

Autobiography of a Teacher: A Journey toward Critical Multiculturalism

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Abstract

Many of us do not realize the prejudices we learn by living our lives. However, through reflection we can understand who we are, why we are that way, and how we can change. As a teacher I naively believed that I had transcended prejudicial thinking and acting. Yet, through much reflection during my doctoral program, I came to understand myself from a new perspective. By revisiting my white privilege, being the other, and my place as an educator, I unfold the invisible construction of myself. This both personal and cultural autobiography challenges others to look behind the invisible veil of their own social construction of self so that new understandings are possible.

Introduction

In his 1992 book on race in America, Studs Turkel told the story of a cab driver who, in times of stress and exhaustion, reverted to racist thoughts and feelings. The cab driver said, “No matter how much education you may have had, the prejudices you were taught come out. These sinister forces are buried deep inside you” (p. 6). Many of us do not realize the prejudices that we were taught just by living our lives. But through reflection, realization is possible, and it is through reflection that we can change. As a former public school teacher I naively believed that I had transcended prejudicial thinking and acting. However, through much reflection during my doctoral program, I struggled to make visible the historical transparencies of race and privilege that I had been looking through. I was tearing away the veil of ignorance.

My story has two beginnings that are chronologically forty years apart. In the fall of 2002 I enrolled in a course entitled “Diversity and Equity.” At the time, my cultural identity allowed me to assume that I would be learning about the other; however, I soon realized that I would be forced to critically examine my own identity. For me this examination took place in the form of autobiography.

As Susan Edgerton (1991) described, autobiography aids in the understanding of self. My autobiography tells the story of the places I have been and describes the language, routines, habits, perception, thoughts, attitudes, and unconscious actions that have shaped and changed my understandings about multiculturalism. “Understanding ‘place’ in this way suggests the process known as ‘making the familiar strange’ (Green, 1973) . . . critically examining the clichés by which one has learned to live — clichés expressed not only through language but also via routines, habits, and modes of perception as well” (Edgerton, 1991, p. 78-79). Further, there is a connection between our constructions of self and our constructions of other (Edgerton, 1991) and that by discussing those constructions we can only grow in our understanding of the multicultural world in which we live.

As Steinberg and Kincheloe (2001) acknowledged, there is little agreement among scholars in defining multiculturalism. Therefore, in order to set a context for me to discuss multiculturalism, I will use the five positions delineated by Steinberg and Kincheloe: (a) conservative, (b) liberal, (c) pluralist, (d) left-essentialist, and (e) critical. *Conservative multiculturalism* encourages assimilation to Western middle class standards based on a traditional patriarchal culture, and “promotes the western canon as a universally civilizing influence” (p. 3). By focusing on the sameness of individuals from diverse backgrounds *liberal multiculturalism* supports assimilation as proposed by conservative multiculturalism. Further, liberal multiculturalism maintains the separation between politics and education. *Pluralist multiculturalism* has a greater focus on race, class and gender differences and supports education about various cultures and ethnicities. This position “has become the mainstream articulation of multiculturalism” (p.4). *Left-essentialist multiculturalism* upholds the notion that the categories of race, class, and gender are based on a set of static fundamental values and only authentic members of the group have authority to represent themselves or the group regarding their oppression and related issues. *Critical multiculturalism* focuses on issues of power and domination; identifies sources of race, class and gender inequities; and analyzes privileges all with the goal of social justice. To this end, marginalized groups are encouraged and assisted in resisting their oppression. Using these positions I present my own complicated, very personal, and at times painful journey.

The Beginning

A Place of White Privilege

Now I come to the second beginning. I lived in the same small Midwestern town

for the first 23 years of my life. I did in essence leave when I went away to college, but returned during the summers. I lead a fairly privileged life. I had two parents. Dad worked; Mom stayed at home and took care of the children. My father's income provided the resources to fulfill the majority of my desires, from the latest fashions to a car. In addition, his status in the community and in the state provided a network of influential people. Education was valued and my parents supported my involvement in extra curricular activities ranging from sports to music. I never questioned my status. Rothenberg (2000) described my feelings about my privileged status quite well; it was "not privilege at all, just the way things were, the way they were supposed to be" (p. 73).

