

3

"I Could Hear You If You Would Just Calm Down": Challenging Eurocentric Classroom Norms through Passionate Discussions of Racial Oppression

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Many educators who desire to transform the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression in their classrooms often focus on altering the *content* of their curriculum rather than on the *process* by which that curriculum is developed in the classroom space. Yet developing an inclusive learning experience involves not only de centering whiteness (maleness, etc.) in course material but also making space for nondominant modes of interaction and behavior as ways of processing that material. Here I want to explore how incorporating the emotional response of *anger* in class discussions of racial oppression disrupts the normative hierarchies of white dominance in classroom space. This disruption is not without its challenges, particularly for some white learners, but it ultimately creates great antiracist possibilities seldom tapped by unemotional approaches to oppreSSiOn.

Several analysts of race, gender, and class oppression have critiqued the false dichotomies of public/private, reason/emotion, and mind/spirit (among others) as creations of those in power, used to devalue feminine, non-European, and working-class ways of being. As Marimba Ani points out in her book *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (1994), the first step to objectifying (and thereby controlling) someone is to remove any emotional attachment to her/him.

Thus, being "objective" and therefore intellectually superior means disconnecting from all that is deemed emotional, according to dominant Eurocentric thought. To this end, everything that displayed such "objectivity" became labeled as civilized, while anything emotionally expressive was deemed irrational, uncivilized, and thus deserving of domination by those in power. This dichotomy between reason and emotion not only serves as justification for colonization and oppression, but it also functions to suppress any revolution against oppression. As bell hooks notes in her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, "rage is not pathological. It is an appropriate response to injustice" (1995, p. 26.) Yet as long as emotions such as rage can be characterized by those in power as uncivilized and inappropriate, "it ensures that there will be no revolutionary effort to gather that rage and use it for constructive social change" (hooks 1995, p.18). It follows, then, that norms of classroom *behavior* that privilege "rational" intellect and devalue "irrational" emotion not only will continue to privilege members of dominant groups in the classroom but also will squelch the more revolutionary possibilities for liberation from emerging from such classrooms, *even if that course's curriculum reflects diverse perspectives.*

Although I will be focusing primarily here on anger as a legitimate (and integral) part of the process of decentering *whiteness* in the classroom, it must be clear that validating emotional expression in the classroom disrupts many other hierarchies of power as well. Many women know the admonition of "calm down" has been used to silence them in various ways. Similarly, the stigmatization of emotional expressiveness has been used to devalue the working classes. In discussing the "bourgeois class biases" that dominate mainstream pedagogy, bell hooks (1994) writes:

As silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom. Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of the social order. These traits were also associated with being a member of the lower classes. (p. 178)

Thus, the incorporation of emotion into the classroom process holds liberatory potential not only toward dismantling racial oppression but gender and class oppression as well, by creating a space where previously devalued forms of expression are legitimized as equally valid in the quest for knowledge.

The validation of anger and other forms of so-called inappropriate emotions in the classroom has particular implications for members of dominant groups. Hearing historically silenced voices speak out emotionally about their plight often gives members of dominant groups their first

exposure to the lived realities of oppression. Because of the stigma described above, expression of raw emotion about oppression often stays within oppressed groups, where it is more likely to be taken seriously and understood. So a diverse classroom that affirms emotion can be an eyeopening experience for those whose privilege has heretofore insulated them from hearing such testimonies. Furthermore, members of dominant groups also may be dealing with their own anger on learning about oppression, even in the absence of "others" in the classroom with them. For instance, whites may become disillusioned with the educational system, feeling betrayed that they have been misinformed up until now about their nation's racist history, or white males may feel targeted and blamed as the "bad guys." Thus, those in privileged groups might appreciate the space to process these new emotions they are experiencing, and effective instructors can even channel this emotion into effective social change action. However, it is important to note that members of dominant groups still are accustomed to the privilege of being taken more seriously when their rage is expressed (O'Brien 2001).

