

REVISITING COLLABORATIVE BOUNDARIES-PIONEERING CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVES AND RELATIONS OF POWER

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Abstract

In this article, we examine collaboration as a situated practice that defies a prescriptive definition mainly located in the interpersonal relations of professionals. We argue that collaboration does not merely depend upon “good” will or professionalism, rather interacts complexly with racial expectations that have been cultivated in institutions where racism is manifested in subtle ways. We use Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to examine how we as 2 different pairs of teacher educators in innovative programs in different sites faced racial tensions through our co-teaching experiences. Each racially diverse pair consisted of a more senior faculty member and an international teaching assistant. Hence we discuss the tensions that are inevitable as we professionals collaborate across relations of power and race. We argue for a more complex understanding of what it means to collaborate from these different social positions.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; Teacher Education; Co-Teaching

Learning happens in and through relationships, by ways of ‘instructional conversation’ where teachers and students alike are engaged and mutually influenced. Understanding collaborative teaching means understanding these relationships and their contexts geographies both human and institutional.

DiPardo (1999, p. 153)

Introduction

Dewey (1939/1991) linked the improvement of our social environment to a democratic process that required freedom, equality, and cooperativeness. However, very few research studies have examined closely how learning takes place in the context of hierarchical relations of power, specifically between collaborative professors and their teaching assistants. We take up this space in our inquiry to problematize collaborative teaching and learning by analyzing two case studies that initiated innovative practices in second language teaching. More specifically, in

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this paper we will show that collaboration does not merely depend upon the instructors' good will or professionalism, but rather interacts complexly with racial expectations that have been cultivated in institutions where racism is manifested in subtle ways. Indeed, similar to many other situations today where unequal relations exist, within collaborative learning and teaching relationships race tends to be ignored in an attempt to create harmony, which in turn leads to viewing conflicts as personal rather than a confluence of expectations that are racialized. We recognize that these attitudes permeate an institution's educational practices so much so, that they become invisible, hence they go further unchecked, even by those who stand most to lose by the lack of collaboration.

Theoretical framework

Mutually critical dialogues were an essential part of the re-conceptualization of our understanding, both as parts of our research about the lived experiences as well as sources for generating new understanding of these lived experiences. Therefore, this research drew from phenomenological perspectives where complex understandings are formed through interactions from which we create our standpoint (Gadamer, 1979; Denzin & Lincoln, 1995).

We used Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) as a way to theorize race beyond the interpersonal, and provide another layer of understanding of how our experiences together unfolded. This theory built from legal studies of the 1970s sought to denaturalize norms that, on the surface, might seem neutral and fair. Since then, interdisciplinary work has been undertaken to investigate persistent social inequity in serving populations of color in public schools (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado & Stefani, 2001). Such work highlighted the need to challenge the use of "color blindness" and meritocracy myths as "camouflages for the self-interest of dominant groups in American society" (Ladson Billings, 1998, p. 6). Often non-dominant participants in studies using critical race theory employ a discourse of "naming one's own reality" or using one's "voice" to heal the wounds caused by racial oppression. These authentic stories help communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed and serve as the first steps taken toward addressing these inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Inherent assumptions in this line of thinking are first, that there is a dominant culture and that all others are non-dominant. A second important assumption is that race is recognized clearly as a stable identity marker by the participants. In our study, we saw race as a complex and unstable social construction, one that shifted over time and political circumstances.

Two Contexts and Participants

Massachusetts

In 2002 a series of legislations affected the provision of public education. The No Child Left Behind federal policy dictated the indicators of quality teachers and also provided grants to promote teacher education. Another was local to Massachusetts Question 2, beginning in 2002; teachers were required to comply with another law that restricted provisions of bilingual education services. The University of Massachusetts was one of the recipients of a Title III and VII grants aimed to raise achievement of English Language Learners (ELLs) who were both

learning English and academic content by preparing teachers to work more effectively with this population.

