Beyond the Comfort Zone: Diversity Issues as Catalyst for Student Learning

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1. Abstract

This project analyzes the case study of a fall 2005 African American Literature class to determine whether the intellectual risk of confronting diversity issues can serve as a catalyst to deep learning, even in a class that is generally racially homogenous. The paper begins with a definition of the term "deep learning" as it has been employed by several contemporary pedagogical scholars. Next, in the case study description, the writer examines several key class discussions on topics of race. Reflecting on the conflicts addressed, questions raised, and assertions made by students during these discussions, the writer concludes that diversity issues can indeed provoke students to a deeper understanding of society's complexities and a more sophisticated level of thought.

Keywords:

diversity, African American literature, critical thinking, deep learning

2. Introduction

While there is much scholarship these days on the importance of accommodating diverse student populations in U.S. classrooms so that all students have equal opportunities to learn, to succeed after college and to establish a meaningful life(see endnote 1), there is relatively little discussion about the intellectual boost provided in the classroom by diversity itself. This intellectual boost is needed, perhaps especially, in colleges where the population is fairly homogenous. In this environment, the feeling of belonging, the feeling that "the way things are" is only natural, can actually stultify the learning process. Why consider views that may challenge one's perspective if one's perspective is confirmed as correct on a daily basis?

The need for a way to launch students into "deep learning," or "deep level processing" is well established by John Tagg (2004) in his article "Why Learn?: What We May Really Be Teaching Students." Tagg distinguishes between the average student's tendency toward surface learning, or "learning it up for exams" (p. 6), and deep learning, or learning "for personal change" (p. 6). He articulates what most of us already recognize intuitively: Those students who see "learning as understanding, learning as seeing something in a different way, and learning as changing a person . . . see learning as mainly concerned with seeking meaning" (p. 6) rather than as simply a way to earn a competitive grade. Tagg asserts that anything less than this deep learning leaves students unprepared to face the challenges of life after college. He cites Robert Kegan's book, In over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life, in explaining that "as we grow older and seek to meet the challenges of adulthood, we need to develop new ways of thinking about ourselves and about our relationships to others and to the world" (p. 7).

While Tagg argues that the only solution to this problem is to stop privileging surface learning with our current grade systems, there are certainly measures we can take to encourage deep learning in spite of this emphasis on grades. In the majority of colleges and programs where development of critical thinking skills is a primary objective, both a) diverse classrooms and b) material addressing diversity issues can serve as effective catalysts for the learning of students from a variety of backgrounds, including those in generally homogenous institutions. At North Georgia College and State University, in Dahlonega, Georgia, USA, we have just such a homogenous student population. Recruitment of faculty and students of color is tricky at a small university where the tradition is military, where the regional population is historically very white (that is, after the Native American peoples were driven out), and where minority students can peer down the road toward Atlanta and see what they perceive to be a culture that is more colorful and more tolerant of difference. We are currently devoted to finding more effective recruitment methods and, ultimately, to changing the homogenous appearance of NGCSU, but in the meantime, we are seeking creative means to promote the kind of deep learning that a more diverse campus would naturally encourage. In my own classes, I have found that texts introducing diversity issues are very effective in channeling students toward the kind of deep-level processing Tagg calls for.

Any of us who has sat in a barbershop or at a family dinner when the subject of race or sexual orientation was introduced knows how effectively these issues can be used to elbow us out of our own psychological safety zones. As teachers, most of us do not desire to alienate our students, either from ourselves or from each other, so we tend to choose our discussion topics carefully. I know faculty, for example, who work hard to avoid subjects such as abortion or religious belief. However, if treated the right way, diversity issues can provide a highly effective tool for promoting students' intellectual growth.

