

PROFESSOR IN A STRANGE LAND: REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING IN A COLLEGE PROGRAM FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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Introduction

In the fall of 2006, I was invited to teach a course in a new program called “Eastern in the City,” that was designed to provide low-income urban youth the opportunity to receive a college education at a private university in a supportive and culturally sensitive environment. I was approached because of my prior experience with the course, my experience working with urban students, and my expressed desire to help underrepresented populations gain access to higher education. Needless to say, I eagerly accepted the invitation.

Many colleges and universities have designed programs to provide low income and minority youth and adults access to higher education. Such programs tend to provide a wide range of services including mentoring programs, study skills workshops, specialized advising, tutoring, and pre-college outreach programs (Swail, 2000). Furthermore, much has been written on economic issue such as rising tuition costs (Vaughn, 2004; Wagner, 1998) and insufficient financial aid or inadequate basic skills preparation such as reading, writing and math skills (Swail, 2000, 86-89). However, in this article I want to focus on the experience of teaching in such a program, which I hope can shed light on some of the personal and cultural factors that must be taken into account when seeking to provide low income urban students access to a college education.

Background

The vision for the Eastern in the City (EIC) program grew out of conversations between the president of Eastern University (EU), David Black, and African-American church leaders. The original vision statement stated that the program’s purpose was to provide “a two year academic program that [was] neighborhood-based, financially accessible, and contextually relevant. A final decision to begin the program was made in January 2006, and the first class was admitted in August 2006. Students were largely recruited African-American churches and radio ads on Christian and urban-focused radio stations, and were admitted according to the same criteria required of all Eastern University applicants. More consideration was given to students with poor SAT scores and all applicants were required to have an interview with the EIC director. All admitted students were given a financial grant of \$12,000 toward tuition costs (estimated at \$20,030 for 2006-2007). Students were expected to cover the balance either with financial aid or personal finances. A total of 81 students were admitted to the first class (2006-2007) (Barlow, 2007; Eastern in the City).

The course I taught was a required first year course entitled Introduction to Faith, Reason and Justice (INST 150). The purpose of the course was to provide students an introduction to the three core values of the university in supportive, discussion format. All the readings and assignments were standardized across every section, although each instructor had some freedom to innovate as long as overall course objectives were

achieved. The course reviewed time management and provided self-evaluative testing on personality types, learning styles and general preparedness for college. Assignments included regular readings on the three core values, reflections papers, a group project, a research paper, and twenty hours of community service. When offered on the main campus, the class usually meets for two 75-minute periods per week, but because of the unique structure of the EIC program, this class met once a week for 2 ½ hours. In addition to INST 150, EIC students took three other courses (Introduction to the Old Testament, Writing, and Acting) in the same format during the semester.

My Experience Teaching

Since I had taught INST 150 several times before, I basically followed the same lessons plans as I had previously used, essentially combining two class periods into one. Typically a class session involved a brief-lecture discussion, small group work, and/or student presentations. Occasionally, our class would join two other sections for large group presentations or videos. Each class session was opened with devotions led by student volunteers. Devotions included a variety of music, Bible readings and personal testimonies.

There were 22 students in my class, 21 African-Americans and one Hispanic, 12 women and 10 men. I was the only white male in the room. Most of the students were traditional college age (18-19), but there were seven adult students ranging from mid 20's to early 60's. All of them lived at home with family and commuted to class, and most of the worked in addition to going to school. All but two lived within the borders of Philadelphia. In terms of personality they spanned the spectrum from quiet and reflective to extroverted and energetic.

After the first couple of weeks, roughly two-thirds of the students in the class had fallen behind in their assignments. Several had not handed in any of the required assignments, and for many that did, the work was incomplete or academically inadequate. At the same time there were about one-third of the students whose work was timely and well done. I took time out in the class session to go over the requirements and to review some basic writing and grammatical principles. I also referred a number of students to the director for tutoring assistance. Needless to say, by the time midterm grades were announced in late October, all but six of the students were earning either D's or F's. The main reason that so many of the students had earned low grades was because they had failed to submit required assignments. When I handed out these grades in class with personalized explanations, heaviness filled the room. Several students approached me in a desperate tone, worried that they were going to flunk out. I assured them that there was still enough time for them to pull up their grades, if they chose to do the work. I called together my most competent students and asked them to assist me in encouraging their classmates. Because the male students seemed to be lagging behind the most, I also asked two men who I judged to have leadership potential (although they had also done poorly during the first half of the semester) to "step up" and be role models for their peers.

