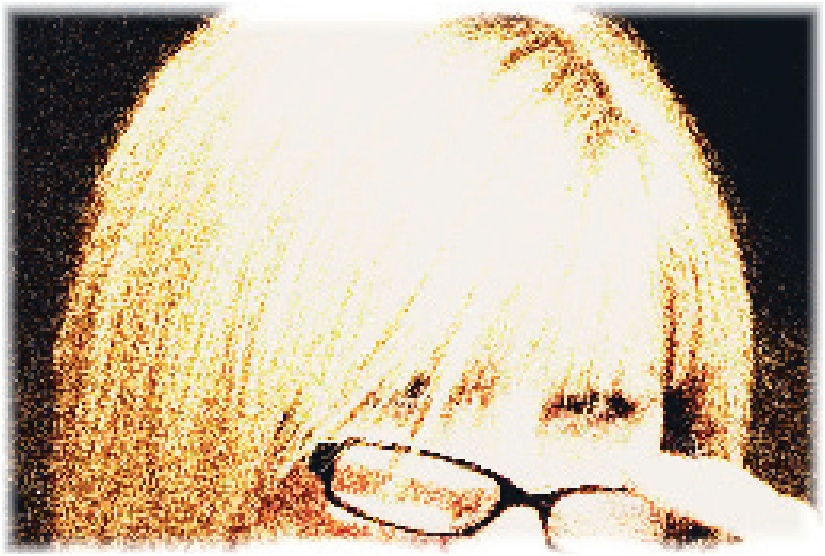

# "My Professor Has Her Opinion and She Sticks with It"

## *Using Critical Multiculturalism to Challenge Assumptions of Teacher Candidates*

**Debra A. Miretzky**

Up until recently I had only three reviews on RateMyProfessor.com. I suppose, given the general trend, that I should be grateful that I don't have more. Two of the three alert unsuspecting students:

> If you don't agree with her she will mark you off for it! You need to know her side at all times!

> Dr. Miretzky is the type of professor who tells you to give her your opinion, when in all reality she really wants you to tell her what she wants to hear! She hardly ever agrees with students' comments!

It is certainly not news to those who teach social foundations of education courses in teacher education programs that these programs are under fire for not being useful contributions to a prospective teacher's education (Butin, 2005; Will, 2006) and are a potentially endangered species (Morrison, 2007). And we also know that social foundations classes, even taught thoughtfully and well, can be quite challenging for undergraduates; as Nancy Flanagan (2009) put it in a response to a recent Education Policy Blog post:

> I agree […] that older students—especially career-changers pursuing new opportunities in teaching—are more likely to appreciate the necessity of studying educational foundations. They're further away from the K-12 stream than traditional students, and have likely had to do some deeper thinking about education as a pursuit and field of study.

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Social foundations courses, and in particular any course that has to do with multiculturalism or diversity, can be land mines for teacher educators seeking to provide, as Applebaum (2009) put it, experiences that may be *partisan* but also *educative*. This article explores the tensions of teaching multiculturalism classes to undergraduate teacher education students and is based on experiences at a public rural Midwestern university over the last few years. Interviews with department colleagues who teach the multiculturalism course, student journals and course evaluations, and reflection provide the data for this reflective essay.

### The Social Foundations Dilemma

While it is "received wisdom" that so-called liberal college professors seek to influence students regarding social and political issues, especially in colleges of education (ACTA and University of Connecticut Center for Survey Research & Analysis, 2004; Cunningham, 2009; Will, 2006), recent studies have shown that this perception is not well grounded in reality (Smith, Mayer, & Fritschler, 2008; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). Researchers conclude that, essentially, the most important influences on social and political viewpoints are parents and family, with professors among the least influential.

However, while the Association of American Colleges and Universities argues that students' "ethical, civic, and moral development" should go hand-in-hand with intellectual development (AACU, 2009), "The goal of producing ethical, moral graduates raises legitimate questions about the role of college professors […] in shaping students' values" (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009, p. 343). It is probably not unusual for many faculty in disciplines like teacher education, especially newer professors, to struggle with how far they should go in the classroom in "encouraging" students to reconsider strongly held beliefs, or to worry whether there is a slippery slide towards turning students off entirely or blurring the lines between *inculcative* and *liberal* functions of teaching (Warnick, 2009).

While Warnick is describing K-12 education, his functions are just as relevant to working with undergraduate students. For him, inculcative purposes of education seek to "socialize [students] into existing norms and values" (p. 208). Liberal purposes of education involve "helping students to decide for themselves what lives to lead rather than telling them the values or lifestyles to adopt" (p. 208). These purposes can be construed in many ways, depending on how one perceives existing norms and values, and both carry risks in terms of how they contribute (or not) to an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable to genuinely explore a range of perspectives.

