



Making Whiteness Visible in the Postsecondary Classroom

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Invisible Whiteness is the Problem

Racism continues to persist in our country and around the globe. After decades-long conversations, debates, controversies, protests, and activism, why is racism still prevalent today? The answer begins centuries ago with colonialism, and the spread of a White empire through invasion and seizure of land and established culture in places around the world (Healey, et. al., 2019; Patil, 2013). The White empire persists today, centuries later, in different subtle forms.

Whiteness, or White racial formation, is a construct at the base of racism, and it is often invisible to White people (Kivel, 2017). It has been aptly described as an “invisible knapsack” that White people possess, because of their whiteness, which grants them automatic access to places, jobs, relationships, security, and freedom to be who they are (McIntosh, 1988). Some examples of what Whiteness looks like can include dominating a room—speaking when not spoken to, deciding the topic of conversation and how it plays out, defining what is and what is not, pushing out other voices (Bettez, 2011, p. 158; Hunter & van der Westhuizen, 2021). This is normal in White experience, and therefore oftentimes invisible to White people. The invisibility of whiteness makes it insidious and pervasive. Contrary to some arguments, invisibility does not make White people innocent; it makes them ignorant. The invisibility of whiteness is the reason racism is still an issue today.

Multiculturalism and Fostering Cultural Awareness

Multicultural education has been implemented in the United States and in Europe for several decades as a framework to foster cultural awareness—the visibility of other cultures—to promote the value of diversity (Grant, 1978; May & Sleeter, 2010). It is a movement toward a just, pluralistic society through public education (Banks, 2020). However, multiculturalism is criticized for its lack of durability to hold up against racism for two major reasons. The first is that during the process of its implementation through teacher trainings and curriculum design, its primary concerns have been diluted through varying “interpretations of ethnicity” (May & Sleeter, 2011, p. 4). Therefore, the multicultural agenda in education has become what is called a “heroes and holidays” approach (Grinage, 2021, p. 8), in which cultures other than White are only discussed in the context of non-White holiday traditions or through a small selection of heroic non-White people in history.

The second is that multiculturalism has been co-opted by neoliberalism (Mohanty, 2013; Grinage, 2021; Lawless, 2021; Musser, 2015). The idolization of a free-market economy means that everything is privatized and corporatized, including education institutions. The result is that the White agenda of capitalism trumps any movement toward justice but will accommodate any endeavors that promote capital gain. For instance, universities (which are corporatized) are more than happy to advertise and celebrate diversity on their campus to attract more learners, especially internationals who pay higher tuition (Lawless, 2021). However, learners of color often feel lack of support (Lawless, 2021). Moreover, faculty are hired for their non-White and non-heterosexual identities, but only feel like “specimens” (Musser; 2015) or “warm bodies” (Grant, 1978), instead of valued for their contributions to academia. Whereas multicultural education had a worthy original intent, the invisible White agenda has taken the bite out of it, rendering it ineffectual and

insipid.

Critical Multiculturalism

A solution is to add teeth back into multiculturalism with critical discourse. *Critical multiculturalism* would not only decenter whiteness and bring forward the valid voices of other ethnicities, but it would also consistently ask where knowledge sources come from and who are benefiting from their agendas (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical multiculturalism not only celebrates diversity—making other cultures visible, but it also looks for ways to make whiteness itself visible to White people. Critical multicultural education, then, provides an educational framework for combatting racism through making whiteness visible within a classroom context. Postsecondary classrooms are almost guaranteed to be diverse these days (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, Chapter 1), so White learners and Learners of Color will likely be represented. This is an advantage, and a hope of multiculturalism.

With critical multiculturalism as the backdrop, instructors can facilitate *reflective discourse* to facilitate discussion among these learners to give voice to all cultures and ethnicities represented. Mezirow (2000), an adult learning theorist, says reflective discourse “involves a critical assessment of assumptions” (p. 11). Practically this looks like learners critically self-reflecting among peers through dialogue regarding the presented subject matter. Perhaps that subject matter is whiteness itself as an entire course. Or perhaps it is within a course designed to juxtapose critical whiteness studies with critical Latinx theory, for example. The course could be another subject altogether, such as human resource development (HRD), and a critical examination of the presence of whiteness is interwoven with HRD material to make its dominant influence visible within that field. In reflective discourse on whiteness in any of these contexts, all learners self-reflect on their relationship with whiteness as a historical, social construct. Discourse through dialogue promotes

a fuller understanding of others' experience, and therefore a fuller understanding of one's own experience.

Understandably, the study of whiteness is controversial, personal, and difficult. It is crucial, however, that it is made visible. Racism affects everyone, and whiteness as a dominant, invisible construct is the cause of racial injustices (Hunter & van der Westhuizen, 2021). Learners who enroll in a course on whiteness are obviously willing to engage with it. But those enrolling in a philosophy course or one with practical content should be informed up front of the critical, reflective nature that the discourse involves. Ideally education should support and require such discourse on whiteness, resisting the neoliberal agenda, for the benefit of everyone. Departments or individual facilitators can frame course material with a critical multicultural emphasis, provide clear intent, be transparent about knowledge sources, and foster a safe and collaborative learning environment welcoming of reflective discourse.

Reflection Questions

1. How diverse are classes taught?
2. In what ways does having a diverse population in the classroom help or hinder a critical look at whiteness?
3. What approach can facilitators take to foster a safe, collaborative environment to include the discussion of the delicate but crucial issue of whiteness?
4. What should learners take away from a course that includes a critical study of whiteness?

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BIOGRAPHY



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