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Joining Forces: Other or Us?

by

Patricia A. Gross

[Studying in college] I had won for myself a standpoint, both subjective and objective. I could already perceive unity in diversity, the correlation of forces, the interconnection of all living things, life in matter, and the principles of physics and biology ... All is unity, all rests in unity, all springs from unity, strives for and leads up to unity, and returns to unity at last. This striving in unity and after unity is the cause of the several aspects of human life.

Frederic Froebel, in Ulich (1954)

F. W. Froebel (1782-1852) recognized well over a century ago a strong underlying congruence and coherence in all life. He held to a vision of unity and embarked on a teaching career in hopes of closing the gap between this vision and the realities of the actions and perceptions of the people that surrounded him.

Similarly, as a college professor in a small, liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania, I confronted attitudes and values among the students that varied greatly from my life experiences as a native New Yorker who had been reared and educated in New York City and who had taught high school and reared a child of my own on Long Island. Trying to relate to these students proved jarring. Attempts at conversation revealed layers of ignorance (in the purest sense of the word) on the part of students whose answers seemed facile and glib. Efforts to elevate critical thinking regarding issues of diversity led to the study described below.

Objectives

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and beliefs of two sections of first-year college students enrolled in a liberal studies seminar course dealing with issues of unity and diversity. The purposes of this study included enabling students to: (1) articulate specific ways in which to raise consciousness concerning race, gender, and class issues among primarily white, middle class, and conservative students; and (2) apply insights gained from course experiences to encourage critical thinking and responsible behavior in daily campus life.

Background and Conceptual Framework

In the first few years of teaching education courses at a rural college, I had been startled to hear the assumptions students made assertively about matters they had neither encountered nor researched regarding minority populations. Their views seemed disturbingly entrenched. After confronting students about their lack of information, I discussed with them the possibility of offering a course to deal directly with issues of race and gender. Students readily agreed such a course would be welcome.

Educational research continues to recognize the value of multiple strategies for learning, yet many university and college teachers and schedules persist in traditional approaches. Lecture and limiting time slots often preclude students from grappling with controversial issues. Britzman (1991) and Bateman (1990) argued that dialogic discourse activated learners to reconceptualize received ideas and reevaluate opinions. I felt the issues of diversity merited such in-depth discussion and consideration and required a schedule other than the typical few hours a week.

In addition, the need for greater awareness of equity and diversity issues has been well articulated, especially in multicultural, urban contexts; however, the need for heightened sensitivity is crucial among predominantly monocultural settings like the one in which I found myself involved. Students from all white communities lack the familiarity and experience of interacting with a wide range of cultures.

The richness of cultural exchanges imbedded in my New York City roots contrasted greatly with the lives of students who came largely from rural areas in the Middle Atlantic region. I found scores of students who had rarely interacted with minorities, who had parroted parents' views of roles of women, and who were unaware of their own thoughtlessness. If they continued to be insulated, these students would not be prepared to enter the professions.

These well-intentioned, but poorly-informed, students needed to stretch parameters and embrace differences as essential preparation for effective participation in democracy (Giroux, 1992; Rosario, 1994; Novak, 1994). They needed to develop strategies to acquire more informed self-knowledge and greater awareness of others—what Banks (1994) called “the transformation approach” and what the Sadkers (1994) championed to counteract *Failing at Fairness*.

As Nieto (1992) delineated, effective multicultural education requires going beyond tolerance, acceptance, and respect in order to achieve authentic affirmation, solidarity, and critique. I designed a pilot course with two other colleagues who held similar sentiments. We hoped to accomplish the two goals that drove this study.

Methods and Data Sources

Breaking with traditional class scheduling and assessment, we explored the value of extending inquiry of issues to two sections of students who met both separately with us as their respective professors and jointly with us in a team-teaching situation. We scheduled afternoon and evening events beyond prescribed class meeting times. The classes met twice a week to grapple with issues that emerged from common and individually selected readings, interviews, guest speakers, and performances. Joint course sessions explored beliefs, conflicting viewpoints, and concerns, enabling students to identify filters, acknowledge alternatives, and activate change.