Applebaum (2009) examines this question of engagement versus resistance and stakes out an admirably aggressive position in labeling as disingenuous students who claim "liberal bias" as a basis for feeling shut down in discussion. She asks "…must the teacher allow and encourage the expression of all viewpoints in the classroom?" (p. 383), and raises the disturbing and important consideration of

how often "dominant students" (p. 401) end up silencing others. This is clearly not a desired outcome. But what if the teacher is perceived as "dominant"?

Is my student who wrote "I believe it is common knowledge that students write papers with made up beliefs and views so they can finish a paper or assignment to get a good grade" in her final paper in my Education Law and Policy class speaking truth to (a sort of ) power? Is it not outside the realm of imagination that at least some students exit social foundations classes with their perceptions intact, or hardened, having cast the professor in the role of "social liberal" after being on the receiving end of unwelcome intellectual (and perhaps psychological) challenges?

A significant amount of scholarship (Landesman, 2001; Majors & Ansari, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; Tatum, 1992; Wise, 2005) has been devoted to the challenges presented by White students unwilling to examine their own privilege:

> Although they are the majority Whites still have to work for what they want. They have scholarships specifically for different ethnic groups such as African American. Yet there is not a scholarship geared just for Whites. (Annie, student)

Or denying difference:

> I personaly [sic] do not see color. I see people. Cultures do not bother me nor do the people that own that culture. I love the discovery channel and the history channel and the travel channel. (John, student)

Or resentful that they are being "attacked" for their opinions:

> The topic of homosexuality frustrates me, because if you are not completely supportive, then suddenly you are a closeminded person who doesn't appreciate the emotional connections of homosexuals. (Nancy, student)

Or unclear as to why they might need to consider their own perceptions as part of their preparation. As another student wrote in her weekly journal:

> Class this past week was interesting. The topic grabbed my attention and made me want to participate in class discussion. Nevertheless, we start talking about our reading and then branch off from there, but the topics seem to end up in the same spot (people debating/discussing diversity). I think we should focus the topics make [sic] about the classroom and maybe more how to deal with a child's background. Everyone has a different story to tell, and that is great, but when are we going to address how to handle it. This is an education class, but where is the knowledge going to be used.

## The Limitations Factor

It is impossible *not* to have opinions as an instructor, but navigating a classroom of primarily White, Christian, and rural/exburb students so as to create an environment in which honest engagement—rather than acquiescence or resentment—is fostered is a daunting task. One clear obstacle is a lack of diverse resources—people, experiences—to take advantage of as an instructor. When a colleague and I surveyed rural schools in spring 2009, the most frequent responses to the question "What are the three most significant obstacles your institution faces in meeting the NCATE diversity standard?" were:

- Lack of diversity among student candidates.
- Rural and/or isolated location in a community with little diversity, which effected teacher education departments' ability to attract and retain minority students and faculty and made it extremely diffeicut to arrange meaningful "field trips" or other types of diversity experiences.
- Resistance among faculty at both the higher ed level and the K-12 level to seeing diversity as a serious concern.

These first two issues, at least, are familiar at my institution. This leads to the question: How often is the instructor in multicultural classes at such institutions called upon to represent alternative perspectives? When does this become promotion or advocacy in the eyes of students? Perhaps it is naïve to think that colleges of education situated in cities have an easier job of representing diverse perspectives, but at least students have a greater chance of stepping out into the street and seeing evidence of a heterogeneous population. Who does the instructor represent, and to what degree, when he or she finds him or herself in a classroom with mostly Christian, White, and straight students, many of whom have little experience with people who are "different"?

Additionally, in a rural university setting in which many preservice teacher candidates express a desire to teach in the same (or similar types of) communities they grew up in, another question comes up: What if they really *aren't* going to be dealing with a broad range of "diverse" students? We know that our neighborhoods and schools are becoming more and more segregated (Orfield & Lee, 2006) and that it is becoming less likely that White students will attend schools with minority students and English language learners (Fry, 2009).

We are experiencing the curtailment of long-standing legal remedies in urban school districts that have provided a modicum of integration; the U.S. Supreme Court struck down, in 2007, programs in districts in Kentucky and Washington that appeared to have worked fairly well, with broad support, in integrating public schools. Recently the consent decree that launched the Chicago Public Schools' magnet programs was lifted (Ahmed, 2009), leading to speculation that the city's schools would swiftly re-segregate due to an influx of White applicants to selective enrollment and magnet schools no longer required to provide specific numbers of spaces to minorities. These are sobering developments that reinforce the significance of Eric Holder's words at a 2009 African-American History Month program:

> Our history has demonstrated that the vast majority of Americans are uncomfortable with, and would like to not have to deal with, racial matters and that is why those, Black or White, elected or self-appointed, who promise relief in easy, quick solutions, no matter how divisive, are embraced. We are then free to retreat to our race protected cocoons where much is comfortable and where progress is not really made. If we allow this attitude to persist in the face of the most significant demographic changes that this nation has ever confronted—and remember, there will be no majority race in America in about fifty years—the coming diversity that could be such a powerful, positive force will, instead, become a reason for stagnation and polarization. We cannot allow this to happen…

The reality, however, is that in many respects we *are* allowing this to happen, and the reminders (or warnings) that our society is changing may fall on relatively deaf ears if those ears are attached to students who have had little to no contact with diversity up until enrolling at this modestly diverse university, and who see no compelling rationale for contemplating the notion that they might someday be teaching children who won't reflect a White, middle-class sensibility, let alone contemplating how society and schools are structured to reflect those sensibilities.