Creating an inclusive classroom that affirms diverse modes of expression may sound simple, but it is actually an approach from which many instructors shy away. Our traditional socialization as educators teaches us to "maintain control" over the classroom, and we may take passionate outbursts as a sign of an unruly, undisciplined space that needs to be managed. In fact, encountering such settings has historically led even the most progressive instructors to retreat from fully inclusive classroom processes. Reflecting on the history of the incorporation of cultural diversity into academia, bell hooks (1994) writes:

Many folks found that as they tried to respect "cultural diversity" they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of "authority." Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a "safe," harmonious place was challenged. . . . Many professors lacked the strategies to deal with antagonisms in the classroom. (pp. 30-31)

Perceiving one's own "loss of control" can be a scary feeling, especially when mainstream pedagogical philosophies reflect a hierarchical teacher-student model, and any diversion from this hierarchy is a sign of professional failure. In my own discipline (sociology), even our more progressive national professional association held a conference session on "managing anger in the classroom," and when I submitted a paper affirming anger as a necessary and useful pedagogical process for teaching about oppression, this was politely deemed "inappropriate" for the session. Indeed, we are

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more ready to diversify the *content* of our curriculum than we are to confront the biases inherent in the *process* of teaching. Yet facing the racist, sexist, classist norm of keeping emotions out of the classroom *is* all the more relevant for those of us teaching in classrooms where topics like racism, sexism, and classism are the focus of the course content. It *is* urgent that we begin to share strategies for affirming anger in such classrooms, so that there are alternative models of pedagogy available for progressive instructors who desire traversing this tenuous terrain of challenging the status quo. Although a daunting task, *its* rewards are tremendous.

Sources of Personal Observations

I base this exploration of anger as a necessary part of the pedagogy of oppression primarily on my own observations at a small state college for the past three years teaching courses to undergraduates that deal with structures, identities, and relationships that oppress people. Although I have seen similar issues emerge across those years, and my examples may periodically draw from different semesters and courses, this paper will deal largely with a section of "Gender, Race, and Class" that met in Spring 2002. This was a cross-listed sociology, women's studies, and African American studies course comprised of mainly junior and senior undergraduates. Because our entire campus has less than 10 percent total "minority" enrollment, with barely 3 percent of that figure representing African Americans, my class was a more "diverse" environment than most of the students had experienced before. This class of twenty-nine students included six black students (five African American and one Jamaican), four women and two men), and one Mexican American male. There were seventeen white women and five white men. There were eight nontraditional students (this connotes students over twenty-five, who often are married/partnered with children) and four nonheterosexual students that I knew of (two of these were students of color, and two were white, although one was not openly "out" to the class). Our campus *is* comprised largely of first-generation college students, so most every student usually *is* working a job outside of school, with the nontraditional students often working full-time. Thus, my impression of the class background of the students *is* a fairly even balance between middle class and working class, although I do not have hard data for this. Overall, white females made up the majority of the class, but the students observed that the racial-ethnic and sexual orientation diversity in the classroom was more than they had experienced in most of their other courses. Although *it* was only a third of the class that provided this perceived "diversity," this handful of students

happened to be more vocal and outspoken than most. I attribute this both to these students' individual personalities, and to the pedagogical philosophy I stressed throughout the course that affirmed diverse modes of expression.

I begin my courses by not only going over reading, writing, and participation requirements, but also by explaining my philosophy of teaching and learning, and asking students to agree to some ground rules for discussion. My teaching and learning philosophy was inspired largely by bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and it is based on the ideal of a non-hierarchical "learning community" where teacher and students are colearners actively engaged in the pursuit of knowledge with each other. I let students know right away that they will not be lectured to, and that they need to take a very active role in the direction of the course. I also explain that there is a conscious philosophy of student empowerment behind this approach, lest my lack of lecturing be perceived as a lazy instructor's copout. Part of this philosophy is also a respect for one's peers and for the knowledge that peers can add to the discussion. This is especially important for a classroom that focuses on oppression, because as a white female I cannot provide them with equal experiential knowledge on all forms of oppression. (For example, I have not personally experienced discrimination based on the color of my skin.) Students have reported in evaluations that some of the most powerful learning experiences they have taken away from my courses have been those gleaned from the passionate participation of other students. They can read examples of discrimination all day long, but somehow hearing it "live" from a real person they sit next to every day seems to consistently have the greatest impact. This is true for both members of dominant groups and for members of oppressed groups, who report appreciating knowing they are not alone in what they are feeling or have experienced. For example, students talk to me about powerful learning experiences and credit them to the diversity in the room. Unfortunately, I rarely get students telling me how eye-opening the class has been in a homogenous classroom. Although I present this pedagogical philosophy in all sociology courses I teach, it is particularly essential for approaching oppression-related courses.

