

Fostering Dialogue in a Post-Racial Society

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ABSTRACT

This article explores strategies for promoting classroom discussions with pre-service art teachers. Ranging from ways to build a classroom environment conducive to sharing ideas to some specific video resources, the author explains some techniques she has implemented. Though the results of these efforts are mixed, continuing to explore ways to address race and culture in our post-racial society is an important step towards building the cultural competency of pre-service teachers. Because of the far-reaching and insidious effects of institutionalized racism throughout society and education, it is especially important for teachers to see and understand the profound effects of racism to work toward a more just society.

KEYWORDS: pre-service teacher preparation, race, culture, higher education, video

In response to the journal theme *Media in a Post-Racial Society*, I reflected upon my attempts at teaching university students about race and how it operates in contemporary society. Because of the need for greater cultural understanding among teachers and students, addressing race and culture is of paramount importance in education. As societies change and interact, finding ways to help pre-service teachers expand their cultural knowledge may have significant effects on their future teaching and their cultural competence in a classroom. Decker and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) note that there is no handbook for teaching; teachers frequently make decisions based upon their understanding of the circumstances, and these understandings are shaped by teachers' belief systems. Thus, the values that a teacher holds have a significant impact upon how that teacher interprets situations, treats students, makes pedagogical and curricular decisions, and decides which topics are appropriate for class discussion.

Because I want to build the value of understanding and appreciating a range of students and their unique contributions, I address race, gender, culture, class, and sexual orientation throughout my classes of pre-service and in-service teachers. Finding ways to build an environment for an open and honest exchange of ideas around race and culture is a challenge and a continual learning process for me. Many university students may not have a significant degree of comfort with conversations about race and inequities, but it is crucial to have these discussions while they are in a formative period of becoming a teacher. Decker and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) point out that teachers' views are more flexible during their teacher preparation program than when they have their own classroom, thus making this time a critical point for intervention.

In a recent study, Brown (2009) found that the majority of pre-service teachers completing their student teaching thought they were inadequately prepared for the multicultural and multiethnic settings of public schools. This is an important issue for pre-service teacher preparation programs because "these White middle class teachers possess very limited intercultural experiences to bring into the classroom that will provide students with the knowledge and skills to work for a more just society" (Brown, 2009, p. 1). Sleeter (2001) notes that white pre-service teachers often have limited experience with and knowledge of people from cultures other than their own. Instead, pre-service teachers frequently hold views that are influenced by the media, their cultural environment, and their values (Garmon, 2004). Kaplan (2011) writes that many teachers in urban schools are young and white, often right out of college, and may not be prepared to work with students from cultural backgrounds different from their own. This problem comes, in part, from an educational system that is more segregated than it was in 1954 (Orfield & Lee, 2005), before legal desegregation. The lack of diversity within public schools today means that many students come to college with limited experiences working with and learning alongside people from different backgrounds.

Pre-Service Teachers, Diversity, and Whiteness

The students I teach at Virginia Commonwealth University reflect the fact that 86% of teachers are white and that 80-93% of students in teacher preparation programs are white (Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011)¹. Additionally, the vast majority are middle-class women who mostly attended high school with people from similar backgrounds, as Orfield and Lee (2005) note. Further, a significant majority of faculty members who teach pre-service teachers are also white women (Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

Interestingly, students frequently mention that diversity is one of their favorite aspects of Virginia Commonwealth University. Many students are comfortable with diversity and freely share experiences from their own lives or from friends and families, throughout the US or abroad, and have nuanced understandings of race and culture. However, this is not true for all students. Though I address race and culture in various ways in different classes, I continually encounter overt resistance from some students, a level of reticence among others, and a desire not to see or address inequities from others. At times, university students have referred to resources including noted multicultural education scholar James Banks' (2008) *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* as racist. After reading Jonathan Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, some students described it as "too depressing" and did not want to deeply engage with his points. One student stated that Kehinde Wiley was "playing the race card" in reference to his portrait of Ice-T from 2005. When viewing an art exhibit that contained handmade contemporary dolls reminiscent of stereotypical pickaninny² imagery, some students expressed the idea that, though the imagery was problematic, it was acceptable since the dolls were made to help children.