I was exposed to very little diversity during my common school education. I went to school with American Indians but was practically oblivious to them having different experiences from mine. I often visited my mother's hometown where there is a large African American population, but saw the *coloreds*, as my relatives called them, as people that "traded" at my family's store, but not as people with whom I would have social interactions. As an undergraduate student, I encountered a great diversity of people. I had my first conversation with an African American person, and I became good friends with some students from Mexico. I became interested in other religions and cultures immediately and was fascinated by all the people who were different.

Academically Othered

While in college, I realized that I might not have been as privileged as I believed. Ironically, I was underprivileged with respect to my education. My entire common education was in a small rural school. Just as Yeo (2001) discussed, smaller rural schools "are unable to provide a broad range of courses, thereby severely disadvantaging their students" (p. 515). This was definitely true in my situation. There was no college preparatory track in my high school, and I had chosen to attend an academically rigorous university. The lack of advanced math courses available in high school made me deficient for college level mathematics. Further, my senior English class consisted of "listening" to Romeo and Juliet and writing one library research paper. Needless to say, the required English composition courses were a struggle for me. There was no foreign language requirement for graduation, so I did not take a foreign language. This made foreign language at the collegiate level an impossibility. I struggled through my entire undergraduate education and constantly felt inferior in regard to my academic ability. This was my first experience with feeling othered.

A Place in Education

Although I had a Bachelor's degree in computer information systems, I did not like the world of computer programming. One year after graduation, I moved to a

large metropolitan area to pursue a career in retail management. After working in retail for several years, I decided that I was really meant to be a teacher. Although I had considered this career as an undergraduate, I had not taken it seriously until several careers later. So, I went back to school and got a Masters degree along with elementary certification. This began my experiences with children from diverse backgrounds. I did all of my field experiences including student teaching in the same school district, which had a predominantly African American population. In addition, many of the students lived in poverty. As I mentioned previously, my initial awareness began with a conscious recognition that others were different from me, but as a teacher I recognized that I was different from others. I became the minority.

Racially Othered

After receiving my degree in elementary education, I interviewed for a teaching position in this same district where I did my field experience. However, I did not get the job. When I asked the principal why, he very candidly told me that he had to hire a black teacher. I felt that it was unfair that someone should have an upper hand just because of skin color, and I complained of reverse discrimination. I was angry that someone had an advantage over me. Ironically, I failed to acknowledge that I constantly had the upper hand because I was white and my privilege had always gotten me what I wanted. I was again the other. Eventually, I began to understand that this district along with many others was concerned with its teaching staff reflecting the diversity of the student population.

Enacting Pluralist Multiculturalism

As fate would have it, I ended up teaching for that very principal. A teaching position at his school opened not too long before school started and I was offered the position. I accepted and spent my entire public school teaching career at this school. The children in my classroom came from a multitude of cultural backgrounds and often times the students had just moved to the United States and did not speak English. Each year presented a variety of challenges.

Becoming a teacher was a critical point in the development of my multicultural awareness. The lack of diversity in my own background made me unaware of the complexities of living each day in a room of culturally, racially, and socioeconomically different people. Many would say that I was naïve, but I believe that my naïveté provided the foundation necessary for me to enter this context with little experience that would support stereotypical views of the people I would encounter. I believed that I had an unbiased perspective, looking for the potential in each student. I used every resource available to complement what I did in the classroom. My expectation for each student was to learn no matter his race, socioeconomic status or past academic and behavioral history. In spite of this seemingly enlightened perspective, I was enacting a curriculum that reflected my Eurocentric notion of pluralist multiculturalism. I was guilty of the “tacos and egg rolls” curriculum that Rothenberg

(2000) described. I felt it was important for my students to be “exposed” to other cultures, and that exposure consisted of doing units on pueblo Indians and participating in a contest to communicate to Japanese students what a day was like in an America school. If the culture I chose as a focus overlapped with the culture represented by students in my class, it was purely accidental. However, the few white students in my class were privileged through my enactment of traditional white curriculum, curriculum as institutionalized text (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000). I reflected Rothenberg’s ignorance with respect to presenting a Eurocentric worldview. She described it this way, “Since it had never occurred to me that it was impossible to place any other experience, history, or culture at the center of my focus, I could not identify the perspective from which I taught. For me it was not a perspective, it was ‘reality’” (2000, p. 111).

