

“My Life in the Classroom, Where Race Always Matters”

By David Leonard

When you walk into a classroom, what’s your demeanor? Are you approachable, even casual? Or do you favor authority and formality?

Ever since Katrina Gulliver, a professor at University of New South Wales, lamented a “culture of familiarity” in the lecture hall, I’ve been reading professors’ reflections on these questions. Reflections from professors like Will Miller, who pushed back against Gulliver: “I have been known to occasionally teach in clothes that I could mow the lawn in,” he wrote, “and apparently a student or two have at some point said I was cool. That’s not my goal, however.”

I’m a casual dresser, too, but that’s not what struck me about Miller’s essay. What stood out was this line: I may be a white male, but this has nothing to do with why I am comfortable in a classroom.

There’s a lot to digest here. But let me start with this: I am a white male, and that has everything to do with why I am comfortable in a classroom, why I am respected, and how I’m read by students and others. That is my story, and the story of my career within academe.

Berkeley: Summer 1998

I still remember the excitement I felt when I taught my first class solo. No discussion sections, no grading demands from other professors: This was my syllabus, my approach, my opportunity to develop relationships with students. The course covered the civil-rights movement, and I was thrilled by the opportunity to share my passion for the untold stories of the movement.

As a white, male graduate student, I worried: Would my knowledge and academic background be enough to make students respect me as an authority on civil-rights history? But back then, I figured that my extensive reading list and my preparation were enough. Beyond that initial burst of anxiety, I gave little thought to what my whiteness meant inside the classroom.

About halfway through the class, we prepared to watch Spike Lee’s *4 Little Girls*, a powerful documentary that chronicles the trauma and terror of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Ala. Wanting the students to sit with the film, to reflect, and to emotionally connect with it, I encouraged them to bypass the standard practice of detached, academic note-taking. “Sit back,” I said, “and enjoy the film.”

Looking back, I cannot believe I said these words. But I’m not entirely surprised: My privilege needed to be checked. In my mind, I was simply reminding them to watch, listen, learn, and feel. Yet that’s not what came out of my mouth. What I said seemed like an attempt to turn a film about terror into a moment of pleasure and enjoyment.

A few weeks later, two African-American students approached me separately. They each challenged me to think about what I had said, why it was significant, and how my whiteness mattered. They were right. I was blinded by privilege and the belief that “it’s all about the material,” not even questioning how I presented that material. My distance from the history shaped how I talked about the civil-rights movements and white-supremacist violence. When I reached into my pedagogical toolbox, steeped in whiteness and my middle-class Los Angeles upbringing, I grabbed hold of “enjoy the film” with little forethought about how such an insensitive phrase might trigger emotions and anger. It was the first of many lessons on how race always matters in the classroom.

Berkeley: Spring 2002

As I approached the completion of my Ph.D., I was afforded the opportunity to teach an upper-level undergraduate ethnic-studies class with over 200 students. It was daunting. Between wrangling eight teaching assistants (many of whom were my friends), and lecturing to all those undergrads, I was apprehensive—if not scared—for much of the semester.

Over the years, I have been asked over and over again: Did the students—either the legendarily political Berkeley crew or the less-progressive students who just were taking the course for a general-education requirement—ever challenge me, question why I was teaching the class, or simply resist my pedagogical approach? Never. Happened. Even though I lectured about genocide, enslavement, mass incarceration, and persistent white supremacy, students offered little resistance.

This all changed, though, when a fellow graduate student—an African-American man—delivered a couple of guest lectures about the prison-industrial complex. After two mind-blowing and brilliant talks, I was excited to continue the conversation with the class. My students? Not so much. They lamented the guest lecturer’s “attitude.” They described him as “angry,” as “biased” and “sarcastic,” and as “different from me.” Several students seemed more interested in litigating his pedagogical choices than discussing the injustices of the American judicial system.

We (I’m indebted to one of my TA’s for her work here) refused to hold this conversation in his absence, so we brought him back into the classroom. And we pushed the class to reflect on why I was seen as an objective, fair-minded, truth-telling, and lovable “teddy bear,” whereas he was angry, biased, and more interested in a political agenda than the truths of history. The conversations that resulted from these interventions were powerful, spotlighting that race, racism, and privilege didn’t just operate outside the classroom, in history and in culture. They played a role within our learning space as well.

