

The Challenges of a “Multicultural” Classroom: Some Reflections

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Abstract

The author reflects on small group work in classes and common challenges encountered in terms of “differences” and “power.” She suggests that these challenges may be a product of state multiculturalism discourse and resultant identities. Another dimension of social experience, disability, is also touched on.

Résumé

L’auteure émet une réflexion sur le travail en petits groupes dans les salles de classe, ainsi que les défis auxquels elle fait face en ce qui a trait aux “différences” et au “pouvoir”. Elle suggère que ces défis sont peut-être le produit d’un discours sur l’état du multiculturalisme et des identités qui en découlent. On aborde aussi une autre dimension portant sur l’expérience sociale et l’invalidité.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing literature on feminist, anti-racist and other forms of critical or anti-oppression teaching and its challenges in practice. This literature has been authored mainly by those who are directly involved in teaching at various levels, some within public school systems (Lee 1985; Thomas 1984), some in healthcare (Lee and Marshall 1994) and several in university settings (Kaufmann 2010; Wagner, Acker and Mayuzumi 2008; Ng, Scane and Stanton 1995; Dua and Lawrence 2000; Jakubowski and Visano 2002; Razack 1998; hooks 1994, 2003). Many of these authors have been women who are part of the so-called third wave of feminism in North America which focuses on the interplay of sexism, racism, classism and other oppressive ideologies and practices in the classroom. They have pointed out that issues around racism, poverty, and colonialism are feminist issues because they intersect with women’s gendered experiences. Many of these same feminists who are scholar-teachers have theorized based on their own experiences of disrupting hegemonic social relations in their teaching contexts and their efforts to introduce alternative pedagogical practices based on epistemologies that call into question entrenched assumptions about what knowledge is, who has it, different types of knowledge, how they develop, how they are expressed, and about the politics of teaching and learning. Much of this literature on anti-racist feminist pedagogies which has been informed by third-wave feminist concerns has focused on gendered and racialized dynamics in educational settings, particularly the classroom, although other intersecting hierarchies have also been explored, such as sexuality (Martino 2008) and disability (Ferguson and Titchkosky 2008). This article offers a contribution to this literature.

As in the case of other scholar-teachers, my own inspiration for critical peda-

gogy arose after reading Paulo Freire's (1988) classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he emphasized how established educational structures and practices reflect and in turn perpetuate power inequalities and oppressions. He advocated for a counter-hegemonic "pedagogy of the oppressed" starting from the lived experiences of students (in his case, poor labourers), creating curriculum materials based on their lived realities, and building reflective and analytical exercises through experiential activities. This approach develops students as active and critically engaged learners who have knowledge and the capacity for critical consciousness and social engagement. He described this as a process of conscientization or consciousness-raising. This is in marked contrast to what Freire referred to as "banking education," which views students as having empty minds into which knowledge is deposited by the teacher (58). The latter approach, which is dominant in most class-based societies, produces students who are passive and disempowered individuals who basically fulfill their prescribed or ascribed labouring roles in oppressive and unequal systems. The ultimate objective of Freirean pedagogy is human liberation.

In the 1980s, my interest in Freirean methods was reinforced when, as a community worker, I encountered them among colleagues who were working with immigrant women in Toronto. Freire's ideas influenced early community educators of immigrant women who were Catholics subscribing to liberation theology, interpreting Christianity as social justice work. Most of these Toronto-based community educators were literacy and English as Second Language (ESL) teachers with ecumenical backgrounds, including a few who had worked directly with Freire (Miranda 2010). These teachers focused on teaching language and consciousness-raising using curriculum that was based on the experiences of their students who were immigrant women in Toronto working in such fields as building cleaning and textile factory work. Soon after, another impetus came from anti-racism educators who concentrated on how oppressive racial structures and racism as an ideology were reproduced through traditional educational practices (Lee 1985; Thomas 1984). These

different approaches brought together concerns around working-class students as well as those of racialized minorities and immigrant women in Toronto. They brought together feminist, working-class, and anti-racist perspectives which became known later in academic circles as "intersectional" perspectives. I carried these approaches to adult education into my post-secondary teaching experiences, first at a community college and later at a university.