Taking care to provide a safe environment for students, an instructor can use diversity issues to pull students out of their comfort zones and into meaningful, productive exploration, both in class discussion and in their writing. Even in a generally homogenous environment, students seem to be drawn to class materials addressing multicultural issues. I have observed this phenomenon in the number of non-English-major students requesting to be enrolled in our sophomore-level African American Literature class each semester. The class never fails to fill to capacity, and those students who cannot secure a slot in the class during registration resort to haunting the departmental office, begging for permission to add the class anyway. Further, the conversations that take place in the class once the semester is under way lead me to believe that while most of our students feel culturally "at home" at NGCSU, their experiences in their more public lives make them eager for more knowledge about their fellow Americans, who are of a variety of backgrounds. In spite of students' enthusiasm toward the subject matter, however, diversity topics must be addressed with sensitivity. Mary Dilg (1999) observes, from her work with adolescents in American public schools, "The same closeness students feel with this material because of the way in which it confronts real issues in their lives makes the material very challenging to work with in class" (pp. 6-7). Yet, like Dilg, I believe that here, in the space encompassing both intellectual hunger and uneasiness about the subject, much intellectual growth can take

place. Because these issues are intensely relevant, and because the cost of misunderstanding and/or miscommunication among class members is high, students tend to construct with great care their positions on these issues. As they consider their stances against those of multiple oppositions, their awareness of an issue's subtleties increases and their need for thorough knowledge and for effective rhetorical strategies becomes plainer to them.

3. Case Study

To illustrate both the fertile nature of diversity issues in the college classroom and the careful management that renders them effective, let us return to the example of my African American Literature class. In fall 2005, the make-up of the class was thus: 37 students who identified as white-American, 4 who identified as African-American (at least part of the time), and 1 who identified as Mexican-American. For the third class meeting, students in the course were assigned to read Geneva Smitherman's essay, "Black English in Whiteface, or Who Do I Be?" (1991). This essay challenges common notions of Standard English as a superior "language," especially in the realms of academic and professional American life, as opposed to Black English (or Black Idiom), often treated as an inferior "dialect." Smitherman makes her argument successfully, not only by providing solid logic and evidence but also by employing in the essay itself a combination of academic Standard English and Black English. I have purposefully selected this essay for my course readings because of its usefulness in provoking a particular kind of debate.

On the day scheduled for our discussion of this essay, students began timidly. In response to my request that someone sum up the gist of Smitherman's argument, "Sue," a young white woman, answered, "She's saying that Black English is a real dialect and not just an incorrect way of talking." Immediately, a young Black male student, "Randy," challenged indignantly, "What do you mean 'Black English'?"

In spite of the pinched expressions that immediately appeared on the faces of the class as a whole, my inward response was delight. While the students fidgeted in their seats, especially Sue, I smiled and addressed Randy, "Well, tell me; how does Smitherman define the term?" His silence only confirmed my suspicion that he had not done the reading, a suspicion born when he asked the question in the first place. I shifted my eyes from Randy to scan the rest of the class for a hand. Sue piped up, a bit sheepish: "I didn't mean to offend anybody," she said, glancing at Randy. "I really thought she'd used the words 'Black English' in the article."

"Yes, she does," I said, "so help me everybody, and let's put on the board a list of the features she offers in order to illustrate that Black English is a viable, effective dialect." With some coaxing, then, I began to draw answers from the class. I proceeded to ask follow-up questions about how Smitherman forwards her argument, and slowly but surely, the class began to delve into the complex issues raised by the essay. Randy's initial reaction had, of course, been grounded in his understanding of prejudices against Black Idiom, the same prejudices Smitherman battles in the essay. These assumptions were voiced over the course of our discussion. One white student stated, "It seems to me that Standard English exists for a reason. We need a standard form of language that we can all understand no matter what slang forms we use when

we're in our own communities, don't we?" The best tool I had for addressing this assertion of course was, once again, the assigned text. I summed up Smitherman's argument on the subject: Any verbal exchange demands a process of negotiation, and furthermore, if Black English is evaluated for its ability to communicate effectively, it scores high. I illustrated her point by asking, "How many of you understand the parts of Smitherman's argument that are written in academic English better than the parts written in Black English?" There was a general chuckle from the class. A white student commented then that because of the contemporary media, she was more familiar with Black English than with academic English, which is still pretty foreign to most college sophomores. And with this remark, another student suggested that it is the status of academic English that makes us value it, not its superior ability to communicate, at least in any context other than a scholarly one.