In attempting to integrate current efforts being made at the School of Education, the Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition (ACCELA) Alliance was born with the purpose of collaborating with school districts and communities in western Massachusetts to find more effective ways to support these learners. This program leads, among other things, to a Master of Education (M.Ed.) and Licensure in English as A Second Language (ESL).

In-service teachers, waived teachers and paraprofessionals involved in the program had the opportunity to learn how to better work with ELLs in the mainstream classroom partly through inquiry projects based in their own classrooms. Courses were taught by faculty from the Bilingual/ESL/Multicultural (BEM) Practitioner Program together with Teaching Assistants (TAs) who worked with teachers on their projects. Theresa, a biracial Afro-Okinawan, was the faculty and Andrés, a Columbian was the TA.

This course was part of a series of four courses designed to both promote the learning of Spanish and to provide professional development for teachers. Some of the expected outcomes of the course were (1) to familiarize teachers with the language development challenge through first-hand experience as learners of another language trying to learn a language while learning content (2) To familiarize teachers with types of language programs and content that were potentially available in the state. This meant that teachers as students were to be taught in Spanish during the Immersion section of the course, Sheltered Spanish during the second phase of the course and finally, in both Spanish and English for the last phase of the course.

Ohio

In 2000, the College of Education was the recipient of a three year Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to use Technology (PT3) grant to integrate the use of technology into the different Master of Education (M.Ed.) programs available at the Midwestern university where part of this research took place. This grant was the result of the government efforts to ensure that every student in the United States would be technologically literate (e.g., Goals 2000).

Consequently, the College of Education created systemic changes in the university's teacher education programs so that all graduates were able to make appropriate use of technology to improve teaching practices and student learning (Bangou, 2003). Several Graduate Assistants were hired to infuse the use of technology into specific graduate programs and Francis, a French-Caribbean, was the PT3 graduate assistant for the Foreign/Second Language Education (FSLED) program and started working in January 2001 (Bangou, 2003).

The previous academic year, the College of Education hired a visiting professor named Rose (pseudonym) for the fall 2001 to teach the FSLED Methods of Teaching courses. Rose, a White woman, was an experienced foreign language teacher who had taught in a suburban high school for 24 years, but she had never taught at a university before. The main goal of these courses was to help students develop their teaching skills. However, Rose and Francis agreed that the course expectations related to technology would be to: (1) create a two-week web-based

unit plan; and (2) start building their professional electronic portfolio. Moreover, six technological workshops were provided to students to help them with their final project (Bangou, 2003).

Methodology

We arrived at a more complex understanding of race and collaboration through sustained discussions and interactions between Theresa, Francis (the two authors of this paper), and Andrés. Rose, politely declined an invitation to participate in the discussions. However, her perspective was included in the conversations through interviews and field notes that Francis collected when working with her (Bangou, 2003). Moreover, we reconstructed the history of our collaborations through four separate personal narratives and Rose had the opportunity to write her own narrative. The next step to add more depth to our representation occurred through dialogues about our texts. In conjunction with our narratives and dialogues we used other data sources collected in the process of carrying out our normal duties as instructors in the two different teacher education programs. These sources included our field notes, interviews, lesson plans, memos, student work and informal communication with students. Unlike other narrative inquiries, we also analyzed our narrative together for further identify assumptions and negotiations that have produced our current understandings. In this way we reflected analyzed, and portrayed our discussion of the inherent racial tensions and negotiations involved in institutional innovations and their impact on our collaborative relationships in teaching.

Findings

Raising the Issue of Race

Initially when we wrote out narratives, our gender and status as professionals figured in our discussions. However, what did not surface were our racial/ ethnic and class affiliations. Francis admitted at first that for him race seemed unrelated and Andrés expressed reluctance to talk about how race may have figured in the conflicts that unfolded. He began to question whether he could be perceived as the “oppressor,” a perspective that provoked his fear as he holds very strong notions of social justice. Contrary to Andrés and Francis, Theresa was open to discussing how race could be tangled into the events and wanted to begin a discussion on the matter. As mentioned earlier, Rose politely refused to discuss this issue.