Along with this teaching and learning philosophy, I also introduce the students to some ground rules for discussion. As we read each rule aloud and discuss it, I leave it open to the students to revise, add to, or discard any part of the rules to make them their own, as this will be part of the contract they agree to for the semester. Although I will not list all ten of the rules here, there are two especially worth noting. One is to acknowl

edge that we have all been taught misinformation, both about our own group and about members of other groups. The implication here is that if I should be "caught" making a racist statement, and then someone in our learning community challenges that statement, we need to understand that this is not a personal attack. Rather, it is an attack on the system that has allowed the misinformation to perpetuate such that I, and many others like me, have come to accept it as truth. However, another ground rule states that we will be held responsible for not perpetuating misinformation once we have become aware that it is misinformation. That is, if we have just spent weeks going over evidence of institutional discrimination, and someone makes the statement that America is now an "equal playing field," this person deserves to be held personally accountable for the statement as opposed to excusing him/her by chalking it up to societal misinformation. I raise these guidelines to accentuate the afore-mentioned point that a course focusing on oppression in a deep and meaningful way cannot always be a "safe" or harmonious space. Yet it is still a community. As bell hooks writes: "Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us" (hooks 1994, p. 40). In agreeing to the ground rules, we acknowledge that the pathway may be rocky, but we are ultimately all in pursuit of certain common goals despite our differences and different starting points.

Tension in the Classroom

A wise professor on my dissertation committee once told me something I have never forgotten. He said that if his classroom did not become contentious, he was not doing his job. As a young graduate student, this comment stuck with me because I had been socialized into typical white middle-class female culture that taught me that conflict was a sign of distress and of failure. In fact, I still strive to avoid conflict in my personal life and relationships. Yet I have learned by teaching courses related to issues of oppression that the classrooms in which students seem most powerfully affected by the experience are always those characterized by emotionally intense discussions. Repeatedly I have observed that white middle-class female students tend to be the ones leaving class after the first heated discussion thinking something has gone horribly wrong, and I always revert back to that old professor's remark to help normalize the situation: "I'm not doing my job" if such conflict *isn't* occurring in my class. It is an approach that overturns mainstream white middle-class norms of etiquette, and thus is a deeply personal challenge for many white students especially.

The fact that we have dichotomized academic challenge and emotional/personal challenge in our society only adds to the unexpected/traumatic nature of that experience for them. They are being challenged in a way they never expected to be in a classroom, thus they are taken off guard and unprepared no matter how much I try to warn them from Day One.

Fast forward from day one to day fifteen. By this point in my Gender, Race, and Class course, we have built some sense of community; they have worked in groups, gotten to know each other a bit, shared personal examples and stories, and learned basic terminology. We are now beginning to discuss the manifestations of these various forms of inequality in specific institutions, beginning with the institution of education. We are dealing with the question of whether schools and teachers are doing all they can to promote diversity and multiculturalism in schooling. Students have just read critiques by parents and teachers of the educational system's lack of diversity and what still needs to be done. Enter two vocal class participants, Vivian and Roger. Although both are nontraditional students and come from working-class backgrounds, Roger is now married to a schoolteacher, and his wife is supponing him while he goes to school full-time. Roger presents both himself and his wife as good white liberals-Roger quotes studies he heard on NPR, and beams with pride about his wife's struggles to understand her inner-city students who are predominantly students of color. Vivian, by contrast, is an African American lesbian mother, who could very well be the parent of one of the students whom Roger's wife teaches. She still struggles to make ends meet, both going to school full-time and working, yet still finds time to volunteer in the community with groups serving gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals of color. What follows is a paraphrased version of an interchange that took place between them during class.

Roger explains how hard it is for teachers to be supponed by the school system as they struggle to serve their inner-city students. He says his wife has had to fight back stereotypes in her head that black parents don't care about their children when they don't show up for parentteacher conferences, when the fact is many of them are working long hours and nonbenefited jobs that will not allow them to make the conference times. Vivian hears the statement "black parents don't care about their kids," and is enraged. She retorts with an impassioned rebuttal of that stereotype. Not only have black women historically cared for their own kids, but they also nursed white women's children at their breasts when white women apparently did not want that task. Furthermore, black

women take care of each other's children, and become mothers to the whole community of children. Far from not loving their children, Vivian asserts there's a "whole lotta love" in her and in black women that surround her.

