LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF AN EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract
The journey to professorship has taken me into many different classrooms. From Canada to the United States, and from the inner city to the urban middle class, I have discovered the freedom to pursue a pedagogy that flexes with the cultural fabric of my classroom. This article addresses the racial basis for determining whether your students are field independent or field dependent learners. It challenges whiteness within academia, and it encourages the need for instructors to embrace a pedagogical approach that will increase the agency of the students.

Although I was never a strong student in grade school, somehow I believed I knew what would make a great teacher. I didn’t like to read, I didn’t like to sit and listen, and I didn’t like the long hours wasted in the classroom. Based on my consistently negative approach to the classroom as a student, it must have seemed odd to my parents that I was always looking for opportunities to recreate the classroom setting with my own parameters in place. My first class roaster consisted of my baby dolls and Barbies. A few years later, I managed to coerce the neighborhood kids into playing along at pretend school. It was my childhood experiences outside the formal classroom setting that began my lifelong commitment to developing a pedagogy that evolves with the students and encourages effective learning.

My exit from student status immediately took me back into the classroom; however, my new position had moved me in front of the class. I was a real teacher with real responsibilities, and I didn’t want to make the same mistakes my grade school teachers made with me. My first teaching position was at the middle school level. I had the students for one hour a day, during which time I wanted to inspire them to write well and read effectively, while exposing them to new genres within the plethora of literature available for their reading pleasure. It was a great adventure, really. I loved my students. I set my standards high and expected them to succeed. Overall, I believed I was on my way to becoming the teacher I had always wished for when I was in grade school, but I still had a lot to learn.

As my CV details, I transitioned from teaching middle school students to instructing at the high school level, then I moved to community college students, and, eventually, I found myself in front of university students who still needed the same help with writing well, while effectively interacting with literature. I discovered that the shift in age within the classroom was also accompanied with a shift in racial demographics. My middle school students were part of a private school that served as an alternative to the projects in Dallas, my high school students were part of an inner city public school in Canada, one of the community colleges where I taught was made up of predominately white, middle class students who had grown up in “Small Town, USA,” and the university where I am presently employed as an Assistant Professor of English is part of the Historic Black College and University (HBCU) system. I have discovered that there is not just one recipe for successful teaching; the secret of developing an effective pedagogy is to allow your pedagogy to evolve with the changing demographics of your students.

Historically, the design of the American classroom is based in Eurocentric tradition. Morrison (2002) points out that “whiteness,” rather than a minority focused learning approach, determines the exercise of power within the classroom, and the only way this will change is by “reifying the range of color on a palette” (p. 7). Power based in racial “whiteness” is important to understand as a classroom instructor engages in the necessary evolution of pedagogical design. Hill (1998) states that whiteness is an invisible, unmarked norm in American society, and Kendrick (2005) declares that “whiteness is the canvas upon which everything else is painted” (p.396). As an American norm, whiteness is considered an ideology as

Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 2014
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well as a system where white dominance and superiority marginalize and oppress people of color (McIntyre, 2002). Therefore, we need to recognize the power and privilege that defines whiteness and the implications this has on the process of developing pedagogy.

Sadly, the privileges of whiteness are unacknowledged among most whites in education (Prendergast, 2005). McIntyre (2002), hoping to help prospective teachers become more aware of the dynamic of whiteness, asked some student teachers to design a collage that would depict white privilege and power. In Figure 1, the collage the student teachers designed has many noteworthy elements: President Clinton, movie stars, sports, and money; however, it is significant that these students included the word “Teacher” in the top right hand corner of the collage.

When thinking about whiteness within our American society, teachers in the classroom setting was one aspect that was identified by these teachers in training. Educational discourse can be defined by whiteness because whites occupy positions of authority in the educational arena. Over ninety percent of the teaching force in America is white (Picower, 2009). However, inside the educational system, whites often do not see the implied whiteness (McIntyre, 2002). White teachers are often limited by their predisposed notions regarding language and learning styles, and they can be traditionally passive regarding the impact of the “white” learning process on the minority students who are part of their classroom (Ball and Lardner, 2005). Kynard (2007) explains that white Americans have established the norm for academic communication; thus, the learning style and communication style of the “white” teacher is predominately what appears in the pedagogy for the classes they instruct. In order for instructors to embrace a multi-cultural approach to their pedagogical design, they first need to understand the implications of field independent and field dependent learning and the implications for a racially varied classroom.

