

White-Bashing?

Teaching “Hot-Button” Issues via Indirection

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Previously Published in *Democracy & Education*, Fall 2000, pp. 69-72.

INTRODUCTION

The biggest barriers to learning about racism, sexism, and the other oppressions, are the non-rational aversive reactions most of us have to the material and to the learning process. When men truly inquire into the lives of women, we come face to face with a horrible reality that just cannot be true, but is. When those of us of European heritage inquire into the lives of those whose ancestors came from the other continents, what we find makes us flinch at its brutality. We feel guilty for what “whites” or men have done and most of us don’t like to feel bad. Our visceral reaction — seeking to shut out this new information — continually wars with the desire many of us have to get closer to others by understanding their lives. This paper presents one method I have found to be extremely effective at circumventing the triggering of these hot-buttons.

THE SETTING

The context for my course module on racism is a team-taught, multidisciplinary, year-long course that serves as the entry point to the newly instituted general education reform program at Portland State University.¹ The over-arching goal of this *Values in Conflict* course is to help students become conscious participants in their own value systems and to help them examine the conflicts that occur in society when perspectives collide and individual rights conflict with social and community responsibility.

The multifaceted roles of science, technology, ethics, and social distinctions are central to the discussions including: examinations of racism, global and regional environmental

conflicts; the impact of culture, gender and politics on scientific discovery; the role of ethics in the practice and development of technology; and the role of art in politics and activism. Students have the opportunity to write and act in dramatic productions, read plays, poetry, essays, and novels, take part in group environmental projects, create political art, write about and discuss issues of culture and diversity, and explore the scientific method through formulating hypotheses and carrying out experiments.

Students begin the racism module with a written inquiry into their own cultural history, whose main goal is to wean pink-skinned students from the idea that they are “Vanilla Americans.” They next view a movie set inside a different cultural group than their own (either *Double Happiness*,² about a Chinese-Canadian family or *Smoke Signals*,³ about Native American Indians from the Coeur d’Alene reservation in Idaho). Then we move from the fascinating and intriguing facet of diversity awareness (learning about other cultures) into the other facet, which may be described as discovering and taking some responsibility for the ways in which dominant American culture has dealt oppressively with ethnic groups over time.

The center of this educational piece is the movie, *The Color of Fear*,⁴ in which eight men of various ethnicities talk about their own experiences of race relations. In order to head off feelings of guilt, we spend a prior day talking about where guilt comes from and what its role is: reinforcing “White privilege” by shifting the attention from the oppressed person back onto the privileged person. Tess Wiseheart of

the Portland Women’s Crisis Line says that displays of guilty feelings translate as “I’m going to feel so crummy about my privilege that you are going to take care of me.”⁵ Cherie Brown, Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute, says that “Guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place.”⁶

After seeing *The Color of Fear*, we spend the next session processing on an emotional level, via Paul Kivel’s *Stand-up Exercise for Whites*,⁷ which puts us in touch with the way “whites” are affected by white racism and also with the palpable reality of its prevalence. We then talk extensively about the content of the movie. The students’ cognitive processing is further directed as they write and perform a panel discussion analyzing *The Color of Fear*, one in which each student takes on the persona of one (or more) of the authors they have read; Freire,⁸ Morales,⁹ Tompkins,¹⁰ Trask,¹¹ Takaki,¹² Hughes,¹³ and Omi and Winant.¹⁴

Inevitably, a few days into this project, my Peer Mentor¹⁵ begins to hear a few students using the phrase “white bashing.” This is the clue that reactive “hot-buttons” are being triggered.

INDIRECTION

When someone is caught up in a resistant mind-set, there is little point in trying to convince them of the need for an expanded vision. The more evidence the teacher presents to convince them, the more their potential for guilt-reactions and the consequent refusal to hear any more. One way around this is to direct their attention to a parallel oppression that does not yet have them triggered into denial. The lessons they learn can



We are talking about social responsibility for the rest of the term, and as a teacher I am faced with moral decisions about my responsibility to educate. As a physicist, I am tempted to put these two lists onto a scale and see which has weightier consequences: If I teach about sexism I may make men uncomfortable. If I don't teach about sexism this absence also sends a message, one implying my consent to sexism. I am not willing to let my silence legitimate a world view in support of a literal war on women comprised of rape, assault, and murder. What would you have me do?