When we had come to the end of our discussion, I stopped and addressed the class once more: "I want to say how impressed I am at how respectfully you're offering your contributions to the discussion. We'll be covering some particularly sticky and sometimes heated issues in this class [Here, Randy nodded significantly.], and I want us to be able to have honest, productive discussions about them. I do think, though, that we'll want to be careful to broach those issues respectfully. I think we're capable of that - you've shown that already in our conversation today."

At our next class meeting, Randy had done the reading, as was clear from his comments, and we continued on, as a group, exploring what the students now recognized to be a much more complex set of issues than they had originally understood. Randy, incidentally, became a particularly useful factor in our conversations. His initial defensiveness diminished a bit as the rich legacy of African American literature began to unfold for him and his fellow students. But just as importantly, his anger had made an impression on his peers. In our discussions thereafter, they took great care in articulating their opinions and questions. Rather than making the sweeping assertions so common to college students' arguments, assertions symptomatic of surface learning rather than deep learning, they were more apt first to consider the weak spots in their cases and then to qualify their assertions.

In describing my internal smugness at the students' discomfort during our discussion of Smitherman's essay, I may sound self-important and patronizing. If I am treating the exchange a bit like a game, it is only because I've been through the experience enough times to see the potential in the moment, and like any teacher, I get a rush of adrenaline at the thought of that light bulb coming on for students. But I do want to echo Mary Dilg's assertion that the instructor should always be open to what he or she can learn from the students, as well. My own assumptions are often challenged in these discussions, too, as they were one day when we were exploring the concept of Blackness as a construct. This conversation sprang from our reading of Nella Larsen's novel Passing. One student I would have identified as Black (and assumed would identify herself as Black) revealed that because of her white German ancestry, and her "high yellow" color, she often identifies herself as "other" on forms asking for race identification. This comment launched us into a wonderful, energetic discussion of the meaning of Blackness, and of race in general. In another semester, this same novel had drawn from a student the argument that not only does passing occur among people of

color, but it is also often practiced by gays and lesbians. This perspective on the subject led us back to the novel for a new analysis of character relationships and then to a discussion about the social pressures that cause people to decide to pass.

For both the students and me, these topics promote the types of learning that Tagg asserts are necessary for deep learning. First, the motivation for understanding is high: Randy's failure to do the reading for that first discussion kept his argument from being convincing, and it turned out to be an argument close to his heart. Thus, he was more likely to do the assigned reading thereafter. Sue was also motivated not only to do the reading but also to make a strong effort to understand its implications and possible reactions to those implications. Secondly, even before our discussion of Smitherman's article, most of us would not have argued publicly against Black English as an important dialect, because we are aware of the issue's hot-button status, but many students had not previously understood Black English as a fully structured dialect with a predictable grammar. The article and our conversation about it did indeed result in most of the students' seeing the issue in a different way. 3) Finally, I saw evidence in the students' later writings that they themselves were in some way changed. Students revealed an increasing willingness to investigate cultural features carefully before presuming the causes of those features, and this willingness extended both to students' own cultures as well as to "other" cultures. I found all of these developments to be significant contributors to students' deep learning.

4. Conclusions

Having employed diversity issues in my course curricula for the past several years, I have observed the ultimately positive effects these topics have on students when used as the basis for debate. Introduced both in reading assignments and in class discussion, topics such as racial difference, sexual orientation, and religious diversity draw most students outside their comfort zones and force them to reexamine the ideologies that inform their understanding of human existence and interaction. If employed insensitively, these topics can cause students to "shut down," which can impede intellectual risk-taking. However, if instructors provide a safe environment for treating these difficult subjects and then guide students carefully through discussion of these subjects, diversity issues can serve as the catalyst for great developmental advancement among college undergraduates. This kind of development will yield learners who are better prepared to meet the challenges of life after college.

Endnote

1 - For insightful discussions of this perspective, see Brown and Kysilka, 2002; Lue, 2003; and Gregory, 2003.

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