The students in my classes over the last many years have been so diverse that they cannot be dichotomized sharply in terms of white and non-white students only. They have been multicultural, multiracial, multi-religious, multi-generational, mostly women and a few students self-identified as having disabilities. The diversity is so extensive and multi-dimensional that it cannot be simplistically analyzed in binary terms. Numerically speaking, it is often the case that there is no clear majority ethnic group in my classes. This is partly reflective of the population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (*The Daily* 2005), partly due to the subject matter that I teach, which seems to resonate with students who are largely marginalized within higher education, and partly due to how students view me as a South Asian woman of immigrant background—all factors which seem to attract a great variety of students from differently racialized backgrounds to my classes. This racial and ethnic mix in turn has produced new challenges. Within this context, I want to suggest that my subject position as a South Asian female professor "in charge" may have influenced the conduct of students with each other and with me. Resistance to feminist, anti-racist practices may not always be emanating from white students, but also from students of colour.

Here I reflect from an intersectional perspective on my university classes where "difference" and unequal power relations surfaced among students and disrupted their ability to work together in small groups to the extent that it required my intervention. In particular, I am concerned about the interactions between different groups of students of colour. This is a departure from existing literature, most of which focuses on the dynamics between white students and students of colour.

I begin with my experiences organizing small group work in my classes and some common challenges encountered there in terms of gender, racialization, and ethnic differences, and how ethnic differences might be linked to the ways in which multiculturalism as a state discourse has developed in Canada and how it has shaped identities. In making this connection, I refer to critical multicultural literature from a feminist, anti-racist perspective. I also raise other dimensions of social experience that further complicate differentiation among students, such as disability. The final section explores some deeper meanings in relation to anti-racist feminism, critical pedagogy, and power relations within the situations encountered. This paper is not meant to prescribe answers or solve problems, but rather to name, reflect on, and contribute to the dialogue on continuing and new challenges to feminist, anti-racist and critical pedagogies.

Use of Small Group Work

Mainstream educational systems at all levels entrench values that are compatible with a patriarchal, racist, colonial capitalist system (Jakubowski and Visano 2002; McLaren 1993; hooks 2003). Some of the common continuing practices that uphold the colonial capitalist system are the preponderance of individual assignments, exams, standardized tests, and individual grading; the rewarding of high grades with prizes and scholarships; and the commodification of education to be bought and sold, where students are positioned as consumers and teachers as sales agents (Steele 2010). It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the strongest imperatives in education in recent years has been that of internationalization, in keeping with a globalizing world and as a euphemism for new forms of cultural, political, and economic dominance of capital at the international level. Apart from consumption, this culture of the marketplace also promotes other related values such as the naturalness of inequality, competition, individualism, meritocracy, and “difference,” which is essentialized and also commodified. McLaren (1993) has referred to this as “market identities” (215). Within the “banking” paradigm referred to above, knowledge is viewed as a commodity that teachers

“possess” and students do not. Further, teachers are expected to lecture “to” the students with the hope that they will receive some nuggets of knowledge in the process. In the culture of the education marketplace, there is pressure on teachers to “sell” knowledge in a way that will satisfy students just as an attractive pair of shoes might. Students are rewarded according to how much of this commodified knowledge they can demonstrate as having accumulated. This accumulation, which Bourdieu (2001) aptly conceptualizes as “cultural capital,” puts these individuals in the field of other members of the capitalist class(es) or those aspiring to be one of them. Within this process, students are assumed to learn only in set ways: by reading prescribed texts, copying, and repeating, which is appropriately described by Ferguson and Titchkosky (2008) as requiring “a mind-body split and masculinized ways of knowing” (73). This approach to teaching and learning starts from the earliest years of education and continues into university and college levels.