We all become teachers in various capacities as we go through life. What will you do?

TURNING THE CORNER

Now having gone through this process with sexism, I want to return to racism. If we were to change the headings above these two tables from "men" to "whites," and "women" to "people of color," would much of anything change in the content of the tables? (A few items.)

Pornography is one area in which there is a difference. We know that women's predicament under male supremacy is often expressed via sexual coercion, degradation, and torture. You can walk into any convenience store and find magazines — sold as entertainment for men — showing naked women bound and hung from trees. It is much harder to find material — sold as entertainment for whites — in which African-Americans, say, are bound and hung from trees. This is true despite the fact that African-Americans' predicament under white supremacy has often been expressed via physical and mental torture up to and including lynching.

At this point the emotional tenor in the room typically drops a full octave. Most in mainstream America have heard so much about sexual freedom vs. censorship, that it is a shock to be faced with the fundamental contradiction of "sexual freedom expressed as bondage of women." (This portion of the class could be labeled double-indirection.)

Beyond such specific changes, a lot in these lists is similar. I know some of you have felt pretty rotten during and after our discussions on race. Is "white bashing" an appropriate term for that experience? Is it an adequate term, given

the emotional nature of the experience of "whites"? In terms of social responsibility, should I, or should I not teach about racism?

THE END RESULT

By the end of this class, I have routinely noticed a marked, stable change in attitudes of many of the most resentful students. One of my students phrased her experience this way:

[Over the term we] went through feeling defensive, then angry, then wanting to give up and drop out of school, and then I think we all came to a turning point, and the whole experience humbled most of us. I know for a fact that it humbled me. Racism is ignorance, and before that first term I didn't consider myself racist at all. I found out that my ignorance about other races made me racist in ways I didn't understand. Every time I hear someone putting down another race I put myself in the other person's shoes and try to explain things from what that person's point of view might be.²⁴

Although no single class session in this module can be pointed to as "the" turning point for personal transformation, this one is quite significant in that it poses a simple moral choice to the students. I try to make the classroom a safe place for each of us to share, on an emotional level, what is going on in our lives, including our (and specifically my) shortcomings on issues like race. In this session I make a point not to hide my feelings about the women in my life who have experienced male violence, and at the same time honor the real emotional reactions of men who just do not want to face the magnitude of this war. It becomes clear that my outrage+sadness+disgust+determination and another's aversion are simply two different responses of a person with a heart: had they known, they, too, would have had to act. So when I ask them to choose for me whether I should or should not teach about racism, they simultaneously choose for themselves.

My final sermon to these students is this:

You will continually be faced with

conflicting values on issues like these. Whenever you feel confused, guilty, or put upon, I have found no better way to solid ground than looking at actual harm.

But how did they come to the point where are they willing to look at actual harm on the topic of race? By "instead" talking about gender. This fresh mapping of the landscape of sexism is experienced as initially freer of guilt-laden land mines (almost entirely free of them for "white" women) so students don't engage as readily in protective armoring as during the racial mapping that has been such a constant focus of our attention. It does not matter that having arrived at our destination, students discover that it is the same place they would have gotten to on the original path. There is simply no need to don armor after the fact because the emotional danger is elsewhere.

This also applies for examinations of classism, heterosexism, ageism, and so on. Again, some of the details on the tables may change. (In the case of heterosexism, where fundamentalist Christian religious overlays may decrease a given student's willingness to confront actual harm, approaching this issue via an indirect path may be the only way to make headway.) The oppressions are not identical, but they are linked and they are similar *and the same folks seem to always come out on top.*

One of the strengths any oppressive institution is the way in which it is linked to the other oppressions in the fabric of our culture. The beauty of teaching by indirection is that, like Aikido, it uses those very strengths of the oppressive culture — the linkages and parallels between oppressions — to undermine that same culture.

