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Highlight:

Reflections on Issues of Student Diversity

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Reflections on Issues of Student Diversity

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In an academic environment, in which students from a wide variety of different backgrounds and personal circumstances come together, issues of diversity and equality are extremely important. In this short essay, I would like to consider the role of diversity and equality issues in my own teaching, by reflecting on an incident that occurred a few years ago, with a student whom I will refer to as K.

K. was enrolled in a Level 4 English module on which I taught, which was designed to introduce students to a variety of works of literary theory and to teach them how to apply these theories to literary texts. K. was the only black student in the class; I knew from conversation with him that he was born and raised in England, but came from a family of Caribbean origin. In the early weeks of the module, we were studying Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (which is about a white European's experience in colonial Africa), alongside some theoretical works about literary treatments of race and colonialism.

About a month into the semester, K. came to me with a concern. In small group discussions, he said, other students were repeatedly assuming that he could 'speak for' black people in general: that he would have some special insights into the text on account of his skin colour and cultural heritage. He was unhappy about this: he felt that not only were assumptions being made about himself and his background (which he considered to be English as much if not more than Caribbean), but also that other students were responding as if all black people were alike, and all black experience was the same, attempting to reduce a wide diversity of black experience and opinions down to a single perspective which was assumed to be representative and 'typical.'

I was troubled by this situation, and initially uncertain how to respond to it. My students, in my experience, believed themselves to be (and usually were) supportive of diversity. They would not, I thought, react well if they suspected that I was accusing them of treating K. differently because of his skin colour.¹ That said, I could not, of course, prioritise the other students' feelings over K.'s. Moreover, it felt like this was an important issue – particularly in a class that focused in part on issues of racial and cultural difference and ways of talking

¹ This assumption is supported by a study of classroom bias and instructors' responses to it, which reports that, 'Research indicates that people who confront prejudice are perceived negatively and that confrontation leads to negative emotions among those who are confronted (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Shelton & Stewart, 2004).' In: Guy A. Boysen, David L. Vogel, Marissa A. Cope and Asale Hubbard 'Incidents of Bias in College Classrooms: Instructor and Student Perceptions', *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 2.4 (2009) 219–231, 222.

about such difference. I decided that this apparent problem could in fact be reframed as an educational opportunity: a way of exploring the pervasiveness of racially-based assumptions even in communities that consider themselves unprejudiced and inclusive.

I therefore decided to use our next session to address this issue. I was careful not to make the discussion too personal, by referring directly to what K. had told me. Instead, I initiated a whole-group debate in which the subject was identity politics and the way in which our sense of our community and identity might or might not shape the way we viewed the world. I encouraged the students to write down a list of things that they felt were important parts of their own identity: nationality, home town (or specific area of that town), religion, education, friendship groups, personal interests and hobbies, and so on. They then compared the lists with each other. Through this exercise, they were encouraged to see how many different things might shape people's sense of themselves. The lists also showed why making assumptions about others based on factors like education or religion was problematic: even when people's lists corresponded on one or two areas, they often differed radically in others.

From this, we progressed into a discussion of the appeal of stereotypes: why human beings might want to assume that they can understand another person or group of people through making assumptions based on features such as skin colour or accent or dress or place of origin. Stereotypes allow us to feel that we can make sense of a hugely diverse and potentially confusing world, by allowing us to fit people into simple categories. We also talked about the way in which such stereotyping may be insidious: we may not even consciously realise that we are making judgements about others based on stereotypical assumptions.

We moved on to discuss the way in which stereotypes can be dangerous, because they allow us to partially or wholly dehumanise others, by not recognising their individuality. We discussed 'stereotype threat': the research from experimental psychology that explores 'the psychology of stigma – the way human beings respond to negative stereotypes about their racial or gender group.'² Research into stereotype threat suggests that – for example – reminding female students of the stereotype that women are not good at maths can have a real and immediate effect on the way that they perform in a subsequent maths test. We ended by thinking about the stereotypes that might affect us personally: the assumptions others might make about us, based on our own appearances and backgrounds. At the end of this session, I encouraged students to be more aware of the role that stereotyping and hidden bias played in their own lives: to think about the way in which human beings automatically (and often unthinkingly) judge others, and the discriminatory assumptions that might lie behind their decision-making.

