandfather and the enormous impact on his life and his accomplishments. So are we looking at another statistic? I think not. Before our class stood a young man on the brink of adulthood who is taking the life lessons from his grandfather and telling people, “I am Prentiss and here is my story.”

◆ My first impression of Prentiss is that he is an intelligent and confident young man. He exhibited this greatly by coming into our classroom unintimidated and eager to answer questions. It is amazing to me that a student who will be only 15 this month can do so much. I think he truly values his education and appreciates the fact that his school offers as much as it does.

He did say he was one of few minorities in the honors program and that he had all White teachers. He would like to see a change in this, but his main message to teachers was just don’t be boring. I find it comforting that he finds no added pressure from his mom having a Ph.D. I had often wondered about this with my own child, and now know it is more a reflection of the parent. If the parent handles it correctly, the child will feel no added pressure.

With respect to the *Freedom Writers* film, he said it was real. He could relate to several of the characters and had friends who were in the same situations as many of the students in the film.

I really liked *Freedom Writers*. I am very skeptical of classroom movies and any film made by MTV. I sometimes think they overdramatize or give an incorrect slant. However, I think *Freedom Writers* stayed true to the happenings in room 203 without any Hollywood spin. This is what made it real and got me hooked. I am still thinking over the movie in my mind and will have to watch it again. Next to *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, this film reminds me of why I got into education.

◆ Prentiss was asked if he is ever accused of “acting White,” and he said this has never been a problem for him because his school is so diverse and very “integrated.” I asked him if this diversity is rep-

resented in his honors and pre-AP classes, and he responded that it is not, that there are mostly White students in his advanced classes, with a few Black students and one or two Hispanic students. This definitely reflects what we have been discussing in class. Minority students are not being well-represented in honors classes, due to the achievement gap or lower expectations for these students because they are not White.

Prentiss also talked about wearing a uniform to school. When asked if he felt like this inhibited his expression, he replied that he did not need to express himself with his clothes because “there are other ways to express yourself.” He also said that the uniforms were good because it meant that more people talked to each other. Without the uniforms, he said that he knows certain people won’t talk to each other, but the uniforms help make everyone equal.

◆ One of the main points of *Freedom Writers* is how all of the different ethnic groups are separated. They are angry with the “White folks” for how they are being treated, but what they don’t seem to realize is that they are doing the exact same thing to each other. I love how they finally look past the external to see how much they are alike.

One of the first questions asked of Prentiss was how real the film is. He said he believed it was very realistic. However,

he also said that his high school is very integrated and that most students interacted instead of staying in their own little groups.

◆ Prentiss said that he never personally felt like he was in a position where he had to give “the Black perspective” or be the spokesperson for his race. He also said he never encountered other individuals who criticized him for “acting White.” I have encountered both situations on numerous occasions because I have been the only African American student in a program like Gulf Coast Youth Leadership or in college activities like Mortor Board and Omicron Delta Kappa.

◆ Prentiss stated that he prefers the city schools over the country schools because he felt his teachers in the city schools seemed to care about their students. This idea is consistent with the students in *Freedom Writers* because when they felt Ms. Gruwell cared about them the performance level increased. One important thing Prentiss emphasized is “please never be a boring teacher!”

◆ During interview I was reminded of the “Closing the Gap” article my class group had read and discussed. For Prentiss, similar to the ideas expressed in the article, parent involvement and influence played an integral role in success. While he does have the experience of being one of a few minority students in his AP classes, he

has not been forced to be a spokesman for his race like in *Freedom Writers*. Additionally, he has not had to deal with the label of “acting White.” Again the self-confidence given him by his mother has made a huge difference.

Overall some of Prentiss’ comments were expected based on our class discussions, but some were refreshingly different. Due to parental involvement and the racially blended school experience, he seems to be having a more positive school experience than other students we have studied.

◆ *From a letter of thanks to the instructor:* The class was great, the experience was great, and I can honestly say that I have found a class and a subject that kept my attention for the entire time. No days were the same and no topics were the same. Your class provided my classmates and me with an outlook on society, the people that are in it, and how it relates to education.