Although one could critique my description of education today as being outdated and refer to the range of “experiential techniques” being incorporated within academic arenas to support her/his viewpoint, I would suggest that these new approaches tend to leave the basic epistemological structure of the educational system intact. For example, the Freirean principle of incorporating “dialogue” in classrooms in order to break the “culture of silence” has not necessarily translated into liberation, as many feminists have pointed out (Kaufmann 2010; Simpson 2003), but has often reproduced a “Eurocentric standpoint” in which students of colour have had to modify their way of speaking and acting in order to be recognized. According to Kaufmann and Simpson, dialogue is predicated on the use of language which is not neutral. Indeed, they reiterate the feminist suggestion that “silence,” rather than indicating “lack of voice or social identity,” may represent a “strategy of resistance” (Kaufmann 460). White (2008) has written about the experience of being in “the hot seat” (85) in the classroom and in other academic environments when having to talk about her “Blackness,” even though she may

not want to. As she points out, her racialization “binds the Other to a script and performance of oppression and anger” (80), a condition that for her contributes to a chilly climate in academia. McLaren (1993) has talked about the dual potential of storytelling. He says that “narratives can become politically enabling of social transformation or can serve as strategies of containment that locate ‘difference’ in closed epistemological discourses” (203).

Keeping in mind the contradictory potential of “dialogue” as discussed above, I nevertheless engage students in small group work to facilitate more interconnections among them. This is particularly important since our university classes have become quite large, a development that has become a serious hindrance to engaging in any form of meaningful interaction. However, having to work in small groups invariably causes a great deal of anxiety among students as it is counter to the ways of teaching and learning that most of them are used to from the earliest years of their education. Group work demands the ability to work with others, to be able to conceptualize an assignment collectively and to build consensus, to be able to divide tasks as equitably as possible, and to learn how to compromise and *work across differences and power inequalities*. While most groups struggle to work on their projects and are successful to varying degrees, working *across and with differences and power inequalities* becomes insurmountable in some groups.

In organizing small group work, instructors are always confronted with the decision of *how to divide the students*. I have debated as to whether I should let them self select their group members (which I knew would make them happier) or whether I should assign them to a specific group. My concern is that if I allowed them to form groups on their own, they would join together with friends or form homogenous groups in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and groups that are convenient in getting the job done. In order to counteract such intentions, I usually randomly form groups based on last names listed alphabetically on my class list.

Despite this process, there are some groups that have concentrations of one ethnic

or racialized group. I have noticed over the years that it is these groups that present problems in terms of working across differences. The minoritized individual(s) in these groups generally get excluded from dynamics set in motion by the dominant group members. In my classes, dominant group members have often been students of colour from one ethnic group, while minoritized members may also be of colour but from another ethnic group; for instance, Indian and Black respectively. I have observed situations where some South Asian students who are numerically dominant in a small group will subject other minoritized students to exclusionary and racializing practices. There have also been instances where some Black students have expressed discomfort or even anger towards South Asian students. How can this kind of interaction be understood within the Canadian framework of multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism as a “Racial Project”

Omi and Winant (1994) have discussed the notion of a racial formation in which ideas, structures, practices, and everyday experience flow into each other and give rise to racism simultaneously as an everyday reality and as systemic and institutionalized. They further theorize that the ways in which ideas and representations about race are connected to racial structures, including resource allocation and everyday racial experiences, can be referred to as racial projects. In this way, they connect everyday micro-situations, such as in classrooms, and macro structures and historical memories, such as those emanating from colonialism and current formulations of multiculturalism in Canada. Multiculturalism policy in Canada has been described as a framework which can be administered in complementarity with colonialism, generally excluding Indigenous Peoples in Canada and applying it to those who are outside the so-called English and French “founding nations,” those who came as settlers, migrants, immigrants and refugees. Multiculturalism is also in line with globalization and imperialism in current times (Thobani 2007; Bannerji, 2000).

Liberal state multiculturalism as it has existed in Canada since the 1970s has engendered a society in which Canadians are en-

