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*Race is a variable that affects the teaching and learning transaction both overtly and covertly.*

## Race Matters: The Unspoken Variable in the Teaching-Learning Transaction

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Adult education is a reflection of the society in which we live. It exhibits our values, reproduces existing systems of power, and functions to maintain the status quo. In these ways, it is similar to all other levels of education in Western society in that it is based on a hierarchical system where privilege is usually accorded along existing lines of established rights and entitlement. Adult education, which was conceived as a field in the early twentieth century, was embedded with a charge from its major theorists and by its epistemological processes to work toward full citizenship and the democratization of the entire adult populace (Cunningham, 1988).

Despite the stated good intentions of the field, adult education has not succeeded in accomplishing the lofty goals of empowering those lacking basic skills and in bringing all citizens to the table of equal access and opportunity. Indeed, the barriers that have crippled the field's goals, including race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation, continue to divide and disable society in general. How are these issues manifest in the delivery of adult education services? There are many avenues through which societal issues enter adult education practices: however, programs and class curricula, student enrollment, student interactions, and faculty makeup are the most apparent foci in any discussion of how the adult education system operates. As educators, how can we best grapple with the dilemma of who we are serving, and how can we foster a teaching and learning environment of equity and empowerment? I believe the answer for practitioners lies in day-to-day teaching and learning transactions.

## **Race in Adult Education**

Many variables drive the teaching and learning transaction. This chapter examines one of these issues: race. My intention by this choice is not to suggest that race is the most significant or important of the variables. Because power operates in similar ways to disenfranchise women, people of color, gays, and the disabled, race is therefore offered as a salient and representative constant that can be used as an instrument with which to make comparisons and evaluations.

In examining race, it is necessary to establish a working definition that is applicable to American society. Race is a social construct (Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Winant, 1994) used to organize people into groups according to their physical appearance. In addition, racial clustering encompasses tacit ideas concerning the intellectual, physical, and moral tenets of group members. Although scientists agree that definitive racial codification is based on a nebulous set of physical characteristics, such classification systems stand as primary ways in which we identify people in Western society. Admittedly, no matter how ambiguous racial classification may be, race profoundly affects how a person functions in this society (Giroux, 1997; McIntosh, 1995). Therefore to be Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, or White in the adult education classroom carries a different meaning with each classification. Yet in the field of adult education, we frequently ignore these arbitrary distinctions by proceeding with generic praxis, literature, and discourses.

The notion of the adult education classroom as a neutral territory where a facilitator functions to bring all participants into a shared dialogue is the archetype set forth in the literature (Apps, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Knowles, 1992). The fact that our classrooms are the real world, with preset hierarchical power relations, remains largely unacknowledged. When we participate in programs or classes as students, instructors, or planners, we bring the historical weight of race with us. It matters little whether we intentionally trade on or naively try to discard the privileges, the deficits, or standpoints of racial statuses. Such ranks, authorizations, honors, suspicions, and stereotypes cannot be cast aside. They are accrued in society's invisible hierarchical banking system of trading and bartering according to designated racial rankings. If teachers are to function proficiently, they must acknowledge and manage the uninvited specters of race that haunt our practices.

## **The Importance of Discussing Race**

In general, speaking of race in the United States means speaking of people of color. One major marker of disenfranchisement in Western civilization is race: people of color are disproportionately poor and locked out of full participation. The group designated as minority varies according to the critical mass in a geographical area. For instance, when educators in Texas talk about minority concerns, the minority in question are Mexicanas(nos), and

in Oklahoma they are referring to Native Americans. As a hierarchical society, we rank-order groups according to their alleged contributions and participation in maintaining society. We value one group over another in terms of tax dollars generated and in turn allocate that group greater or fewer resources to support basic needs, including education. The implicit understanding that those who have more in a capitalistic order will receive more translates directly into how educational dollars will be disbursed. Many studies have well documented that in the United States, disenfranchised groups routinely receive substandard K-12 educations and have less access to higher and adult education. For disenfranchised adult learners, the consequences of a system that parcels out educational benefits based on privilege can be demonstrated in several ways. For instance, such systemic practices could result in libraries, community centers, and community colleges being built in areas that are not proximate to their communities. And so for minority learners, their race can affect the quality of their education well beyond the boundaries of tax-based mandatory education and intrude into the realms of voluntary client-sponsored adult education.