The writing component of the combined courses weighed heavily. Students documented feelings and impressions through learning logs, reaction papers, and reflection papers. Interactive exercises stressed listening to viewpoints and synthesizing ideas, which culminated in joint projects—performed, explicated, and evaluated by both sections.

Drawing from *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (Holland & Quinn, 1987), *Teaching With a Multicultural Perspective* (Davidman & Davidman, 1994), *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994), and *Border Crossings* (Giroux, 1992), we sought ways to enable students to recognize tacit, presupposed knowledge and devised specific strategies for registering constructive assertions of difference. *The War Against Women* (French, 1992) and *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Takaki, 1993) provided additional support for investigating accepted knowledge with a more critical eye for understanding various perspectives involved in presenting history.

Multicultural Education of Children and Adolescents (Baruth & Manning, 1992), *Responsive Teaching* (Bowers & Flinders, 1990), and *Beyond Silenced Voices* (Weis & Fine, 1993) suggested ways in which to heighten awareness of individual needs within the context of the classroom. Tatum

(1992) and Delpit (1988) stressed the need to develop racial identity to bridge the social power code to succeed. These works served to alert students to the impact and resistance to change of the privileged classes.

The first assignment entailed reading Cole's (1990) *Filtering People* and writing a two-page autobiography in which students identified the filters they used when relating to others. These writings provided the bases for the first joint class discussion. Students then selected two sections each from McCullough's (1987) *American Childhoods*. They compared the readings in terms of the importance of place, the sense of optimism, the awareness of race, and the regard for parents. The groupwork entailed in both of these readings provided the groundwork for each student to interview at least one relative about issues of identity and filtering influences. A culminating paper from these activities analyzed heritage, customs, beliefs, education, and socioeconomic status to identify specific impressions, possible misconceptions, and new insights.

Both sections heard guest speakers of African-American descent. For many students, these events comprised their first encounters with minority professors. Following each event, question and answer periods invited students to interact with the speakers. Students wrote reaction papers for each speaker and reconvened in joint sessions to discuss the issues raised, feelings evoked, and questions still left unanswered. A main aspect of the study involved cognitive dissonance, forcing students to continue to wrestle with incongruities.

Common readings included Dubois' (1989) *The Souls of Black Folk* and West's (1993) *Race Matters*; common film viewing included the video entitled "The Meeting" which pits Malcolm X against Martin Luther King in an imaginary dialogue. Students also read individually selected excerpts from Terkel's (1992) *Race*. From these cumulative sources, students worked together to analyze discrimination and prejudice and wrote individual papers to develop specific solutions for alleviating tensions among peoples.

Gender issues quickly became apparent throughout discussions. All students read *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky et al. (1986) and divided amongst themselves the chapter readings from French's (1992) *The War Against Women*. They heard guest feminists and viewed the film, "Raise the Red Lantern." Students also participated in a workshop with a gay minister who described the fears and concerns of homosexuals. These activities culminated in a paper in which students examined silencing, particularly of women, and its effects on all people.

The final project challenged students to represent the insights they had gained from the course and joint sessions. These student presentations had to reflect each student's individual identity as well as defining moments that had occurred during the semester. The final product had to address influences on thinking, new perspectives or sensitivities, views of the world, and reactions to issues of multiculturalism.

Options for the final project included artwork that expressed one's growth, a skit or dramatization, original literary work, musical composition, or dance. Criteria for assessment of the final product included self-evaluation and peer evaluations of the depth and expressions of insights, contributions and cooperation with partner, quality of performances, clarity and relevance of content, organizational design and specificity of form, and creativity. All final projects were videotaped.

For the last class, students re-read *Filtering People*.

Data Analysis

My colleagues and I, having functioned as participant/observers, read through all student learning logs and writings. We recorded student questions and concerns voiced in group discussions amongst themselves and with guest speakers. We met regularly to discuss emerging patterns. Through this continuous data analysis, we charted student progress and applied grounded theory to shape the course content (Strauss, 1990).

We viewed and reviewed the final, videotaped presentations to ascertain the growth evidenced from the written records documented throughout the semester. Students' final written and taped explications and course evaluations recorded their articulation of insights captured throughout the course, providing further documentation of their progress.

