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Hogwash: Coming to Terms with Critical Race Theory in Adult Education

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Abstract: Today's adult and community education classrooms and sites of practice are increasingly diverse. As adult educators, we have a responsibility to appropriately meet each student at their level of need. Critical race theory provides a non-hegemonic lens for understanding and meeting the needs of our diverse student population.

Background

During the Summer of 2008, I facilitated a course on critical race theory (CRT). I am an African American junior faculty member at a predominately White regional university in the Midwest. Four students signed up for the course. Though small, the group was diverse across a number of demographics: race, age, sexual preference, political ideology, class, and academic discipline.

Critical race theory was relatively unfamiliar to all of the students but all entered the course with great anticipation of learning something useful to take back to their respective sites of practice. Much to the surprise of everyone, including the instructor, the course resulted in learning across multiple domains - cognitive, emotive, personal development. As we grappled with the material, we began to appreciate the immense possibilities for how CRT could be used as a pedagogical strategy to meet the needs of diverse learners and better understand our respective academic discourses.

In addition to learning that CRT has four guiding tenets - (1) Racism is endemic and central to understanding classroom relationships; (2) Racism challenges dominant classroom ideology such as white privilege; (3) CRT moves the discussion to that of social justice; and (4) Experiential knowledge is key to exploring race, racism and its impact on classroom discussion, workplace, and society at large (Yosso, 2005) - we experienced the power of the CRT as a method. Through the medium of the story, a hallmark of CRT, our class moved past pleasant surface conversation to deep meaningful dialogue about the emotionally charged and, at times, cognitively dissonant course material. When one student exclaimed the material was "Hogwash", we knew we had moved to a place where raw discussion could take place. This depth of discussion helped us to understand critical race theory on many levels.

By the conclusion of the class, we felt like we had experienced something quite extraordinary. In this paper, the students share their stories of their experience with CRT. The collective experience, as told through the stories, highlights the power of CRT as a pedagogical strategy.

Our Stories

Jeanne's story: Nearly a year has elapsed since my introduction to Critical Race Theory. It is difficult to remember clearly my experiences in this class. The mind so quickly compresses expired time into a movie of the mind that, when played over, may alter one's perceptions of that reality. Reality, after all, is egocentric and victimized by the stories we tell ourselves. This

reflection, then, is an accounting of the directional shifts in my thinking and the development of a disruptive propensity to rewind and replay old thinking through a new lens prescribed with critical race theory. I now find myself more attuned to events, beliefs, and dialogue that marginalize people because of their color, alternative sexual orientations and lifestyles, differing social classes, age, physical appearance, and gender. At times I find myself attempting to suspend time in order to unearth personal biases that shape the way I perceive the world. I cannot let this reflection proceed further without first setting the context for our small learning community.

A snapshot of our learning community reveals a fair amount of diversity within the group despite its small size, featuring differing perspectives that lent to enriched discourse--once the walls built by a colorblind and polite white society were cast aside. A physical description of seminar members included two African American heterosexual females (the professor and a student), one Native American heterosexual male, one Caucasian lesbian female, and one Caucasian heterosexual female. Cognitively and socially, the learning community included five individuals seeking to understand the societal implications of a country founded on a culture that privileges the white race, particularly white males. Understandings emerged as we came to better know one another through our stories, beliefs, emotions, and reflections of past experiences.

Despite the lapse of a year's time, one revelation continues to stick with me more than any other. Our instructor stated her race precedes her into a room. It was at that moment I first realized the impact another's appearance has on my perception of who and what I judged them to be. As a result of Lisa's statement, I at times play a game where I study a person's face and try to remove all my socially constructed, preconceived notions and biases. I look at the individual physical features of people and try to remove all the definitions I have learned over a lifetime associated with race, gender, appearance, and age that our society projects...that I project...on others. It is nearly an impossible task, but one that mitigates the prejudices that have long held me captive growing up white and female in America.

I cannot end this reflection without stating the now obvious heightened degree to which the study of critical race theory has changed the way I think and behave, not only in my personal life but in my professional life as well. As a result of the time I spent with my colleagues in EDAC 698 and the opportunity to hear their shared personal stories, I now think and act differently. Someone once said that the world is changed for the better one person at a time. Hopefully, the study of critical race theory through this course of study has done that through me.