Despite the importance of race to educational access, disenfranchisement and enfranchisement as related to education and group membership are rarely discussed in tandem. When the poor and undereducated are the center of the discourse, what is absent in discussions is the norm of enfranchised learners and privileged students who remain the measure of comparisons. Researchers often present data on one group and represent the other group in silent absentia. However, in order for any discussion on adult education to be complete, the examination must not only give statistics on who participates, how they are instructed, and how they learn but must also include who does not participate or who seldom participates, how they are instructed, and how they learn.

Research on teaching and learning in adult education acknowledges the delicate dance between teaching and learning but does not extend the conversation by examining the possible interconnectivity. Brookfield (1986) states of the teaching-learning transaction, "It is a highly complex psychosocial drama in which the personalities of the individual involved, the contextual setting for the educational transaction, and the prevailing political climate crucially affect the nature and form of learning" (p. vii). Yet missing from the complexities that Brookfield and others have explored is the enigmatic nature of race in American society as an important part of this "psychosocial drama."

### **Perspectives on Race in Adult Education Literature**

Although educators and practitioners acknowledge race as a variable that affects teaching and learning, they do so without fully acknowledging how race shapes the ways in which we plan and practice. We frequently use terms like *underprivileged students*, *at-risk learners*, and *minority students* to identify and label certain populations. However, we do not expand our thinking to understand how the life conditions of underprivileged learners

play out in their everyday classroom circumstances. How do such learners fare in classrooms and programs? How does our thinking about these learners affect our practice and our field?

The way we think invariably affects the way we research, write, and teach. A survey of the literature by Cafferella and Olson (1993) indicates that the majority of the field's major studies do not incorporate gender or race as factors in the sample population. An examination of race in the major adult education textbooks (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2000) used throughout the field reveals the same lack of attention to race as a variable. The literature surveyed shows that three major outlooks or stances are routinely used regarding race: the color-blind, multicultural, and social justice perspectives (Johnson-Bailey, 2000). Each view affects research and praxis.

**Color-Blind Perspective.** A survey of adult education literature will not reveal a position labeled as the color-blind outlook. However, this term seems well suited to a stance that does not acknowledge race or that views all racial issues as inconsequential when not expressed as part of any classroom or curriculum equation. This attitude, which remains oblivious to difference, is the most widely used approach among adult educators. Overall, race is either not mentioned or is rarely discussed in the adult education textbooks (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2000). In a major survey of adult education graduate program curricula, race was conspicuously absent, with the exception being courses on cultural diversity or community education (Milton, Watkins, Spears-Studdard, and Burch, 2001).

In the major philosophies and concepts that drive the field, such as andragogy (Knowles, 1980), the notion of race and the way it affects learners is not considered. From Knowles's standpoint, climate setting more directly involves other attributes, such as the physical environment. Knowles and his proponents do not recognize that the educational environment is not a neutral setting and that some learners enter the classroom in deficit positions that have been imposed by society. A clear example of how commonplace adult education practices discount race as a factor is seen in the use of small group activity. The traditional adult education practice rests on the notion that all learners will feel comfortable with their co-learners and will therefore share ideas and opinions. However, not all learners, especially Latinas and Native Americans, are enculturated to speak as individuals; rather, they are culturally grounded to consider the group as more important than the individual. In many Asian cultures, speaking out is seen as seeking individual honor and is assessed as shameful behavior. In addition, Knowles and his supporters naively assume that all participants will treat each other with respect and that differences or struggles based on racial tensions will not enter into classroom dynamics.