Field independence and field dependence relates to the learner’s method for acquiring, structuring, and processing information. Pithers (2002) explains that cognitive style is about a student’s preference and strategies for perceiving, remembering, and problem solving along with the student’s ability to memorize and retrieve information. This author clarifies that field independent learners are more apt to see the parts of the field as distinct, thus being able to break up a field and consider the parts individually; whereas, the field dependent learners are holistic in their approach, perceiving the parts of the field as one. Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, and Cox (1977) explain that field independent students prefer solitary situations, they have self-defined goals, and perform better when they are allowed to develop their own strategies. On the other hand, there is the field dependent learner who values community, prefers externally defined goals and reinforcements, and requires more explicit instructions for problem solving. According to Cross (1976), field dependent students also require more frequent feedback. Thompson and Knox (1987) explain that this group of field dependent learners are looking for a setting where there is “greater social interaction, more immediate instructor feedback, and more structure and direction” (p. 21). Therefore, in our more ethically blended 21st century classroom, we need to determine who our field independent learners are and who our field dependent learners are so that we can design the classroom experience to fit their learning style.

There are many determining factors involved in the development of field dependent and field independent learning; however, I discovered an important factor to consider in pedagogical development is the racial demographics of each new class I will be instructing. Before we look at the cultural implications, it would be helpful to identify the difference between race and culture. Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary explains that race identifies a people group who share particular physical features; whereas, culture is a way of thinking and behaving based on the customs of a particular society.

Figure 1: Whiteness Collage (McIntyre, 2002)
Although race is an initial identifier in a multi-ethnic classroom, it is culture that is the determinant which we will be discussing. Within every race, there are different cultures, and the cultural aspect that needs to be examined when considering pedagogical implications is whether the student grew up in a community where whiteness had a significant impact on their learning style. Bruffee (1999) argues that knowledge is a construct of community based discourse that is maintained by consensus since learning is a socially negotiated process. For many of our students, the community where they began developing their learning style is more home based than school based. Nasir and Hand (2006) also support this link between race, culture, and learning styles. There are some defining characteristics that make up a typical “white” European American audience. This particular people group is culturally comfortable receiving instruction through written Standard English, which is a characteristic of whiteness (Bennett, 1998; Ornstein and Levine, 1982; Kynard, 2007). Also, research has demonstrated that the European American “White” people group is made up of linear, field independent learners, which means they can isolate facts as needed, and they are able to manage well with instructions and feedback. European Americans also value independent work and are self-motivated rather than group motivated (Mestre, 2008). Thus, the traditional approach in a classroom setting where independent, written work is part of the educational experience works well for field independent learners. Also, the culture that minority students grow up in has a direct impact on the student’s learning style. Some minority students’ formative years are permeated with interaction that is traditionally associated with “White” Eurocentric communication, and an example of this would be the use of Standard English in the home. On the other hand, there is a group of minority students whose culture did not prioritize a “White” way of communicating, and research demonstrates that this group of students are inclined toward becoming field dependent learners. The social, family based dynamics within non-Standard English speaking minority cultures fosters the socially based learning style that is shared by minority students (Gonyea, 2010), and is also shared by field dependent learners.

There are three minority, non-Standard English speaking people groups that I will be considering in this article: Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. The identifier used to establish that the three groups are minority people groups is the language spoken in the home. If the language spoken in the home is not the traditional language of academia, Standard English, then these students are considered part of the “minority” in the classroom setting. These minority students’ experiences outside the classroom setting are not based in the Eurocentric approach to learning and communicating, and this Eurocentric approach is what is considered “standard” within the classroom based on what the white majority have established as “standard.” It is important that we acknowledge the whiteness that has permeated our pedagogical approach as we consider these three specific minority groups that could potentially be a part of our classroom roster.

The first group of students we will consider are the non-Standard English speaking Native American students. Swisher and Deyhle’s (1987) research identify Native American students as field dependent learners whose cognitive process is based on visual discrimination and imitation. More (1987) discovered that these students’ cognitive ability increased through visual processing and decreased when instruction was delivered through verbal coding. Hilberg and Tharp (2002) also emphasized the importance of collaboration and reflection when Native American students processed information. Thus, group work that involves images rather than dictionary definitions would be more effective with this people group.