1 Though other studies (Kaplan, 2011) differ slightly in the numbers, many put the percentage of female teachers around 75% and the percentage of white teachers between 80-85%.

2 A pickaninny is a stereotyped racial caricature of an African American child that is depicted with exaggerated facial features that often include extremely large eyes, nose, and mouth.

Further, some students have felt the need to privately relay to me a negative personal experience with a person of color after discussions of race occur in class. While I usually want to jump in when students make these comments, I have noticed that it seems to be more powerful when one of their peers asks a question or challenges what was said. Through an open peer dialogue that allows for questions without immediate negative assumptions, I think more students begin to see the world differently. If another student does not address what the student said, I do intervene and explain, to the best of my ability, how or why some of the ideas may be problematic. These classroom experiences reinforce that the concept of the United States as a post-racial society is not accurate and that systemic racism is indeed deep and prevalent throughout contemporary society including in laws, public institutions, and education.

Whiteness

Addressing social constructions of whiteness is an area I am working to develop in my own teaching. Within a city that is still grappling with its history as the capital of the Confederacy, critically interrogating whiteness in Richmond, Virginia³ is a challenge. For example, the building where I work is located about one half mile from a large monument to a Confederate leader, J.E.B. Stuart, and there are four other large Confederate monuments within close proximity along the same street. I typically include 1-2 classes specifically on public art each semester and address ways to respond to works of public art and how that can be part of a curriculum (Buffington & Waldner, 2012).

Roediger (1991), an early theorist of whiteness, explained the social, political, historical, and changing aspects of whiteness that, at times,

3 Richmond's problematic history has continued due to many factors. For instance, during the Civil Rights era, the local schools and citizens promoted "massive resistance" as developed by US Senator Harry Byrd, from Richmond, leading to the complete closure of some public county-wide school systems in Virginia for several years in the 1960s. Still today, in many of the local school districts, students of color are suspended at more than twice the rate of white students.

excluded certain groups now widely understood to be white. The construct of whiteness later included a wider range of people as they embraced certain class values. McCarthy (2003) specifically discusses teacher education and points to the unequal relationship of knowledge and power within the system. He writes: "White teachers and students benefit from such an asymmetry. White identity, then, is an effect of the practical operation of systems of privilege and material advantages – not simply a matter of physical characteristics or markers such as skin color" (p. 128). As noted by researchers (Gallagher, 2008; Matias & Zembylas, 2014), many white people believe they are not racist and use cautious and guarded language around race. To Matias and Zembylas (2014), this reticence to engage in discussions of race creates an additional challenge when some people may be hesitant to unpack their identities, instead believing that they are "normal" and labeling people they perceive to be different as "other" or "having culture."

Intersectionality

Educators and theorists recognize that identity is not a fixed or singular demographic category. Crenshaw (1991) explains that intersectional identity is complex and involves a constantly shifting combination of personal, cultural, societal, and political factors that work together. Rather than individuals having a set identity, aspects of their environment, peers, circumstances, emotions, and other factors continually influence how an individual may identify. Additionally, intersectionality addresses how various aspects of a person's identity may intersect with other aspects to create particular unique circumstances. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) discuss what happens when an individual's identity distances them from the prototype of white, male, and heterosexual. They posit the term "intersectional invisibility" to refer to the marginalization that can occur, even within subordinate groups. For instance, in the classes I teach that are predominantly white and female, we could consider the lesbian students, the students of color, or international students

to potentially be experiencing intersectional invisibility. Powers and Duffy (2016) believe that it is crucial for educators to "develop an understanding of intersectional identities to develop cultural competence" (p. 63). Further, pulling from Freire's work (1998), Powers and Duffy argue that teacher education can assist pre-service teachers in becoming aware of their own intersectional identities as well as their future students'. Developing awareness could lead to small openings in preconceived or fixed notions about self or others (Hatch & Groenke, 2009). Related to Freire's (1998) belief that coming to conscientization tends to be an incremental process of small steps, these small openings may lead to greater awareness in the future and potentially impact the pre-service teachers' future classroom communities.