Vivian goes on to ask Roger what his wife has done to look inside herself and make herself more diverse. Has she attended the Puerto Rican festival, or gone to a black church? Vivian gives examples of some of her own community involvements 'and attempts to understand other cultures she did not know about, and asks if Roger's wife has done the same. Vivian also asks if Roger's wife has tried to meet the parents at other more convenient places and times. Whereas Roger states that his wife has met parents after school hours at Dunkin Donuts, he admits she has not attended cultural events. He had mentioned to me in private how much he thinks his wife would love to sit in on my course, but today he asks the class if they would like for her to come in as a guest speaker so they can ask her such questions themselves. There seems to be some interest.

Although this is the *substance* of the exchange between the two students, the text alone does not capture the interaction. Roger's style of speaking is an even-keeled, perhaps even monotone inflection, and he appears calm although quite engaged. Vivian's style of speaking is much more animated than Roger's, her head moves from side to side as she speaks and she uses hand gestures, even pointing in Roger's direction. I watch both of them carefully as the dialogue goes on, because I typically intervene if one person's point seems to be overshadowed or unheard. However, both parties appear not to be personally offended by the other, so when they have finished I interject related points and move us on with the issues they raised.

When class ends I normally have several students approach me to ask me questions, usually about written assignments and other technicalities. Today Roger happens to be one of those students, telling me when he will be submitting his journals. Again it is clear that his class discussion has enhanced him in a positive way, for he is not distressed about it and is focused on other things. However, as we walk out of the classroom together, I notice a gathering of several young white female students from class out side the door, whispering busily and intently with each other. One of them remarks to Roger as we pass: "I would not bring your wife in here because she'll just be attacked in class the way you were today!" Although Roger assures them that his wife is from Brooklyn and she enjoys heated debates and would not be intimidated by them, another white female goes on to say that she will never speak up in class because she doesn't want

"what happened today" (which from her perspective was an "attack") to happen to her. I spend some time after class talking with this small subgroup of the class, but not as much time as I would like, as I must head to another commitment after class. I try to move them toward thinking of the interchange that took place in class as an exchange of ideas rather than a personal attack. I assure them (as does Roger) that he did not feel attacked, and explain that "I'm not doing my job" if we are not getting to the heart of these issues with some passion. But I know I have not done enough.

This is not the first classroom in which white students have expressed their concern to me privately that they do not want to speak out for fear of black students' "attacks" on them, or for fear of being called "racist" by them. I can recall no student of color ever calling a white student a racist, or any other name, during class, but this is the white students' perception. Prior to this semester, however, it has usually been an individual student expressing concern to me in her journal (it has notably always been a white female, in my experience). This gives me the time and space to construct a thoughtful written response to that student. However, my concern on this particular occasion is that there is a critical mass of students gathering after class reinforcing one opinion only without an alternative interpretation of the class dynamics, influencing each other to no longer speak up in class. Looking ahead I can see that, without intervention, the situation easily could end up disabling a substantial part of our learning community's participation if this group decides to simply shut down for the remainder of the semester. The learning experience could be thwarted not just for this group but for the entire class if the class discussion becomes restricted to only a select few willing participants.

Race, Gender, and Class Differences in Anger Perception

How my intervention will take place depends in large part on my perception as an instructor of the race, gender, and class dynamics of the situation, paying special attention to how my own social location biases how I will interpret it. These white middle-class women are turning to me, another white middle-class female, approaching me with what they assume will be a shared cultural understanding between us. Yet this subgroup of students is mainly focusing on the *racial* aspect of the class tension. In their perception, a black student has stepped out of bounds of appropriate classroom conduct by intimidating white students. They are expecting me, another white middle-class female, to concur with this perception, and do something about it so that the classroom is a more comfortable place for

them. However, it is a privilege of whiteness to not have to take another racial group's perspective into account in order to survive in society, so they have not considered how unsafe it must feel daily to be one of a handful of students of color in a class where white students, however innocently and naively, utter hurtful stereotypes about your group. Furthermore, their perception of Vivian as attacking and intimidating calls forth all kinds of antiblack stereotypes that form the fabric of our society that teach whites to fear African Americans. Perhaps as a reader it might have been difficult to find anything too scary about Vivian's class remarks. But filtered through the color-conscious lens of our society, hearing and seeing Vivian's remarks, spoken in person by an impassioned African American woman, made a significant difference in how these white females interpreted it. I believe they were seeing someone they were taught to fear, so this emotional response overwhelmed any other conscious listening they might have done to the *substance* of what she was saying.

