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CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY AS A TOOL FOR STUDENTS LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE BIASES

A First Day of Class Conversation on What a Professor Looks Like

Jesica Siham Fernández

Women of color in academia represent less than 20 percent of full-time female faculty in institutions of higher education across the United States.[1] A plethora of articles and publications document how women of color experience the burden of invisible work in academia, often characterized by emotional and caring labor, as well as a cultural taxation.[2] The empirical evidence attests to claims that women of color often work harder, yet are less likely to receive tenure and promotion, and commeasurable salaries, in comparison to their White and male colleagues.[3] Race and gender discrimination, along with intersecting modes of institutional marginalization, collide to shape experiences of *unbelonging* for

women of color faculty in higher education, especially for Latinas in the professoriate.[4]

For Latina faculty, these conditions render us illegible, other, and suspect within academia.[5] Even when we appear to succeed at carving a space for ourselves to belong, some of us are viewed as "hot commodities, cheap labor."[6] Universities often view research and teaching that women of color faculty engage in as desirable and marketable because it demonstrates "diversity work," but such labor is often inadequately compensated, poorly ranked, and devalued in tenure and promotion. The consequences of these structural conditions cannot be understated. The transformation of institutions of higher education must include the dismantling and transformation of structural barriers that limit Latinas securing tenure and thriving in academia.

To cultivate inclusion, representation, and equity in higher education learning, the demographics of faculty must change to reflect the diversity of student experiences. The underrepresentation of women and people of color in academia forecloses opportunities for the democratization of knowledge. When institutions of higher education adequately support women of color faculty and help them thrive as scholars and educators, they are supporting the academic success, inclusion, and retention of students who may be seeing themselves for the first time in the college classroom. Students might be seeing their lived experiences reflected in the curriculum, perhaps for the first time, when they're working with a professor whose identities are similar to their own.[7] A students' experience of inclusion might come through the content of the course material, as well as by whom it is being delivered.

The experience of seeing oneself in the classroom resonates with how I began my journey into academia. In my

second year of undergraduate studies, I enrolled in a social psychology course taught by the sole woman of color in the psychology department, who on the first day of class explained that she identified as a feminist Chicana. The experiences and identities she shared with our class, and how she embodied her passion for the course content, made salient the importance of having students critically reflect to recognize and work to undo their biases about who a professor is or can be. This encounter shattered my assumptions about the professoriate, and I realized that I too could one day be a professor! Telling the story of my journey into academia is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is the basis for a classroom activity I developed, implemented, and have modified over the years to engage students in critical reflexivity.

Grounded in the understanding of the structural conditions and institutional barriers that Latinas in the professoriate experience, and the importance of critical reflexivity for facilitating inclusive learning communities in the college classroom, in this chapter, I describe the "What Comes to Your Mind?" activity as a tool to help students recognize and work to transform their problematic biases about who a professor is. I offer this activity as a pedagogical tool for educators to use during the first day of class.[8] Critical reflexivity can help facilitate students' understanding of how their perceptions of who a professor is, or what a professor looks like, undermine opportunities for meaningful learning and the cultivating of positive student-educator relationships.

I'll begin by briefly sharing who I am and the experiences that shaped my identities and pedagogy. Next, I describe the "What Comes to Your Mind?" activity and explain how I've implemented it in the classroom. Then, I offer some reflections on student responses in the context of the activity. Student responses demonstrate their process of engaging

in critical reflexivity by identifying and naming their biases about what a professor is supposed to look like and do, and how that is juxtaposed by the professor they see before them. Together, we unpack how these biases impact learning, especially when the identities of a professor are counter to students' expectations. Beyond this intervention, the activity also offers strategies to cultivate positive student-professor relationships that can aid student learning and participation.[9] I conclude with implications for engaging critical reflexivity as a pedagogical tool toward equity and racial justice.

Who Am I? Some Brief Reflections

When members of my college community see me they often wonder: Am I really a professor? Did I really complete my PhD? Do I really know [fill in the blank]? Students, staff, and even other faculty often question my credentials and knowledge: What did you earn your PhD in? And what do you teach?[10] Thereafter, I get a rather ubiquitous question many people of color with an accent and non-English-sounding surname frequently hear: Where are you from? When this question is asked, it resurfaces the renewal of suspicion about whether I belong. Specifically, whether I belong in the United States, academia, and the university.[11] These lines of inquiry, which may often emerge out of genuine curiosity, underscore for me a constant lingering feeling: I do not "look like" a professor. Indeed, I recognize that for many students and colleagues, I very well do not look like one because what a professor "looks like" reflects a very limited stereotype. What I look like and who I am challenge the schemas of what a professor should look like. Most of all, they contest how a

professor embodies themselves in relation to their pedagogy, students, and the classroom environment. As a Mexican American, first-generation immigrant, cisgender woman in her mid-thirties and a first-generation college student and PhD, I am a professor. As of this writing, I am an assistant professor at a private Jesuit institution in Silicon Valley.