Classroom Community

I have made and continue to make changes to the content and how I teach in an effort to better prepare students for their future teaching positions. In terms of altering the classroom environment, I work with students to build a classroom community that allows students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences. Community building starts on the first day of the semester with overt conversations of how classroom discussions could unfold. I ask students to brainstorm, at times with a partner and sometimes as a whole group, successful strategies for discussion. After brainstorming, I usually stop the discussion and let the students know that they have until the next class to think about the best strategies they have seen in various classrooms throughout their education.

We continue our conversation in the next class, discussing in detail what factors create an environment that fosters strong discussions and what factors impede a good discussion and how to avoid those pitfalls. We compile a class list of discussion guidelines and try out the parameters starting in the next class. Revisiting this list at least once during the semester is also useful to make revisions or changes. Giving students advance notice of this discussion is a strategy that

seems to help because, when given time to reflect about previous experiences, they seem much more likely to contribute to forming our discussion norms.

Video Resources

Recently, I have also begun using more video resources in teaching and find that viewing and discussing videos is a helpful tool for eliciting meaningful discussions. Because many of my students spend significant amounts of time consuming media, including video, they tend to have robust comments and are easily able to make connections between and among various videos, frequently introducing classmates and me to related resources. Additionally, I intentionally work to introduce pre-service teachers to strong resources, including *Teaching Tolerance*, a publication and website from the Southern Poverty Law Center that focuses on anti-bias curriculum. Though their art-specific resources are limited, many of their resources relate to contemporary culture. One article in particular, written by English professor Neal Lester (2014), addresses the problematic parodies of some music videos.

In the spring of 2015, in the context of an undergraduate curriculum class for Art Education majors, I asked students to read Lester's (2014) article, and then we watched the videos he discusses – Will Smith's (1997) *Miami* and the video Christmas card parody of it created by the Holderness family (2013), *Xmas Jammies*, as well as the Toyota *Swagger Wagon* (2010; 2015) advertisements that are corporate parodies of rap videos. Lester makes the point that while there is nothing inherently wrong with white people rapping or with satire in general, it can be viewed as a form of modern day blackface when stereotypes related to language, fashion, culture, etc. are also employed. He writes, "These modern hip-hop parodies—integrated into the mainstream media as innocent fun—devalue the creative integrity and impact of hip-hop as a genre of social change and social justice" (2014, para. 5).

Reading Lester's article and watching the three videos he mentions

led to a long, insightful, and, at times, passionate discussion about race and how it operates in contemporary society. While many students agreed with Lester's point that these parodies could be problematic and perpetuate stereotypes, other students vehemently disagreed. Students shared many ideas, including: rap and hip hop is for everyone; analyzing someone's video Christmas card was just reading too much into something intended for fun; and they had never thoughtfully considered these videos. One point that multiple students raised is that in the Will Smith *Miami* video, both he and some of the actors say the phrase, "Welcome to Miami" in English as well as the Spanish translation, "Bienvenidos a Miami." The use of Spanish became a significant topic of discussion; some students compared it to Lester's (2014) point that using language from another culture in a stereotypical way can be problematic. Other students disagreed and brought up the points that Miami has a significant Spanish-speaking population and that neither Will Smith nor the other performers dressed or acted in a stereotypical manner meant to imitate Latino people. Students also mentioned other videos that include words and phrases from Spanish. Our discussion then centered around linguistics in the *Miami* and *Xmas Jammies* videos, as it was the point about which more students were passionate.

