Enough with Color-blind Classrooms!
Giving African-American Students a Voice
in Constructing Their Learning Experience

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Abstract: Literature on critical thinking discussing the experiences of African American students is limited. This study examined the experiences of African American undergraduate business students, as they became stronger critical thinkers. The study concludes by suggesting educators in higher education settings embrace the cultural diversity of the students in their classroom to inform culturally relevant course content development.

Background

According to the report, *A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities,* issued by the Education Trust (Carey, 2004) college enrollments are increasing (p. 2), gains among low-income and female students are the largest. "Unfortunately, once they get there, a great number of students don't succeed. Many higher education institutions routinely lose more than one out of every four students they enroll in the freshmen year alone" (p. 2). This means that on average 25% of students who enter college do not graduate and fall into the "some college" category. The report also reveals that among African American and Latino students, the attrition rate climbs to over 50%. Most African American and Latino students do not complete their undergraduate degrees within six years. The structures and policies of colleges and universities may contribute to this failure to earn a degree. bell hooks, in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), suggests,

> In our nation, most colleges and universities are organized around the principles of dominant culture. This organizational model reinforces hierarchies of power and control. It encourages students to be fear-based, that is, to fear teachers and seek to please them. Concurrently, students are encouraged to doubt themselves, their capacity to know, to think, and to act. Learned helplessness is necessary for the maintenance of dominator culture (p. 130).

When African American and Latino students do not persist and graduate, the impact is apparent via high unemployment rates or high numbers of families living at or below the poverty level; because, a high school diploma is simply not enough to ensure a comfortable standard of living. The Educational Trust report confirms that to have any kind of earning power individuals need an advanced degree (Carey, 2004). Because fewer than 50% of African American and Latino college students graduate, communities of color will continue to struggle economically.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) originated among a group of culturally grounded critical legal scholars who sought to address the failure of the legal system to alleviate the impact of racism in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). According to Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw (1993), "Critical race theory is

interdisciplinary and eclectic. It borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and nationalism" (p. 6). Critical race theorists believe that racism is endemic and will always be part of American society (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lopez, 2003; Matsuda et al., 1993; Peterson, 1999).

CRT, critical theory (specifically the concepts of hegemony, ideology critique, and pragmatist constructivism), and culturally relevant pedagogy grounded this study. This study occurred in a culturally diverse classroom setting. CRT provides one means to name, identify, and appreciate the life experience learners bring to the classroom. CRT provided a lens to examine the content of textbooks used in the classroom for the inclusion of the voices or at least opportunities to discuss the perspectives of people of color. Additionally, CRT opens a discussion that challenges majoritarian color-blind stories and begins to explore the world from "counter" perspectives.

CRT takes the dialogue present in critical theory regarding hegemony and ideology critique and re-tells the experience for people of color. Brookfield (2001) suggests, "...hegemony is lived out a thousand times a day in our intimate behaviors, glances, body postures, in the fleeting calculations we make on how to look at, and speak to, each other, and in the continuous micro-decisions that coalesce into a life" (p.5). CRT offers another view of these micro-decisions and names them microaggressions. According to Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000), "Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color often automatically or unconsciously"(p.60). Subtle aggressions can create a classroom climate that fails to make space for a multicultural student population. Because we have become so color-blind, we do not talk about racism openly. Culturally relevant pedagogy addresses and discusses racism. According to Guy (1999), teaching in a culturally relevant manner means educators make sure that instructional content is compatible with a learner's culture (p.14).

Negotiating the Classroom

Educators have unique and powerful roles in the lives of learners. Adult education literature asks educators to revisit the common assumptions governing how they manage their classrooms (see Brookfield, 1995; Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Peterson, 1999). Take, for example, the concept of positionality. Repeatedly, the literature reminds educators that the positionality of the instructor affects how the classroom will function. It is the responsibility of the educator to acknowledge that give-and-take is possible in the classroom space. By the time students reach college, they have learned (incorrectly) through hegemonic practices—depending on their schooling experience—who has power in the classroom.

Renegotiating power in the classroom takes time, effort, and an acknowledgement of the diverse student populations that exist in higher education. A student's lived experiences will define who they are and what they believe. Sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical factors and forces affect each student's history, present, and future differently.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the classroom experiences of African American undergraduate business students, as they became strong critical thinkers. The importance of teaching future managers to think in a manner that maintains a stance of fairness and that is intellectually responsible and mature is integral to the future of society as a whole. Managers must continue to

question what is presented as truth or fact with a spirit that is open to the perspective of others. Students must understand the importance of both becoming stronger critical thinkers and maintaining a disposition to think critically and make sound judgments.

Literature on critical thinking pedagogy among African American students is limited. This is primarily because most conversations about critical thinking are color-blind and race neutral. Research focuses on defining critical thinking, demonstrating the process of critical thinking, and discussing the components that constitute critical thinking.

The questions guiding this research were as follows:

1) How can faculty create a classroom environment of trust and safety—provided educators understand the racial, culture, and emotional dynamics—for African American learners that will enable students to revisit their paradigms and shift their consciousness? How can faculty address positionality, racism, and gender dynamics in their classrooms?

2) What classroom conditions and pedagogical methodologies are conducive to African American students' learning to think critically? What classroom conditions and pedagogical methodologies inhibit African American students from learning to think critically?

Research Design

Qualitative action research design guided this study. Action research is real-time and application focused. Merriam (1995) suggests, "The theme or principle around which Lewin patterned action research was that in order to gain insight into a process, the researcher must create change and then observe the effects and new dynamics of the change" (p. 122). She continues with a discussion of the ways that action research departs from conventional methods. This methodology supports the purpose of this research because the objective of this methodology is to "obtain knowledge that can directly apply to a particular situation" (p. 122) and allow this research to examine the "natural 'flow' of human activity" (p. 123). By reading student journals and listening to their stories, this study utilized counter storytelling to capture an understanding of how these students experience their learning and develop a disposition towards critical thinking.

