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Navigating Perceptions of 'Otherness' in the Classroom: One Experience

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Abstract

As a direct result of the pervasive nature of Eurocentrism and Platonic epistemology in the academy today, teaching undergraduates is a special challenge for those who are viewed as representations of cultural others. This presents such teachers with what may be described at best as "unique" classroom experiences. Their "being" is rendered in a manner that places it on trial. This trial, taking place in the mind of the student becomes an additional barrier to the learning process, and oft-times a crutch that allows the interjection of variables of social and cultural stratification when the lack of academic preparation is the crux of the issue. This affects the utility of alleged student "evaluation" processes and ultimately can impact the overall effectiveness of pedagogical environments. The veteran teacher and scholar here invites us into "his" experiential world of teaching as an "other" that we might all benefit from examining these questions in terms of developing theory and empirical practice to ameliorate these effects in modern U.S. classrooms.

Introduction

The Eurocentric epistemological system has been described by Molefi Kete Asante (2003), the father of Afrocentrism, as possessing a fundamental dogma. Aspects of this dogma locate knowledge in Greek philosophy, which in turn is linked to modern Europe and its own intellectual tradition. To the extent that it can be said to exist, this dogma, has the practical effect of locating knowledge in a particular material and geo-political context. One might describe the context in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) reflexive sociology concepts like habitus and field in which social and cultural activity may be characterized as situated in a particular matrix of presence, or being. In accordance with the dictates of Platonic epistemology, this being is transfixed upon or inscribed upon specific social bodies in much the same way as Foucault (1977) notes punishment may criminalize individuals by the state.

In the United States, the bodies of knowledge are branded in the context of ideologies like White supremacy, patriarchy, and oligarchy. Bodies inscribed with the insignia of humanity under these

governing philosophical constructs are similarly crowned as legitimate repositories of knowledge.

This situation is especially problematic for those on the war front of the academy, namely "nontraditional" scholars. Nontraditional scholars here refer to those who by some stratification system of race, class, gender, caste, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, religion, or language are identified as cultural "others". They face as individuals within affected social groups, the matrices of discrimination that impede their access to the educative process, to credentialing, and to employment. An overlay to this is the set of experiences they encounter as "insider-outsiders" within their ivory towers themselves, in their efforts to conduct the tripartite tasks of scholarship, teaching and service. A second overlay is embedded in the nature of the curricula and materials themselves which may reinforce the stereotyping and marginalization of their relevant social groups as legitimate objects of study, and certainly, as critical analysts of social life and participants (full) in the enterprise of science itself.

Amidst this morass, the "other" as a scholar must grapple with another of Bourdieu's (1992) concepts, the "sincere fiction of the self". In this case, however, the concept is modified. Here, the "sincere fiction" is on the part of the audience of would-be students. I say would-be, because the actuation of the learning process is never totally complete. Complete engagement would require the difficult suspension of the state of psychological normalcy induced by the aforementioned dogma. This is true for all the potential pupils, both those themselves part of relevant subject groups as well as those branded with ascriptive superiority in some strata. It is accentuated in the latter due to the fact that the integrity of their socially constructed identities may be at stake.

Virtual reality can constitute an effective comfort zone only as long as there is no cognitive and connotative encroachment upon its conditioning by truth. Such an encroachment confronts those in the dominant strata in a number of ways when an "other" manifests himself or herself as a purveyor of knowledge. Coupled with these are a number of typical coping mechanisms that are accordingly triggered but yet form formidable obstacles to teaching and learning praxis.

The first case I shall refer to as the "denial of presence." I had a student who had been in class for several sessions, when he suddenly rose with what was clearly for him an important query: "Are you really the instructor for this course?" At that point, I had introduced myself, the course, the syllabus, and discussed my expectations for the class as a collective as well as delivered the initial substantive lectures. This student was unwittingly revealing that his psychological trauma at my "being" had created a three-day deficit in course materials. His contemplation of my existence as an African scholar in a class supervising his work, paradoxical in his reasoning, had proven so traumatizing that he had ignored the substance of the course altogether. I could have stated the obvious, but my own coping mechanisms involve humor and sarcasm. I remember extemporaneously mouthing some mythology about the then current president driving by me in his limousine as I stood on the corner holding a sign stating, "Will teach for food". The rest, I said, was history. The class laughed uproariously, although the student's still blank visage told me that either my icebreaker had been insufficient to address his question or that he was processing my fable mentally to the test its plausibility. Either way, the prospects of engaging this student seemed frightening.

A second coping mechanism involves a more developed response in which the presence of the "other" as a teacher is accepted, but the position of the "other" is distinguished from the supposedly superior structural position of his or her peers or the students themselves. The first experience I had with this involved a student who came to my office and asked, "What should I call you?" Had this been a conversation with a personal friend, I would have assumed it was a debate about whether or not the individual was to use my surname in addressing me. Since this was a student, whom I had just met and who had attended one class, I knew more factors of deliberation were at work. I responded, "How do you refer to other faculty members?" He quickly rejoined, "Dr. X, Dr. X, Professor ____" I probed further by raising the issue of what about me signaled to him that I might be addressed differently. While not approaching that matter directly, he brought up as a defense his assumption that I could not have been a "real" professor. No ultimate rationale for that observation, just silence and withdrawal out of my office.