We studied two main categories: (1) the ways in which we were able to raise consciousness, and (2) the manner in which students carried these insights beyond the classroom into campus life. We divided each of these categories into three specific sections: (a) the existence of lenses to filter others, (b) the behaviors that singled others out, and (c) the adjustments made to become more inclusive.

Raising Consciousness. After the first assignment of reading *Filtering People*, initial student writing reflected the extent to which they had often unconsciously excluded those who differed from them.

L.F. (who had many minority friends in high school) wrote:

I create filters against people to boost my self-esteem. ... I have judged people because they were overweight or handicapped. Despite my preconceived ideas about these people, after getting to know them better I found out that we had a lot in common.

S.A. (who considered herself open-minded) wrote:

What I never realized was that I had created a world of many filters, denying minority groups their rights, their pride and the respect that all humans deserve. Instead of confronting this notion, I have convinced myself that my beliefs are justified, for individuals like myself have supported me.

After encountering a live performance by a minority actor, students expressed increased awareness of the lives others are forced to live because of the filters they are subjected to.

D.V. (who struggled against family views) wrote:

We grow up in such a naive state of mind and continue to progress in that way that things like discrimination and prejudice are overlooked. ... As I watched him portray several characters ... I realized that fears were a huge factor ... people who were afraid to accept blacks or allow blacks to be free.

D.S. (who described himself as from a redneck area) wrote:

The production was very eye-opening. It showed me what it was to be oppressed. Some of the characters told tales of the horrors that white people perpetrated. But the part

that I found most enthralling was when he performed Martin Luther King. This was the closest I have ever been to Dr. King and the way he acted it made me want to help fight injustice.

One month into the course, students began to transfer some of the learning they were gradually absorbing.

Another student, A.T. (who had been the most resistant to the course content and purpose from the beginning), wrote:

My first reaction of having to go to see the performance was one of bitterness. I have studied Martin Luther King so many times that everything at this point seems to be repetitive. After this performance, my view of Martin Luther King, as well as live performances in general, has changed. ... My roommate and I both went to the program and we could not stop talking about it when we arrived back in our room. I thought this was a very effective way of learning and I would certainly go to another performance when there is a chance.

One African-American student in the class, D.A. (who grew up in Washington, D.C.), often articulated views other students had never considered. One example from her racial identity paper:

To be born a minority is bad enough, but to be set off, excluded, chastised, mimicked, tortured, or just flat out discriminated against because of the color of your skin is a hell of a lot worse. ... Yes, I was born African-American and I can accept my race, because I'm very proud of who I am. But not everyone can say the same. The solution to racism is not acceptance, or tolerance ... it's caring, and knowing about what the other person has been through. The solution comes from within your own heart, but you have to care enough about yourself, and where you come from before you can have enough pride in yourself to say who is and is not the better man.

A medial course evaluation revealed student concerns regarding the issues raised and their attempts to come to terms with them. At this point, D.V. wrote:

Who am I ethnically? What kind of thought pattern do I possess (sic)? What's the next step after awareness of the problem? How does my thought make me an individual when others have the same opinion?

An anonymous paper offered the following:

It is very hard to be an open-minded person when those around you are not. If your family holds some sort of prejudice, how can you help them see things differently? Even if they are stubborn and unwilling? How can I prevent my younger brother from holding this prejudice?

Another anonymous paper posed the following questions:

Why am I prejudiced against certain things and not others? What makes me choose (sic) over certain things? Will racism ever be abolished, why or why not?

Medial course evaluations also served to direct the students into the next segment of the course, developing issues they themselves raised.

R.G. (who had felt privileged as the only girl in her family):

Although I now realize many of my filters, is it really possible to live a prejudiced-free life? How have gender roles affected my life in ways I don't know about?

Another anonymous commented:

I would like to find out what I truly believe with the gender issue—what roles women are responsible for and what roles men should possess. I would also like to find out why I stick to these beliefs and how I can change my ways of thinking on them.

Though there were twice as many females as there were males in each section, the non-judgmental spirit that had been built in the course encouraged each person to speak openly.

The men held vastly different viewpoints, from strictly traditional to tentative to willingly open-minded. Everyone spoke up often and at length, trying to explain his position and answering questions from the women in an attempt to reach some workable ways of relating both in class and on campus.