The participants for this study consisted of fourteen students affiliated with an urban private college that offers associate, undergraduate and graduate degrees. The students were male and female 18 to 40 years of age. Participants were enrolled in a course focused on teaching business students critical thinking. This course is required as part of their curricular requirements. The use of five methods; triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, participatory research and addressing researcher bias, gave attention to the validity and reliability of this study. The data collection for this study used four methods including participant journals, surveys, interviews and an after class discussion group. I conducted follow-up interviews with several participants to share the findings and affirm these findings reflected their voices.

Relevant Themes and Conclusions

The data analysis revealed the participants movement through distinct stages, as they became stronger critical thinkers. Data analysis shows an initial period of erecting the foundational pillars and life/educational connectors that structured and anchored their journey. Participants spoke to the role faculty play as anchors and guides toward course completion. What

followed was a progression of individual and collaborative experiences, each a movement forward. Finally, the participants shared a need to persist as they reached toward completion of the course.

Learner Relevant Content/Learner Engagement
        Final comments about the cases used during the course underscore the importance of being current and relevant when selecting discussion topics. Achieving cultural relevant requires understanding the class members and topics relevant to their goals and aspirations.
> **Verria:** I really enjoyed the cases and wish there could have been more. The cases that were chosen were very appropriate. People, not just managers, have similar problems everyday and the choice of cases put into perspective the magnitude or the "real" problems. I also thought the cases were very current and up-to–date.

        Early in their journey, students expressed a desire to take on the task of becoming stronger critical thinkers. As they continued their journey, they developed an appreciation for what was required of them. Student reflections revealed a level of introspection that acknowledged the simplicity of their thinking and the need to expand their thought process to include different ways of thinking and, for some, how they engage the world around them.

Creating a Safe Space
        Faculty must manage classroom dynamics to ensure a safe space for students to enter each day. Start establishing this space at the beginning of the course by engaging in an open conversation about learner expectations and experiences with other courses. That conversation may need to occur on multiple levels, in small groups, as an entire class, one-on-one via student questionnaires or, in person, if warranted.
        Creating a space for learning in the classroom is the ongoing responsibility of adult educators. Participants expressed their appreciation of my comfort level with the material I was teaching. They also commented that they were encouraged to engage their classmates freely because of my willingness to share my experiences. Students felt free to construct their own knowledge, rather than think like the instructor or being told the answer. Early on in the course, Sarah shared the following in an after class session:
> **Sarah:** I like the freedom that comes in your classroom. Versus some people [who] want you to think like them. They don't want to, they want to evolve your thinking process but the result has to be the way that they think. And everyone is not going to think that way. And because you're[referring to me] so open and so free and you're not rigid and you're not written in stone and you're kinda, "Okay, guys, let's do this." You're kinda free with us.

> **Jessie:** I appreciate being in an environment where your true feeling is not viewed as bad! I have also questioned some of the thoughts and opinions that I believed to be facts. My views have changed recently in my life. It's [an] amazing experience to view the world in a selfless way. I want to make an impact on the Black community. With that being said, I need to learn more.

Implications for Theory and Practice
        Color-blindness prohibits teachers from seeing the students of color in their classrooms. By not seeing students of color, educators may fail to acknowledge the lived racial reality students juggle each day. Color-blindness diminishes the experiences of people of color, stifles

creative classroom methods that might embrace different ways of learning, and prohibits a view of the classroom that sees differences. Educators talk in generalities and do not often acknowledge the lived realities present outside of their classrooms. In an attempt to be color-blind, educators make curriculum decisions that fail to embrace or acknowledge the multicultural landscape defined and occupied by learners.

Color-blindness does not acknowledge whiteness. Thus, the educator, if not a person of color, may fail to recognize what their racial group represents to students of color. If you assume your classroom is color-blind when discussing any type of racial dynamic you may not address the privilege that comes with being White. Because being White is taken for granted, individuals who are White, rarely recognize this privilege. The African American experience is a racial reality for people of color. In a color-blind classroom, what types of scenarios are chosen to discuss and debate? Are there any related to practices that are racially subtle not overtly racist? The law addresses overt racism; however, the subtleties demean and insult people of color each and everyday.

Color-blindness limits the conversations in the classroom and stifles conversations that African American students need to have. At issue is whether educators are comfortable having these conversations. If you are an educator of color, what experiences have you had during your lifetime? What are you willing to share? The objectivity of the classroom stands in the face of this possibility. If you are White, do you yet understand the privilege that is inherent in being White? How will you address this in your classroom? How will you mitigate your positionality versus the students of color? How will you negotiate the diverse cultures and races represented in your classroom? What happens with the students in your classroom that are not of color? What will you ask of them? Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, in *The Invisible Politics of Race in Adult Education* (2000), offer this thought for educators to consider regarding the larger context in which learning occurs.

> "[T]he unspoken assumption that the activity of teaching and learning must happen in a parallel universe to the real world because the power relationships based on race that are omnipresent in the social and organizational settings of everyday life have been obliterated. By stripping learners and teachers of their place in the hierarchies of social life, this view assumes we stage adult education where the politics of everyday life do not operate or matter. This view asks us to see teachers and learners as generic entities, unencumbered by the hierarchies that structure our social relationships" (p. 154).

Review of literature found no conversations that told the stories of African-American students on their journey to become strong critical thinkers. Most conversations about teaching critical thinking are color-blind and general. By revisiting the idea that classrooms should be color-blind, we begin to understand that in being color-blind we are in fact ignoring the students of color in our classrooms.

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