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From Resistance to "Solidarity": Teaching Race, Class and Gender to Working Class Adults

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Abstract: In this paper two faculty members critically reflect on their experiences teaching a course entitled, Class, Race, and Gender in an effort to contribute to a sustainable conversation grounded in intersections between the three.

Introduction

That there needs to be an “honest, in-depth conversation about race” is a commonplace assertion in the United States. The authors of this study argue it would more important to engage in a conversation rooted in intersections between class, race, and gender. The authors have, individually, together, and collectively with students, attempted to engage in such a conversation while teaching a course entitled “Class, Race, and Gender” (CRG) in an adult education labor studies program in New York City.

This paper will unpack the resistance to the subject matter the authors encountered while teaching CRG, and explore how an adult education program focusing on labor studies might, in collaboration with the students, engage in a conversation about class, race and gender in ways that are honest, critical, and sustainable. In documenting how issues were defined in the course, we aim to contribute to a larger conversation about the intersections between the three.

Theoretical Framework

Freire says that education is about reading words and worlds (1970). Because education is never neutral, we see labor studies as helping to turn this reading of words and worlds into a collective critique of capitalism as an economic, political, and social system *and* a way of pushing this reading toward a search for a more just alternative. Critical theory, then, framed the first part of this study because it speaks to the multiple ways in which capitalism produces and reproduces relations of domination and subordination (Brookfield, 2005). And since it stresses themes such as institutionalized racism and the myth of race neutrality, Critical Race Theory is important here because issues of race continually emerged, explicitly and implicitly, in our conversations and in the larger narrative of the course (Delgado and Stephanic 2000).

While guided by Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory, the second part of this study was also directly informed by an anthropological approach to the cultures of the working class. This approach is rooted in the notion that the structural inequalities basic to a capitalist political economy create temporally and spatially specific “fields of force” which give rise to particular forms of political and cultural domination, and particular forms of resistance to that domination. (Roseberry 1994; Thompson 1978) From this perspective, working class culture can be understood as the process by which ordinary men and women understand, adapt to, and struggle against these inequalities at work, at home, in the community, or in this case, in the classroom. (Crehan 2002)

Research Design

Collaborative Inquiry (CI), the primary methodology used in this research, offers a rich way for participants with a shared experience to explore, critique, and analyze their perspectives as co-researchers. Since the people collecting the data are also the ones from whom the data was being collected, CI offers a systematic structure for learning from experience, alternating between cycles of action and reflection (Kasl and Yorks 2002; Heron and Reason, 2001). In addition to discussions where the two participants explored emergent ideas, identified salient themes, and analyzed data, we also journaled extensively, took notes after classes, and spoke at length with our students, using their spoken and written words to ground our discussions and analysis.

Scene 1 (September, 2009)

I (Dianne) walked somewhat apprehensively into the classroom. It was my first night of teaching the course "Class, Race, and Gender." I had over prepared and like every other instructor I know, wanted it to go perfectly. Instead, it turned out to be as far from perfect as possible.

*The students, mostly white males from a NYC based-construction trade union, poured into the classroom, brimming with pent up energy. Not realizing I was the instructor (though I was standing at the front of the room writing on newsprint), they uninhibitedly voiced their disdain for having to be in class that evening. When I—a woman of tri-racial heritage—turned around and introduced myself, there was complete silence. Then we got started. Upon noticing one of the texts on the syllabus was Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, three students began protesting vehemently. "We're not reading anything written by a socialist." "I'm not racist but there's no way I'm spending a penny on buying anything written by him," said another. The atmosphere became increasingly chaotic. Inwardly, I was shocked. I explained that this was one of the aspects of the class that was non-negotiable. I added that reading the text might help inform, if not change, their position.*

"I don't have anything against my black brothers and sisters, or you, but I will not read this text!" One student began kicking his chair in protest. At one point, an instructor, who was teaching next door, popped his head in to ask if things were going okay. I switched off the light, shocking the students into silence. I switched them back on.

Analysis

I furiously journaled after that class, thinking that if I just continued writing, I might be able to pinpoint the exact moment or issue that contributed when things got hideously out of control. Were spaces of solidarity really this tenuous and frail they were so easily tearable? Were the decades of anti-oppression work so fragile that its stitches barely held seams of progress together? If the students felt connected by class, how did race enter the narrative so effectively? Most of all I thought about whether the classroom space was salvageable after such anger had wedged itself into people's consciousness.

The journey from that night forward was slow, uneven, and unfinished. We began by attempting to collectively disentangle how we come to think and see what we see, making it possible to potentially re-construct our realities in different ways. (Martin, 2001). I introduced the following questions so that we might collectively unpack unacknowledged discourses. Who benefits from presenting these ideas as facts? How is it in your (our) self-interest to believe

(Obama is a socialist, etc)? How does it work against you (us) to believe this? Who has something to gain by asking these very questions? Who has something to lose?