The women surprised themselves by the recognition that they had accepted attitudes toward women which hurt them and interfered with their personal relationships with men. Four such women produced a skit for their final project that dealt with this issue. One of them, K.L., wrote:

In playing a woman that had been abused I discovered many things. I found myself feeling extremely sorry that she had to go through what she did. Because of what my character endured she developed this notion that all men were "scum." I can say that jokingly in real life but to someone like her it is true and she firmly believes it. I found myself wondering why society puts down those that are abused. We tend to victimize the wrong person and that is simply not fair.

Among the men in the course, A.T. had been the most entrenched in voicing traditional views regarding the roles of men and women. After viewing "Raise the Red Lantern," he wrote the following:

I felt the helplessness that the women felt throughout the movie. I realize that this is a very big problem in the world but through this perspective it seems even larger. We must also think of women across the world. I would have liked to know ... if this sort of treatment is still practiced somewhere in the world.

The first purpose of this study, how to raise consciousness, seemed to have been met through the readings, performances (on film and live), written work, and small and large group discussions. The second purpose, application of heightened sensitivity to daily campus life, seemed to be more subtle.

Application of Awareness in Campus Life. Student reaction throughout the course revealed a deepening awareness of their own filters and those of others, as well as the effects of behaving according to these filters.

T.L., an Asian woman, wrote:

I realized that I do build filters against those who are different from me because I am afraid. I am of a minority and sometimes I filter those who are like me so that I feel part of the majority. ... I don't think I filter as much as I used to now that I realize that filtering people is wrong. I now know that filtering people not only hurts those I filter against, but I hurt me as well.

M.K., a white male, wrote:

A funny result of the course and the book (*Filtering People*) is that whenever someone says anything that can possibly be a prejudice, anywhere on campus—in the dorms or in the cafeteria, someone will pipe up with the words, "YOU'RE FILTERING!!"

The choices of topics for final projects tended to show the areas students felt most keenly about.

J.S. (a white male) and D.A. (a black female) chose to write poems and reflections based upon surveys that provided them information regarding "the views of students and faculty on multiculturalism."

J.C. and S.Z. choreographed a dance, costumed in black and white, entitled, "Growth Over Time: How We Came Into the Class 'Blind' About our Filters, But Over Time Broke Through the Filters." The performance portrayed ignorance of one another, moving to wariness, and finally resulting in harmony.

K.T., K.S., and M.K. entitled a video they made, "Views on Philly," which focused on homosexuality and various reactions they got from interviewing random people on the city streets.

D.J. and J.C. entitled a video they made, "Change From Within." This work drew from art sculptures and paintings on campus to (1) explore how their thinking on race, religion, and gender changed and (2) explain the "before and after of our thinking."

C.K. and J.M. developed a skit about conflicts between mother and daughter because of interracial dating. Their efforts dealt with the generation gap as well as racial misunderstandings.

R.F. and D.S. (two traditional white males) chose to have a live discussion which they entitled, "How We Have Matured Towards the Feminist Point of View." They chose to focus upon "how women are perceived in society and mistreated, why we have changed toward women, and the ways we have changed."

N.K. and R.G. chose a photographic collage which they assembled and displayed "of diverse situations in the city, suburbs, schools, and campus, to show that diversity exists in a world where we had otherwise thought that separate and defined groups existed."

The final course assignment required students to re-read *Filtering People* (the first course reading) and to write another reaction paper, indicating current feelings and opinions. Among the concluding remarks, students recognized that they themselves still had plenty of work to do in erasing prejudices and discriminatory actions.

S.A. wrote:

One of the most important lessons that I will take from this class is that not only do filters hurt those who you are filtering, but they also deny ourselves the chance to get to know our "true" selves. In other words, all filters really do is keep us from questioning ourselves and our insecurities, the reasons why we filter each other and what it is that sets us so far apart from others ... it frightens me to think that I was more sure that I could change the world in the fifth grade than I am now.