## Adding Additional Complexity: The Lack of Follow-Up

As with so many self-studies situated in the classroom of the researcher, the purpose of this essay is not so much the creation of new knowledge, but instead an attempt to offer my own and my understanding of others' experiences in teaching a multicultural undergraduate course as a way of encouraging the reader to "imagine their own uses and applications" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). I make no

claims to validity, because studying oneself is problematic in that sense (Feldman, 2003), but hope to convey some legitimacy through a clear description of the data and its possible implications as well as the use of other research and theory to inform the discussion.

Ironically, with this article I am contributing to the proliferation of "studies" that are questionable contributions to the multicultural field. As Clift and Brady (2005, p. 334), discussing studies of methods courses and field experiences for the American Educational Research Association report *Studying Teacher Education*, noted, there is an overreliance on "conclusions generated by short-term case studies conducted within the confines of the researcher's own course or program, often based at a research-intensive university" with little movement "beyond one course to learn more about how beliefs are shaped and reshaped by practice."

It is also sobering to read, in this same volume, Hollins and Guzman's (2005) review of studies of programs focused on preparing students to work with diverse populations and their conclusion that, overall, the existing literature offered little in the way of understanding whether and how multicultural classes and experiences influenced candidates' behavior and practices, including the impact of teacher expectations on student learning, in the classroom (p. 510).

In other words, we really don't know what works in the multicultural classroom—what results in knowledge, skills, and dispositions that carry into the new teacher's classroom and practice and continue to be challenged and developed as the educator grows in experience. So, struggling with "what works" in an environment in which we really don't know "what works" may seem misguided, but for me, the question remains: Is it enough to lead the horse to water? Or should you try to make sure it drinks?

## Context of the Reflection

At my university, Delpit's "culture of power" (1995) is embodied by my primarily White, middle class Christian students. Cochran-Smith (1991) and Tiezzi and Cross (1997), among others, described the resistance of many teacher education students to the notion of examining their own assumptions and values as a means of learning to teach for diversity. Religion in particular can play a prominent role in shaping students' beliefs; as one result, as Fraser-Burgess (2007) put it, "While the typical preservice teacher… tends to understand her professional obligation to teach all students, the student typically does not view her professional responsibility in the light of [for example] a morality that accepts all sexual orientations."

I also found that patriotic beliefs can distort student perceptions of a school's legal obligations; a significant proportion of my Ed Policy/Law students annually argue in a mid-term essay that a fictional high schooler named Mohammed merits suspension for wearing a politically provocative T-shirt—this after prolonged discussion of student First Amendment rights and *Tinker* (1969) and *Morse v. Frederick* (2007). As noted, it is not unusual for many students to come from backgrounds they describe as homogeneous or to presume that they will teach in settings that pose few challenges in terms of diversity, resulting in students, usually female, who are eager to learn about "others":

> My first impressions of this clasws [sic] where [sic] very positive. This is the first semester I am taking education classes and I couldn't be anymore excited! […] I believe that this class is going to be very fun and challenging. I am really looking forward to the rest of this semester in this class and learning about teaching in this very diverse world. (Janet, student)

> I am somewhat excited for the class presentations because I think that it may get very creative and I really would like to hear about each minority and their struggles. (Mary, student)

While Butin (2005, p. 219) reminds us that social foundations classes are meant to "… help our students think carefully and critically about socially consequential, culturally saturated, politically volatile, and existentially defining issues within the sphere of education," in reality this is easier said than done. Considering Gorski's 2008 analysis of multicultural syllabi, enthusiasm for learning about "others" and "celebrating diversity," often with a focus on assimilation into the prevailing structure of our society, can inadvertently overshadow the more challenging, and arguably more important, task of addressing the institutionalization of a White, middle-class perspective in the schools (and indeed in all our society's major institutions), which he refers to as "critical multiculturalism" (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001).

