Finding new words: how I use critical literacy in my multicultural teacher education classroom

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We must find new words or new combinations of and meanings for old words that more accurately reflect our reality. When we don’t—when we resign ourselves to the old words that apportion us less worth than we deserve because it’s less awkward and just plain easier—we are validating a description of ourselves that we know to be false. This danger is like that of looking into a funhouse mirror without challenging the falsehood of the contorted stranger staring back at you. Eventually, you’re going to believe what you see is you, and that twisted version of yourself becomes the only truth you know. (Howitz, 1998, p. 230)

For 10 years I have been researching and teaching in multicultural teacher education classrooms and I’ve come to the conclusion that we need to help white students find new words to talk about their whiteness. In my experience, white students too often sit in multicultural teacher education classrooms feeling as if the whole purpose of the class is to make them feel guilty. To make matters worse, when they voice these feelings, we, as multicultural teacher educators, interpret and respond to their comments as white resistance and then double up in our efforts to make them aware of their racial privilege. This creates more of the perception of multicultural teacher education as a guilt trip and around and around we go.

To get off this merry-go-round, I’ve begun practicing a new approach to multicultural teacher education. I tell my students that the class will not be about ‘learning about Others’ (as they invariably think it will be), but instead about the very basics of literacy. I say our goal for the semester is to read the social messages and meanings that shape our lives, and particularly, since it is a multicultural teacher education class, as they relate to difference, similarity and educational equity, and then to write new messages and meanings that better fit our understanding of how the world is or ought to be. This kind of literacy, I point out, is called critical literacy (Kelly, 1997) because it challenges the taken-for-grantedness of the messages and
meanings attached to the world around us. In this way, I tell them, it is a basic skill for living in a democracy.

The figure below illustrates the four steps, or levels of thinking, of my critical literacy approach, namely, description, analysis, vision, and strategy (Bunch, 1998). I use them to generate reflection in my students that:

1. cycles through the goals of deconstruction and reconstruction; and
2. promotes ongoing critical thinking as the main goal of my multicultural education class.

Below I briefly explain how I use these four steps to get my students actively to engage with two of multicultural education’s key ideas, ‘race’ and ‘whiteness’, and, in this way, destabilize their perception of themselves (and their perception of my perception of them) as ‘guilty’ white people.

Description

Discussion at this level is intended to have students describe how they perceive ‘racial’ classifications. The key question is ‘What are the physical properties of “race”? ’ This question elicits responses about the biological manifestations of what we call ‘race’—skin color, hair texture, eye and nose shape, etc. When asked specifically about the physical properties of ‘whiteness’, students will notice that the individuals they perceive as ‘white’ are those who do not share particular physical characteristics, most notably skin ‘color’. This facilitates the understanding that whiteness is a norm by which ‘otherness’ is measured.

Figure 1. A critical literacy model of multicultural teacher education (adapted from Martin, 1999, with elements added from Bunch, 1998)
Analysis

Discussion at this level is intended to have students analyze the influence ‘race’ has had on themselves and the world. The key question is ‘What is the social meaning of “race”?’ This question elicits responses about how ‘race’ functions to create a social hierarchy. After having been introduced to readings like Race and manifest destiny: the origins of American racial Anglo-Saxonism (Horsman, 1981) or The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class (Roediger, 1991) or the video Race: the power of an illusion (California Newsreel, 2003), students will also be able to answer the questions ‘Where did the concept of “race” come from?’ and ‘What was it intended to do?’ Provided with data on educational, social, and economic well-being, like those contained in Changing America (Council of Economic Advisors for the President’s Initiative on Race, 1998), they can answer the question, ‘What have been the consequences of “race” in our world?’ They can also begin to understand that there is, in fact, a ‘white culture’, one that is defined as a place of skin-color privilege that accrues in benefit from one generation to the next through a number of institutional mechanisms.

Vision

Discussion at this level is intended to have students articulate a vision for the future. The key question is, ‘Are we satisfied with the way “race” has shaped our world and, if not, how would we like the world to be?’ Students will talk about how a racialized society is unjust and how they would like a world where ‘race’ did not exist. This entails a discussion of theories of ‘color blindness’ and ‘race cognizance’ (Frankenberg, 1993) and the extent to which it is desirable today to recognize ‘race’ in our practices and policies. Students at this level may feel frustrated because they cannot even imagine a world where ‘race’ does not exist and this makes it clear to them the extent to which they have been socialized into racial ideology.

Strategy

Discussion at this level is intended to have students develop a strategy, to identify and set personal and professional goals for becoming more actively aware of multicultural issues. The key question is, ‘What are some steps you can take to help achieve the kind of world you envision?’ This solidifies in students the understanding that, given the knowledge generated by the previous three levels, to do nothing is to perpetuate racism. It also provides them with the possibility of claiming for themselves a positive white anti-racist identity, finding new words for their whiteness, through the actions that they take in the world to combat racism and racist socialization in their personal and professional lives.

References

Council of Economic Advisors for the President’s Initiative on Race (1998) Changing America: indicators of social and economic well-being by race and Hispanic origin (Washington, DC, Council of Economic Advisors for the President’s Initiative on Race).