Dawn's story: I participated in a class exploring critical race theory during the summer of the democratic primaries. I am currently writing this reflection piece about the class in the aftermath of the discussion concerning the incendiary cartoon in the New York Post and Eric Holder's statement that America is a "nation of cowards" for not being more open in talking about race. I will linger with Holder for a moment. I believe it is true that Americans shy away from substantive conversations about the social construction of race. It can be a difficult weight to lift in the name of real dialogue about life experience. Case in point, for those who disagreed with Holder, the predominate critique seemed to be that he did not acknowledge the strides that our country has made. We do have a president of African descent, and Holder is the first African American to hold the office of Attorney General. Holder did not know what he was saying, he was being unwise. Others got caught up in the word choice. How dare he call Americans cowards? Americans have been in wars to spread democracy, for goodness sake. That is as far from cowardice as you can get.

But Holder is a smart man...who has been witness to the ramifications of race on our legal system up close. I believe he was very intentional in his comments, and the media's holler in reaction to his quiet certainty about the nature of racial discourse in this country only confirms the accuracy of his observation.

But I digress. With the primaries as the backdrop, I was allowed the opportunity to unpack racism with a cadre of four other fearless souls. They were fearless because over time we started getting down and dirty about what we really believed about the nature of race in this country, and we listened to each other openly and without judgment. We absorbed and tussled with work from critical race theorists, and, though the temptation was there to retreat into our smiley-faced masks and make nice about some tough aspects of reality, we resisted false platitudes. I did not end the class in wholesale agreement with the tenants of critical race theory, but I did find some voices that captured and reflected a lot of the angst, anger, and defiance I had been feeling vis-à-vis scholarly work in my discipline. And I was moved by the passionate, soulful work we were engaged with on each other. I will never forget it.

Berta's story: I signed up for this class expecting just another summer class with an enormous amount of reading crammed into five short weeks. I had no idea that this class would change my view of society, the world, and myself. This subject required a trip deep below the surface layers of my conscience, character, and worldview to the place in my mind that only I know about – a place that even I am only vaguely aware exists as a part of me. The most difficult part of the class for me was the discussion of “whiteness” and white privilege. I had to put the readings down and walk away from my anger and guilt many times during this part of the class. I began to feel hopeless: no matter what I do, it is wrong. I read about white people taking over the conversation and wondered if I do that. I spent most of this class coming to terms with my own use of white privilege and trying to understand and recognize whiteness. Although we only met a few hours a week, the class never really ended. My email was overflowing with articles and examples of racism in all aspects of society. These “aha” moments led us to crossroads where we recognized our personal racism as well as that of society. This CRT class may not have changed the world, but it changed my world and now I am better equipped, and more useful as an adult educator and citizen of the world.

Mitch's story: As a student in EDAC 698, I started on a journey of which became the enlightenment of my education regarding Critical Race Theory. As an American Indian/Caucasian, I had never looked at myself as being of a race in the context of color, therefore I never allowed race or its culture to enter into my educational experiences until now. Learning from a tilted perspective that race was nothing I should be concerned with became disheartening to me as I struggled through this class to be open-minded in regards to the diversities within the classroom. Every race, culture, socio-economic class, educational level, and sexual orientation was represented giving me no choice but to be critically aware of the need for a restructuring of the way I had been raised and taught to believe were inferior to me if different than myself.

By classifying people as poor, uneducated, and of lesser value in society because of color, gender, class, or ethnicity, we have allowed ourselves to promote an ideology of hatred and a concept that it is acceptable to hold certain groups at bay for the pursuit of happiness and educational advancement. Being prejudiced is a way of thinking or feeling towards another person or group. By giving ourselves the authority to think and feel negatively about someone because of differences in race or culture, we have placed ourselves in a class of bigotry. In EDAC 698 it became a stretch for my mind to wrap itself around some of the theories and ideas boldly

emblazoned in others. I suspect my upbringing, and the era I grew up in, along with my spiritual beliefs, stalemated my acceptance of some of the ideologies set forth in the class.