I have found repeatedly that a passionate point made by a writer of color in an assigned reading can be heard and understood by a white student in a way that the same point uttered by an impassioned classmate of color will not. That same insightful classmate's point is much more likely to be perceived by white students as a personal attack. For example, in this same class, we read a piece by Audre Lorde (an African American lesbian writer) who is angrily tired of whites always turning to her to be their educator on oppression, and asserts that it is the oppressors' responsibility to educate themselves, not the oppressed, who have enough extra burdens of their own. We read this near the beginning of the semester, and it gave rise to a stimulating discussion about whether it was the oppressor's responsibility, the oppressed's responsibility, or both, to educate others about oppression. Yet near the end of the semester, when a white student asked what should be done about racism, and a black student responded, "you figure it out," a white middle-class female wrote to me in her journal that African Americans were basically undeserving of help if they were going to be so "rude" to those who volunteered to help make changes. I reminded this student that her black classmate's point was identical to Audre Lorde's, that it was white students' responsibility to educate themselves about oppression. However, again it was not just an intellectual point this time, as it was filtered through this white middle-class female's interpretation of an impassioned black male student, whose physical presence she has been taught to fear.

As I have already mentioned, these feelings of fear and intimidation that white students experience in their classroom interactions with stu

dents of color are most often expressed to me by white middle-class female students. In the interchange between Roger and Vivian, for example, Roger did not feel threatened in a way that the white middle-class female students, imagining themselves in Roger's shoes, felt that they would be. Roger comes from a working-class background, and I have already established that societal dichotomy between the "polite" and calm middle-class norms of interaction and the "loud" and boisterous working-class norms. Many men are also socialized to more readily disconnect their emotions from the intellectual or public sphere. Thus, students like Roger may be less likely to see impassioned and angry classroom interactions as personal threats the way white middle-class females tend to do. Finally, racial stereotypes have also been sexualized, such that white females have historically more often been projected as innocent victims of black violence, particularly sexual violence. This only intensifies the fear response to African Americans in white women's minds.

Case in Point: Vince versus Susan

To further illustrate this gender difference, I want to contrast two journal entries, one from a white female (Susan) and one from a white male (Vince), both of which included emotional statements about Vivian's impact on them. Both were written at the end of the semester, but while Vince's writing reflected excitement and enlightenment, Susan's writing carried resentment, pessimism, and despair. Vince begins by describing himself as a "white male who grew up upper-middle-class in a predominantly white neighborhood" who, before taking this class, was "so naive" and did not realize until now that "this is not a perfect world." He writes:

Vivian's stories and struggles in particular had a strong impact on me. Hearing what a black lesbian woman had to go through in this world really made me think. Some of the things she said shocked and amazed me. For example. . . she shared with us that she had to go around and collect pens and paper for school and how other people didn't really help her because of the way she is.

On the last day of class, I had the students make any closing statements they desired, and part of Vivian's remarks pertained to Vince. Vivian told the class she knows a lot of people in class did not like her, but she does not change herself just to be liked, and she just hoped she had some kind of impact on people so that when we meet someone like her again we will realize she is also human just like them. She stated what many of my students of color have told me over the years: white students who try to act like allies while in the classroom will often walk right by their classmates

of color on campus and not speak. Yet Vivian was very moved when she passed by Vince on campus one day and he looked her in the eye and said, "What's up, Vivian?" Thus, clearly Vince's transformation was not just made up on paper for my benefit, for he was walking the walk beyond the classroom doors. Furthermore, Vivian sensed that not everyone in the class felt the same way, particularly members of the white female majority of the class.

Susan's sentiments represent some of that animosity that Vivian was sensing. Like Vince, she also identifies herself as previously naive: "Up until I took your class I tried to pretend like it [racism] was something that happened only in extreme ways (like the Rodney King situation ten years ago) but now I understand that it is part of everyday life." Yet she progressed to a point at which people of color's anger about racism was perceived as personal prejudice toward her as a white person: "I think the hardest thing about this class is to know that I am hated by people because of the color of my skin." Susan felt hated by Vivian, and, like another white student I mentioned earlier, felt affronted that blacks would seem less than appreciative toward whites who genuinely wanted to help: "Don't get me wrong, I understand the anger of the African American students in our class, and I know that they are 100 percent justified, but the majority of the white people would not have been in that class if we weren't concerned with educating ourselves and making changes." Unlike Vince's uplifting sentiments about the course, Susan ended this way:

In closing I have to say that I am very disappointed in myself, because I let this class get to me so much that I am now horribly cynical about the African American race. Perhaps this is a step in the process, but I am scared of the feelings I am having. I don't want to feel this way.