By unpacking notions of whose truth was being privileged and at what cost, we were able to step back and critically analyze some of the toxicity of that first night. Students began noticing dichotomies in their thinking. For example, I'm saying and thinking my neighbors are lazy because they're immigrants but my parents were also immigrants, or I hear Obama being called a terrorist and muslim on Fox news and I don't question it (nor am I really thinking about the effect of what I'm saying on the black students in the class...make that everyone else in the class.) Towards the end of class, there seemed to be a clear shift in consciousness among students, from everyone needs to take this class to this class isn't just about becoming a better student, it's about becoming a better person. I should mention that while many students in class expressed similar statements demonstrating a shift in thinking, not all students did. Among the students who seemed to demonstrate a change in their consciousness, I wondered how sustainable this shift was. In what ways can the classroom become a space for co-authoring alternative democratic and humane scripts when we haven't gotten past the historical impact inequities upon certain groups?

We must continue to ask to what extent can solidarity be authentically unleashed and nurtured when we reside in a society that privileges competition and individualism. After all, understanding the effects of racism and other institutionalized inequities doesn't mean we eject it from our consciousness. To expunge the full effects of the tremendous dehumanization that has been inflicted upon all of us (and which we have, albeit inadvertently, inflicted upon others) would take a lifetime. Another dimension to this were the ways in which students of color responded to the class being taught by someone who looked like me. Several times after class they approached me saying, how heartening it felt to be grappling with issues and questions that they had been their whole lives (We didn't choose to think about race. We had to). Added to that was a closeness they articulated feeling with me because of our shared outsiderhood. (We're glad it's you who's talking with us about this stuff).

Looking back, the course was a very small beginning to a complex, important collective conversation that needs to occur. With no vocabulary to meaningfully unpack the painful, brutal history of racism in the United States; as a society, we are paralyzed, unable to fully move forward because historical scars haven't healed (yet ironically, our historical collective memory has proven selective on this matter). As a nation, we accepted the notion we were a color blind society. This acceptance has disempowered the historical experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stephanic, 2000). Counter-narratives (people of color telling their stories and naming their realities) is one way that can support collective healing.

Scene 2 (Fall 2009-Fall 2010)

I had already steeled myself for a rough start when I (Richard) walked into my first class that same semester (Fall 2009). It was not my first time teaching Class, Race and Gender to apprentices in the construction trades, so I expected the interruptions, the complaints about the cost of the books and the amount of reading. In some ways I had a leg up. I am male, after all. I had also spent time working in construction, so I was familiar with boisterous masculinity. But there was also a resistance amongst the students similar to what Dianne experienced, a resistance to the course material itself, and especially to Obama's Dreams From My Father.

There were audible sighs when I mentioned we would be reading Obama's Dreams From My Father, gestures which could be interpreted as "raced." More interesting was the overall

cynicism when it came to politics and politicians of any stripe. In a room of predominantly male, working class students, roughly half white ethnic, and the rest a mix of African-American, Latino, and Asian, several students said something on the order of, "Why should I buy this book, he [Obama] is just another politician who wants my money. They're all the same." Throughout the semester that cynicism would return. When we discussed current events, and especially items that raise the issue of entrenched class power, it was hard to get past comments suggesting something like this: "It always been like this, always will be." Just like the rest of them, they would say when addressing Obama's failure to take a hard line against Wall Street in the aftermath of the financial meltdown of 2008.

Might this be an indication of some sort of solidarity? In the Fall of 2010, I spent the final evening in Class, Race and Gender discussing what students felt these terms actually meant, and more importantly, which one—as an idea, or a force in their lives—was the most important. "Class," one African-American apprentice, a woman, responded. "I know," she said, "that when I wake up in the morning and I feel kinda sick, that I just have to go to work. Rich people can roll over and go back to sleep." That's what class is all about, she added, and she feels it all the time. So did the others in the room.

Analysis

Our students are mandated by union leadership to take this and other courses to secure an Associate's degree. If they are to advance within their apprenticeship program, a process which involves pay raises, they must perform at a basic level academically. What's more, they are often worn out by the demands of their jobs, not to mention the strain of keeping their heads above water in today's economy. Many have commutes of an hour or more to jobs that begin at 7 AM.