The third case involved a brilliant freshman who appeared at my door after the first session to offer me assistance. During the class I had made an offhand reference to the market forces of supply and demand. In so doing, I sketched a superficial and simplistic "X" drawing on equilibrium. I knew the drawing was ideal neither in scale nor in geometric form, but I felt it sufficient to illustrate the point I was making, particularly since it was sociological and not economic. With four years of college economics behind me at Georgetown, I could have plunged into the statistics of the whole thing, but it seemed wholly unnecessary at the moment. To this precocious student, however, this constituted "ignorance on my part". An 'ignorance' that he, out of the goodness of his heart, could correct. Fresh out of his first college course ever and his first course in economics, he offered vital information from his textbook on the proper form of supply-demand curves. Of course, I had to pull out the old calculus-statistics-economics background in my defense. In short, the disappointed student finally had to concede that I actually knew more than he did on macroeconomics.

The proverbial icing on the cake comes from a student who came into my office perturbed and exasperated by the impression he had developed that I acted as though I knew more about the subject matter than the students?!! Imagine. Of course, there is a legion of runners-up for the awards of those most affected by the malady of my equality with my colleagues. The students who went to the department head because I gave a pop quiz (!), the student who came to me with recommendations on what my syllabus should say, the students who request grade changes ex post facto because they wanted to join a fraternity, the students who decide to tell me what materials and academic resources I should use, and so on. Almost all of these special people acknowledge that they do not and would not engage other faculty members in the way that they engage me. I would suggest that these experiences are symbolic of an attempt to establish new cognitive equilibrium for the presence of this "other" in their midst. I am a professor, but somehow less than the others, and accordingly the perception of ascriptive superiority remains intact.

The fifth test case involves a coping mechanism which emerges during the course evaluation stage. This part is inevitably problematic since the socio-cultural context creates a "rock and a hard place" minefield for "others" as scholars. If one is "nice", one is likely to be deemed incompetent and affirmative action by students. If one is "hard", one becomes "intimidating" and

"unapproachable". Add this to the fact that the structural impediments in the academy make it more likely that such evaluations, normally a minor part of collegial critique, but is likely to loom large in any negative predispositions. Good ratings may be indicative of the sane lack of conscientious grading. Bad ratings validate an inability to work cross-culturally. Finally, there is the curricular dimension where the coping mechanism of explaining away the significance of a knowledgeable "other" rears its ugly head.

I refer to this mechanism as externalization. In externalization, the "other" is accepted, but the communicated discourse of the "other" is simultaneously invalidated. This nullification is usually affected by affixing essentialism to the "other's" expounded knowledge. The category of essentialism attached is drawn from the socially-subordinated group of which the individual is a part. In my case, this meant that anything I said could be assigned to an ontologically "black" point of view. My speech acts are rendered both dichotomous and inferior at the same time. There are "dichotomous" in the sense that a "black" point of view cannot ultimately be subsumed by a "white" mind. Inferiorized by its very "blackness", for the latter in the context of white supremacy is necessarily other than the "norm" or the "real". It is not surprising therefore, that the twin accusations of intimidation (unapproachability) and one-sidedness (excessive personal opinion) recur among students who show poor academic achievement. The beauty of such a rhetorical question is that it completely externalizes responsibility for lackluster results and places the onus on the "other". Many institution's evaluative processes at the collegial level come along and validate such student's responses without comprehending the psychopathological response to the "other."

The sixth case involves a particularly vitriolic course evaluation where a student lamented both of the afore-mentioned alleged traits before the telling conclusion of "I've learned more in this course than any other course I've taken. The instructor should be fired." Many colleagues across the country who have parsed their evaluations have spoken to me about the difficulties of trying to explain such bipolar student responses to unsympathetic critics in the ivory tower. What must be understood is that students in evaluating the "other," must in the matrix, evaluate themselves. Many students face the same psychological dilemma that Hitler faced in grappling with Jesse Owens stellar performance in the Olympics. A positive evaluation validates the "other" as not only a legitimate knowledge bearer and, in fact, as an authority with respect to the course the "other" is assigned to teach. Course evaluations thus become disturbing last nail for disgruntled students, and where the minds of students become shaken to become reflective of their sustained misperceptions of the "other." And, so there is this quagmire involving scholars of the "other" groups.

Those whose mere physical presence in the academy signals dimensions of privilege and disadvantage and of superiority and inferiority must overcome not only the rigors of their day-to-day lives among the untouchable social castes, but also must contend with the fundamental paradox of being purveyors of knowledge systems, which the most dominant of which contradict their very existence. After the "others" seem to have gained from the world an admission and acceptance of their humanity, they must now fight for their very legitimacy as scholars, academicians, and faculty and as equals.

What is to be done? First, I believe that options are limited for "other-scholars". They must engage, within their disciplines, the philosophical debate over their legitimacy and legitimacy to participate in their disciplines. An African sociologist ignores the history of, and historical context of continuous marginalization of African sociologists' work to the detriment of human civilization.

Second, and pedagogically, I believe it imperative upon the "other-scholars" to contextualize the disciplinary contributions of their own groups within the larger field of human experience. Thus, my discussions of African communalism nuance conversations about other forms of the samelest it be rendered by some of my students as either an inferior form of European socialism, or as some exotic "alien" form to which one could not relate because of its Afrikaneity.

Third, the fundamental Eurocentric presumptions that attach knowledge ontologically to particular human bodies must be rooted out of all disciplines. Otherwise, the academy will be unable to give any real substantive focus, discussion and meaning to the terms "multiculturalism" or "diversity" beyond their physical forms. In fact, I find paying lip-service to these concepts a travesty to human dignity and civilization and an injustice to the "other."

I conclude then that, perhaps we might be able to speed up the day when the ubiquitous theme of "I think, therefore I am," is rendered "I am, therefore, I think," as may be supported by Mbiti's (1970) general assertion that, I am, because we are.

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