



University of Alaska Anchorage

Alaska Pacific University

Race, Class, Culture

By including literature in our courses, we often set the stage for difficult dialogues—and even though we see the value of literature that confronts, for example, racism, many of us harbor concern for the students in our courses whose races are the ones represented in the readings we assign. In the essay that follows, we hear from two minority students about their reactions to discussing race matters in class.

Checking In:

A Discussion on Race in the Literature Classroom with Minority Students

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One of the reasons I applied for the Engaging Controversy workshop was because I am often uncomfortable teaching literature having to do with race or ethnicity, particularly when there are unflattering representations of a minority group, even if the author's point is in support of that group. This is especially true when there are just one or two minority students in the class. I avoid teaching anything I perceive as racist, but I am at times uncomfortable even teaching texts by minority writers such as Ralph Ellison. I am acutely uncomfortable that students of the affected minority will be embarrassed or offended or feel as though they are being put under a microscope or made to defend their entire ethnic group. Only rarely does it prevent me from teaching a particular text, but I suspect that at times I skip over issues or cut short discussions or

just don't handle them skillfully enough.

As a result, I decided to talk to minority students about their experiences in my classrooms when race or race-related issues are being discussed. I came away from our talks with both a deeper understanding of how minority students might experience my teaching certain texts and even more admiration for the students. What follows are interviews with two students as well as my reflections on our conversations.

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Interview #One

The student in the first interview, who I have had the good fortune to have had her in four courses over a two-year period, is Irish on her mother's side and Black and Puerto Rican on her father's. As she pointed out, however, "I've never even met him, so there's not a Black or Puerto Rican cultural aspect in my upbringing."

Me: I am always uncomfortable using the word race, since it there is only one race of humans. We continue to use the term in literary studies and in common parlance, but I don't like it as I think it reinforces incorrect information. How do you feel about it?

Student: I understand that race is not a scientific term but more of a social construct, but I think we all use it because it's easier. To me, I don't think it is offensive. When I hear the word I think it is used just to describe difference. It's easier than to go through all that we know now about it.

Me: Do you prefer to be referred to as *Black* or *African American*?

Student: I think *Black* is fine to say; it's almost uncomfortable for me to say *African American*. [She laughs.]

Me: How comfortable are you as a minority student in your classes?

Student: I haven't seen many Black folk in my classes, but maybe that's just because everybody else is studying Math or something.

Me: You seem quite comfortable talking about racial issues in class. Are you ever afraid of being criticized or challenged?

Student: I am a person who can take constructive criticism and am up for a debate. But I am concerned, sometimes, that if I speak up about race is it going to be written off as different? Am I professing to speak for all Black people? That definitely is a factor, or if someone can't understand where I'm coming from. Sometimes after I've said things I think, How was my tone of voice when I said that? I think I may say things in this tone of voice that I *know* I'm right. So I know when I say things and they don't respond it may be because . . .

Me: How comfortable were you in discussing “Everyday Use”? [The story, by Alice Walker, is about an African American woman in the South and her two daughters. One of the girls is lighter, goes to college, and comes home to reclaim several previously despised family possessions as cultural artifacts, while her darker, less gifted sister has been quietly appreciating these household objects for their usefulness, beauty, and meaning all the while.]

Student: A lot of non-Black people don’t understand the tension related to skin color. There is always this kind of sense that the lighter you are the more privileged you are, the more opportunities you have. A friend showed me a series of letters that a white plantation owner wrote to another one in another state. He talked about using skin color to create divisiveness, create tension on his plantation. That’s where the concept of the field nigger versus the house nigger came from. I was just thinking, when we read “Everyday Use,” yes, this really works. It just goes to show the racism that exists even between Blacks.

I have a black friend who has several sisters. The lighter one is lighter skinned. She got to go to a special school. She got lots of special privileges her darker sisters didn’t. So anyway, that’s what I was thinking about in that class. Dee got to go to the good school, she had the lighter skin, the good hair. I think it is something that all cultures have to deal with.

Me: How did you feel about reading “Party Down at the Square” [a story by Ralph Ellison about a Black man in the South being burned alive by a bunch of Whites]?

Student: I would have liked to do more with that piece. It was appearing to me that you could view it in a metaphorical sense. What was going on in the story could be compared to the suppression of black literature or the mishandling of it by critics. The policemen were just a little short sprint away while there was a man who was burning. So when I was doing my paper, I felt that things could be more fully or deeply interpreted.

Me: But how did you feel during the discussion? Wasn’t it upsetting to hear the word *nigger* so many times while we were reading it in class?

Student: So . . . it wasn’t really difficult to sit there and hear the word *nigger* heard so many times. . . . I know people use those words to make people feel bad, but we live in Alaska, so we don’t hear it much. I was bothered that somebody yawned when we were reading it aloud. Just treating it so nonchalantly. [At this point I interrupted to offer the possibility that yawning can be a response to nervousness—probably revealing my own nervousness in changing the subject.]