Reflection is often required of students in social foundations classes as a means of digging deeper into issues and perceptions, but as Liston et al. (2009) point out in a recent article that examined social foundations' role in teacher education,

> Rather than being employed as a means to examine and explore the variety of educational ends and values as well as our personal engagements, reflection is all too often employed as a technique to evaluate the achievement of pre-specified outcomes. (p. 109)

Presumably, those outcomes would be what the teacher educator somehow implies should be the outcomes. Bredo (2005) lists a rather benign set of possibilities—greater sensitivity to others' viewpoints; the ability to recognize different ways of framing issues; and adoption of less dogmatic conceptions—but notes, "Of course, even this program could be anathema to a student, but if they care about what they are doing and we are not imposing our conceptualizations on them, then experience with self-defeating activity should eventually lead them back to our door" (p. 237).

However, how do we know if undergraduate students feel imposed on or not? When does a teacher "cross the line" from offering "different ways of framing issues" to advocacy, in a student's mind? How often do students parrot back, verbally or in writing, what they think they are "supposed" to say, or sit in silence thinking their thoughts, rather than challenging the professor or even simply raising questions? As Applebaum (2009) notes, objections to "teacher advocacy"" often are based on the belief that "Since students want to get good grades, students might be unduly influenced by the teacher's personal viewpoint and uncritically adopt such a viewpoint *because* the teacher holds it" (p. 382).

## The Semester That Demanded Reflection

This exploration was prompted by a particularly difficult semester teaching both multiculturalism and education law/policy classes—both required courses in the teacher education program at my institution—to undergraduates who, in significant numbers, seemed to resist being asked to consider alternative perspectives about issues as varied as race relations and classroom management. Often during the semester I found myself feeling irritated and impatient, and I sometimes experienced a Woody Allen moment as I heard the conversation in my head:

> *Don't go there… You can't think of anything reasonable to say so it's best to just nod and murmur and move on! But I can't just ignore that comment…*

I found my struggle at least partly reflected in Ahlquist's (1991, p. 164) musing:

> Rather than see conflict as an opportunity to clarify their positions and to view learning as progression toward that clarification, my students had perceived the rigor of my arguments as an attempt to impose my point of view on them. As I asked myself, "Did I provide hope for change, or was *I* responsible for their feelings of powerlessness? In my attempts to demystify the effects of the 'system' on their thinking and to offer students a view of possibility, had I pushed them to the point of resistance?"

She diagnoses a "disengage[ment] from the process of self-examination and withdraw [al] from class discussion," which she attributed to "growing awareness of their own biases" that "proved more disturbed than these students wanted to admit" (p. 163).

While it was difficult to tell if there was "growing awareness of their own biases" on the part of my students, it did seem quite plausible that I had "pushed" too hard. The evaluations my students filled out at the end of the semester were just about split down the middle in terms of their answer to a question I decided to include: "Did the instructor establish a class environment that was conducive to open and honest discussion? How or how not?"

"She would always disagree with your answer." "She was one sided and always had to try and make us agree with her." "[On some topics] I felt that if I voiced my opinion I would almost be attacked by the professor." "She was not open to different opinions." And in a way, the most thought provoking: "…not that she didn't make us feel comfortable expressing ours, it's just that when you know a teacher's feelings on a particular topic it may be a little harder to find the courage to express your own."

Comments from my educational law and policy class—presumably the less challenging in terms of examining biases and assumptions—included responses like these:

> Final paper not relevant to [class] material we went over teacher having her opinions and hers only.
>
> Least valuable was how she continually asked us for greater participation even while halting discussion by repeatedly ignoring what we're trying to say.
>
> Be accepting of students remarks, rather than simply telling us that our participation is welcome (i.e., cold responses, glares, lack of encouragement).
>
> She could: stop making ignorant racist/bigoted remarks (even while telling others they're making them). Not dismiss issues students have just because she disagrees.
>
> I felt she tore our papers apart. It is our opinions not her opinion! So she can't tell us we are wrong b/c it's our opinion.

Consider Applebaum's (2009) reminder that, in courses in which the instructor

> requires that the students be exposed to scholarship that addresses the ways in which power works and that challenges the "knowledge" of the traditional curriculum […] students may *feel* silenced not because they have been excluded but because they are used to having their own discourses go unchallenged.[…] They may then interpret this as "the teacher does not let students disagree" and that the teacher is "biased" or "one sided." (p. 401)

Nevertheless I felt chastened by the student responses. And I felt resentful. Most of all I felt that I was struggling. If part of my responsibility in required social foundations classes for preservice teachers was to foster a new awareness, what needed to be done to make this more likely to happen?

## Words of Wisdom from Colleagues?

As the semester drew to a close, I decided to interview six colleagues, also teaching the undergraduate multiculturalism courses at my university, about their perceptions of the classroom discussion environment. I also asked their permission to add the previously mentioned question ("Did the instructor establish a class environment that was conducive to open and honest discussion? Why or why not?") to their end-of-semester multicultural course evaluations and all of them agreed. Things got predictably hectic as the semester finished up and faculty prepared to embark on travel and other summer endeavors, so after obtaining permission, interview questions were sent via email in late May. Responses were returned to me over the course of the summer of 2009.

