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Doris Flowers

Vanessa Sheared

Lee Martin

Ming-hey Lee
San Francisco State University, USA

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information
Doris Flowers, Vanessa Sheared, Lee Martin, and Ming-hey Lee

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Women of Color on Teaching Race  
Doris Flowers, Vanessa Sheared, Lee Martin & Ming-yeh Lee  
San Francisco State University, USA

Abstract: Women of color discuss issues of race in a teaching and learning context. In doing so we will include discussion of the differences in the philosophical approaches to teaching about race in academe and the barriers encountered in the classroom.

As women of color engaged in teaching courses on race and gender, focus on these topics has caused feelings of trepidation, frustration and excitement not only for us as educators, but for our students as well. When we as women of color engage in teaching courses on multiculturalism, equity, social justice, culture, race and gender we often encounter resistance by Euro-Americans. While Euro-Americans tend to act out of resistance, students of color have traditionally responded fully in the dialogue -sharing experiences and ideas - or they have grown silent. In as much as we believe that institutions of higher education should allow people to reflect upon and engage in discussions about social inequities and injustices due to racism and sexism, we find that these issues continue to create tension and frustrations in the classroom. Moreover, we find that race and gender remain elusive topics in the classroom environment.

Never the less there is a commitment to ensuring that race and gender are understood within the context of the social, cultural, political and historical reality which they affect. We know that this particular space was not designed with women of color in mind. We enter draped in a garb unlike that of others in the professorate. For our wear resembles that of a shield - a shield of confidence, patience, knowledge, and understanding. While teaching courses that involve topics of race and gender have informed much of our understanding about how complicated and challenging these issues remain, we as women of color have a commitment to creating social change. Through our experiences on teaching about race and gender, we have come to understand the importance of talking to each other, engaging in a dialogue and sharing the ways in which we have used race as the unit of analysis in our discourse.

The purpose of the roundtable discussion will be to offer an analysis of how race and gender factors into the classroom dynamic of teaching and learning. The methodological framework that guides this work is grounded in Afrocentric, womanist, feminist and critical race theory. The Afrocentric paradigm is a philosophical approach grounded in African Tradition (Flowers, 2003). It is more inclusive of the sociohistorical, political, race, class and gender contributions made in the learning development of African Americans. The womanist perspective acknowledges the intertwining realities that human beings experience within society where race, class and gender are interwoven (Sheared, 1994). The feminist pedagogy is defined as a method of teaching and learning that employs a political framework which attends to and/or encourages the following: 1) consciousness raising; 2) activism; and 3) a caring and safe environment. Implicit in this form of teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is an understanding of the universality of gender oppression and a critique of Western rationality, andocentric theories, structured inequalities, and unequal societal power relations (Lee & Johnson-Bailey 2004). Critical race theory is rooted in an understanding that race is the underlying unit of analysis used to deconstruct the ways in which racism affects our society. Moreover, it views racism as an outgrowth of oppression as a result of one groups exerting power and control over another
because of the color of their skin. In our approach to present dialogue around this topic, the
discussion is organized to share our experiences as educators who teach about race. In doing so
we will include discussion of the differences in the philosophical approaches to teaching about
race in academe and the barriers encountered in the classroom.

*Philosophical Differences*
On teaching race and understanding racism, women of color in the classroom find themselves to
be a significant part of the equation. Women of color teach race and racism from experience in
that we tell a story that is inclusive of many other voices at the margins. This is particularly
significant for women of color as the knowledge construction for many of us comes through our
own lived experiences (Sheared, 1994). Therefore, by shifting the center to include all, we allow
for a better understanding of the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (race, class,
gender, etc.).

When teaching race, a major conflict in academia is in how race and racism is constructed. The
philosophical differences in how race is taught often interfere and offer another level of
resistance for engaging one another in constructive dialogue. Many euro-centric academicians
grounded in postmodernist social perspective, often see experience as a matter of competing
discourses, personifying “voice” as if the voice or discourse itself constituted lived experience
(Anderson & Hill-Collins; 2004, p 4). This perspective objectifies the reality of those
experiences, rendering them as social data.

*Race Barriers Encountered in the Classroom*
The resistance of learners to engage in discourse that acknowledges the existence of white
privilege and the myth of meritocracy is a barrier that renders learners motionless and ignores
racism and gender biases. This is reflected in learner behaviors such as guilt, blame, accusations
of prejudice, anger, and other forms of resistance. While this appears to be forms of
powerlessness, this is really a demonstration of power so that those in the center can remain in
the center and issues of oppression and social injustice become irrelevant topics of discussion.

*Transforming Thinking and Perspective*
In teaching about race and gender, we approach this endeavor with an aim of transforming
perspectives and thinking. While this framework seeks to give voice to the experiences of those
who exist on the margins and those who are silenced, it most emphatically recognizing and
analyzes hierarchies, systems of domination and privilege that restrict full participation/true
democracy and social justice within this society. As a result, learners are exposed to the
conceptualization that race and gender inequities affect all individuals and groups in this
society—whether they reside in the center or exist on the margins (Anderson & Hill-Collins;
2004). Women of color in the classroom who approach race and gender within this framework
assume the responsibility of not only analyzing race and gender but also reconstructing
knowledge to encompass the learner— their experiences and their experiences with engaging in
the dialogue of race and gender.