The wages of whiteness were paid inside and outside the classroom. I was seen as an objective authority, I realized, in part because I was a white male.

Pullman, Wash.: 2004

Since joining the faculty at Washington State University, I have been known to swear in class. I’ve worn ripped-up jeans along with a Lakers jersey. I ask my students to call me David, though I do tell them that if they are interested in formality, “Prof” or “Dr.” are fine.

I’m less able to pass as a student these days—I’ve got a gray beard, a balding head, and an old person’s sartorial style—but I’ve embraced blending into student populations. For me, this isn’t simply about being cool or fitting in or feeling young. I consider it a pedagogical intervention: The idea is to challenge our collective understanding of what it means to be an intellectual, and to show that scholarly pursuits are not incompatible with the “everyday.” Sure, I could lecture on Bourdieu, but I could just as easily talk trash about another Lakers’ championship—remember, 2004 was a while ago—or talk shop about the latest Madden incarnation.

But my ability to do this—to maintain authority even while wearing a Zinedine Zidane or Terrell Owens jersey—is predicated on what George Lipsitz called “the possessive investment in whiteness.” In other words, institutional biases and individual prejudices reinforce one another. They certainly affect my place as a professor. My status as a white male is intertwined with the respect I receive. Women and scholars of color are not afforded this built-in respect, whatever their individual accomplishments, sartorial choices, degrees, or pedagogical styles. As a white male, I benefit from being seen as a professor, as an authority, before I actually say or do anything.

In my 12 years at Washington State, I have never had a student complain about my sartorial choices, my profanity, my propensity for “tangents,” or my professionalism. The same cannot be said about my colleagues, women and faculty of color, whose professionalism, authority, and preparedness is routinely challenged. My

wardrobe of jerseys, hoodies, baseball hats, and sagging jeans is not subject to the evaluative scrutiny of future Mr. Blackwells. Contrast that with the women and people of color in the academy whose clothing selections are questioned and used to evaluate their expertise.

On the basketball court, it might be the shoes that make the player. In the classroom, though, it's the privileges afforded along racial and gender lines that make the professor. Or it's those privileges, at least, that color the ways students, faculty, and administrators measure a professor's success.

Pullman, Wash.: May 2014

I have spoken, by now, in numerous classrooms, at conferences, and in many other venues; for the longest time, I felt uncomfortable with any sort of introduction that noted my academic background, publications, or accomplishments. I scoffed at pretense and formality; I was David.

I know now that that was a luxury. More than my degrees or my publications, my whiteness was authenticating me. I had thought that by refusing the accoutrements of academe, I was bucking the system. Instead, I was merely cashing in on the societal privileges afforded to me because of my identity.

So what have I learned? My education is ongoing: I still wince at the lack of critical awareness I showed, early on, in giving underdeveloped introductions to guest speakers in class or at conferences, centering my sense of appropriateness and formality. And I haven't started to demand a level of classroom formality that doesn't work for me. But I'm more sensitive to the experiences of others. I'm more aware of how my whiteness matters. Not many of us would be naïve enough to think that the classroom is a colorblind nirvana, but too many of us still act as if that's the case.

Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process

Professors rarely speak of the place of eros or the erotic in our classrooms. Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body. To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders, who have been usually white and male. But our nonwhite elders were just as eager to deny the body. The predominantly black college has always been a bastion of repression. The public world of institutional learning was a site where the body had to be erased, go unnoticed. When I first became a teacher and needed to use the restroom in the middle of class, I had no clue as to what my elders did in such situations. No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the

classroom? Trying to remember the bodies of my professors, I find myself unable to recall them. I hear voices, remember fragmented details, but very few whole bodies.

Entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom. Repression and denial make it possible for us to forget and then desperately seek to recover ourselves, our feelings, our passions in some private place—after class. I remember reading an article in *Psychology Today* years ago when I was still an undergraduate, reporting a study which revealed that every so many seconds while giving lectures many male professors were thinking about sexuality—were even having lustful thoughts about students. I was amazed. After reading this article, which as I recall was shared and talked about endlessly in the dormitory, I watched male professors differently, trying to connect the fantasies I imagined them having in their minds with lectures, with their bodies that I had so faithfully learned to pretend I did not see. During my first semester of college teaching, there was a male student in my class whom I always seemed to see and not see at the same time. At one point in the middle of the semester, I received a call from a school therapist who wanted to speak with me about the way I treated this student in the class. The therapist told me that the students had said I was unusually gruff, rude, and downright mean when I related to him. I did not know exactly who the student was, could not put a face or body with his name, but later when he identified himself in class, I realized that I was erotically drawn to this student. And that my naive way of coping with feelings in the classroom that I had been taught never to have was to deflect (hence my harsh treatment of him), repress, and deny. Overly conscious then about ways such repression and denial could lead to the

“wounding” of students, I was determined to face whatever passions were aroused in the classroom setting and deal with them.