Perhaps I could find some guidance in the experiences and reflections of my colleagues: Carol, a foreign-born professor who had been teaching the class for 10 years; Susan, the bilingual coordinator who had taught it for 13 years; Brenda, new to the university and the class but with six years of teaching experience, who was mainly teaching at a satellite campus about 90 minutes away; Terri, a clinical instructor who had two years of teaching one section of this class each semester; and BH, who had redesigned the multicultural class close to 20 years earlier (all names are pseudonyms).

I also decided to submit the questions to Jack, who had not taught the class during the just-past semester but has taught it for six years, and who continues to partner with BH in research and scholarly activities focused on diversity. Though he could not, obviously, address questions with immediacy, I felt his experience would provide additional and valuable context to an understanding of the expectations for multicultural teaching. All of my colleagues are White with the exception of BH, who is African-American.

My colleagues were asked to reflect on the previous semester and the multicultural classes they taught, with an emphasis on the climate for discussion, their own role in helping and hindering discussion, the student factors that might have impacted the classroom climate, and their overall goals for their students in these classes. The questions they were given were as follows:

> 1. Overall, do you feel as though your students engaged in open and honest discussion about diversity (ethnic/racial, gender, sexuality, language, religious, and socioeconomic) in your multicultural education classroom(s) this past semester?
>
> 2. If yes, did this change at all from the beginning of the semester (e.g., did students speak up more in later weeks)?
>
> 3. How do you feel you—as a professor and as a person—helped or hindered open discussion?
>
> 4. Do you feel you facilitate discussion differently now than when you first began to teach it? How so (this is about how you "use yourself" rather than choosing content or materials)?
>
> 5. You got [positive, negative, mixed] responses from your students about the discussion atmosphere (you have your copies to review). Do you feel as though the responses were what you expected? If not, why not?
>
> 6. You had a class of [describe demographics—class level, traditional undergraduates or returning students]. How did student demographics (age, backgrounds, diversity) contribution to the classroom discussion atmosphere?
>
> 7. Were there any other challenges you feel you faced in encouraging students to talk about multicultural and diversity issues?
>
> 8. What was your overall goal for students in terms of their exposure to diversity issues?

### *Perceptions of Classroom Climate*

In terms of their perceptions of open and honest classroom discussion, and whether this evolved over the course of the semester, five of the six instructors were pleased with student engagement and

most felt that if there was a change over time it was for the better and reflected a "getting comfortable with each other" process. Several of them identified "talkative" or "articulate" students as helping to drive conversations.

There was a recognition that every student was not comfortable with speaking up in class and so opportunities for small group discussion and activities were planned as a means of participation. Jack explained "You [the teacher] definitely create opportunities" and he mused, "At times…. I think for some of these issues, I think just for them to have an opportunity to hear what other people think" is "a means of "heightening awareness…. Awareness is very important."

The one dissenter was BH, the only African-American member of the faculty. He felt that the just-passed semester was the "worst semester I've had in 21 years of teaching" at this university, in terms of student participation. One class section had gone slightly better than the other, and improved somewhat over the semester, but in general he was frustrated with the lack of interaction: "Often they're so talkative I can't get a word in… really rare… this is an extreme." BH's students' written responses to the class discussion environment question were mainly variations on the theme of "encouraged us to share our opinions." Many used the term "open" and "respectful" to describe BH, although a minority wrote that they felt concerned about sharing their opinions for fear of being "judged" by him or by other students.

Carol was described as "welcoming" and "comfortable." A few of her students who wrote that they had held back on offering their opinions identified other students as the issue, not Carol. Susan's students were brief, offering "yes" and "sure" as answers. Terri was seen as "open-minded" and "respectful" by most of her students, and many of them noted that they felt comfortable sharing personal experiences in the classroom. Some of Brenda's students remarked on the organization of the room—chairs in a circle with students facing each other, with Brenda sitting amongst them—as one reason why conversations worked, though a few students expressed discomfort with the "open forum" structure. Some students wrote that Brenda stated opinions but didn't "push" them.

In general, no one was surprised about the overall positive responses that students provided when asked about the class discussion atmosphere. Carol had only a few students who wrote that they had been reticent; her response took this into account:

> In a class of almost 30 students, if only a few say they are uncomfortable, I am quite pleased and, indeed, I was very pleased about the responses in general. This past semester, I definitely felt more at ease with the subject and with the classes. The two groups were more responsive than usual to the class topics, and I pushed more than usual to include students in out-of-the classroom activities that would get them directly involved with "diverse" students and environments. I was also more comfortable talking about issues in more personal ways—perhaps that helped.

