

Chapter 2

The Politics of “Being”: Faculty of Color Teaching to Social Justice in the College Classroom

Michelle Harris

Introduction

Much attention has been paid to *social justice* within higher education in recent times even as policy makers, educational administrators, and researchers struggle to come up with a clear and cohesive definition of the term. One working definition offered by Young (1990, p. 15) is “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” with the goal of including and valuing people of diverse (broadly defined) backgrounds. While some may explain what *social justice* ought to encompass differently, most would agree that operationalizing its meaning into actionable results—i.e., how to reach the end goal of a socially just educational setting or an equitable society—is a difficult endeavor and one, as educators, we struggle to both define and achieve.

Many post-secondary educators, like the above-mentioned groups, also struggle with what a socially just classroom setting may entail. We are, after all, in the business of providing an education to our college students that ultimately improves their lives (Cunningham, 1988; Teel, 2014), and in doing it in such a way that our graduates feel empowered and affirmed on the way to procuring their degrees. So while some disciplines provide few (and some may argue, no) opportunities to directly and overtly teach about social justice, the *value* of creating an inclusive and respectful classroom setting is embedded within the institution of higher education.

In this chapter, I argue that while all faculty may acknowledge the charge to create learning environments that are nondiscriminatory and respectful, Black (and other visible minority) faculty in particular, are often understood to embody values associated with social justice because of their physicality—being non-White. What comes into play is a kind of “politics of being” that highlights the larger racial social

M. Harris (✉)

Department of Africana Studies, University at Albany - SUNY

BA 115, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, USA

e-mail: maharris@albany.edu

structure in which education takes place and in which both students and teachers alike are embedded. In other words, how we are imagined may be more important than what we are. What we (as Black faculty) are about—or want to be about—may rest not so much in our own hands, but more so in the hands of our students who work to make sense of our presence in the front of the classroom. Therefore, Black faculty, regardless of their disciplinary expertise, may be able to capitalize on parts of this reality by becoming academic activists that forward the cause of racial social justice in the classroom.

Black Identity Politics: A Very Brief Discussion

The meanings attached to race and ethnicity derive from the social structures within which individuals live (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2014; Omi & Winant, 1994). While it is a part of how we come to know ourselves—our racial identity, specifically—it is not a solely subjective phenomenon. In other words, one's racial identity is not only salient to the self, but is also objectively salient to others, and may, in fact, have radically different meanings, significance, and “life” to the other than it does to the self.

Because racial stratification is a feature of American society, for the purposes of this argument, I want to point to two (amongst many) important phenomena that must be acknowledged in terms of how racial groups are understood both from an insider and an outsider perspective. First, people who seem, by their phenotype and skin color, to belong to a particular race come to constitute an “imagined community,” not in the sense of nationalism, as Anderson (2001) introduced, but in a more essentialist way of the assumption of shared interest, experiences, or sense of affinity for and with others who look like me and who share a similar rung on the ladder of racial hierarchy. I do not suggest that a particular Black person, for instance, does not or cannot have her own complicated, flexible, or unique subjective identity category by which she comes to know herself. Rather, I am making the case that regardless of how salient (or not) race may be to a particular individual, if she is perceived to be and then categorized as Black, she will be imagined to be more like (i.e., “in a community” with) others who look like her. Let me illustrate from a personal experience in the college classroom. One semester, while teaching a course entitled *Race and Ethnic Relations*, a student made the comment that because I am Black, I ought to know that Blacks have “certain” values and that those values were what made them different from Whites.

The second (and related) phenomenon is that categories of racial bodies are “read” in different ways—often independent of objective cues, and these readings are inherently political in nature. By political I mean to draw our attention to the ways in which group interests are often framed around identity markers. This point could easily be illustrated by the recent highly publicized killings of innocent Black men and boys by police, in many cases because their actions—some neutral, some obviously nonthreatening, and some ambiguous—were construed as aggressive or

criminal. Examples can also be drawn from the classroom. An African American and a White colleague from a College of Education tell the story of co-teaching a course on assessing learning in the elementary classroom. The course focused on both standardized and non-standardized assessments and covered topics such as the achievement gap, bias in testing, and the hidden curriculum. Students, I was told, were taught to disaggregate standardized test results by socio-demographic variables like gender and race. Throughout the semester, one student, in particular, voiced opposition to this practice, saying that to look at data by race is to be racist. While both of these professors repeatedly addressed issues related to racial bias in testing and assessment, my White colleague was apparently much more “confrontational” in presenting data and other facts related to the topic. At the end of the course, their resistant student gave the White professor a glowing evaluation, but said of the African American that while she was a nice lady, she seemed to want to “single-handedly address topics of multicultural education and race debates.” My example illustrates how individuals may be “read”—i.e., understood in terms of motives and actions as a function of race and/or ethnicity. Of course, this makes perfect sense when we again remember that we come to know the meanings attached to race because they are embedded within the cultural, structural, and political systems in our society. They are difficult to escape and they operate to impose what may seem to be “objective,” though not necessarily truthful meanings on who and what we are.