The invisibility of race in the narratives, Rose’s refusal to talk about it, Andres’ fear of one’s judgment, and Francis’ perception of race as unrelated could well be part of the culture of “contrived collegiality” that Fullan & Hargreaves (1991) reported on between school administrators and teachers that impede teacher empowerment because of limited commitment to building collaborative cultures. It could also be part of the silence that Tatum and Brown (1998) describe as a major barrier to speaking openly because of fear “that talking about such sensitive topics will create rather than avert racial tensions” (p. 12). In any case, it was clear that within the contexts of our collaborations talking about race did not make the majority of us feel comfortable. To break the wall of uneasiness Theresa had to take the lead and as the discussion progressed about her experience both Francis and Andrés began to agree that race could figure into their understandings of their interactions.

Negotiating tensions

As mentioned earlier, one of the goals of the course taught by Theresa and Andrés was to provide teacher-participants with an immersion experience in Spanish. Andrés admitted that their comfort in the class was a primary concern to him and he would sometimes switch to English when he felt that the communication with the students started to suffer. Contrary to Andrés, Theresa made a point to seek as many opportunities to speak primarily in Spanish with props and cognates as scaffolds. Because of Question 2, a legislation that restricted the use of non-English instruction in the classroom, several teachers did not perceive learning Spanish as important. Symbolically Andrés became the mainstream representative and Theresa became a bilingual ~~other~~, at times viewed as a ~~threat~~. Andrés' decision to use English was even more powerful since he was a native speaker of Spanish. Theresa and Andrés were not on the same page pedagogically and it allowed for resistance from students who already disagreed with Spanish as medium of instruction in the class. Moreover, Andrés characterized his alliance with the students as an issue of ~~fairness~~ and was effective in shaping several students' perception of Theresa as the dominant authority, which created an unusual rift between students who actually saw the course as being meaningful and those who dismissed its importance to their formation as teachers of ELLs.

Race here is implicated through the use of language and through the symbolism. For several participants, Theresa was an outsider by physical traits, as she was the only Asian-looking and only African American in the program. However, this *outsiderness* was linguistically constructed by her persistent use of Spanish and her liminal interactions with participants in the class. For others, Theresa was seen as a professor attempting to have some understand deeply through their own experience what ELL students actually undergo in the schooling process through a second language. Andrés became positioned as one of them, an English dominant participant who disagreed with the authority in using Spanish and in having to meet state standards. The fact that the populations that were directly impacted by these language policies were Puerto Rican and that the majority of the teachers in the schools were White and monolingual provides an symbolic juxtaposition of realities of Spanish and English in the classroom implicating racial bias. Mey (1985) states that when people are denied the right to language, the legitimacy and value use of their own language is oppressed linguistically. Schools become sites of unequal social relations whereby upholding dominant language choices is seen as ~~natural~~.

Collaboration, Race and Power Relationships

In his narrative Andrés highlighted that his understanding of hierarchical relationships between faculty and students/TA were based on his experiences in Columbia. He commented that in Columbia ~~students~~ might be able to express their opinion but the faculty's opinion was the one that always mattered." He later admitted that his cultural background impacted the way that he negotiated the content of the class with Theresa. Interestingly enough, such understanding of hierarchical relationships also impacted the way that Andrés wrote his narrative and interacted with Theresa during this research project. At first, Andrés did not want to appear to be disrespectful towards Theresa and be perceived as ungrateful. The information that he decided to include in his narrative and his investment into the dialogues were impacted by such concerns.