Less than half of Susan's students answered the question, which did not disturb her; she commented that the student who collected responses reported evaluation fatigue (meaning unwillingness to answer more questions). She felt, though, that there were students "who seemed indifferent to the course material (and to me for that matter)." She offered her sense that

> The more mature students definitely contributed more and had more experiences on which to base their comments […] There were also more males in the class than I had ever had. I found I needed to be very "stern" with a couple of them who were trying to convince me that they should get As when they didn't earn them.

BH's assessment of the largely positive student feedback about classroom atmosphere that he received was that his feedback in general was "very consistent, every year" and added:

> For most of these students, I might be the only African-American instructor they had or ever had […] They've had no contact with people of color. One semester, I had a student crying […] I was the smartest Black man she ever met. And she was intimidated by me [when asking about her grade].

### *Student Demographics*

Apropos of Susan's comment about male students and the need to be "stern," instructors felt that class composition made a significant difference in how well discussions go. There tends to be a mix of age levels in the multicultural courses. When Carol was asked how student demographics contributed to the atmosphere, she had a number of impressions to share (cautioning, "take them with many grains of salt!!!"). Minority students "make my life easier" by contributing personal experiences tangibly "connecting to the materials and ideas I present." Other times, though, these students "almost shrink in their seat when I deal with race/ethnicity/immigration issues. Especially, Latino students…."

As with Susan's class, older, non-traditional students, (or as Terri put it, "more mature students") seemed more predisposed to discussion and sharing of experiences. Brenda felt the fact that 70% of students on her campus are over 22 years old, and that many of these non-traditional students were enrolled in her class, made a difference, saying "According to theories of adult education, not only should these students have more life experiences upon which to draw, they should have more self discipline and self direction along with more confidence in their abilities. I find this all to be true."

Terri pointed out that non-minority students drove discussion in her class:

> I had one experience late in the semester with a student who came to class fully prepared to debate the value of Christian values in public school and the evidence of this being the basis of our educational system…WOW did we have a discussion…everyone was very respectful, but I think he came away with a larger view of himself and his ideas…it made me realize I needed to spend more time on this topic in future semesters. I think the best part is when I have students say things like "I don't think it is really that bad"…or "that doesn't happen so much anymore" (on various topics) and other students will either share their experiences or those they have witnessed that are to the contrary.

Further, BH noted that "oftentimes the shrinking violets are the ones who are really listening […] you can see it in the quality of their writing." It seems clear that while demographics can drive the frequency of class discussions and add to their quality, for my colleagues, homogeneity didn't necessarily result in acquiescence or resistance.

### *Use of Self*

Not surprisingly, all my colleagues felt that the way they used themselves in the classroom could help or hinder discussion, and the use of personal examples was, for most of them, a way to make the classroom safer.

Carol put it this way:

> As a White female with an accent (that thank God seems to be pleasant to most students' ears) who has moved to the U.S. as an adult and has strong roots in and knowledge of a different society, I can use my cultural, linguistic, gender diversity in the class to make some of the topics more tangible from a personal perspective. Being an immigrant and an international traveler, I can use my background to explain diversity on different levels. My personal examples seem to receive interest and I think my personal stories make me more reachable, less professorial,

and might help students feel comfortable about telling their stories and opinions.

Carol also felt that she "used herself' differently than she had when she began teaching the course, writing:

> OH YEAH! Definitely. I can still remember the first semester: I came into the classroom like a bulldozer with all my baggage of leftist righteous theories hammering students about social justice… and they hammered me back. In that particular moment, I did not engage in conversation with my students, but I engaged in confrontation, trying to convince them of my position. I almost had a "race" riot in one of my class with students from different backgrounds verbally attacking each other. I didn't have any idea about what "place" most of [my] students were coming from and I hit a cement wall that really bruised me.

For Carol, the experience of also teaching bilingual classes, where students were mainly from diverse backgrounds, helped her concretely understand that students "heard" classroom content differently, depending on those backgrounds. This helped her to slow down, along with "perhaps spending more time on being more organized and calm in the class."

Terri talked about her use of herself in this way:

> I try to establish a non-judgmental environment. I am honest about agreeing or disagreeing with my students, but I try to frame comments (written or verbal) so as not to turn the student off, but get them thinking in a different direction.

Like Carol, she noted that:

> I do a lot of using examples from my own experiences or injecting a story or experience that I have accumulated (from others) that might challenge them into thinking how this topic or issue is complex and needs to be carefully thought through. I always try to verbally thank each student for voicing their opinions in class [because I] recognize that it is not always easy to do so.

She did not feel that there was a significant change in her approach to the class from when she first began teaching it, writing "I think from the beginning I began with being honest about myself and my approach to multiculturalism […] I think it helps them to be thoughtful about some of the course topics if they first do so from a personal perspective then explore where that fits in the world and education."