Critical Reflexivity as a Pedagogical Tool

Critical reflexivity is characterized as an intentional introspective practice of discerning, engaging, and working through thought processes that surface when people focus on their feelings, emotions, and thoughts and how these relate to an experience, perspective, or belief. Kenneth Gergen defines critical reflectivity as an "attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the 'obvious,' to listen to alternative framings of reality and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints. . . . If we are to build together toward a more viable future then we must be prepared to doubt what we have accepted as real."[12] A critically reflexive practice embraces subjective understandings of reality as a basis for intentional and deep critical thinking about the impact of particular assumptions, perspectives, and actions toward others.

The "What Comes to Your Mind?" activity engages critical reflexivity as a tool to aid students in identifying, recognizing, and working to transform their biases, the schemas of who they view as a professor, and the assumptions associated with this perception. As an iterative practice, critical reflexivity requires consistent introspection about feelings, emotions, and thoughts, and how these shape behaviors.[13] Critical reflexivity can help students understand how they

constitute their assumptions and actions through their biases. Once they are aware of their biases, and the challenges these might present for their capacities to connect with the course content and the professor, they can begin the work of recognizing and transforming their biases. The intention is to help cultivate student learning and the development of more authentic student-professor interactions that reinforce student academic engagement.

The "What Comes to Your Mind?" Activity

The "What Comes to Your Mind?" activity builds on the pedagogical practices of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's critical decolonial feminist scholarship and evidence-based teaching informed by critical race theory.[14] The objectives are to help students engage in critical reflexivity in order to facilitate their process of becoming aware of their biases and learn how to challenge and transform these. The goal is to help students become more cognizant about their associations and beliefs about what a professor embodies—or looks like—and to strive to undo these. Otherwise, these can limit their capacity for learning, academic engagement, and relationship building with the professor. Students are tasked with identifying and thinking through the sources of these associations and biases and how these may be juxtaposed, challenged, or nuanced by the presence of a professor who is unlike who they imagined.

» INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY

The activity engages students in a practice of critical reflexivity that involves a process of thinking about their thinking,

or introspecting, in relation to a series of prompts and questions about who and what a professor embodies. Students are asked to identify, or visually imagine, a professor. Before implementing the activity, however, I share with students a brief autobiography of who I am: "I was born in Mexico and immigrated as an undocumented child to the United States. I grew up in a migrant farmworking community. And I am the first in my family to attend and graduate from college." I do this so they know who I am, and how the content we will engage with cannot be devoid of my identities. Because the courses are personal and connected to my scholarship, I cannot fragment these from my role as an educator. In sharing these experiences in relation to my pedagogy, I highlight for students that who I am as a professor cannot be devoid of who I am as a person. I cannot tease apart nor compartmentalize my experiences apart from the classroom space; such a binary cannot be drawn. When I engage with students, I strive to be fully present in expressing and embodying my most authentic self.

Next, I ground the activity in the course content. I explain how social constructions of race and gender in the United States are shaped by hegemonic discourses and unconscious beliefs that can shape individual biases and behaviors. I demonstrate with empirical examples the problematic consequences of unconscious biases and how these reproduce inequities, discrimination, and stereotyping. I describe the activity in relation to my pedagogy, which strives to cultivate learning communities of critical compassion.[15] Specifically, learning communities where we challenge our biases with compassion as we engage in critical reflexivity. Having set up the "why" to the activity, I invite students to participate with an openness of mind and feelings, emphasizing that they will not be judged for what

they "see" as they are asked to imagine, reflect, and respond to the activity.

» CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

The following is a script I use to facilitate the activity. Some of these questions can also be adapted to synchronously or asynchronously online or remote learning. For example, via an online discussion forum, invite students to post a photo or image of what a professor looks like and then respond to a series of reflexive questions:

> If you are comfortable and willing to participate, please close your eyes. I will ask you to engage your imagination in response to the following questions. After I read each prompt, I will pause before reading the next question. You do not need to share thoughts out loud; this is the silent critically reflexive portion of the activity. Please know that you can withdraw your participation at any time; however, I encourage you to join us.
>
> - What comes to your mind when you think of education? What do you associate with education? Who do you associate with education?
> - When you think of education, specifically in a classroom setting, who comes to your mind? Who is that person?
> - Envision the college classroom. Who is the educator/professor?
> - What does that person look like? What is their race, ethnicity, gender age, or other identities?
> - Now open your eyes please and write three to five characteristics about the professor. Next, pair up with a classmate to reflect on and dialogue about what you envisioned. Consider reflecting on why you noted such characteristics or how these relate to your experiences with a professor.

Once students are provided with an opportunity to reflect and share with each other, we transition to a class dialogue. The characteristics students write, and the pair-share activity, are meant to help scaffold student engagement toward an encompassing class dialogue. I begin the class dialogue by asking students to raise their hand if they imagined any of the following characteristics associated with a professor: White, male, and old. These three characteristics are the most common that students associate with a professor. I then open up the dialogue to the class and ask them to freely share what they imagined and whether this was consistent or different from what I named. Several students will name or describe a professor they had before and with whom they really enjoyed learning. Some will name the class and how the professor engaged with students. Occasionally some students will even describe how the professor behaved, their demeanor, and appearance, including how they dressed.