**Multicultural or Cultural Diversity Perspective.** The second view that is manifest in adult education is the multicultural or cultural diversity perspective. This position sets forth that society comprises different cultures that imbue their members with values, folkways, and mores and that

one's experiences can be significantly influenced by one's cultural membership. Furthermore, multiculturalism calls for the recognition of the accomplishments of each culture and sees this acceptance as a way of valuing each group and as a step toward bringing equity to the educational setting and potentially to the larger society. This perspective has found widespread acceptance, especially in the light of globalization as an emerging research area in the adult education component of human resource development.

An example of how the field accesses the contributions of disenfranchised groups is readily evident in the add-difference-and-stir approach, as seen in most adult education textbooks published in the past decade. This method refers to the way authors trivialize the significance of race in their authored or edited texts and sourcebooks by adding on a final chapter that pertains to minority concerns. These chapters are usually offered to placate the concerns of politically conscious publishers or readers to whom they would not want to be appear exclusionary.

**Social Justice Perspective.** The third outlook takes a moral position that critiques society as unjust toward minorities and other disenfranchised groups and calls for the field to remember its mission to work toward democratization. Although this message has been present since the field's inception, it is experiencing a resurgence in direct response to the prolific writings of Afrocentric and feminist adult education scholars (Guy, 1999; Hart, 1985; Hayes and Flannery, 2000; Sheared and Sissel, 2000; Tisdell, 1995). The focus of this position is twofold: to highlight the moral imperative and commitment of adult education and to work to empower adult learners. Focusing on the workings of power as a force that drives society and the classroom, social justice advocates urge practitioners to examine the embedded privilege in classroom practices and the curriculum.

According to Cunningham (1996), if we are not working for equity in our teaching and learning environments, then adult educators are inadvertently maintaining the status quo. Other supporters (Rocco and West, 1998; Tisdell, 1995) write specifically about dialogue and the use of voice as analogous to how power and privilege are manifested in routine classroom workings: students who feel powerful and validated by the teacher or the curriculum talk, and students who feel neglected or ignored by the teacher or the curriculum remain silent. Rocco and West (1998) and Tisdell (1995) also cite race as a major location of power and privilege in society and in adult education classrooms.

### **How Positionality Drives the Teaching and Learning Transaction**

Overall, in adult education, teaching and learning has existed as a generic concept for the past fifty years: all teachers and learners are the same (Brown, 1997). In the 1990s, several adult education scholars turned their attention to how power affects teaching and learning (Collard and Stalker,

1991; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1997, 1998; Rocco and West, 1998; Sheared, 1994; Tisdell, 1993). In one study, Tisdell (1993) notes that the power dynamics that exist in the classroom between instructors and learners and between learners and their co-learners are often affected by gender and racial differences. Sheared (1994) posits that teachers and students will have varying sets of experiences that will be determined by their race, economic status, and language skills, as well as their personal experiences.

Subsequent studies conducted in adult settings have shown that both teaching and learning are affected by the race of the participants (Brown, 1997; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998). Brown (1997) found that women of color who taught math to adults in community college and other higher education settings offered narratives and supporting documentation to show that they were perceived differently from their White counterparts. The data showed that often the students challenged the Black math teachers' knowledge base, openly consulted other math teachers to check their expertise, and reported alleged teacher infractions to a supervisor.

In a separate study, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998) noted similar concerns. However, their study, which focused on the influences of race on teaching and learning, used both the teachers and the students as units of analysis. The comparative case study examined two graduate courses taught by adult education professors: one White male professor and one Black female assistant professor. Using Maher and Tetreault's (1994) four themes—mastery, voice, authority, and positionality—as organizing concepts, the researchers used student evaluations, teacher observation, student and teacher interviews, syllabi, and peer debriefing as data sources. Allowing for issues of faculty rank and gender, the data indicated that the race of the teachers affected the message received by the students and the class interactions between the instructors and students and between students and their classmates. Although the White male professor had race as a central class topic, the learners never perceived him as pressing an agenda. In addition, they never questioned his competence, fairness, and classroom management. The Black female professor, who did not have race as a central topic, was seen as having an agenda that overtly supported racial equity. Incidents that both the female professor and the students reported showed that the learners carefully scrutinized her competence, fairness, and classroom management and saw her race as “the most salient issue” (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998, p. 396).