Susan emphasized the importance of learning everyone's name and having informal conversations with students during the first class, as a way of establishing connections. She is willing to be open about herself as well, writing, "I do share my own beliefs for the most part. I tend to hold back some on the religion, but race, class and gender, and language issues, I generally am open if anyone asks." This openness is not new for Susan, who said "I'm sure my examples change, but I personalize it [the class] as much as I can […] I think this adds to the safety factor."

Brenda sees herself as a "patient, trusting, compassionate" educator who realizes her limitations, namely, that "teachers can only shape the learning environment" and "make the invitation." She believes that approach positions her classroom as a place where students feel comfortable expressing their perspectives.

Her sense of herself as facilitator is echoed by Jack, who says that his purpose is to try to foster a "creative environment that hopefully exposes people to the issues […] … hopefully leaves them open to working to learn more and do more." He wants students to see him as "someone who's willing to do things, try things, to get to that point." He acknowledges that sometimes this is s struggle, and he has learned that "students have always been looking for the practical, the real. There are students that want more, and I'm aware of being able to provide that."

Jack described his reactions to resistance, saying "I'm continually vacillating back and forth—there's part of me that wants to confront students, shake them… Shaking them will only cause them to turn off […] All you can do is create the context." He's learned over time to "kind of let that go […] I can't force people to change."

On the other hand, BH saw his role differently, largely because of his race and to some extent because of his age. As mentioned, he felt his race was an important sub-text to his work in the classroom. This difficult semester saw BH "definitely us[ing] many tools from my bags of tricks" to engage his students, "beyond what I'd ordinarily do." He found himself returning to material he had stopped using because he felt more acutely the "distance in age," saying that students "have no clue whatsoever… none" about the "contextual framework" provided by historical markers such as McCarthyism, Vietnam, or the Civil Rights Movement. These changes and additions helped somewhat, but he still felt resistance he could not penetrate. The resistance, he thought, might have to do with him:

> Some students feel "he's racist..." I challenge. I'm "overbearing." I have always been about social justice and always about critical inquiry…. I don't care. They're going to have so few opportunities to engage a personality like mine that I'll run that risk.

He acknowledges that he has tried to be sensitive, but "I'm not shying away from what I believe is a realistic, alternative view to the mainstream crap they they've been taught."

### *Other Challenges*

In terms of other challenges that might hinder classroom discussion, Carol echoed BH's concerns about contextual understandings, listing "lack of historical knowledge about their country for the most part; very superficial understanding of their social surrounding because of students having grown up in segregated communities (White middle class group). The work we do to provide the average student with lenses to see through social and political realities is overwhelming at times." Susan reiterated that "religion is always a touchy issue" that can sometimes play out with student resistance to planned visits to non-Christian places of worship, or to guest speakers, manifested by a lack of attention.

Jack believed a key challenge is the lack of institutional attention to social class as an element of multiculturalism, and that an additional obstacle is finding a way to "get people [students] to think about their own privilege." Brenda agreed and went further, writing:

> Deficit thinking and racism are pervasive memes of American culture that I expect to encounter. I position myself to work with students from their own starting places in uncovering biases and becoming more justice-oriented in their thinking.

### *Overall Goals: What Happens to the Seed?*

For Jack, "planting a seed […] that we're all different and that's going to have implications in the classroom" is his main purpose in his multicultural classes, along with his emphasis on the teacher's role as a change agent. Susan's overall goal was to "make them [students] aware of their responsibility to teach all students and give them a sense of who their students potentially will be." Brenda wrote that she hoped students became

> aware of the pervasive and inescapable influences of prejudice, as all people are biologically predisposed to prefer their kin groups; and further that in the US we are socialized into a racial hierarchy where White (and male, Christian, heterosexual and English speaking) is the norm; and further that personal bias is distinct from the prevalence of institutional forms of discrimination; and finally that social

> forces contribute to academic achievement more than internal characteristics.

Carol felt that there were "many goals, too many to be reached in one semester with a class of 30 students." She noted, in particular, personal awareness of one's own biases, an ability to embrace and enjoy diversity, and on a broader level, "awareness should take them to act against those practices and policies at least in their own classrooms, but hopefully beyond them." Terri hoped students left understanding how quickly our student populations are changing, and "how [their] views can and will effect their abilities to be the kind of teachers our students need. […] Most importantly, I tell them that I hope they leave our class with more questions than answers…that's my greatest goal for them."

Finally, with BH, we return to the "seed" metaphor, albeit in a slightly different form. He sees himself as a seed planter too:

> I see myself as Johnny Appleseed, and sometimes your crop will come up really fast […] Sometimes, though, you give it more time, more rain, more everything, and still, the birds will get it.