Another minority group in our school system is made up of non-Standard English speaking Mexican American students. This people group has a strong society and family based connection (Gonyea, 2010) with an emphasis on cooperation in the attainment of goals (Griggs and Dunn, 1995). This strong familial connection results in other-directedness; thus, this group of field dependent learners needs to see the big picture through cooperative learning opportunities that provide personal relevance (Mestre, 2008). When developing lesson plans for multi-ethnic classes that contain this particular segment of Mexican American students, it is important to provide opportunity for the students to understand the big picture or purpose of the lesson, give them some time to interact with others in the classroom regarding the material being learned, and present examples that will allow for personal and or cultural relevance to be established.
Finally, there is a segment of the African American community whose dominant dialect is African American Vernacular English. This particular people group incorporate external cues into their communication style, and these external cues include body movement and tonal semantics (Smitherman 1977, 2007). Therefore, it is important that students who identify AAVE as their dominant dialect, rather than Standard English, have the opportunity to experience tonal semantics and non-verbal cues when receiving instructions. Instructions given to this group of students are better understood when they are delivered verbally, since the tonal semantics of the teacher along with the non-verbal cues provided will increase the student’s agency. Also, the element of call-response (Smitherman, 2007) is part of the AAVE speaking African American community outside the classroom and should also be present inside the classroom in order for student agency to be experienced. Group work often allows for call-response to be experienced because the informal setting of group works allows for “the speaker’s solo voice to alternate or . . . intermingle with the audience’s response” (Smitherman, 2007, p. 87).

Research consistently reveals that white mainstream students are usually field independent learners and minority students are generally field dependent learners. Banks (1988) proposes that the difference in learning styles between mainstream, white students and ethnic minority students who are identified as field dependent learners remains consistent even when social class remains constant between minority students and white students. This author cited two studies, one of which was conducted where there was a variance in the social classes of the participants involved, then another study where the research was conducted in the suburbs where the social classes of the students remained constant, and the results were the same: the minority students in each study were identified as field-dependent learners. However, it is not just the learning style of the students that need to be considered, but also the learning/communication style of the teacher who is designing the pedagogy.

If ninety percent of the teaching force in the United States is white, then it would be logical to conclude that most teachers approach the classroom from a field independent perspective that is permeated with “whiteness.” Banks (1988) confirms this logic when he writes, “Most teachers are significantly more field independent than [their minority] students” (p. 460). As a result, it is apparent that the learning styles of the white, field independent learners is more apt to be met in the classroom than the cognitive styles of ethnic minority field dependent learners. Banks (1988) goes on to explain that the teaching styles of most teachers as well as the teaching style incorporated into the school curriculum tends to reflect the characteristics of field independence. Thus, if we are not aware of our general pre-disposition within academia to field independent instruction, then we may naturally default to developing a pedagogy that is steeped in “whiteness” resulting in favoring the culture of white, mainstream students while placing minority students at a serious disadvantage.

Since learning styles are culturally based (Graybill, 1997), academia must consider the cultural discontinuity between the teachers, administrators, and school structure that is “White” Eurocentric and the culturally specific learning styles of a minority people group, which is not Eurocentric. Furthermore, academia must consider the implications the discontinuity might have for the minority student’s agency. Thankfully, we have the freedom in the 21st century classroom to challenge “whiteness” within our classroom while pursuing ethically sensitive pedagogies that take into consideration the varied learning styles in a culturally mixed classroom. When we understand that our field dependent Native American students need images, our Mexican American students value examples with personal relevance, and our African American students experience better agency in group work, then we will be better prepared to resist a “White” approach to classroom instruction. The more we are aware of the different approaches our students have to learning, the more intentional we can be, as instructors, in including strategies that will increase our students’ agency.

As an experienced teacher who has spent her life in front of one classroom or another, I have discovered that the pedagogies I have in place must never remain stagnant. Lining up my baby dolls and providing an inspirational lecture with flannel pieces on a felt board was a starting point in my journey of discovery. It is important that my pedagogy continues to evolve as I consider new ways of working with my students. There are so many elements that go into determining a student’s learning and
communication style, but cultural influences need to be part of our consideration if we want our pedagogy to be effective in our multi-cultural 21st century classroom.

REFERENCES