In watching the *Swagger Wagon* commercials (Toyota, 2010; 2015), the factor that a few students pointed to was the participation of the acclaimed hip-hop artist Busta Rhymes in the 2015 version. Some students believed that as a legendary figure in hip-hop, his presence was a "stamp of approval" from a knowledgeable person, so the commercial was not racist. Thus, they disagreed with Lester's (2014) assertions that the *Swagger Wagon* commercials are funny if you believe certain stereotypes. Though we did not come to a group consensus on either of these issues, it was important to me that a wider range of students than usual shared their viewpoints, were able to disagree with one another and still be respectful. To a small degree, this dialogue reduced the stigma of discussing race and culture in a classroom setting. Because so many students were familiar with the genre of music video as well as these specific videos, they seemed

more engaged than in an average discussion simply based around readings that I select.

Cultural Appropriation and Microaggression

As a result of my experiences with music videos and advertisements, I have worked to include more videos as fodder for class discussions, including ones on related topics – microaggressions created by MTV (Kornhaber & Romagnoli, 2015) and another by teenage actor Amandla Stenberg (2015) on cultural appropriation. The ensuing class discussions were interesting, and the use of video seemed to prompt students to consider other perspectives, rather than only their own lived experiences. By referencing numerous popular culture icons and fashion trends, Amandla Stenberg creates an interesting link between the popularity of cultural appropriation of African Americans by white musicians at the very same time that police killed numerous unarmed black youth, igniting the Black Lives Matter movement. She points out how some celebrities felt it was acceptable to use black culture to further their careers, but then seemed to ignore the issues that go along with black culture and did not participate in the movement. Certainly not all students were in agreement with Stenberg’s points, but the videos elicited passionate responses from students and helped them think about daily occurrences in new ways.

Questioning Strategies

Certainly, using video to start a classroom discussion is not a panacea, but I have found that contemporary media, along with carefully worded open-ended questions, can draw more students into a discussion. Simply showing videos and asking, “What do you think?” is not likely to be successful. The strategy that I have used is to compose 5-7 open-ended questions ahead of time that relate to the video, as well as other recent readings, current events, or the students’ personal experiences. I have a copy of the questions prepared for everyone and allow students to read over them and pick

our starting point. Usually we only address a few of the questions that I generated, but having them written out is a helpful tool to begin a discussion; it aids in redirecting a floundering discussion, and it allows for students to have some choice and direction related to our discussion. What typically occurs is that we start with some of the questions that I have prepared, students raise other points that lead our discussion to their areas of interest, and then we return to a different question. This strategy builds a back-and-forth among the class members and allows for the natural flow of conversation as well as the opportunity for students to take the conversation in another direction.

Building Comfort

As with most classes that I teach, students who are ready to offer opinions about gender, curriculum, the history of education, and their own experiences often become much quieter when we start discussing race. Racism is so embedded and pervasive that many university students are not aware of it and how they may be reinforcing these societal inequities when they make decisions about their curriculum and pedagogy, either inadvertently or intentionally. As a teacher, I struggle with how to react when students make what I perceive to be unintentionally racist comments or comments that perpetuate outdated ideas and beliefs. In the example above related to the *Miami* video, I see a significant difference between Will Smith speaking Spanish in a song about Miami and the use of “gangsta” slang by a white person who then steps out of that role and into a role identified with the normative power of speaking standard English. However, in the moment, I waited to see how students would react to their peers’ comments. Several students engaged in a back-and-forth about this issue and I paused until their discussion seemed to run its course before offering my opinion.