Although Francis had a better cultural understanding of racial relationships in the US, as an international student he felt quite vulnerable. Andrés shared similar feelings. An international student cannot be legally hired outside of campus and tuition fees are often twice as high for international students. In such context, a TA position is usually a coveted means for international students to afford university costs and stay in this country. Francis and Andrés admitted that they would avoid anything that could potentially jeopardize their chance to be hired as TA's. Rose's opinion about his work and his professionalism was one of the factors that could endanger Francis' status in this country. At first, Rose resisted Francis' vision and he confessed that when negotiating with Rose, he often felt that he had to comply to her requests because he did not want to upset her and potentially lose the dreams and goals he had been working so hard to achieve.

As a Black man, Francis admitted to being socialized to rarely trust a White person and to only trust people from his own race. These values are often part of the survival apparatus developed by the Atlantic Black Diaspora and its roots in slavery and centuries of discrimination. These values are usually transmitted from parents to children. Francis admitted that the collaboration would have been different if Rose had been a person of color. For instance, when Rose returned students' first draft of their unit plans she did not include any feedback about the technological aspect of the unit. Consequently some students believed that creating an online unit plan was not required. Instead of confronting Rose about it, each group sought out Francis after class. He helped redirect their focus and clarified any confusion about the assignment to construct a unit plan.

For Theresa, as a biracial professor whose race is often not clearly identified by people who first look at her, particularly those unaccustomed to multiracial peoples. Her interactional practices are a composite of her Latin American, Louisianan, and Okinawan socialization, and form a hybrid resource whose roots are not clearly singled out. Often she is mistaken for Chinese or Filipina. In the Northeast, even though her speech is sprinkled with “ya'll” or other southern tokens from time-to-time, she is often complimented on how well she speaks English (for a foreigner). In her narrative, Theresa's insights into differences between second and foreign language settings shaped how she interpreted Andrés' eagerness to downplay Spanish and use more English even in their co-taught Spanish course. She saw his minimal use of Spanish and the reluctance to explain underlying Spanish linguistic rules as a lack of knowledge about the differences between foreign and second language development, which needed to be scaffolded through his performance as instructor in the class. By taking on these tasks, she positioned him as learner and not co-teacher. She stepped in where and when she saw him experiencing difficulty or needing additional support. Her expertise as non-native, professor conflicted with the image of native speaker as expert. Again, the conflict is racial and related to language, in this case metalinguistic knowledge. The normative ideology operating in the background is that Theresa cannot be perceived as the authority because Andrés is the native speaker. Thus for several students, it became clear that Theresa was an expert and Andrés was in an apprenticeship position. For others, Andrés was positioned as a subordinate, and unfairly so.

Discussion

In the previous sections, we developed several insights about the nature of collaborating across race and power relations. Indeed, we were able to show that collaboration is indeed affected by institutionalized racial expectations grounded in power relations. For instance,

Theresa and Andres collaboration was affected by local racial expectations associated with native/non-native speakers; and dominant/minority languages. In both institutions, collaborations were complexly affected by participants' status as professor, TA, International students, White, Columbian, bi-racial African-Okinawa, and French-Caribbean. Moreover, through our experiences we were able to illustrate how difficult it is to talk about race even when one is willing to do so. At first, for a majority of us race seemed irrelevant, and it was clear that there was an uneasiness to address such issue. One of the participants even decided to leave the project. However, through our discussions we were able to create a space where race could be unbarred. We were then able to reveal that race was rendered invisible mainly to protect ourselves and our collaborations. For instance, As TA and international student, for Francis and Andrés raising race was perceived as a threat to the success of the collaboration and by extension a threat to their success in our institutions.

This study has implications for educators interested in issues of power and race and who are teaching collaboratively. Like DiPardo (1999) we do believe that understanding collaborative teaching is institutionally and humanly contextualized. To understand such collaborations is to understand their complex interplays with power relations and race within institutions. When assessing collaborative relations a question we might always want to ask is: What is missing, invisible or silent here? While inequities that are located in interpersonal relations can be addressed through dialog and analysis between two willing people, our study reveals that it is not necessarily an easy process in part because of the subtle inner-workings of racism, what makes it even more necessary to address.

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