On Teaching in the Multicultural Classroom

Talk to Workshop for New Graduate Student TAs at UC Santa Cruz (9/19/00)

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We have a very short time in which to talk about a vast subject. Rather than focus on gimmicks or techniques that have been useful to me in teaching, I'd like to develop and if there's time discuss with you a way of thinking about the task of teaching in the "multicultural classroom." That is, practically any classroom, since there probably aren't any more non-multicultural classrooms -- especially in California today. I'd also like to make explicit a premise without which most of what I'm going to say wouldn't make much sense at all. The premise is that we are not here teaching in this great public university just to "reproduce the labor force," or train people for the job market; we are also concerned with helping our students put some finishing touches on the long process of their self-education for responsible, dignified, independent-minded citizenship in a democratic republic -- a society such as we've not yet seen in this country, but most of us aspire to live in.

Let me start by asking each of you to think back through your own experiences as a learner in multicultural classrooms, and remember a lightbulb moment in which thanks to somebody's good teaching you learned something that has been important to you ever since. I'll start with one of my own, in which I realized that radical thought has deep roots in Biblical Christianity (write this on the board, and elicit and write as many more as possible in maybe ten minutes).

Now let me make clear the nature of my own experience in this line of work, and some of its limitations, to help you interpret what I will have to say. When I came here to teach Latin American history in 1971, there were no particular expections with regard to what I would teach. I was a colonial Brazilianist and world historian by training and inclination, but also a fluent speaker of Spanish who had lived for years in Mexico, had a Mexican wife and three small Mexican children. We lived on campus for several years, and soon had close relationships with a good many Mexican and Chicano students (much less numerous then than they are today), and with several Mexican groundsmen and maintenance workers.

A strident Chicano cultural nationalism was in the air in those days, alongside an incipient and sometimes separatist feminism (both movements are a whole lot subtler, more sophisticated and less in your face today); and while on the one hand it was hard for a leftist professor not to sympathize with both of those sets of complaints and demands, both were also strangely jarring to a man whose life experience so far had put him in sympathy with working people, with trade union struggles against the power of capital in the workplace, and with Third World struggles against imperialism abroad. I thought then, as I still do, that class constrains people's lives more decisively, on the whole, than either race or gender. Or to put it another way, that a concern with the oppressions of race and gender that deemphasizes class will serve to mobilize people for a while, and then lead them into a dead end street of identity politics -- because the great threat to humanity and nature on this planet is capitalism itself, and not the older forms of discrimination. Racism and sexism are indeed extremely oppressive to people; but the confident, well-centered and well-educated can eventually stand up to them. It's class compounded by racism and sexism that deprives so many of our people of hope and sometimes saps the ability, even the will, to resist.

It was obvious to me from the get-go that what UCSC needed from somebody like me was a pedagogy focussed on the search for a "people's history" of

Mexico, of Latin America, of Southeast Asia or the world -- the search for a history that puts the experiences, culture, struggles & achievements or ordinary working women and men front and center, rather than the saga of wealth and power. A history that seeks to build ties of understanding and solidarity between students struggling here today for a dignified and fulfilling place in the world, and ordinary people struggling in other times and places.

So for thirty years I've taught Mexican and general Latin American history from my peculiar radical perspective, to classes consisting mostly of about half Mexicans, Chicanos and Latinos of other origins, and half Anglos who are studying Spanish and want to be bilingual teachers, lawyers, doctors, journalists, social workers or community organizers. At least three quarters of my students in both groups have been women. And here, sadly, is something very revealing of the impact of identity politics on this campus in the late 20th century: as a White professor teaching Latino Third World subjects, I have only very seldom seen an Asian, African-American or Native American student -- maybe one out of a hundred from all these groups together -- even when I offered courses called "Black People in Latin American History," "Native American People in Latin American History," or "Brazil in the Era of Slavery." My classes on World History and on the histories of Indonesia and Brazil have been taken almost exclusively by white people. For a while I taught a course on the history of the Philippines, in which there were only Pilipino students and a scattering of Anglos in relationships with Pilipinos. So though I have a lot of experience in the "multicultural classroom," I have very little with some of the principal groups of so-called "minority" students on our campus.

Here are some main lessons from that experience:

1) That people anywhere in the 18-24 age group are concerned with questions of identity, but that in the cultural and demographic circumstances of late 20th- (and presumably early 21st-) century California that youthful preoccupation has become central to many people's lives. Students are under enormous pressure

to identify themselves, and to live their lives and even choose their friends, lovers, courses, recreations and ideological outlooks, as members of racially and ethnically determined groups. This sometimes makes young people feel stronger and less isolated than they might otherwise be, for sure. But it also often limits their awareness of (or makes them feel unfree to explore) many kinds of inquiry that are available to every student in a great university.