Faculty-of-Color in Universities

Faculty-of-color in university classroom can represent many things to their students. True, they can represent bias (in support of other people of color and against Whites) or an overconcern for issues of multiculturalism or racial inequality. In a more positive way, I believe we also represent change and inclusion, and that we often embody what diversity means to students—meanings we can parlay into teaching for social justice. With over 79 % of the professorate being White, it means that students have only a one-in-five chance of ever seeing a person of color leading their classes (NCES, 2012). Therefore, when students enter such a setting, they have an implicit understanding that they will be experiencing something that is outside of the norm. In this sense, race—i.e., non-White status, constructs or presents a circumstance where the faculty-of-color is seen to have some social capital in the area of concern or awareness of issues around social justice.

It is important to remember that how others may make meaning of us is sometimes disconnected from how we may make meaning of or even endeavor to portray ourselves. Each player in a particular educational setting—whether student, professor, or administrator—brings with them the weight of what his or her particular physicality means in our society. As noted above, race, in particular, is a powerful physical marker, and the meanings attached to racial designations, situates individuals differently along the lines of both privilege and disadvantage by governing

access to material and ideological resources, and variously distributing power. Thus, to ignore this phenomena—that race gives varying amounts of respect, authority, credibility, and credence—sometimes independent of, but often in accordance with, other social identities and designations—is to ignore the various and multiple ways in which society is stratified.

This reality means that a Latino professor of physics, even though he has never mentioned race or gender in terms of course content, still brings with him the social and historical weight of both race and gender into the classroom. While it may be more comfortable to imagine that neither race nor gender matter in today's society, the realities of everyday life reveal that the intersection of those two designations, positions individuals very differently; a Latino teacher in front of the average college classroom is likely to command less respect and authority, and will be prone to more negative stereotyping, than a similarly trained and equally competent White teacher (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Additionally, that same professor is likely to be seen as more invested in issues of social justice and inclusion than his White counterpart because in our society those most affected by racism are thought to care most about issues of this nature.

Few would argue that this assumption unfairly burdens non-White faculty, and situates White faculty as uncaring, at worst or, at best, oblivious. It is clear that White professors have work to do to overcome such assumptions, but my focus here is on what Black and other professors of color can do to capitalize on (in the service of furthering a social justice agenda) the common fate assumptions that emerge as a function of their physicality and that certainly follows them into the classroom. I want to be very clear in stating that just because one is Black, for example, one is no more likely to know how to theorize, teach, or care about issues of racial injustice.

Each semester I am confronted with examples of how students tend to “read” me as a Black professor, regardless of the course I may be teaching. They, for example, routinely assume that they know my opinions on a range of matters pertaining to issues of racism, inequality, and social justice. They literally sometimes preface comments they make in class with the phrase, “...I know you think....” Some assume that I relish using the platform of my professorate to scold them about issues of inequality in our society, and they certainly sometimes take offense when some subject matters make them uncomfortable. Moreover, I believe I am “read,” in part, as someone who cares about these issues because I am Black. Some years ago, a student in my Race and Ethnic Relations class made the following comment when evaluating the course, “...because she's black, all she does is talk about race.” The irony was not lost to me then, or now; yes, it was a class on race. What this vignette communicates more than anything else, I believe, is that the reality of our positionality in the larger society follows all of us—both student and teacher—into the classroom. We are unable to leave it in the hallway. Since that is the case, and even if one is not an expert on issues of racism, exclusion, and inequality, faculty-of-color can parlay some of how students make sense of us into forwarding an agenda for social justice and positive change in the educational experience.

Below, I outline three strategies that all faculty—not just faculty-of-color who are already likely framed as caring more about these issues—can use in their

classrooms to teach towards social justice. They can be implemented regardless of discipline, subject area, and without ever mentioning the words race or social justice.

“Teaching” to Social Justice in the University Classroom

Create an Inclusive Classroom

Most educators would agree that a setting where students feel respected and valued is one in which learning can most easily happen. Two important and necessary elements for creating and encouraging an inclusive classroom space is to allow and encourage students to voice divergent and diverse ideas, and then to pay attention to the ways in which classroom culture and practice can oppress some students (e.g., English as a second language students who may hesitate to speak up in class). Sometimes, educators may introduce critical perspectives to everyday occurrences or present multiple scholarly views of the same topic to their students, thereby modeling the value for divergent voices. Of course, students, themselves often embody the idea of diverse and divergent experiences, understandings, and perspectives because of their various backgrounds. Insisting on an atmosphere of respect and acceptance of difference when students share ideas, question positions, or offer perspectives that may be different from the majority perspective or from the cannon, models the values of inclusiveness and respect. Disenfranchisement, says research, is bad for all of us (Brennan & Rajani, 2008; Williams, 2012). Students who, because of their race, ethnicity, or sexuality, may feel like outsiders in the educational setting, are more likely to suffer emotional distress, feelings of low self-esteem, and are less satisfied with their educational experience.