The construction industry has always been cyclical—so layoffs and periods "on the bench" are the stuff of common experience. But faced with an unemployment rate in the construction trades of around 25% in New York City, many apprentices in the trades fear what the future holds. Plus they work and often live in neo-liberal New York City, a "luxury" town where the wealthiest 1% earns 44% of the total income, while the working class that makes the city run struggles to get by. Unions in the construction industry are comparatively strong, but the students know full well that in New York City and across the US, organized labor is under assault. (Moody 2007; Parrott 2011)

Caught in this field of force, it is hard for our students to think much past the next paycheck. They don't feel "college" is for them, and they don't have time or energy for it anyway. Students ask what I "really" think of them; just recently, a student asked me if I thought they were stupid. However awkward the question, when the students ask it they are saying no to power. It is how they understand their position in the field of power; it is an expression of solidarity.

When I asked students what they thought Class, Race and Gender was all about, one apprentice said, "well, if you think one class will change the way one group thinks of another, ain't gonna happen." Evidence of hard held views? Perhaps, but it was also a spur to begin a conversation about how students define these terms, how the meanings of the words might organize the world around them, and how, in their own lives, these meanings might (or might not) "matter." Moreover, it pointed in the direction of a discussion about what social solidarity is, about how it works, and about what forces get in its way.

The challenge is to create the space that permits a productive and sustainable conversation about such things. When discussion turns to the impact undocumented immigrants might be having on the labor market, solidarity draws tighter. It gets tribal, all about protecting insiders from outsiders. Moreover, when the conversation turns to how deeply entrenched assumptions about femininity and masculinity, or for that matter race, still shape the experience of many in the trade, the conversation can get bogged down as students retreat into various defensive postures.

Amongst the apprentices there is an often rambunctious but heartening camaraderie on display in the classroom. Spilling over from the established working class culture of the worksite, it can harden into a reactionary exclusivity. But it cuts both ways, for it also suggests another kind of cultural politics. The lines drawn by the historically sedimented experience of sexism and racism are not erased by any means. But they are discussed, argued, negotiated, often heatedly but never in my time where a laugh could not still be had as the students packed up and went home.

So there is, in their common experience as union members and workers, a way forward, a way to begin to imagine another world. Indeed, I would suggest that union membership, when extended to the classroom, can enable the creation of a *cultural space* in which the oft-times narrowly felt, tribal kind of solidarity can move toward a broader form of class solidarity. As we discuss how, for example, women might *feel* working class in their own ways, how people of color might feel working class in their own ways, and how whites might feel working class in their own ways, we can achieve a critical consciousness of the way in which capitalist domination creates various kinds of subordination, different working class sensibilities, different working class *habitus* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The promise here is not that, suddenly, all will recognize that they have common “interests,” and then march lockstep to the voting booth and put vote appropriately. The cultural commonality lay in the struggle—as the late historian of the English working class, E.P. Thompson, put it, culture is not so much a way of life but a way of struggle (1961)—and we need to be as attuned to its many valences as we are to the maneuvers and positions of the powers that be.

Implications

To the extent that adult education programs are committed to helping their students become active agents in the remaking of their own worlds, then courses such as Class, Race, and Gender play a critical role in creating the space in which dominant scripts can be subverted and rewritten. While they explore uncharted and difficult terrain, they are rooted in democracy and equity; so we, as adult educators, we have a responsibility to co-author and embrace these new scripts.

The theoretical approaches put to work above represent different perspectives, which have produced different findings. The first focuses on building a sustainable, self-reflexive critique of the discourses of domination, especially those that perpetuate racial inequalities. In doing so, it helps us see how culturally embedded these discourses still are, and how important it remains for education geared toward democratic social change to find ways for working class students to productively unpack these discourses. The other focuses more on how the rudiments of a broader-based working class solidarity might be built up from the kind of solidarity the students already feel, and bring to the classroom, through their common attachment to a working class institution (a trade union) and a common struggle to get by in hard times. There is a

tension here, in that one of us hones in more on the challenges, and the other on the possibilities, our classrooms present. This is, however, a productive tension.

It is productive, on one hand, because it keeps us honed in on the dialectical nature of critical education. We need, after all, to constantly find ways to enable a sustained critique of the world as it is, while at the same keeping our eyes open for opportunities—in the circumstances of our students' lives—to remake the world as it should be. On the other hand, it is a productive tension because the question it raises is *not*, say, does class therefore trump race (or vice-versa). The question it raises, rather, is what does life under capitalism feel like, in this time, in this place, and to what extent/where, in all the different responses, can we locate common ground?

Boggs argues that we must recognize the damage that a highly developed capitalist system has done; and in that recognition there a necessity to create strategies to transform ourselves into more complete, more *human* human beings. This is a struggle that must be waged not only against the external “oppressor” but also the oppressor within. (1998, 151-152). However, we must also understand that there is nothing immanent about solidarity born out of oppression, however we label it. Effective solidarity, the kind that produces and maintains actual change in the face of power, is both a historical-social *process* and an ongoing political *project*. Education for democratic social change can create space in which the difficulties and the promise of this process and this project can be understood and articulated by the students themselves.

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