R.G. came to the following realizations:

There is absolutely nothing positive about prejudices, but people still tend to use them consistently. Even now, I find myself still using old prejudices that I know are wrong in order to fit in with people who have similar filters. Now I realize though that I'm only hurting myself each time I continue with one of my filters because I am not giving individuals a chance at being themselves free of filters. If everyone is given a chance to be themselves then there will be no need for filters that inhibit each of us daily!

S.Z. shared a personal experience:

Last night I met this girl who was the neatest person ever!! The thing is that I always built a filter against her because of the way she looked (hair style and clothes) and never took the time to get to know her personality. Everyone around campus would constantly joke about her; I have to admit that I would partake of this joking, too. After actually meeting her, I have nothing negative to say about her, only positive things. She listens, responds, is cheerful—many qualities that anyone would want in a person. I feel horrible that I used to filter her all last semester—that was unfair.

D.S. (a struggling white male) concluded:

I realize that some grave injustices have been committed in the past. But why does everyone highlight the bad instead of the good? Why don't we concentrate on making the future better instead of blaming each other for the past?

Conclusions

Confronting serious campus issues in classroom settings proved dynamic and provocative. The nonthreatening climate enabled students to speak openly and listen attentively to their peers. Over time, the expanded audience of two sections tended to encourage participants to discuss controversial issues beyond the safe confines of the classroom, voicing more informed opinions more freely and emphatically throughout the campus, cautioning one another not to filter others.

This study served to shake students up. Many began the course feeling quite removed from the problems to be considered. From the first reading of *Filtering People*, however, many began to realize that they didn't know themselves and their own thinking quite as well as they had complacently thought they had.

The few minority students in both sections surprised themselves by the prejudices they had been unconsciously carrying and acting upon. The predominantly white population on campus struggled with the realities of privilege as their peers brought to their attention the many instances

that colored their thinking and behavior.

Most importantly, by exploring the real issues of daily interactions with others, students began to see the part they played and the ways in which they could alter their own behavior. As one student, A.L., wrote:

I have learned that there are solutions to help reduce prejudice. Prejudices and discrimination can be crumbled if people become more familiar with people who are different from themselves. Expanding views will help people be more accepting and break down barriers.

K.L. felt caught in transition:

I think my filters have shrunk—I no longer look at things the same way. I try my hardest not to stereotype because I know it is wrong. I've also found myself informing others about their filters and that certain things they say should be reconsidered. I see people differently now. I really hope that I can treat all people equally.

J.W. wrestled with family influences:

Sometimes I filter people from another race the way my family would. Usually I catch myself doing so and try to view the situation differently. My family has not had the chance to interact with those of a different race as I have. ... I hope that my family eventually does get the chance to interact with those who are different and destroy their filters.

S.K. felt she had made some progress:

Because of this class, I notice many more things that have always been around me. Now these things, being what people do or say, are so much more aware to me and also seem to bother and affect me more. I see some things and many more points of view more and more openly, although some concepts people hold still do not seem acceptable. I hold this great hope that someday, when I'm still alive, that everyone will look at another as an equal.

Immersing students in the issues, through readings, writings, discussions, performances, speakers, and student presentations forced students to grapple with the realities of their lives and the consequent effects on campus life.

As first-year students adjust to the independence that accompanies a 95% residential college setting, providing courses that both delve into current literature and insist upon daily application of newly gained insights can serve to raise their critical thinking as well as their consciousness about how they live their lives and impact themselves and others in the process.

Combining sections routinely throughout a semester enlivened both students and teachers. Confronting racial, class, and gender issues, particularly in a predominantly monocultural setting, allowed for frank discussions, for student-driven course content focus, and for student responsibility for the depth of inquiry, the exchange of ideas, and social agency on campus.

Such courses require clear follow-up opportunities, either through additional courses, units in required courses for majors and minor specializations, or through extra-curricular activities on and off campus. Once the process of reconsidering one's perceptions and attitudes begins, continual prodding from a range of sources necessitates continued vigilance of one's own sources of opinions and actions.

One course is just the beginning. Following this study, circumstances have led to the reconstruction of a small building on campus. This building houses four residents of mixed backgrounds and serves the campus as a center for all groups to mingle with one another and learn of each other's cultures. Froebel would be pleased to know the students have called this new venue for understanding "Unity House."

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