Whenever one teaches about oppression in our culture, one must actively deal with the guilt that many students feel as they identify with the oppressors.²⁵ We all tend to react to information that makes us feel badly, and many of us respond by trying to shut this information out. Talking



about guilt with students will help, but a rational dialogue on a non-rational reaction will not entirely solve the problem. Indeed, for some students the aversive reactions get stronger the longer the class remains on this subject.

It is helpful to eventually divert their attention to a parallel oppression in order to bypass some of the resistance they have to learning material that they feel guilty about. Shifting to a topic students haven't already built up a store of reactions to allows them to see with fresh eyes how, say, sexism impacts the lives of women, and many can subsequently apply a similar oppression-analysis to racism without restimulating aversive feelings.

REFERENCES

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- 4 Directed by Lee Mun Wah (Stir Fry Productions, 1904 Virginia Street, Berkeley, CA 94709, 510-548-9695, 1994, 90 Minutes).
- 5 Tess Wiseheart, Director of the Portland Women's Crisis Line (personal communication, 1995).
- 6 Cherie R. Brown, Exec. Director of the National Coalition Building Institute (personal communication, 1999).
- 7 *MEN'S WORK: How to Stop the Violence That Tears Our Lives Apart*, by Paul Kivel (Ballantine Books, New

- 1) One of the privileges "whites" have is the right to name. What are some of the other privileges?
- 2) How does guilt influence our willingness to hear about others' oppression?
- 3) What positive role does guilt play in our lives? Are there any other responses that provide the same benefits guilt does, but with less social cost.
- 4) How did you learn what you believe about race relations?
- 5) If we were to change the headings above these two tables from "men" to "wealthy," and "women" to "poor or working class" what would change in the content of the tables if anything? How about if we were to change the headings above these two tables from "men" to "heterosexuals," and "women" to "gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgendered persons"? (Note that I use "or" in both questions to generate the most inclusive list because bisexual men and gay men, for instance, may not have precisely the same experience of oppression.)
- 6) What are the effects of the existence of sexism on men? In what ways do men benefit from the oppression of women, and in what ways does this system harm men?
- 7) What are the emotional and physical effects of discussing sexism on women?
- 8) What, if anything, would be changed about your conclusions regarding the social responsibility of educators if lists generated from either of the above two questions were used instead of one or more lists generated from the questions posed in the article? What if the new lists were generated in addition to the lists generated by questions posed in the article?
- 9) Why is sexist violence a vivid reality for many women who have not personally experienced sexist violence? Why is it not one for many men?
- 10) What do men lose out on when they are not in touch with women's realities?

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America, *supra* note 9, p. 756-7.

14 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formation," in *Re-reading America*, *supra* note 9, pp. 356-64.

15 Junior or Senior students who teach the 14 student lab sections of the course.

16 Mary P. Koss, Christine A. Gidycz, and Nadine Wisniewski, "The Scope of Rape," *J. of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* **53**, 442-443 (1987).

17 A more complete examination of this issue reveals that there are many positives for individual men in abandoning a sexist mindset, but despite doing so there is no way give up the unearned privileges that accorded to males by the dominant cultural and institutional sexism. The best one can do is remark upon them or use them (such as the privilege of being heard) to dismantle sexism.

18 Ronni Sandroff, "Sexual Harassment" The Inside Story," *Working Woman* (June 1992) pp. 47-78.

19 *Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Is It a Problem?*, conducted by the Federal Merit Systems Protection Board, cited in *Sexual Harassment on the*

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20 Bill McAllister (LA Times), *The Oregonian*, November 14, 1995, p.A10.

21 Diana E. H. Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, child abuse, and workplace harassment* (Sage, Beverly Hills, 1984), pp. 53-56.

22 Louis Harris and Associates, *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of Women's Health* (The Commonwealth Fund, New York, 1993), p. 8.

23 Tess Wiseheart, Director of the Portland Women's Crisis Line (personal communication, 1995).

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25 That one may simply stop identifying as "white" or "male" seldom occurs to us.

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