2) That diversity nevertheless cuts in many directions, not all of which are represented in the so-called "ethnic" distinctions between students, or even in those defined by the intellectually fashionable categories of "race, class and gender." Not all brown people come from working-class backgrounds; many white people do. Neither Brown people nor White people share a common culture. Some Mexicans, Chicanos and Latinos come from the city, some from the country; some are Catholics and some are Pentecostals; some have large, supportive families & some have fragmented or dysfunctional families; some speak Spanish easily and well, while others stumble through it or have left it behind altogether. Some love learning and respect teachers; still hate school and work hard to avoid learning anything from teachers at all. Similar distinctions have to be drawn among white people. White people have many ethnicities: some are Irish, German, Italian or Greek; some Christians, Jews, Buddhists or secular humanists. Some were raised lovingly by two responsible parents; some were pretty much left to their own devices. Some went to good schools; others lived in a fog for five years and can hardly remember if they went to school or not, and so on. Members of all groups are both straight and gay, serious and frivolous, outspoken and shy, skilled and unskilled at the work that is required of all students.

So for a teacher to think about students as members of identifiable and operative groups, or to contribute in any way to the pressures that lump students into such groups, however much the students themselves may appear to insist on it, is on the one hand to fly in the face of the reality of any classroom -- and

on the other, to do serious injustice to each individual student. Good teaching shuns anything that massifies.

3) The experience of pursuing a university education should be one that encourages students to experiment over and over precisely with the possibility of breaking out of the comfortable constraints of group "identity", and finding common ground with others through shared interests, shared work and shared accomplishment. But in our context, this takes some serious doing on the part of every instructor.

Here are a few pointers that have occurred to me in teaching, which I offer mostly to prime the pump of discussion:

1) The classroom must be a place in which every student is equally safe, and understands herself to be of equal value in the eyes of the instructor. This is a matter not so much of pedagogical preference as of basic human rights; but it is more easily affirmed than carried into practice. It requires of the instructor an instinctive respect for individual persons, and an ability to treat everybody with the same lively interest and respect. It also requires paying close attention to the process of each class as it seems to be being experienced by every participant, and being quick to intervene and subvert any assertions of hierarchy between them.

2) This goal and standard should be explicit, but not dwelled upon to the point of making people self-conscious. Students should be encouraged to bring these issues up with their teacher, whether publically in class or privately. Departures from the standard may also sometimes be commented upon either publically or privately at the teacher's initiative, but only with an abiding sensitivity to the dignity of persons.

3) Watch your language! Cultivate a plain American speech for serious subjects that an ordinary person can understand. Don't intimidate with jargon (one of

the standard ways in which the University, even without meaning to, inflicts over and over the "hidden injuries of class"). At the same time, however, it's important not to demean the sober and careful discourse that inquiry requires by copping to the often weak, slovenly and evasive language behind which students sometimes hide. University study should develop the muscles of language for the purpose of real work, and not for show. Encourage students to keep track of the words they don't understand, and look them up. Ask them to write down the words they've not understood and hand them in anonymously (you may be shocked!). Develop glossaries. But mostly, help students learn to take their own languages, both spoken and written, more seriously than hitherto, and to become more supple than most have been about adapting language to the tasks at hand.

4) Encourage students to study in groups or in pairs, to read and comment on each other's work, to mentor one another. Mexican students in Mexico City, confronted with a vast and impersonal multiversity, usually form themselves into study groups of five or six during freshman year that stick together all the way through. Here people lose a lot of ground unnecessarily by toughing it out on their own. Help students to broaden their circles of support -- and to do so wherever possible beyond the circles of ethnic identity within which most lead the rest of their lives.

5) Look for opportunities to encourage students to learn from people other than professors, on or off campus, and to report their learning to each other. The University is a special place, providing a special opportunity to concentrate on learning. But it has no monopoly on knowledge. It is not separate from the "real world" and it must be accountable to it. Wherever possible, encourage students to put their newfound skills to work on real-world tasks, and to discuss the lessons of that experience with one another.

So let's hear some lessons of your own experiences with teaching in multicultural contexts -- whether as students or as teachers yourselves -- and how they square with the kinds of things I've been talking about for the last half-hour.