The quotidian image of the professor most students will describe, however, is someone who is a White male in their late fifties, who wears glasses and tweed suits. The professor is also someone with an impersonal, straightforward attitude. Some students will go further by describing the teaching style: long and boring lectures, out of touch with technology. Clearly, several of these responses are based on stereotypes reinforced by how the media often portrays professors. Yet experience and research indicate that these traits are not inherently true. Sure, there might be some professors who are a bit outdated in their

knowledge of technology, or they might express varied levels of care toward students, but most who enter the professoriate do so because they have a passion for teaching and sharing their knowledge with students. I know this to be true among my colleagues, and I know this is certainly my case.

» RECOGNIZING AND TRANSFORMING STUDENT BIASES

Upon having students reflect on, share, and dialogue as a class about the characteristics they associated with a professor, I list these on the board. Then, I ask students to name the associated or legible characteristics they have ascribed to me based on how they see me. Although a few students have had me as a professor before, it is often the case that many students are meeting me for the first time. Consistent with our process for reflecting on who they imagined as a professor, we generate a list of identities and traits they have ascribed to me. Some of these may include the following: Latina, woman, young, petite, with an accent, and passionate (which even comes through on the first day of class and underscores the importance of enthusiasm for effective teaching).[16] We compare and contrast the traits we listed for a professor and those associated with me. The purpose of this comparative exercise is to facilitate students' critical reflexivity about how their unconscious biases surfaced, often without them noticing, and how these may have rendered my position as a professor other or illegible. My intention is to have students work to transform their biases of who a professor is against the embodiment of the professor standing before them: me.

Almost always, I am not whom they envisioned as a professor. With this realization, we begin our work of

addressing race, ethnicity, gender, age, and biases within the classroom. We proceed on to identifying and discerning the sources for our knowledge (Why did I imagine an old White male?) and how these sources in turn shape how we come to see others (Why did Professor Fernández not come to my mind?). Engaging students in critical reflexivity by prompting them with a simple question—What comes to your mind?—helps us recognize, address, and transform our biases, especially the placement of people in particular roles. In the college classroom, where and how we fit (or not) as professors has implications for our capacity to teach and build meaningful relationships with students that can support their learning. The activity invites students, and educators, to create a classroom space where we can challenge our biases in order to acknowledge our full being. At my institution, we describe this as *cura personalis* (care for the person).

» IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACTIVITY

Because I openly acknowledge, without judgment, that I am not whom most students expect to see as a professor, students are more likely to reciprocate openness and humility to learn and engage in a practice of critical reflexivity.[17] I emphasize for students that by virtue of my identities, what and how I teach will be different than what they might have experienced or expect of a professor who is White, male, and old, as I am not any one of these identities. The lack of diversity in the professoriate is empirically evident, as well as part of the biases that circulate among students. Further, the underrepresentation of women of color in academia, specifically in tenure-track and tenured positions, has implications

for the discourses and cognitive schemas that students implicitly, or explicitly, generate about who they will be interacting with and learning from in higher education. The fact that students encounter these inequitable conditions and a lack of diversity should be a cause of concern for all educators, regardless of their identities. For those of us who are not White, male, or old, these conditions challenge our presumed qualifications, credibility, and righteous place in the academy as educators and scholars. Leaving such discourses and biases unquestioned grants some students the permission or authority to dismiss us as educators and discredit and devalue what and how we teach, and who we are.

Conclusion

A critically reflexive dialogue of what a professor looks like opens up opportunities for students and educators alike to cultivate a classroom space of critically compassionate learning that allows us to confront our deepest biases. Acknowledging that some of these biases are implicit is the first step in interrogating and working to challenge them. Once we begin this process of working on unlearning them, new insights and knowledge are gained that align with humanizing values of integrity, dignity, and respect for others. Failing to do so, however, can constrain or challenge student-professor relationships, which can further the racially biased, sexist beliefs some students and faculty alike might hold about who is and can be a professor. In other words, who is deserving of respect, dignity, and equitable inclusion and representation in the academe is shaped by how we as a society come to socially construct what a professor

embodies. As educators, we must strive to recognize, challenge, and transform students' biases about who a professor is and what a professor looks like. We must seek to unearth where these assumptions came from and what these might or could mean for building a thriving critically compassionate learning community.

Teaching Takeaways

- Recognizing, challenging, addressing, and transforming problematic student biases about professors, starting the first day, can help students and professors establish a mutual openness to engage in difficult dialogues that are rooted in critically compassionate pedagogies.[18]
- Society conditions us to feel a sense of unease among those whom we see as different from ourselves or unlike us. Therefore, we must engage, reflect, and work to recognize and challenge problematic biases, especially in light of recent demands for racial justice and support for the Black Lives Matter movement.[19]

Through critical reflexivity, students, as well as professors, can begin to forge opportunities to build relationships toward meaningful learning across what we might perceive as differences. The biased perception of difference and othering limits our capacities for connecting and learning. Critical reflexivity can help set the foundation for a learning community environment in the college classroom.

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Notes

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