

Reflections

Lifting the Veil: Reflections on Privilege and Reciprocal Pedagogy as a White Adult Educator

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I did not always know that I wanted to be an educator, but have found a true sense of purpose and a *home* in my role as a lecturer in one of the nation's oldest adult degree completion programs at a public research university in the Northeast where I engage with an incredibly diverse group of adult learners. I grew up in a white, predominately working-class community in southern Wisconsin, am First Generation, and have a deep-seated interest in the complexities of race and racism in the United States rooted in an intense desire to understand my early experience having been racialized during adolescence. All of these various components are central to my development as a life-long learner and educator.

During my middle school years I was called the “N word” in reference to my full-sized lips, and I did not begin to think about this early experience until my latter college years when I continued to have numerous other experiences where I was racialized. I was often asked about my background and “who my people were,” with others assuming I was mixed, Black, or Puerto Rican depending on the cultural, linguistic, and/or geographic context. I was deeply curious about why this kept happening to me as a young, white, female, and I found this confusing and struggled to understand not only why this continued to happen, but also what it all truly meant.

This was true for me despite the obvious—I have white, and I have been racialized.

As I began to process these experiences, I became keenly aware that I had internalized these various episodes of racialization. As a white person, I simply do not, nor did I, carry the “psychic weight of race” in the world I inhabited (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 54). In fact, I had been socialized to believe that the topic of race had nothing to do with me; and more importantly, I had absolutely no awareness of my own privilege when it came to race. I did carry a heightened awareness of difference while growing up, but this difference was rooted in a feeling of “not belonging” due to my larger size as well as my family's lower class status. DiAngelo (2018) addresses this nuance in reference to white folks when she states, “Because we are not raised to see ourselves in racial terms or to see white space as racialized space, we position ourselves as innocent of race” (p. 62). Meaning, difference and a lack of belonging where I grew up could be attributed to a myriad of reasons, but never was about race. This was true for me despite the obvious – I am white, and I had been racialized.

As I began to delve into this work further, I started to grapple with how race was, indeed, a factor in white spaces, and that I was not some anomaly. I also realized that for most of my adolescence and young adult life, despite having been racialized, I had accepted and believed that the concept of race was linked only to the non-white other. Indeed, throughout our nation's history, race has been framed in terms of people of color, thereby making white an un-marked racial category (Frankenburg, 1997). This very notion of being un-marked was based on the racial homogeneity present within the community where I grew up; and thus, prevented me from being able to see race and subsequently recognize my own privilege because of race. As an adult, I frequently have to continue to lift the veil in the classroom as well as "come out" as white during these encounters when they happen. I am very clear that my experiences are mine alone and am very clear in that I do not equate these experiences with those of people of color.

As I continued to engage in this personal and scholarly work within higher education, I quickly realized one could talk about privilege and race without necessarily talking about or addressing racism. That key piece became an equally important part of my journey. As I started to recognize and grapple with the privileges I had, I was empowered to use in it a way that allowed me to engage in addressing these within the classroom and community to create awareness and work toward creating systemic change. My graduate education in the fields of intercultural relations and anthropology provided me with the tools to begin to understand, theorize, and analyze these experiences of being racialized as a white person. Along the way, I made the conscious choice to specifically study, teach, and critically engage in community projects where I could address and disrupt racial inequities in our society.

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When I joined the adult degree completion program four years ago, I had flexibility with regard to the design of my critical thinking and degree development course. I wanted to incorporate the fundamental themes of race and racism (and other forms of oppression) that underpinned my academic work and led me on the path of personal awareness and to a career as an educator. I knew, despite the generalist nature of our core curriculum, that this was one way I could tangibly demonstrate my ongoing commitment to these particular issues in the classroom while also working to engage the larger issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in my teaching. So, I designed this course starting from the supposition that my role as teacher and that of self-defined life-long learner are not separate, but that each directly informs the other in the classroom. In fact, the combination of these roles provides the foundation for the pedagogical approach I have developed, reciprocal pedagogy. Reciprocal pedagogy is an engaged and social-justice based pedagogy built upon the principle of respect, focusing specifically "on the way respect creates symmetry, empathy, and connection in all kinds of relationships, even those, such as teacher and student, [...] commonly seen as unequal" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000, p. 10). Additionally, it draws from the Highlander principle that everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998).

Many may be skeptical of this as a possibility in a primarily online environment, but I have found this to work in repeated feedback from students over the past several years. I have developed this approach over a decade and a half of teaching in a variety of settings, continuing to revisit it as I continue in my current practice online and with adult learners. Reciprocal pedagogy is a foundational pedagogical philosophy that allows me to teach in any setting with a number of factors in mind – that there are different types of learning, that critical thinking and asking questions is important, and that student "success" is measured by an examination of each individual student's effort and abilities. I tell students that their educational journey began before they entered my classroom as has mine, and that it continues beyond the classroom - that when they finish the course, or even when they finish their degree, they should continue to have more questions about themselves, their community, society, and the world we live in. I share my own story of

racialization and racial awareness that I highlighted earlier as a way to demonstrate this in practice. That is, learning through a lens of reciprocal pedagogy takes place in five different ways:

1. Students learn from the teacher and the course materials provided.
2. Students learn from one another.
3. Students learn about themselves, and the teacher learns about herself.
4. The teacher learns from the students.
5. Students and the teacher take the information, experiences, and knowledge from their learning as they engage in their daily lives with family, colleagues, and their community.

These five components along with respect are the foundation for my teaching practice. I make the conscious choice to position myself in the classroom within an anti-racist and critical feminist framework that acknowledges and emphasizes the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. This is an important underpinning to my pedagogical philosophy, as I believe “it is our collective responsibility to educate for critical consciousness” (hooks, 1989, p. 118). Through engaging in a self-reflexive process, I have been able to position myself both personally and professionally through my lived experiences as well as through the experiences of the adult students with whom I am honored to work. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I do have a deep awareness of my privileges. I am not afraid to talk about my privilege or about race and racism, and I wish to draw upon my experiences and journey of racial awakening in order to work towards opening dialogue and creating change in my classroom, program, and campus. My hope is that my future work continues to draw upon knowledge created through my plethora of learning experiences both in and outside the classroom and that I always allow room for growth, engagement, and liberation.

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