But it wasn’t a difficult piece for me to work with. Obviously, one of the messages was that though he was being burned he was a lot more articulate than anybody else there. [In the story, as the Black man is burning, he asks politely if

someone watching would have the decency to slit his throat to spare him further pain; no one does so. Ironically, he is the only one in the story who is articulate.]

Me: I felt afterwards that we didn't talk about it nearly enough [in class], but it is just, I think it is one of the most difficult things I've ever read in my life. It staggers the imagination just to know that it happened. Not necessarily that event, which was at least somewhat fictionalized, but it happened. Ellison's work is very realistic. I remember thinking it was maybe more than you could bear to hear.

Me: I felt afterwards that we didn't talk about it nearly enough [in class], but it is just one of the most difficult things I've ever read in my life...I remember thinking it was maybe more than you could bear to hear.

Student: I think what is important is the treatment of the work. You always show a fair concern for fair treatment of issues, no matter what they are. I remember that piece about the Vietnamese. I think the most important thing when doing a work that difficult is treating it sensitively. When you're having a discussion like that, it is important not to single people out to talk about it, so they don't feel singled out. It's hard to talk to each other about . . .

Me: Did you feel you got enough African American and Puerto Rican literature in the two classes you took from me this semester?

Student: I would say No, not enough to satisfy me. African American writers definitely don't get as much attention as they deserve. They definitely don't get as much attention as white writers. Puerto Rican writers definitely don't get enough attention. I think Amy Tan would say the same thing about Chinese writers. Any minority would say that. There are so many cultures right now.

But then there're only so many weeks in our curriculum. We can only read so many authors. . . We could expand on what we get, though. We always get Zora Neal Hurston. We always get Alice Walker. There are lots of contemporary minority writers. [There are a lot of] newer authors that have just as much skill as much older African American writers. Lalita Tademi, for example. [The discussion segued to about a ten-minute talk of various minority writers before returning to the interview questions.]

Me: Would you like to see more discussion of race in the classroom?

Student: I think there should be more because it's the only way to get over the distances. It's human nature to avoid things that are uncomfortable . . . The main reason it happens is, well, just chalk it up to human nature. People don't think it's important to discuss or to move forward on.

Food. In the discussions. People have been shown to have more favorable responses in any uncomfortable meeting or on something where you're going to have to think really hard. It's been shown that there will be more favorable outcomes when you have munchies at those meetings. I love food, so when I read, "Studies show. . ." So I just hung onto that one. [We laugh.]

Me: Can you think of any changes we could make here at UAA or in English to make your experience more comfortable?

Student: I don't think there is a way to make a more even representation of the races in the classroom. I know from my experience being a minority in the classroom that has held me back from giving my opinion in the classroom. I think that is something all people share. If you get out there and give your opinion . . . There is the group-think phenomenon . . . that holds you back from speaking up. So I think that having others from a similar background [with you is good] . . . but [there's] no way to control that.

I like to play the devil's advocate. I like to think I can argue both sides. Wasn't it Cicero, a rhetor, who argued both sides?

Me: Do you ever feel disrespected in class?

Student: Probably only indirectly. When there is a discussion and somebody has got a viewpoint and I think, God, You are a pig. [She laughs.] You know. But nothing personal or overt that I can remember.

Me: But when you think that someone is "a pig," is that because they are speaking disparagingly of African Americans or some other minority group?

Student: Well, yeah. . . . People don't understand how they sound. And I am someone who likes to give people the benefit of the doubt. And I think, Do you realize what you just said? Do you realize how people could interpret that? I think people say things and they don't realize the implications of what they're saying. That doesn't make them bad people, and most often when you're disrespecting someone's culture it's because you don't fully understand it and you're not responding to it because you don't know enough about it.

We just don't get into very many personal conversations [in my classrooms]; it's all about the literature. So when they make a response about the literature I have a different understanding about the reading, so I don't necessarily take it personally or get offended.

Me: Do you have anything else you'd like to say, any final thoughts?

Student: I liked "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" [a story by Z. Z. Packer, an African American woman writer, about an inner-city African American girl who goes to an ivy league school on scholarship without ever acknowledging being either poor or Black in an elitist, mostly white school.] so much. I think you should always teach that. The pretending. The escapism. And the line about how the guy tells her, "You're pretending again." That's how so many of us deal with our life situations. That could definitely be applied to discussions of race or class. I think Barbara Christian [African American feminist literary theorist] would love to get a hold of it [the story]. But the pretending just goes to show that we're still, still,

still, still not dealing with these issues in our personal life or in the big picture.