As many teachers of race relations courses know, it is very typical for students to enter optimistically, and by midcourse reach a breaking point or plateau of sorts where they may be ready to give up or shut down. I will never forget the first time I taught a course about racism, and a student (another white female) wrote in her journal that she was sick of talking about race, and asked why we had to talk about race so much. (Imagine a chemistry student stopping mid-semester to exasperatingly question why we are still talking about chemistry!) Those of us who teach race relations and other courses on oppression know that our task is both an intellectual and emotional one, and we are often both educator and therapist throughout the semester. Yet I read Susan's journal entry with sadness that her plateau hit at the end of the semester rather than the middle, because I knew our time together was drawing to a close. We made plans to meet

after the semester was over, however, so I could give her some additional readings to help her work through what she insightfully observed as "a step in the process" toward an antiracist identity.

Beverly Daniel Tatum has written extensively on stages of racial identity development, including how they affect students' digestion of oppression-related course material. When discussing white students, she points out that whites may begin as naive (the Contact stage), but then their naivete is broken as they acquire information about inequality. Eventually during this acquisition process they may reach that breaking point, similar to Susan's mentioned earlier, which Tatum identifies as the shift from Disintegration to Reintegration. Disintegration is when that "perfect world" that Vince described gets challenged in their minds, and Reintegration is the process by which one incorporates that new information into one's current worldview. This can trigger several different emotional reactions, but unfortunately a more typical one is Susan's, where guilt is deflected back onto the "other" in a blame-the-victim ideology. "The guilt and anxiety associated with Disintegration may be redirected in the form of fear and anger directed toward people of color (particularly Blacks) who are now blamed as the source of discomfort" (Tatum 1992, p. 15). I planned to share Tatum's work with Susan, to reassure her that the difficulty with which she was learning about racism was not uncommon, and that there were several more antiracist ways of being white that would be positive and proactive if she could move beyond this "step."

As with all stage theories, progression is seldom linear, so it is no anomaly that Vince moved immediately to thinking about ways to solve racism without blaming blacks while Susan did not. What is instructive about the difference between the way Vince and Susan interpreted Vivian's passionate classroom participation is that each of their social locations determined how and what they would learn from the same person. When Vivian spoke out in class, she brought *experiential evidence* by voicing examples of discrimination, but she also brought the *emotion* that came with experiencing it. If Vivian had simply listed in a monotone voice her evidence, Susan and other white females in the class probably would not have felt threatened by her nor developed animosity toward her. Yet by the same token, neither would students like Vince have been so passionately moved by her examples. While our course was filled with both written and oral testimonies about discrimination, it was Vivian that impacted Vince's (and others') learning experience the most. So while a classroom that validates multiple modes of expression is not easy or safe, and requires interventions that the average professor may not be willing to take the time to

do, it yields some amazingly powerful personal transformations that are seldom seen under other approaches.

Interventions

Although I have already described certain interventions I did with individual students to help move them through their emotional reactions, this particular semester's situation of a sizable group influencing each other with their resistance seemed to call for a more large-scale response. I did not want half the class to shut down without knowing alternative ways of moving through their discomfort. I decided to focus the next class discussion on anger as an appropriate response to oppression. This seemed particularly important to me in light of the white women's after-class response, which so clearly assumed Vivian had breached class etiquette and expected me to "breathe order" back into the room. I began by asking them to read silently a short piece by Paul Kivel entitled "Thank You for Being Angry" (Kivel1995). Here is an excerpt from that essay:

Relationships between people of color and whites often begin as friendly and polite. . . . But then the person of color gets angry. Perhaps they are angry about something we do or say. Perhaps they are angry about a comment or action about someone else, or about racism in general. . . . For a person of color, this may be a time of hope that the relationship can become more intimate and honest. The anger may be an attempt to test the depth and possibilities of the friendship. They may be open about their feelings, to see how safe we are, hoping that we will not desert them. Or the anger may be a more assertive attempt to break through our complacency to address some core assumptions, beliefs or actions. Many white people have been taught to see anger and conflict as a sign of failure. They may instead be signs that we're becoming more honest, dealing with the real differences and problems in our lives. . . . We could say, "Thank you for pointing out the racism because I want to know when it is occurring." Or, "I appreciate your honesty. Let's see what we can do about this situation." More likely we get scared and disappear, or become defensive and counterattack. In any case, we don't focus on the root of the problem, and the racism goes unattended.