Writing about Adrienne Rich’s work, connecting it to the work of men who thought critically about the body, in her introduction to *Thinking Through the Body*, Jane Gallop comments:

Men who do find themselves in some way thinking through the body are more likely to be recognized as serious thinkers and heard. Women have first to prove that we are thinkers, which is easier when we conform to the protocol that deems serious thought separate from an embodied subject in history. Rich is asking women to enter the realms of critical thought and knowledge without becoming disembodied spirit, universal man.

Beyond the realm of critical thought, it is equally crucial that we learn to enter the classroom “whole” and not as “disembodied spirit.” In the heady early days of Women’s Studies classes at Stanford University, I learned by the example of daring, courageous woman professors (particularly Diane Middlebrook) that there was a place for passion in the classroom, that eros and the erotic did not need to be denied for learning to take place. One of the central tenets of feminist critical pedagogy has been the insistence on not engaging the mind/body split. This is one of the underlying beliefs that has made Women’s Studies a subversive location in the academy. While women’s studies over the years has had to fight to be taken seriously by academics in traditional disciplines, those of us who have been intimately engaged as students or teachers with feminist thinking have always recognized the legitimacy of a pedagogy that dares to subvert the mind/body split and allow us to be whole in the classroom, and as a consequence wholehearted.

Recently, Susan B., a colleague and friend, whom I taught in

a Women's Studies class when she was an undergraduate, stated in conversation that she felt she was having so much trouble with her graduate courses because she has to come to expect a quality of passionate teaching that is not present where she is studying. Her comments made me think anew about the place of passion, of erotic recognition in the classroom setting because I believe that the energy she felt in our Women's Studies classes was there because of the extent to which women professors teaching those courses dared to give fully of ourselves, going beyond the mere transmission of information in lectures. Feminist education for critical consciousness is rooted in the assumption that knowledge and critical thought done in the classroom should inform our habits of being and ways of living outside the classroom. Since so many of our early classes were taken almost exclusively by female students, it was easier for us to not be disembodied spirits in the classroom. Concurrently, it was expected that we would bring a quality of care and even "love" to our students. Eros was present in our classrooms, as a motivating force. As critical pedagogues we were teaching students ways to think differently about gender, understanding fully that this knowledge would also lead them to live differently.

To understand the place of eros and eroticism in the classroom, we must move beyond thinking of those forces solely in terms of the sexual, though that dimension need not be denied. Sam Keen, in his book *The Passionate Life*, urges readers to remember that in its earliest conception "erotic potency was not confined to sexual power but included the moving force that propelled every life-form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality." Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process. Keen continues:

When we limit "erotic" to its sexual meaning, we betray our alienation from the rest of nature. We confess that we are not motivated by anything like the mysterious force that moves birds to migrate or dandelions to spring. Furthermore, we imply that the fulfillment or potential toward which we strive is sexual—the romantic-genital connection between two persons.

Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination.

Suggesting that this culture lacks a "vision or science of hygeology" (health and well-being) Keen asks: "What forms of passion might make us whole? To what passions may we surrender with the assurance that we will expand rather than diminish the promise of our lives?" The quest for knowledge that enables us to unite theory and practice is one such passion. To the extent that professors bring this passion, which has to be fundamentally rooted in a love for ideas we are able to inspire, the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears. In many ways this is frightening. Nothing about the way I was trained as a teacher really prepared me to witness my students transforming themselves.