Other important findings in this study have particular implications for adult educators. Analysis revealed that White male students experienced a high degree of comfort when they were free to talk without being checked and when they were called on to serve as group leaders. In environments where power issues were not regulated by the instructor, the White males were permitted to claim their culturally ascribed power roles of leadership. Conversely, disenfranchised learners were direct in expressing how uncomfortable they were in a classroom setting where power dynamics were not

controlled by the teacher. However, they reported a significant level of comfort when they were allowed voice and felt that the instructor valued their opinions. For example, in this same study, Black learners felt that they were allowed to thrive when the teacher monitored who talked in class and ensured that there was ample communication space for all students.

In summary, the literature shows that learning environments are not neutral sites; they are instead driven in large part by the positionalities of the instructors and learners, with a conspicuous component of the makeup being race. Race is seen as a critical lens for assessing classroom teaching and learning experiences. The dimension is multifaceted; the race of both the instructor and the students drives the dynamic of interactions that take place in a teaching-learning environment.

### **Practical Views on Race and the Teaching-Learning Transaction**

A tension exists in the field of adult education between “technical competency and informed practical action” (Wilson and Hayes, 2000, p. 25) and theory and experiential intuitive practice. Nowhere is that more evident than in the teaching and delivery of programs and classes to adults. Brookfield has long offered critical reflection as the answer to this dilemma. Yet on a tenuous note, Brookfield (2000) cautions that a practitioner’s experiential base can limit or affect the way he or she assesses his or her practices when they include power into the concept of critical reflection:

We realize that in order to do good work we must consistently involve others—particularly learners and colleagues—as commentators on our efforts. In a very real sense we depend on these people to keep us honest. When we come to a position as educators of constantly soliciting learners’ perceptions, and of negotiating and reframing what we do on the basis of these, it seems to me we are practicing more, rather than less, democratically. When we elevate learners’ voices to a position of prominence we are working in an inclusive and collaborative way [p. 47].

Brookfield ends his charge by saying that educators and practitioners should be mindful of learners’ experiences and opinions and intimates the individual nature of the learner. Yet he neglects to make direct reference to collective issues that commonly silence the voices of entire racial groups.

Adult education’s current embrace of critical reflection is a promising direction. Critical reflection is flexible enough to serve the field well and also to open avenues for negotiating issues of diversity and difference. Although teaching cannot be reduced to a paint-by-numbers task, it often seems to be portrayed as such since the literature overwhelmingly presents the art and science of teaching as an area that can be mastered if practitioners follow the prescriptive and descriptive means provided. Critical

reflection allows for the use of prescriptive or descriptive discourses but nevertheless provides the codicil that one's teaching practice is always evolving, with growth and maturity dependent on a rigor achieved through personal assessment and input from all stakeholders.

As practitioners, we must reflect on how race affects our teaching environments and how we manage these intersections. Practitioners can incorporate three options into their critical reflection to guide them in auditing their teaching-learning transactions: (1) a personal appraisal and understanding of their own cultural history, (2) a functional grasp of the sociopolitical forces that affect the learners and the learning environment, and (3) an evaluation of whether their own practice is part of the solution or part of the problem.