couraged to maintain their ethnic, linguistic, and religious heritages, even though only the English and French are privileged as “official minorities.” Writers have commented that this official policy has created a “mosaic” which is not only vertically structured (Porter 1965; Hamilton 2005), but also horizontally segregated. Moreover, while equality is urged at the cultural level, there is no similar encouragement for equality at the economic, political, or social levels. In this sense, the policy has a “culturalist” bias and reeks of colonial policies where the colonized (in some cases, not all) were often allowed to practise their religion, language, and other aspects of their “private lives,” although “public life” was dominated by the colonizer. This policy was/is also gendered since the former is usually associated with women’s activities, while the latter with men’s. While multicultural policy upholds the benefits of ethnic diversity, it does not acknowledge inequalities of power that pertain to different ethnic groups, particularly those who were colonizers (such as English and French) and others who have been colonized (such as Aboriginal Peoples, Asians, Africans, South and Central Americans, and Caribbeans) and subjected to racism. Neither does the policy acknowledge the problem of sexism as a systemic problem, which implicates differently racialized ethnic group members in a variety of ways. In fact, in the name of culture and ethnicity, patriarchal values are often reinforced (Bannerji 2000). Recent re-articulations by the Canadian state in light of post-9/11 politics have represented men of colour, particularly those whose bodies are read as “Muslim,” as hyper-sexist due to their “culture,” and women of colour as hyper-dominated and in need of saving (Thobani 2007; Das Gupta 2010).

Multiculturalism policy does not say very much about how different ethnic groups are supposed to work, study, and live together every day despite inequalities at various levels. Simply preserving one’s culture, language, and religion and staying within one’s ethnic space does not necessarily create a non-racist, non-sexist (forget non-classist) society. In fact, Bannerji (2000) argues that Canadian multiculturalism “segments the nation’s cultural and political space as well as its labour market into ethnic communities...

competitive entities with respect to each other. This type of conceptualization of political and social subjectivity or agency allows for no cross-border affiliation or formation, as for example, does the concept of class” (7) or gender, I might add. Such ethnic and gendered subjectivities are compatible with colonial, capitalist, sexual, and racialized relations in society at large and within the individualistic and meritocratic culture of educational institutions. All these discourses learned in years of schooling, within families, and in other cultural arenas militate against working collaboratively across differences. The end result is that students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds remain segregated, even when they have the commonality of being students, being women, being similarly racialized, or being in the same class.

Power of Colonial Ideas

Power expresses itself in a myriad of ways. It is ever changing and illusive. It is not always top-down or coercive. As Gramsci (1971) noted, the state rules not only through force, but also through consent from its subjects. Bannerji (2000) argues that multiculturalism has served as an ideological tool to create consent from Canada’s subjects in which colonial racialized ethnicities have been reformulated to create divided and essentialized identities. The old game of “divide and rule” has been reformulated to keep people who are oppressed divided from each other.

As mentioned above, most discussions of racism in classrooms have been about white racism. However, anti-racism scholars remind us that white people do not have a monopoly on racism (Omi and Winant 1994; Miles 1989). People of colour are not immune to racial thinking and action given the history of how we, as previously colonized peoples, have come to know about each other. Most people from privileged class backgrounds in colonized societies (i.e., those who could afford it) have been taught in colonial systems of education in which colonized people (Aboriginal, Africans, and Asians) were and still are represented as inferior, subservient, or absent. The Canadian educational system is also based in colonialism, either English or French. As Fanon (1967) illustrated in *Black Skin White Masks*, the colonized learned and internalized their own

inferiority and that of others like them; they learned self-hatred and the hatred of others like them, and minute ways of differentiating themselves from other colonized peoples by associating themselves with white masters and their cultures. Freire (1988) refers to this process in the context of “cultural invasion” (150). This also permeated gender/sexual relations among and between colonized peoples as well as relations with male and female colonizers. Moreover, white colonizers used “divide and rule” tactics and positioned differently racialized peoples strategically within the colonial system to develop differentiated consciousness. For instance, Indian indentured labourers were placed as buffers between white colonial officials or plantation owners and enslaved Blacks. Racial ideology, including eugenics, proclaimed a hierarchy of “races.” Such ideas were reproduced over generations through popular culture and folklore so that they have now become commonplace. So, when racialized male and female students from different ethnic back-grounds encounter each other in classrooms today, it is completely comprehensible that they would look at each other through colonial, racist, and gendered gazes. In Freirean terms, they “‘house’ the oppressors within themselves” (Freire 1988, 84).