Choose Course Materials That Further the Cause of Inclusion

Since the beginning of the 1970s, colleges and universities across the country have participated in programs that highlight the importance of including women’s scholarship and contributions into the cannon of disciplines. In some ways, it was a project whose success could easily be assessed—including readings by women in a syllabus, and by scanning the names of authors, one could ascertain the degree to which this was occurring. The inclusion of non-Whites, as generators of knowledge, into syllabi and course readings has been slower to occur. Some in the professorate may say that it is because fewer people of color contribute scholarship to their field; they would not be wrong. Regardless of the much smaller numbers of scholarly contributions by non-Whites in most fields (and in some fields, that number is miniscule, at best), I would contend that if one is deliberate about seeking out this

scholarship, one can and will find it. Why is it important to do? Because a syllabus that is populated by the voices of only Whites, tacitly, if not explicitly, communicates the dominance of White Knowledge. How would one go about doing so? Utilize relevant scholarship that your non-White colleagues produce. When you meet Black or other non-White colleagues at conferences, read and if pertinent, include their works on your syllabi. Tell your departmental colleagues what you are seeking to do, and ask them directly to recommend relevant works produced by non-White scholars who they know from graduate school, conferences, or research collaborations.

The next step to this strategy is one that I've used in my classes. I found that students were really interested in knowing a little about the authors they were reading and that many of the contemporary authors were people I knew personally because we attend the same conferences, were classmates in graduate school, or are research collaborators. I began to include photos and institutional affiliations of authors in my PowerPoint presentations when I lectured about their works. This became a nonintrusive and implicit mechanism of introducing students to the diversity (in terms of race/ethnicity and nationhood) of knowledge generators within my discipline. This can interrupt ethnocentrism and promote the idea that intelligence and creativity are dispersed amongst a multitude of people all over the world; it also subtly reinforces the notion of inclusion and social justice. It is a practice, I contend, that can be copied regardless of the subject matter one teaches.

Become an Academic Activist

Some may argue that the university classroom should be a space that is value free—and certainly apolitical. I do not hold such a belief, and I go one step further in saying that every person in a classroom—be they faculty or student—carries with them the residue of how they are positioned in the society at large. Privileges, deficits, and standpoints are not left outside in hallways. Education, while potentially transformative, is always political, (group interests, positions, and power are variously distributed in society) and the values and mores of the most powerful group dominate in societies. Learning, moreover, does not occur in a vacuum, but unfolds within the context of the larger social world. Therefore, professors have the opportunity to become academic activists—people who work to breakdown the artificial barrier between “education” and society, and who use the platform of the “person in the front of the room” as a way to illustrate, regardless of discipline, the interconnectedness of these structures and the ways in which they permeate life. Doing this is to put action to a socially just classroom space.

To achieve this on a practical level, one must pay attention to classroom dynamics that reflect the racial/gender/class dynamics of the society at large. Do groups form along “natural” lines in the classroom so that students of color, for instance, always work with other students of color? If so, then create groups of students instead of having students always choosing their group-mates. Do more privileged

students show resistance or indifference to issues of inequality? Address the resistance in general ways by pointing out counterarguments and why they may be fallacious. If you teach about issues of inequality, do you fear that students will perceive you as preaching about these sensitive issues? If so, then engage in pedagogy that illustrate, rather than “tell” points. Create an assignment that allows students to “discover” information they can then analyze together.

Conclusions

To understand social justice as endeavoring to include and value people of diverse backgrounds is not to oversimplify all that a socially just society should be. Rather, it is a good starting point, and one at which tertiary educators can convene to do their part in furthering this cause. Faculty-of-color have an important part to play at this historical moment—especially because we still represent a change from the status quo—an underrepresented group amongst the professorate. Without training in the social sciences or in race theory, non-White faculty can create learning spaces that speak to the principles of social justice. Our students may understand us to be more invested in this kind of endeavor anyway, and capitalizing on this perception can actually create an environment that benefits both student and teacher alike. They, I believe, are hungry for instruction on these matters—whether through overt lectures or in subtle and implicit ways. Inclusivity, respect, and ensuring that those who are underrepresented or voiceless have a voice are important ways in which we can achieve social justice in the classroom and ultimately create better lives for all in our society.

Key Instructional Practices and Strategies

1. Create an inclusive classroom where all students feel respected and valued.
2. Choose course materials that further the cause of inclusion in that they are representative of scholars from diverse backgrounds.
3. Become an academic activist—an individual who helps students see the connections between “education” and “real life.”

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