Racial Conflict

I enjoyed working with my students very much; it was the teachers that presented most of my challenges. Although the student population was majority African American, the teaching staff was predominantly Caucasian. This created a great deal of friction among many of the faculty and staff because we questioned the others’ qualifications to teach our students. The black teachers believed that the white teachers did not know how to teach black children. And the white teachers believed that these middle class black teachers had no more connection to the black children in the school than did the white teachers. The white teachers believed that what made the African American students in our school different in terms of academics was their families’ financial situations and their uncertain living conditions. These disagreements were often manifested in behavior such as faculty refusing to attend a holiday party because it was at a particular person’s home.

Even with all this racial tension, I never felt scared around another person just based on skin color until I became a victim of crime. While living in the city, I had two very disturbing experiences. First, three African American males, who looked to be in their late teens or early twenties, tried to steal my car. I came out of a store to find them in my car attempting to drive away in reverse. They could not get the car into drive, so they abandoned it. Second, two African American adolescents were hanging around me in the parking lot of a grocery store while I put groceries into my car. I was not concerned; I thought they worked at the store and were waiting for me to finish so they could take the cart back into the store. I had my purse over my shoulder and when I turned to face them, in a flash my purse was gone. One of the boys had pulled my purse hard enough to break the strap and was running down the street with it.

These two experiences left me feeling violated and fearful of this particular group. My perception of African American young men had been interrupted by these experiences and I had entered Anzaldúa’s (1999) *la facultad*.¹ My fear was compounded by the fact that this particular group was targeted and stereotyped by

the media. To come to terms with my feelings, I made a commitment to learn more about this group that I now feared. I took a course in African American studies, which focused on adolescents. It was a very enlightening experience not only because I was the only white in the class, but also because I began to develop a new understanding of African Americans.

Evolution to Critical Multiculturalism

In 1996, I moved back to my home state to continue my work in education. I took a position as a university-based professional developer where I worked with both preservice and inservice teachers. In this position, I visited many classrooms in the state. Because I visited mostly suburban and rural schools, the sea of white faces that I saw in the classrooms overwhelmed me. Although this sea of white reflected my own educational experiences, it seemed very foreign to me. These classrooms seemed boring; there was no variety. In addition, I saw that many of the teachers in these schools came with a similar set of assumptions regarding multiculturalism that I had as a teacher. This prompted my commitment to put multicultural issues at the core of my own education as well as my teaching.

The courses I took as part of my doctoral work were the most influential in expanding my consciousness of multiculturalism. I would say that almost every course I took had a component that connected to multicultural issues. A major idea that I gained from a course entitled *The American College Student* comes from a simplistic phrase that is sometimes considered cliché, but has taken on significant meaning for me: "Behind every face is a story." It is important for me to encourage others to be conscious of the effect their comments, actions, and words can have. I expect of myself as well as others consideration of all possibilities and to never assume that you know what a person is like just from his or her appearance.

I now teach elementary education majors and consciously use my history and understandings to inform my pedagogy. I have come to take a critical stance when working with preservice teachers by challenging them to look behind their veils to examine their own social constructions of self so that new understandings of curriculum are possible. Multiculturalism is an issue that students need to acknowledge and discuss, particularly in an environment such as teacher education where the majority student is a white female coming into teaching having not interrogated her own cultural identity. To borrow from Frances Rains (2001), I feel that it is my duty as a teacher educator to help my students "unlearn the stereotypes and misinformation that might otherwise become the wobbly foundation" (p. 528) for their understanding of others. Further, I hold the same goal as Rothenberg (2000), who said, "For me, the goal of helping students see the world through many different people's eyes continues to be a primary and laudable aim for undergraduate education" (p. 157). Finally, I strive for my students to be critical, to be conscious "of the way the power dynamics of race, class, gender and other social dynamics have operated to help produce one's identity and consciousness" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2001, p. 26).

The End?

I would like to close with this quote from Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), “Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. ‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (p. 70). Through this autobiography, I have become a different person. It is uncomfortable to acknowledge what I have done and how I have felt, but I have grown through the experience. This autobiography does not end here, it is only the beginning of my life-long journey toward living my life and teaching from a perspective that has at the forefront my new maxim; behind every face is a story.

Note

¹For a detailed discussion of this concept see Chapter 3 of *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa.

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