After focusing the class on the usefulness of anger to alert us to the seriousness of oppression, I wanted to direct us to "the root of the problem." Clearly, the white women gathered after class were not discussing the manifestations of racism in the public school system, which is what Roger and Vivian's exchange was all about. What could have been a powerful learning experience about what still needs to be done to make schools multicultural, from both a teacher and parent perspective, was reduced to a critique of personal conversation styles and manners of a fellow classmate. So the subsequent class exercise I initiated asked the class to brainstorm

things they learned from the last class discussion about racism and stereotypes, on the part of teachers and schools, which I recorded on the board. In other words, I wanted them to focus on the *substance* of the material that the passionate discussion provided us with, rather than just fixating on personality styles of the speakers. Because everything was so fresh, I was still immersed in some ways in the students' personal-level interpretation of the interchange-it still seemed like an individual difference in communication styles, and I didn't want to pick apart their personalities personally in front of the class. It wasn't until I had some time and space from the situation that I was able to process the cultural differences in communication that clearly resulted from Roger and Vivian's different social locations.

Another intervention occurred near the end of the semester, initiated by one of the students. As part of the learning community philosophy, I require each student to lead one day of class discussion, and Tracy, an African American student, guided us through a reading by a black feminist writer on issues of sexism within the black liberation movement. She broke the class up into race- and gender-specific groups—one for white men, one for white women, one for black men, and one for black women. Each group was asked to consider a different statement made by the author, and the most contentious statement became the one assigned to the white women. It was a critique of black men who fear the assertiveness of their black sisters, preferring relationships with white women with low self-esteem, who more willingly submit to being controlled by men. The white women in the group reacted angrily to the generalization that white women were passive, desired being controlled, and that those who sought interracial relationships did so from a place of low self-esteem. Some white women who had remained relatively quiet for the duration of the semester spoke out passionately against being stereotyped in this way. Although perhaps initially some of the white women felt attacked yet again by African Americans, Tracy skillfully pointed out that now maybe the white

students in the class understood how it felt to be stereotyped. She felt that hearing them express their anger was a positive experience for our learning community in that perhaps it could be a point of solidarity between the blacks and the whites in the class.

Both Tracy's and my interventions affirmed that anger indeed is appropriate in the classroom, and in fact is a logical response to hearing stereotypes and misinformation about one's group. It serves to educate us about how deeply painful such stereotypes are. Tracy's intervention also came from a personal place of being tired of being seen as the angry black

with a chip on her shoulder by all the whites in the room. She wanted her white classmates to connect with her common humanity, to demonstrate that anger at injustice was a common human response that they could share. Prior to being on the receiving end of prejudice, it had been easier for the white students to view anger in the classroom as a sign of African American unruliness, but now perhaps they had developed empathy and could move past the walls keeping them from hearing the *substance* of their black classmates' contributions.

Facing Being "Out of Control"

I have yet to see any significant body of writing that addresses how instructors can tap into anger and passion in classrooms exploring oppression-related issues and use it as a catalyst for growth and change. The strategies I described above were situation specific, and were developed with certain personalities and incidents in mind. Yet even though the specifics of the situations might have been unique, some themes are enduring. Each semester there are members of the learning community who, somewhere in mid-semester, view the classroom space as a disaster because it is not harmonious, in some form or another. Including myself as a part of this learning community, it is always a point of growth for me to remember that once this discomfort occurs, it means I am doing my job because we are finally getting deeply to the heart of the issues. Conventional pedagogical models that teach us to "maintain control and order" do not allow us to conceptualize success as a somewhat unsettled classroom.

Cutting even deeper growing pains is the realization that, as a part of the learning community, even I am not exempt from those feelings of discomfort. As a white instructor, I have been personally and publicly challenged by students of color. In one class, we were doing a privilege exercise in which all students begin at the same starting point, but are asked to take a step forward for each "privilege" (read from Peggy McIntosh's list of white privileges) that they believe they can count on, and the class typically ends up with darker-complexioned students toward the back and lighter-complexioned students toward the front. Keesha, an African American student, got more and more visibly dissatisfied with how the exercise was progressing, until she eventually stormed out of class. What was especially hurtful to me is that she ignored my pleas not to leave, and I had initial worries that my authority in the classroom had been undermined.