First, as a woman of color teaching in an adult education graduate program and researching and writing about race and gender, I can easily lose sight of my own privilege: I have a terminal degree; I am tenured; I am able-bodied; I am a married heterosexual; I am middle class; I am Catholic. Although my research critiques the hegemonic relations between the powerful and the powerless, I am not compelled to reside with the powerless on the margins in reality or in abstraction. Despite the overall disenfranchisement of people of my race, I generally find shelter in an inner circle that allows my accomplishments to mitigate any commonly held racial stereotypes about my group. In an effort to reconcile my academic place of comfort with my real-world position, I frequently revisit the variances of my background. Banks (1994) calls this process conducting a cultural therapy exercise to consider how one's culture affects the teaching-learning exchange. This method of critical reflection keeps the positionality of race—mine and my learners'—in an integral position. In addition, privilege is cast as a context-dependent force rather than depicting Whiteness and maleness as possessing the permanent high ground of rights and entitlements.

Second, as a practitioner in a diverse adult education graduate program, I am still surprised at the silence I encounter in the classroom from African Americans, Asians, and the occasional Latino student. Speaking out and being heard is a right that is assumed by Whites, and particularly White males in our society. Being taught to stay silent and thereby finding acceptance is a traditional coping mechanism that minorities use in educational settings (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Yet silence as a response from disenfranchised students is often accepted without question by practitioners and is rarely deconstructed as problematic to teaching and learning. The socialized issue of silence or lack of voice bears investigation and mediation. The instructor can provide alternative means of communicating, such as through journals or one-page reaction papers or through solicited responses from students of color who do not freely participate in classroom exchanges. Modeling behavior that emphasizes give-and-take in dialogue is another method of fostering a respectful classroom space.

One recommendation is that instructors observe the setting to monitor not only who speaks but also who interacts with whom and who takes a leadership role in small group work as part of effective teaching. This is an important way of accessing the power dynamics in the classroom. Often an instructor needs to negotiate classroom conversations and debates, as well as regulate student networks and small group activities, to ensure that these exchanges contribute to a democratic classroom environment. Such monitoring is essential because what happens between and among students affects the quality of teaching, as well as the caliber of the learning.

Another factor that profoundly affects the classroom group strategies that we commonly use as adult educators is the individuation within groups and between groups. Typically in Western society, we live within our own enclaves, unfamiliar with people of different races, religions, and cultures. A lack of familiarity with different racial groups is common in the adult education classroom given our American legacy: a country that was legally segregated until the mid-1950s and divided by convention until the 1970s, and today remains segmented by custom into racial and cultural groups. This history can significantly affect both the teaching and learning experience. Adult educators need to remain cognizant of this variable. Often it is necessary to navigate this maze of unfamiliarity through assigned readings, controlling the mix of small groups, and discussing possible barriers with students.

Finally, the struggle to promote equity in the learning environment through the way we teach or facilitate is ongoing. No matter how far one travels, one never reaches a final destination of establishing a teaching and learning space that is safe and fair. As bell hooks (1989) reminds us, power continuously co-opts. Therefore being satisfied with one's practice sanctions a sense of false comfort. Being a person of color or an empathetic majority member does not provide an automatic understanding or offer solutions for managing a racially diverse setting in such a way that race is never an impediment to the exchange of knowledge. When practitioners no longer struggle to find texts that include different voices and views, when they fail to establish a curriculum that is inclusive and responsive to diversity, or when they do not challenge research that accepts the hegemonic influence of the culture, then they must assuredly be part of the problem.

### **Does Race Matter?**

A glance at the diversity of our world versus the roster of our programs and classrooms, which do not reflect proportional diversity, suggests that race does indeed matter. In what ways does teaching reproduce a setting where learners are not equally valued? One explanation to this dilemma lies in understanding how we teach and represent ourselves and our discipline.

Among the questions that we can routinely ask to evaluate how we conduct our practice and manage our programs are these:

- Are the numbers of students of color growing?
- Do students of color routinely take my classes?
- Is the talk in my class a balanced exchange?
- Is there a healthy and inclusive network in my program or class?
- Is there a vigorous and tense exchange of ideas?

If the responses to these questions are fleeting, then perhaps our teaching and learning transactions in adult education are not appropriately responsive to issues of race as an essential force in our hierarchical world.

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