It was during the years that I taught in the African American Studies department at Yale (a course on black women writers) that I witnessed the way education for critical consciousness can fundamentally alter our perceptions of reality and our actions. During one course we collectively explored in fiction the power of internalized racism, seeing how it was described in the literature as well as critically interrogating our experi-

ences. However, one of the black female students who had always straightened her hair because she felt deep down that she would not look good if it were not processed—were worn “natural”—changed. She came to class after a break and told everyone that this class had deeply affected her, so much so that when she went to get her usual “perm” some force within said no. I still remember the fear I felt when she testified that the class had changed her. Though I believed deeply in the philosophy of education for critical consciousness that empowers, I had not yet comfortably united theory with practice. Some small part of me still wanted us to remain disembodied spirits. And her body, her presence, her changed look was a direct challenge that I had to face and affirm. She was teaching me. Now, years later, I read again her final words to the class and recognize the passion and beauty of her will to know and to act:

I am a black woman. I grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio. I cannot go back and change years of believing that I could never be quite as pretty or intelligent as many of my white friends—but I can go forward learning pride in who I am. . . . I cannot go back and change years of believing that the most wonderful thing in the world would be to be Martin Luther King, Jr.'s wife—but I can go on and find the strength I need to be the revolutionary for myself rather than the companion and help for someone else. So no, I don't believe that we change what has already been done but we can change the future and so I am reclaiming and learning more of who I am so that I can be whole.

Attempting to gather my thoughts on eroticism and pedagogy, I have reread student journals covering a span of ten years. Again and again, I read notes that could easily be considered “romantic” as students express their love for me, our class. Here an Asian student offers her thoughts about a class:

White people have never understood the beauty of silence, of connection and reflection. You teach us to speak, and to listen for the signs of the wind. Like a guide, you walk silently through the forest ahead of us. In the forest everything has sound, speaks . . . You too teach us to talk, where all life speaks in the forest, not just the white man's. Isn't that part of feeling whole—the ability to be able to talk, to not have to be silent or performing all the time, to be able to be critical and honest—openly? This is the truth you have taught us: all people deserve to speak.

Or a black male student writing that he will “love me no and always” because our class has been a dance, and he loves to dance:

I love to dance. When I was a child, I danced everywhere. Why walk there when you can shuffle-ball-change all the way. When I danced my soul ran free. I was poetry. On my Saturday grocery excursions with my mother, I would flap, flap, flap, ball change the shopping cart through the aisles. Mama would turn to me and say, “Boy, stop that dancing. White people think that's all we can do anyway.” I would stop but when she wasn't looking I would do a quick high bell kick or tow. I didn't care what white people thought, I just loved to dance-dance-dance. I still dance and I still don't care what people think white or black. When I dance my soul is free. It is sad to read about men who stop dancing, who stop being foolish, who stop letting their souls fly free. . . . I guess for me, surviving whole means never to stop dancing.

These words were written by O'Neal LaRon Clark in 1987. We had a passionate teacher/student relationship. He was taller than six feet; I remember the day he came to class late and came right up to the front, picked me up and whirled me around.

The class laughed. I called him "fool" and laughed. It was by way of apologizing for being late, for missing any moment of classroom passion. And so he brought his own moment. I, too, love to dance. And so we danced our way into the future as comrades and friends bound by all we had learned in class together. Those who knew him remember the times he came to class early to do funny imitations of the teacher. He died unexpectedly last year—still dancing, still loving me now and always.

When eros is present in the classroom setting, then love is bound to flourish. Well-learned distinctions between public and private make us believe that love has no place in the classroom. Even though many viewers could applaud a movie like *The Dead Poets Society*, possibly identifying with the passion of the professor and his students, rarely is such passion institutionally affirmed. Professors are expected to publish, but no one really expects or demands of us that we really care about teaching in uniquely passionate and different ways. Teachers who love students and are loved by them are still "suspect" in the academy. Some of the suspicion is that the presence of feelings, of passions, may not allow for objective consideration of each student's merit. But this very notion is based on the false assumption that education is neutral, that there is some "even" emotional ground we stand on that enables us to treat everyone equally, dispassionately. In reality, special bonds between professors and students have always existed, but traditionally they have been exclusive rather than inclusive. To allow one's feeling of care and will to nurture particular individuals in the classroom—to expand and embrace everyone—goes against the notion of privatized passion. In student journals from various classes I have taught there have always been complaints about the perceived special bonding between myself and particular students. Realizing that my students were uncertain about expressions of care and love in the classroom, I found it necessary to teach on the subject. I asked students once: "Why

do you feel that the regard I extend to a particular student cannot also be extended to each of you? Why do you think there is not enough love or care to go around?" To answer these questions they had to think deeply about the society we live in, how we are taught to compete with one another. They had to think about capitalism and how it informs the way we think about love and care, the way we live in our bodies, the way we try to separate mind from body.