After the shock of the low grades and the possibility of failure, the provision of outside tutoring services and the assistance of the student-leaders, most of the students began to

respond positively. By the end of the semester the grade distribution included five A's, six B's, five D's two F's and one incomplete. Two students had dropped out. Regardless of their final grades, most of the students had improved in their writing, comprehension and overall academic performance. While it had been a challenging semester, it had been a learning experience for both teacher and student. What follows are some of the insight I gained in teaching this group of students.

Reflections on My Teaching Experience

Lack of Academic Preparation

My first insight confirms what the literature on such programs has stated: many students coming from urban high schools are under-prepared by their previous schooling experience (Swail, 2000). What struck me immediately was the lack of discipline in attending class on time (or at all) and submitting assignments. My sense was that the students were not used to be held accountable for their responsibilities in the classroom and so pushed them off thinking they could “get by.” I also encountered many students who had difficulty with basic writing skills, such as sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and overall organization. Because the students had a writing class and many received tutoring assistance in most cases the writing improved over the course of the semester. Additionally, some students were unfamiliar with basic computer skills necessary for today's college students such as word processing, email and internet searching. While they had computer literacy with regard to games and student websites like Facebook, they did not necessarily possess the computer skills needed for academic work. Most surprising was the inability of many students to comprehend a syllabus and a schedule of assignments. In part students did not hand in assignments because they did not know they were supposed to, even though a week-by-week schedule was laid in the syllabus. Thus, I ended up verbally reminding students of assignments and orienting them as to how to read the syllabus. At the college level, the aforementioned skills are assumed, but with my students that assumption was misplaced.

The Impact of Outside Responsibilities

Secondly, I noticed that some of the students lacked a clear sense of purpose as to why they were in school. Prior to the beginning of the semester, the director of EIC had led students through the formation of a “destiny statement” in which they articulated their personal, educational and professional goals. The objective of this exercise was to give them a sense of purpose in their educational endeavors (Barlow, 2007). While a few of the students referred to their destiny statements through the course of the semester, most them lacked a realistic idea of the steps required to reach their lofty goals. The director referred to students as “scholars” and did an admirable job in instilling a sense of dignity and gravity to their educational pursuits. However, like most young people entering college, these students had not fully grasped their identity as students.

This lack of purpose made them particularly susceptible to outside pressures that distracted them from their academic work. Many of the students had jobs (in some cases full time) in addition to attending school. Several were not only responsible for paying for their expenses, but also helping to support family needs as well. Furthermore, some

students had childcare responsibilities with children, grandchildren or siblings. In a few cases families did not seem actively supportive of their child's academic responsibilities. For instance, one student appeared to be homeless having spent nights on the train or walking the streets. While all college students, particularly those living at home, must find the balance between work, family and school responsibilities, the difficulty of managing this tension seemed particularly intense for this group of students.

In these first two areas academic preparation and financial pressures, the challenges faced by these students resembled those faced by low-income adult students even though most of the them were traditionally-aged students. Adult students often come to college having not only having delayed their higher education, but also having been inadequately academically prepared for the rigors of a college course of study. Furthermore, adult students must pursue their education while maintaining often stressful work and family responsibilities. While financial aid is available to adult students, the burden of student loans is often added to an already precarious financial situation (Imel, 2001). These factors common to adult students were also found in the EIC students.

The Multifaceted Impact of Culture

However, the most intriguing aspect of my teaching experience with these students centered on a variety of cultural issues. Popular educators such as Paulo Freire (1998) and Myles Horton (1986) have stressed that educators working with marginalized populations must incorporate cultural work into their learning activities. Furthermore, educational psychologists now recognize that learning is not only individual and cognitive, but also relational, emotional and cultural.. Information is mediated and knowledge is constructed through cultural forms, which shapes persons' identities and influences their relationships in their primary social and cultural networks (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, pp. 229, 234). John Ogbu, an anthropologist has done in depth studies on cultural factors that impact the educational behavior of students of color, with a particular focus on African American students (Ogbu, 1992, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1994; Wood, 2003.). Overall, I found that cultural factors played a significant role in the academic achievement of my INST 150 students.

In my experience the cultural issues fell into two categories. First, there were the cultural distinctions that existed between my African-American students and me, their white teacher. Secondly, I was struck by the "whiteness" of the academic culture in contrast to the prevailing culture of the students.

Overall, the culture of the EIC program had the feel of a combination of African-American youth culture and African-American church culture.¹ This was understandable since Eastern University is a Christian university, and most of the staff and faculty of the EIC program were African American church members. Furthermore, most of the students were recruited to EIC through African American churches. This cultural distinction first became evident to me in the devotional time at the beginning of the class. Devotional leaders would often exhort their classmates using gospel music, Bible passages, and an inspirational manner characteristic of many African American Baptist and Pentecostal churches. There was a level of formality in the use of titles (such as

Doctor, Professor and Scholar) common in African American churches. Because of the emphasis on testimonies and preaching this culture also tends to be more focused on oral rather than written communication. Furthermore, there was a strong sense of collective identity of sharing together in the struggle of achieving their degrees. This strong sense of community tended to encourage the students to persist in their studies and gave student leaders a sense of responsibility to and for each other's success.