Reflection

Again and again the student expressed a hunger for African American and Puerto Rican literature, criticism, and theory...all her papers focused on minority writers...this has been true of nearly all the minority students I have taught...it is imperative that they find in the classroom reflections of their own experiences, even when and perhaps because those experiences have been painful or difficult.

One of the takeaways I offer from this interview is that again and again the student expressed a hunger for African American and Puerto Rican literature and literary criticism and theory. All her papers in each of the four classes she has taken from me focus on minority writers. This has been true of nearly all the minority students I have taught; they are drawn to what they know, just as we all are. Given that, it is imperative that they find in the classroom reflections of their own experiences, even when and perhaps because those experiences have been painful or difficult.

I was also struck by how different our perceptions of the world can be at times. For example, when we talked about Ann Arbor, idyllic images of a pastoral college town popped into my mind, while the student remarked, "When I think of Ann Arbor I always think of little black kids who were put in special education classes." That really struck me. Her associations of the place are completely different, and so much darker. There is a need for so much thoughtfulness while teaching.

Interview #2

The student in this interview is a young Hispanic woman who was enrolled in my Literature of the United States II course. A biology major, she is a first-year student and a transfer student from Texas planning to go into nursing. In the class, we had read a number of stories, novels, and poems that related to ethnic issues, particularly the T.C. Boyle novel *Tortilla Curtain* and Sandra Cisneros' "Woman Hollering Creek," about spousal abuse of Latina women in contemporary Mexico and the United States (specifically Texas, in this story.)

Me: Overall, would you say you self-identify more as Mexican, Mexican American, or American?

Student: I was born in the United States. My background is Mexican, but I'm American. It's no different than Italian American or Greek American. It's never really been an issue because I grew up in Texas, where everyone is a Mexican. I guess I feel more American because I don't know Spanish. My husband does and my parents and grandparents do; for some reason, my parents decided not to teach us Spanish.

Me: As a Mexican American how comfortable are you at UAA?

Student: Fairly comfortable. I don't notice that many Spanish or Hispanic people in my classes. It's a little different than going to college in San Antonio

where everybody is Mexican and the minority is white people. I mean, I notice that in a lot of my classes I'm the only one who is not Anglo.

Me: Have there been any classes where you felt uncomfortable as a Mexican American?

Student: No, not at all. I haven't taken many discussion courses, though. Plus, this is only my second semester here. Just your class and my philosophy class. And last semester Communications. In all three of them I felt very comfortable.

Me: Is it ever uncomfortable for you to talk about ethnic issues in class?

Student: It seems like other people are a little reluctant to bring issues up because they are afraid to, I guess, stir up a conflict. I guess I really don't care; it doesn't bother me. Differences are always going to be an issue, so to me it's something you get out into the open. Not to offend people but I don't really see that the whole racial, ethnic issue should be offensive. It can be offensive if you let it be offensive, but if you don't let it be offensive [it won't]. I have seen it in other cultural aspects. Like in my philosophy class, a religion class. That whole Catholic thing. No one else wanted to talk about the whole Catholicism thing with Hispanics.

Me: Were there any representations of Mexicans in *Tortilla Curtain* that offended you?

Student: I would get a little offended in places, but then when I stood back and looked at it, I think Boyle cut them all [the white and Hispanic characters] down equally. I mean, he bashed the white guys just as bad. I thought it was a really good book. I really liked it.

Me: What about the discussions in class about the book? Did you ever feel that Hispanics were being deprecated in any way?

Student: No. I actually thought it was interesting. I don't know if you noticed but I could kind of tell when certain people were watching what they were saying. I could see that certain people in class, they were kind of glancing in my direction. Maybe that was just me being self conscious. It could have been just me thinking about it too much. I mean I was never offended by anything. It's interesting to hear other people's perspectives on things.

Me: So, how were they being careful?

Student: I just feel like, like you know when you're talking and you stop and kind of think about the correct word you're going to use. . . I felt like some people were trying to do that a lot . . . Which is probably a good idea anyway . . . to stop and think about what you're going to say before you say it.

Me: But you mean they were being more careful than they would on another topic?

Student: I think so, maybe just because you're aware of the minority in the room, unless you're oblivious to it. I mean like in San Antonio and there's only one white person in the room, you're aware of it. Whether you acknowledge it or not.

Me: How accurate did you feel Boyle's representations of the experience of immigrants were?

Student: I think it was pretty accurate. As far as what I would know anyway, pretty accurate.

Me: At certain points, the legitimacy of the border and the moral issues involved in illegal immigration came up in class. Did any of that discussion offend you?

Student: No. Not personally. My grandparents and great grandparents came over illegally. My grandmother was a baby

Me: So, how do you personally feel about immigration?