The Teacher as a Racialized and Gendered Body

The problematic dynamics between different groups of racialized students that I have addressed above have made me reflect on my own positioning in the classroom as a non-white, immigrant (i.e., not born in Canada), and female teacher. I am powerful and marginalized simultaneously in the classroom. As a professor, I have class privileges and hold the ultimate power of being able to evaluate my students. From a traditional educational perspective, I can be the authoritative voice as far as the subject matter is concerned. To the student, I am a representative of the university, an institution of higher learning which holds ideological, political, social, and economic power. As a faculty member, I am also positioned in contradictory ways in relation to other faculty members, clerical and secretarial staff, administrators, and janitorial staff. However, I

am a woman of colour and as such may be “suspected of being in the wrong place,” “not being good enough,” and, given my outspoken nature, “too uppity” or “not doing my job” if I do not stand up and lecture. Other scholars have acknowledged similar realities for Aboriginal faculty, faculty of colour, women faculty of colour, and faculty with disabilities (Young Man 2010; Dua and Lawrence 2000; Laubscher and Powell 2003; Eisenkraft 2010; Galabuzi 2010; Kobayashi 2010). In order to deal with the ever-present questioning of my knowledge and experience due to my gender and racialization, I do have to resort periodically to my traditional authority as “the professor.” Moreover, the increasing size of my lectures over the last few years has reinforced that approach. However, I also subvert that constantly with non-traditional approaches, some of which I have discussed elsewhere (Das Gupta 1993).

I have noticed over the last few years that I have a significant number of South Asian students, both female and male, in my classes. I always wonder whether they are there because of who I am, because of what I am teaching, or whether it is simply a reflection of demographics in the GTA. Be that as it may, Laubscher and Powell (2003) have talked about how the “difference” embodied by a teacher can become part of the text in classroom discussions and can be utilized strategically to provide support for other marginalized students. To this end, they discuss how they have talked in their classes about feelings of anger that they have felt as othered individuals. I do talk about aspects of my own life in class if appropriate; for instance, my experiences of racism and sexism, of coming to Canada as an immigrant, of a lack of belonging in academia, of my activist work in the South Asian community, and so on. However, I do not go as far as Laubscher and Powell do; that is, discussing my emotional responses to being marginalized. Neither do I get into deconstructing how students react to each other as racialized, gendered, sexualized, and differently abled beings. In other words, I do not engage in discussions about how they react to specific and “different” bodies. I hesitate to do this because of my reluctance to turn my classes into therapy sessions, which I am not trained to facilitate. I also do not want students to be subjected to attacks, as has occasionally happened in the

past. Dua and Lawrence (2000) have talked about faculty of colour and Aboriginal faculty struggling to maintain a safe space in the classroom where students will not be subjected to racist or sexist comments, while at the same time providing an arena to discuss and unlearn racism. However, I am beginning to feel that my reluctance to initiate personal discussions in the classroom may be a catch-22 situation because, while I require them to work with each other in small groups, I do not perhaps provide them with tools to analyze their own reactions to working with people who are different. I can contemplate addressing this discrepancy by making students reflect through journals on their group interactions and personal reactions to working across differences and power inequalities. Some key journals could then be used anonymously with the permission of the student author to animate a dialogue on the topic.

Returning to Laubscher and Powell's practice of using their own bodies as text leads me to wonder how I am perceived by my students in all their complexity. These authors mention that they teach in a predominantly white and upper-class environment, while mine is much more working-class female and highly diverse ethnically and racially. Do South Asian students feel a certain affinity with me and do some feel empowered to act out their colonial aversion towards "others"? Being aware of my own subjectivity, I have made an effort in the past to be a facilitator and mediator rather than to "take sides" in conflictual situations, unless it is an overt case of racism, sexism, or any other "put down." In hindsight, I wonder if some non-South Asian students feel alienated or unsupported as a result of my facilitation style.