Because I had not addressed K.'s situation directly, choosing instead to hold a class session that attempted to change students' thinking more generally, it was hard to know how much I had succeeded in helping him. I did speak to him again a couple of weeks after the session on

² Joshua Aronson, quoted in 'Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap,' Report from the American Psychological Association, July 15, 2006. At <http://www.apa.org/research/action/stereotype.aspx>. Accessed 26 November 2014.

identity politics, and he said that he didn't feel like his group was treating him differently any more – but this might be accounted for at least partly by the fact that we as a class had moved on from *Heart of Darkness*, and were now dealing with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, a text that focuses more on issues of class and gender than on race. It can be difficult in teaching to know how much real, long-term effect one is having on one's students. While assessing students' subject-specific knowledge is often relatively straightforward, assessing whether the goal of enabling transformational learning, in which students alter their essential thinking and attitudes, has been achieved is often harder.³

However, it was noticeable that, as the semester went on, students were being more cautious in the judgements they made of literary characters, rather than jumping to quick conclusions about – for example - what a 'woman' or a 'soldier' or an 'aristocrat' was like. They did seem to have taken on board the idea that there is great diversity within human beings, and that we are not wholly defined by our gender or race or profession or any other factor. Literary characters are not, of course, real people – but nevertheless, the way we respond to them can be indicative of the way we respond to people in reality.

K.'s situation represented a critical incident in my early teaching career. Up until that point, I had been largely adopting a 'paradigm of neutrality' – not in my attitudes towards literary texts, but towards my students, attempting to treat them all more-or-less identically.⁴ I was aware that some had particular needs – that one or two were dyslexic, or suffered from anxiety attacks, or depression, or other specific cognitive and/or emotional issues – but I had otherwise been attempting to be blind to difference, ignoring skin colour, ethnic origin, economic background, gender, age, and other factors, as much as possible. I now realised that this was not ideal. I was acting as if we had moved 'beyond' issues of racism, sexism, and so on: as if, in such an inclusive academic community, there could be no prejudice or hidden bias. However, this was not the case. In trying to ignore my students' racial differences, I had failed to anticipate the ways in which K.'s racial background could potentially create a situation in which he might feel uncomfortable or singled out.⁵ Thus, my desire to treat everyone 'equally' had, ironically, created a situation of inequality. I now realise that it is better to be mindful of bias and try to find strategies to acknowledge and overcome it than simply ignore the fact that it exists. Moreover, engaging directly with issues of prejudice and identity politics seems to me to be an important part of an education in the humanities. We

³ This is discussed in Lindsey McEwen, Glenn Strachan and Kenny Lynch, "“Shock and Awe” or “Reflection and Change”": Stakeholder Perceptions of Transformative Learning in Higher Education,' *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 5 (2010-11): 34-55, 44-6.

⁴ I have borrowed this term from Ofori-Dankwa and Lane, who use it to describe a teaching model in which instructors 'pay little attention to cultural differences or similarities' in the texts they discuss. Joseph Ofori-Dankwa and Robert W. Lane, 'Four Approaches to Cultural Diversity: Implications for teaching at institutions of higher education,' *Teaching for Higher Education* 5.5 (2000) 490-1.

⁵ Ignoring difference is increasingly coming to be seen as a damaging strategy in a pedagogic setting. Thea Renda Abu El-Haj writes, 'As activists for racial, ethnic, language, gender, sexuality, and disability rights have argued, refusing to *recognize* difference [...] does irreparable harm to students who are excluded from meaningful participation in learning environments as a consequence of the *failure on the part of those institutions* to own up to ways that educational curriculum, practices, and policies usually reflect the vested interests of dominant social groups.' Thea Renda Abu El-Haj, 'Equity, Difference, and Everyday Practice Taking a Relational Approach,' Annenberg Institute for School Reform, January 2007. At <http://www.annenberginstitute.org>. Accessed 26 November 2014. (Original italics)

need to learn to acknowledge and accept difference rather than trying to gloss over it, and we need to interrogate ourselves and try to recognise our own hidden biases before we can fairly begin to assess anyone else.