Stepping back with retrospection upon the beliefs I held fast to before entering this class was the most frightening experience which came from the knowledge I gained from my fellow learners/educators. I quickly realized my status in life was no greater or less than theirs, and that I too was as diverse in race and culture as all of my class peers. The beliefs which I had grown up to hold as truth suddenly became as dust whipping about in the breeze and forming a new truth in not only my mind but in my heart. Understanding the diverse human connection in regards to education, this class has left me with a heart for all classes, cultures, genders, and sexually oriented people, knowing that regardless of these differences we are all created equally. All deserve the respect of others, and the opportunities of a racially and culturally balanced educational system in which we can learn through the incorporation of our individual experiences and lifestyles, thus learning from one another, making our education and experiences from it even richer.

Racism is universal and plays out as division on all sides. Whether the expression of prejudice is on the side of any race, an educated America should never tolerate this kind of behavior in our society. Extensive education, promoting rights for all races, including the right to non-discrimination, and teaching our children from birth the ethical and moral obligation of tolerance without setting aside their own belief structure, are places to start the process of unity among all races in our world, and the world of the educator.

Common Threads

Having systematically undergone this exploration, we feel that we are better equipped to see inequity, offer an alternative analysis for why it exists, and to work for social justice based on that knowledge. While we each walk away with our own unique way of integrating CRT into our personal lives and practice, we gained some common understandings of how CRT can be operationalized. We discovered the ways that power and privilege work to mask racism and discrimination in our society. This heightened our awareness of the permanence and the prevalence of race as an unspoken influence in society as we witnessed, week after week, evidence of this in the popular media, in the workplace, and in our daily interactions. Contemporary racism occurs subtly and is much less likely to be demonstrated in overt ways such as lynching and blatant discrimination at voter polling locations. This notion is also exemplified in the characterization of racism as normalized in our society (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and, as such, is embedded in core ideals, like meritocracy and democracy, which shaped our nation. We confronted ourselves through the challenges raised by both the readings and our class members. We were each being held accountable for the assumptions and biases that we held and that invariably influenced the interactions in the class and in the larger society. For instance, the European American students acknowledged the multiple ways they have benefited from white privilege and the heterosexual students conceded the hidden privilege derived from sexual orientation. Each student spoke of being more attuned to how his or her biases and privilege may negatively impact her or his respective spheres of influence.

For each of us, this was an intimate journey. As we listened to each others' stories, we challenged and were challenged through the process of dialogue. We developed new ways of understanding our past behaviors and new ways of informing our future actions. The story, often crafted as a counter-narrative in CRT, was a key mechanism for promoting honest and often emotionally charged discussion. Bell (1992) was one of the first to advance the use of storytelling as a methodological tool for addressing issues surrounding racism that were often enveloped in the

majoritarian story, the story constructed by those reaping the benefits of power and privilege for the purpose of maintaining power and privilege.

The strength of the story lies in its ability to make public the experiences of non-dominant cultural groups and to authenticate the voices who tell them. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined the counter-story “as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). To the class’ credit, we listened, processed, critiqued, and digested these stories in ways that demonstrated respect to the storyteller. In doing so, we became aware of the insidious power of the majoritarian story to dominate the space, and we worked to actively create space for all stories in the classroom.

A call to action was also voiced. Change being not only necessary but also possible was a theme that surfaced. Though we were confounded by how we would use CRT to make large-scale change, we were empowered to do so at the individual level. There was widespread agreement that the awareness of Critical Race Theory was leading to the conscious augmentation of everyday behaviors. We developed a new understanding of how we unconsciously construct our ideas about people and society. As a result we had a greater awareness that in turn sparked us to re evaluate how we react, respond, and behave in our daily interactions, in the workplace and in the ways we implement practice. These efforts were small but necessary steps in the march toward social justice.

Conclusions

Having systematically undergone this exploration, critical race theory provided a new lens through which we could grapple with everyday experiences at our respective sites of practice and in our daily interactions. Based on the analysis of our stories, we found the CRT was a useful tool for explaining what happened in our classroom that summer and what we witness happening in society at large. Issues of White privilege were evident as well as remnants of the impact of race as both a historic and contemporary phenomenon. Our individual histories, which reflect our race, our class, our educational background, our sexual preference, all played a vital role in creating our nuanced understanding of what transpired two days a week for five weeks over the course of the Summer semester. We were quite surprised to see the ways that theory came to life in this setting and in workplace settings that we practice.

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