Other Intersecting Hierarchies of "Difference"

In addition to race and ethnicity, intersections with attributes of age, generation, and ability can compound how students become otherized within a group. I have observed that a student with a self-identified disability in a small group situation often becomes marked as "a problem" and becomes a source of tension. In an effort to spare the student with a disability the humiliation of not

being taken seriously or being subjected to exclusion or resentment, I have resorted to giving the student special permission to work on her/his own. I should add that this is done in consultation with the student concerned and has been welcomed. However, in doing so I may have inadvertently contributed to further marking the student as "other" and as a "problem." Ferguson and Titchkosky (2008) argue that the "process of othering...makes disability void of the necessary relation between self and Other that grounds competency, legitimacy and participation" (72). These authors further demonstrate that disability as constructed by institutional processes is made to appear as an individual problem as opposed to a socially constructed one. The person whose body has been marked as disabled becomes an oddity. The disabled body is made to "disappear" through technical and administrative accommodations, including special permissions. It is necessary to explore ways in which all students can be full participants in classroom activities, such as small group work, without being marked as "a problematic other" or being put in the "hot seat" (White 2008, 85).

Conclusion

Segregating ourselves in the name of ruling ideologies, such as multiculturalism or "equal access," starts early in our lives and continues in post-secondary education, workplaces, labour markets, residential patterns, and social and recreational spaces. As critical scholars have pointed out, multiculturalism as framed by the Canadian state does not necessarily nurture the ability to work across ethnic differences and power inequalities and fails to cultivate a collective consciousness. Rather, it entrenches ethnic/racial identities of the most parochial kind, including reinforcing racism and sexism in thought and action. This allows the state and those in power to "divide and rule" and, when it serves their purpose, to blame racialized peoples for living in their "ethnic enclaves" ("Jason Kenney" 2008) and engaging in "barbaric" gender practices.

Critical scholars of multiculturalism have discussed prospects for a multiculturalism from below as opposed to state-imposed multiculturalism (Bannerji 2000; McLaren 1993). How can we harness the progressive potential

of multiculturalism from below in our classrooms, given that we have such heterogeneous student bodies in some universities today? How can we decolonize our minds and on that basis build solidarity among our students and ourselves? This must be done not only among all immigrant groups (including whites), but also with Indigenous communities. Such work needs to pay serious attention to and acknowledge how our ancestors and we continue to play a role in colonialism against Indigenous peoples, how our cultures may be built on racist, sexist, homophobic and classist ideologies, and how we could build unity based on a desire for social justice.

We need to focus on anti-racist, feminist education in our classes which goes beyond simply “having” a multicultural classroom. Sivanandan (1990) urged us to go beyond multicultural education and to engage in anti-racist education because “just to learn about other people’s cultures is not to learn about racism of one’s own” (68). I would add that we need to also learn about the sexism of our own cultures and other inequalities entrenched in them. McLaren (1993) has talked about developing “border identities” which are “created out of empathy for others by means of a passionate connection through difference” (220). According to him, such identities are forged in the course of lived experience where fixed and socially constructed identities are countered. This can take place in classrooms through what he refers to as “critical narratology,” a pedagogy based on the telling and re-telling of our stories, listening to different stories, including of those who are silenced and oppressed and from those holding ambiguous identities, and “encouraging students to remain ruthlessly self critical” (229). Such connections are made outside the classroom also through forging community coalitions. Sivanandan (1990) discussed an example of how solidarity was built in the U.K. among a diverse group of people which went beyond an empty multiculturalism. The forging of an inclusive “Black” community brought together people of African and Asian heritages, particularly in the fight against racism. “Black” was a political colour (66), the colour of the oppressed. He commented that it was the Black women’s movement in Britain that continued this solidarity into the 1980s as the infra-

structure on which it was built was being eroded. Another example of such solidarity was seen in the immigrant women’s movement in Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s referred to above, which brought together a wide variety of differently racialized and ethnicized working women in a myriad of grassroots organizations that worked in solidarity with each other under the banner of “immigrant women” (Das Gupta 2007). While recognizing that these efforts did not survive forever, that the state has a way of co-opting identities or dismantling these efforts, and that we ourselves often fall prey to sectarianism, they are glimpses of what can be developed in our classrooms over the short period of time that we have with our students, particularly when we are discussing class, gender, race, and other topics of a critical nature. On a practical level, working across differences and addressing power inequalities could be a central part of our curriculum, given the subject matter of many of our courses and who the students are. Students could be engaged with these topics through their class projects and reflective activities, such as journal writing. Finally, I should mention that what gives me hope is that most students work successfully with each other despite differences and power differentials. In the process, they demonstrate an open mind, empathy, cooperation, and other remarkable qualities.

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