Becoming More Aware of Inequity

Many current university students were in elementary or middle school when Barack Obama was elected in 2008, and the idea of a colorblind or post-racial society has been prevalent throughout their formative years. They also consume media virtually all the time through their various screens with some estimates placing their usage at up to 11 hours per day (Fountaine, Ligouri, Mozumdar, & Schuna, 2011). Thus, they are learning constantly from both the general milieu that promotes the idea of a post-racial society as well as the actual media they consume that may be filled with stereotypes and cultural appropriations. What I experience in the classroom relates more to Foster's (2013) ideas about the complex contradictions embedded in the racetalk of many white Americans.

One particular aspect that I have noticed in some pre-service art teachers is what I am tentatively calling the "Pollyanna paintbrush." Through this technique, students look at videos, art objects, other people's experiences, or anything that relates to challenging existing racial oppression and view the works through an extremely happy lens, ignoring the system of oppression that the work is addressing. For instance, when looking at works of art that challenge societal inequities, the university students may focus on the bright colors, rather than the overall meaning of the work. They may gloss over the issues of the work to quickly move on to designing a 'school art' (Efland, 1976) style replica of the artist's work without engaging in an interpretation of the meaning of the original work. Because so many contemporary artists create works with meaning related to race and culture, it is crucial to work with pre-service teachers to help them build comfort with discussions of art that relate to critical interpretations of both the work itself and of society.

One stereotype that I think we as art educators need to retire is the idea of who is or can be an artist. Through many different means – posters readily available through the major art supply companies, reproductions available through various means, and the curriculum

of many college art history courses – we learn mostly about white male artists. A few years ago I worked with a student teacher who was placed in a school where 100% of the students were students of color. Both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher were white women. The first time I visited this placement, I was struck by the fact that the cooperating teacher had named the student worktables after artists, which is a great strategy to help manage a classroom and build student familiarity with artists. But what stood out were the names she chose for the tables – Picasso, Van Gogh, and Dali. Certainly these are all important artists, but I questioned the relevance of deceased European male artists from the 19th and 20th centuries to a room full of contemporary children in North America. While I view this as problematic for all children, it is even more so because all the students were children of color. Taking steps, albeit small ones like changing the names of the tables in a classroom to reflect a range of artists from different cultural backgrounds and genders, can make classrooms more welcoming to a range of students, validate their lived experiences, and promote interest in art.

Conclusion

I agree with Kaplan (2011), who writes that the United States "does not need to be colorblind, but cognizant and respectful of the differences that have made us who we are" (p. 4). It is the concept of being cognizant and respectful that is a challenge as an educator. We need to take the time to think through our practices, question them, learn about the experiences of others, and be ready to change and adapt what we do throughout our careers. Because the popular media that we consume are embedded with stereotypes and cultural appropriation, educators need to learn to see these stereotypes, learn ways to address them, and work to help our students recognize these stereotypes so they can work against them too.

As we look at complex social issues including the inequity of educational funding and the school-to-prison pipeline, it is apparent that there is significant work to do to approach equality. Achieving

equality is a challenge for a variety of reasons. Not only were most pre-service teachers educated alongside students from similar socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, but many of them have also learned not to acknowledge race or cultural differences. Garmon (2005) outlines two major areas that influence pre-service teachers' thoughts on diversity: dispositions and experiences. Within each larger category, he positions three sub-categories. Dispositions include openness, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, and commitment to social justice. The experiences relate to intercultural experiences, educational experiences, and support group experiences. When considering the practices I described in this article through Garmon's (2005) lens, it is clear that I have focused primarily on the experiences rather than the dispositions. In order to better prepare my students, I need to make changes within my teaching to relate to openness, self-awareness/self-reflection, and foster in students a commitment to social justice. Perhaps asking students to engage in a reflective discussion or written piece after one of the videos would be a good tool to help them understand their own openness or develop their self-awareness related to race. Through the use of more first person and narrative videos, I can assist students in understanding a wider range of experiences and people, delving deeply into cultural issues. To create a forum for an extended discussion beyond this special journal issue, perhaps multiple other journals in our field or large national conferences could overtly address systemic racism throughout educational policy and practice.

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