Student: I am sort of torn because, like people say, we have a lot of our own issues, as far as populations and the economy, but at the same time, weren't all our ancestors once illegal immigrants? So who are we to judge what a lot of other people did?

Me: So, have you ever experienced racism?

Student: I've had people make rude or derogatory comments, but it doesn't really bother me. I can't really say I've had a bad experience.

[The student shared an experience of reverse racism. As a student in Texas, she'd observed a non-Hispanic student being really chewed out by an Hispanic advisor.] "I remember feeling very nervous about going in because I wasn't doing very well. She was talking to this young white girl and being really harsh with her. So I walked in right after her and the first thing she said was, 'Oh, hi, *mi hija*. How you doing?' And I was getting a D and had missed class a lot and she said, 'Oh, don't worry about it.' So it was interesting to see the other side of that. If I were on the opposite end of that I would have been offended. It probably wouldn't have hurt me either to get a little chewed out."

Me: What can UAA do to make minority students more comfortable on campus?

Student: On our old school campus they had a lot of clubs for students. Even at the U of Texas, there weren't a lot of Mexican students there. I was in the Mexican American Students Association, and I particularly like that one. It made me a little more comfortable and helped me meet new friends, so maybe something like that would [help at UAA]. But I do see flyers like for Latin dancing, so . . ."

Reflection

I was impressed throughout my meeting with the student's generosity—with her time, opinions, and feelings. I was particularly impressed that she tended to give the benefit of the doubt in assigning motivation or attitude to her non-minority fellow students. For example, she mentioned a girl in our class from Orange County, California, who had expressed some fairly naive attitudes regarding social class, and concluded: "The whole time she was being, like, the people who were rich worked really hard to get rich and that was why they are rich and if everyone worked like that they could be too, and you were like, 'What?' I thought she couldn't have meant to say it that way, she didn't mean it to come out that way, but it did."

These interviews affirmed for the students that I valued their views and opinions, provided valuable feedback for my own teaching, taught me more about minority cultures, provided me with recommended readings, and demonstrated what both students espouse as the best way to move past racism: to talk about it, bring it out into the open.

What can I take away from the interview to make my own classroom more comfortable for minority students and improve my teaching of race-related topics in my classroom for all students? First, from meeting with this student, I got valuable feedback regarding what to teach in my classes. It was helpful, for example, to learn that her favorite readings were those from the Harlem Renaissance: "I particularly liked that Langston Hughes sections. I thought they were easy to relate to for any minority, especially [his essay 'The Negro and] the Racial Mountain.' They [writers] don't want to be seen just as a minority. I really liked to write about that on the midterm." I guess I should have, but it didn't occur to me that Hughes' writings would have applications for other minorities as well as African Americans. That widened readership is valuable to know.

Perhaps the most poignant point she made during our discussion was the following statement regarding immigration: "It's just really different now. I can see people's arguments. I can appreciate them. But I don't see anything wrong with people coming into this country. I mean what difference does it make where they are? They're still going to be on the planet, so it really doesn't make a difference. I know a lot of Americans think, Well, if they're not in our country then they're not there. But they are still there. Just because you can't see them or they're not in your everyday life, they're not going to disappear."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found these interviews extremely valuable. They affirmed for the students that I valued their views and opinions, provided valuable feedback for my own teaching, taught me more about minority cultures, provided me

with recommended readings, and demonstrated what both students espouse as the best way to move past racism: to talk about it, bring it out into the open.

Another valuable lesson came out of the interviews having been recorded. When I listened to the interviews in transcribing them, I noticed my tendency to either follow up too quickly on something they had said without letting them fully explore an idea or cut them off without letting them finish a point, particularly on sensitive subjects. Once, for example, I suggested that another student in class couldn't possibly have meant something negative because I didn't want this student to feel bad. As a result, I effectively discounted the student's opinion. Listening to a recorded interview several times enabled me to become aware of both these poor communications habits.

Both students reiterated the need to talk more, not less, about race and other uncomfortable issues in the classroom.

Another thing I took away from this experience was that I need to do it more often—invite minority students to lunch or coffee to get their input into my teaching and their experiences here at UAA. I have so much to learn from them, lessons they seem eager to share. The two students I interviewed for this project both seemed to want to be heard and expressed a sincere desire to continue this sort of discussion. Both students reiterated the need to talk more, not less, about race and other uncomfortable issues in the classroom.

A caveat on this discussion is that these interviews represent the thoughts and feelings of just two students; other students of the same ethnic backgrounds might have very different answers to questions about how they feel about racial or ethnic terms, readings, discussions, or experiences in my classrooms. It is also worth noting that these two young women are both amazing: very bright, motivated, personable, and self-assured. Students who perceived themselves as less capable might feel very differently about such classroom discussions.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude and regard for these lovely students, whose gracious manners, inquiring minds, and strength of character inspire me to better teaching.