I telephoned Keesha after class, and she agreed to come into my office and meet with me before the next class. During our meeting, I discovered

that Keesha left class out of frustration with the white students who refused to step forward when a white privilege was read aloud because they did not think it applied to them. Because we were already several weeks into the semester, Keesha's initial optimism about white students being able to understand oppression had been eroded, for she could not understand after all we had read and discussed why many whites in the class still did not believe the extent of racism's existence. Not unlike the white students described in previous sections, Keesha had reached a breaking point in the semester where she had begun to give up hope in the idea of racial harmony. I explained to her that, because whites had been taught misinformation all their lives about racism's existence, it was going to take more than a few weeks for them to get it. I also reminded her that everyone had different starting points. To inspire her with hope, I asked her to name any white students in the class she felt were moving toward antiracism, and she could name one or two she viewed as allies. Then I promised her that she would be able to add more names to that list by the end of the semester. Keesha came back to class and was an enthusiastic participator until the end of the semester.

Although my initial internal response to Keesha's leaving class saw her as disruptive and disobedient, I knew that perception was filtered through my own white lenses. I was able to look past my first response and say "thank you for being angry" by making a space for Keesha to tell me where her anger came from, taking my own advice that I would give students about getting to the "root of the matter" rather than stigmatizing personalities.

I would be challenged even more personally to take my own advice later in that same course when two different students of color "called me out" for having overlooked them before and! or after class when they were waiting to talk to me among other white students. We were discussing examples of how whites often do not even realize when they are discriminating (based on a discussion of Feagin 2000) and before I knew it, my own behavior was being scrutinized by the students. It was so easy to sit there in class and criticize all the discriminatory whites that Feagin cited in his book, yet when I became the class's next example of the unintentional discriminator, I felt my whole identity as a white antiracist called into question. My internal reaction was the typical white stance of defensiveness. There must have been some logical explanation for why I did not see them-were they standing farther back, behind someone or something else

that obstructed my view? Here I was the "authority" on racial discrimination, as the course instructor, and I felt all the mainstream pedagogical

pangs of my authority somehow being threatened and stripped away. Yet I managed to remind myself I was another member of the learning community, and asked myself as I would any other student to hear and validate the students' perception. My response was to tell the class this was another excellent example of how well-intentioned people may not realize how their behavior is being perceived, and that we must be ever-vigilant and mindful of falling into patterns of injustice that require great effort to struggle against.

Although initially mortified by this incident, wise colleagues pointed out to me that I had successfully created a space where students felt comfortable sharing these perceptions, that they would not have done so if they did not think I would hear them. Furthermore, although one of the two students of color who called me out that day dropped out because of deaths in the family and other health issues, the other student eventually became quite drawn to me. She told me she gained a great amount of respect for me that day because of my honesty. She brought me a pie for Thanksgiving, gave me a beautiful holiday gift, and opted to do an independent research project with me the following semester. In the first moments of that class discussion, I could hear that common white female

response inside of me, not unlike that of my students: "Oh my gosh, she hates me, she thinks I'm a racist!" It took all the strength I could summons to hear the *substance* of their comments, to understand how much they hurt when their common humanity was ignored, and to affirm their perceptions of me as yet another part of that system we had been analyzing all semester.

I raise these examples to demonstrate that affirming passion and emotional expression in the classroom is not easy. It is scary and unsettling not only for students, but for instructors as well. In intervening to make contentious experiences catalysts for growth and change, one must be ever mindful of the race, gender, and class dynamics that impact both how emotions are expressed and how those emotional expressions are perceived. An instructor of color seeking to affirm emotion and passion in a learning community may confront similar issues, but they are likely to manifest themselves in different ways than I have described here. For example, an African American instructor may face the additional stigma of being perceived by the white students as a co-conspirator with "black rage." Thus, while the white students expect to me to restore order, and write openly in journals about antiblack stereotypes, an instructor of color may not experience that same level of frankness from their white students. Conversely, students of color might expect automatic solidarity and sup

port from an instructor of color, and feel hurt and betrayed if such comfort does not immediately come to pass. Gender and class differences, in both instructor and student composition, will undoubtedly produce more variability in outcomes and possibilities of such an approach. But if one is committed to the hard work necessary for incorporating emotions into classrooms where racism/sexism/classism are studied, the rewards are tremendous. The cards and gifts from students who feel my courses have changed their lives, and have inspired them to dedicate their lives to social change, in just three short years have filled my office shelves. Midsemester, one can always find me fretting that the second civil war has erupted in my classroom, and struggling to come up with effective interventions, on both individual and group levels. But just as I assure the students, I attempt to assure myself that by the end it will all be worth it. If we all "calmed down," our collective learning about oppression would likely never take place.

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