## Looking Back, from the Next Semester on

While I am aware that this is a limited "database" from which to draw conclusions, BH seemed to be the only instructor among my colleagues who came out strongly in terms of challenging students to rethink their assumptions; who seemed to want to take advantage (perhaps, again, because of his vantage point as an African-American professor in a primarily White institution) of his proximity to these students for 16 weeks to shake things up. The more common and more measured "seeds of awareness" approach may be the better choice; as Fraser-Burgess (2007, p. 4) cautions:

> To treat pre-service teachers according to the demands of treasured moral principles means, therefore, that we cannot impose the very moral principles we advocate upon them, even for weighty and important goals such as the demographic imperative […] Practically, pre-service teachers as moral agents means that candidates must be critically engaged with those values that underwrite the demographic imperative and be won to diversity or multicultural education by the weight of the reasons in its favor.

Applebaum (2009, p. 386), however, asserts that "Teachers often make the comfort and safety of students who are systemically privileged a priority, with the consequence that the needs and safety of the systemically marginalized are further marginalized" (though she means this literally, I believe it holds true figuratively as well).

We have all seen the picture of the person with the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other—and here it is, now, as I realize that I am still unsure of the utility of either approach for working with students who by and large can remain—or believe they can remain; it may be the same thing—disconnected in any meaningful ways from "others."

I think of how, for two earlier semesters, my prompts for encouraging discussion of racial issues (or at least discussion of the inherent difficulty of such discussion) took advantage of the "in the moment" national reaction to Barack Obama as a presidential candidate and also involved revisiting Hurricane Katrina by having my class watch a portion of Spike Lee's powerful and angry *When the Levees Broke*, his documentary that indicts those in power—Black and White—for abandoning much of New Orleans to the storm. I scheduled this class for the second half of the semester, along with classes on gender, sexuality, and religion. One student, that week, wrote in his journal:

> As far as the movie clips we watched are concerned, I felt like it brought some issues into the light that needed to be talked about. However, I think that it was clear that the point of view given was very one sided. Because the movie seemed like an attack on so many people I feel like it lost a lot of its effectiveness. I think that many people would dismiss the information given or find other directions to point the blame because they might feel threated [sic] by the way the movie portrays the situation.

He is right, I am sure. Yet there remains something compelling for me about that anger—it is not safe, it is not welcoming—and about BH's contention that "They're going to have so few opportunities to engage a personality like mine that I'll run that risk [of criticism]." I have not figured out how I feel about—let alone how to answer—the question Ahlquist (1991) raises:

> How can the teacher, as problem poser, reflect student reality back to the student in a nonthreatening, problematic way that will induce self-examination and critical questioning—without imposition? (p. 165)

How does a teacher, in one short semester, effectively reflect that critical multiculturalism Gorski (2008) found so little evidence of in his survey of syllabi? Can an instructor really acknowledge their position—their advocacy—and encourage classroom discussion of this position (Moglen, 1996) as one perspective among many? These are questions that arise every semester with every new group of students who want to become teachers and who need to look at race, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality not as abstract theoretical concepts or exotic differences but as, among other things, markers of human struggle and institutional failure.

I have stopped using *When the Levees Broke* for the time being because I am not sure how to use it. It is an upsetting film. It is difficult to listen and absorb the anger of the citizens of New Orleans that permeates its frames. It provokes journal responses like:

> It was dumb on the part of the people living there not to leave when they watch the news and weather and knew the Hurricane was coming, yet didn't want to leave just because they were raised there and only knew that land. So on that part it was there [sic] own fault. (Joe, student)

> Why do Whites not like to argue about race? The reason is slavery in our history and for that the white man is always the bad guy in any debate of race, so why even bother arguing, is my opinion. (Tim, student)

> Yes, there are Black Americans that are well educated and very good people but the majority aren't. Where I'm going with this is that you need your fellow Blacks to back you up in a good way instead of bad. Blacks commit too many crimes each year to have their own month. (Stephanie, student)

> During our discussion in class I felt very irriated [sic]. I feel that it is not fair that White people are made out to be the bad guys all the time. There are plenty of african americans, and other races that are racist to White people. And we also have our share of sterotypes too. (Janet, student)

Even if these reactions were shared in the classroom—they were not—productive engagement "to motivate students to engage rather than resist and dismiss" (Applebaum, 2009, p. 395) often seems like an overwhelming challenge, especially when so many students call race "a very touchy subject that many people dont care to talk about" (Andy, student) or hew to guidelines like "I tend to keep my mouth shut to avoid pointless arguments" (Dave, student) or voice that they are "afraid to offend anybody" (Linda, student).

The stakes are high, at least to me. The class is only 16 weeks long. I continue to struggle with my responsibility and role in terms of my impact, for better or for worse, on students. Recently a new post joined my lonely three RateMyProfessors comments; it read:

> Yeah, she's very opinionated, but I've

never been marked off for disagreeing, neither has anyone I know.

Maybe this signals a trend!

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