There is not much passionate teaching or learning taking place in higher education today. Even when students are desperately yearning to be touched by knowledge, professors still fear the challenge, allow their worries about losing control to override their desires to teach. Concurrently, those of us who teach the same old subjects in the same old ways are often inwardly bored—unable to rekindle passions we may have once felt. If, as Thomas Merton suggests in his essay on pedagogy "Learning to Live," the purpose of education is to show students how to define themselves "authentically and spontaneously in relation" to the world, then professors can best teach if we are self-actualized. Merton reminds us that "the original and authentic 'paradise' idea, both in the monastery and in the university, implied not simply a celestial store of theoretic ideas to which the Magistri and Doctores held the key, but the inner self of the student" who would discover the ground of their being in relation to themselves, to higher powers, to community. That the "fruit of education . . . was in the activation of that utmost center." To restore passion to the classroom or to excite it in classrooms where it has never been, professors must find again the place of eros within ourselves and together allow the mind and body to feel and know desire.

Common Language
Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: A Workshop at Tyler School of Art

racism: a kind of bias that can only be held by people in the dominant social position, this is the blanket term used to refer to a system of social advantages and disadvantages based on race

prejudice: any negative attitudes toward a social group based on an aspect of identity, regardless of their social power

structural racism: the systemic ways through which practices of conferring and withholding benefits based on race are embedded in social institutions

interpersonal racism: any experience or incident in which race functions as the catalyst for disparate treatment

internalized racism: the process by which people of color reproduce dominant narratives about their own local ethnic communities or broader racial/ethnic in-groups to justify their low social and/or economic positions

homophobia: the umbrella term used to refer to a system of social advantages and disadvantages based on sexual orientation

sexism: the umbrella term used to refer to a system of advantages and disadvantages based on sexual orientation

classism: the umbrella term used to refer to a system of advantages and disadvantages based on social class

ableism: the umbrella term used to refer to a system of advantages and disadvantages based on ability

microaggression: often small and ambiguous when considered individually, these are behaviors toward minority group members that repeat or affirm stereotypes or subtly demean them; research has shown that the effects of these accumulate over time, and can trigger significant trauma despite their apparent mildness

white/straight/male/class/ability privilege: the un-earned benefits associated with membership in a dominant group, culture, or class

cultural capital: particular benefits associated with knowledge of and access to dominant cultural practices and norms

social capital: particular benefits associated with knowledge of and access to a network of individuals with privilege and in powerful or advantageous positions

allyship: the set of practices that characterize individual resistance to oppressive or biased discourses and actions, aimed at building coalition with members of minority groups and supporting their aims and efforts

anti-oppression: an ideology that encourages intentional collective and individual resistance to oppressive structures

More useful terms:

queer: a broad term used to refer to individuals who are sexual minorities, that is, members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual communities

trans: a broad term used to refer to individuals who are gender minorities, meaning that they may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, and may be genderqueer, transgender, agender, or gender non-conforming

cis: the term typically used to identify individuals who experience congruence between their sex assigned at birth and their understanding of their own gender

race: a socio-political construct that relies on traits like skin color, hair texture and eye shape to assign group identity

ethnicity: group identity rooted in common national, cultural and/or geographical ties

black: a broad term used to refer to individuals associated with the African diaspora; can include those who self-identify as black, or who are “read” as black despite other racial or ethnic identity

African American: descendants of the North American slave trade with ancestry in Africa

person (or people) of color: an umbrella term that refers to members of all racial minorities

social construct: the idea that concepts of value, import, deviance, normality, and abnormality arise culturally rather than naturally

mythical norm: an abstraction that represents the greatest possible hegemonic power distilled in an individual, against which others are judged; ie., the white, straight, able-bodied, wealthy, conventionally-attractive, heterosexual, cis, man

pedagogy: the means of teaching, as a constellation of theoretically grounded methods for engaging students in learning

teaching style: the personality an individual brings to teaching; intentional choices by the teacher (like the choice to be “easy-going” or “strict” in the classroom) interacting with student assumptions about their perceptions of teacher identity (ie., whether the teacher is black or white, a man or a woman, large-bodied or petite, etc.)

curriculum: the content of an individual class, course of study, or school; the material with which students engage