This cultural distinction was further evidenced when students presented their group projects. The students were obviously more comfortable and competent presenting their knowledge in an oral manner, rather than in written form. One group set up their presentation as a jazz poetry reading, while another used the symbol of a Muhammad Ali type character in a boxing match between competing points of view. The presentations were not only creative, but also reflected symbols and practices unique to their communities. Though I felt fully respected by my African-American students, I was continually reminded in subtle ways that their experience and cultural worldview was distinct from mine.

However, there were aspects of culture identified, which may have adversely impacted the students' performance. Ogbu (1992, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1994) identifies what he calls the "low effort syndrome" among African-American students. Low effort syndrome includes an attitude of "just getting by," the cultivation of poor study habits, and a tendency to blame teachers rather than self for academic failure. He posits that among many African-American youth it is not "cool" to be smart and that academic success can imply that one has forsaken his/her racial identity and started acting "White." Ogbu suggests that Black students seeking academic success are often placed in a position of choosing between conformity and with their African-American peers and academic success (Ogbu quoted in Wood, 2003). Ogbu has found these cultural markers with African American students in both upper middle class suburban communities (Ogbu, 2003) and inner city communities (Ogbu, 1994). While some challenge his observations (Malveaux, 2003), and certainly not all students fit his profile, I observed some of those same attitudes and behaviors among my students in INST 150.

What helped counter the "low effort syndrome" was the fact that the EIC program was able to construct an alternative collective identity based on academic achievement. By having students encourage each other in devotionals, calling on student leaders to encourage their peers, allowing for oral presentations and generally encouraging a collaborative approach to learning, in the first semester we were able to create a culture of success.

This leads to my other cultural observation which is the overarching "whiteness" of academic culture. This culture was not only evident in the authors and issues that were given prominence in the curriculum, but also in the underlying values that undergirded the institutional structure (Hitchcock, 2002; Schaeff, 1981). Some of the prevailing norms in White American Culture include a focus on individual achievement, competition, objectivity, linear thinking, rationality, personal privacy, and the primacy of work over play. Conversely, cooperation, intuition, subjectivity, and outward emotional expression

tend to be devalued. The White perspective of history tends to focus on European descendants, while the history of peoples of color is left to the margins and footnotes. Moreover, in White Culture there is the assumption that this way of living and seeing the world in the norm by which all other people should be evaluated (Hitchcock, 2002; 112-122, Schaeff, 1986; 7-20)

Even though I had taught this course before with largely white students on the main campus of the university, I had failed to notice the whiteness of the curriculum and readings.ⁱⁱ All the authors were white and reflected a European worldview. Even videos used language and cultural forms were largely white. For instance, I showed a video of the Frontline program “Merchants of Cool” (PBS, 2001) which focused on the how the marketing industry seeks to manipulate young people’s values and attitudes. While my African-American students could relate to the ideas presented in the program, the specific examples of music and products mentioned were largely foreign to them.

Realizing the whiteness of the curriculum, I replaced some of the assigned readings with readings reflecting the African American urban experience (Suskind, 1998) and on the formation of Black identity (Tatum, 1997). I also invited a special speaker to talk about his experience as African-American professional in predominately white corporate world. However, the cultural issue was more than simply a matter of readings and presentations. Because White culture tends to be linear, individualistic, and focus on the written word, the course stressed individual achievement largely through writing. What I found was that my African American students responded far more effectively in assignments that were communal and oral than individual and written. While realistically, successful African American professionals must learn how to navigate white-oriented professional and corporate cultures, I was struck at how the academic culture placed my African American students at a disadvantage not because of their abilities, but because of the cultural forms used in the delivery of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Because a college education is now essential to long term economic and professional success (Harrington & Sum, 1999) and because nearly one-sixth of the school population in the United States lives in poverty (Burke & Johnstone, 2004, p. 21), colleges and universities must continue to provide access to higher education for low-income students. The challenge of educating such students is multifaceted. Adequate financial resources must be made available to potential students. Better basic skills training must be provided at the primary and secondary school levels. Institutions must commit themselves to provide support services such as mentoring, advising and tutoring. However, the faculty must also be equipped to enter a new milieu of teaching, which includes orienting students to basic academic responsibilities, helping students deal with multiple responsibilities, and becoming competent in communicating lesson plans cross-culturally. While I supposedly was the teacher in the room, I found that at many turns I was in a new territory, a “Professor in a Strange Land,” and thus the roles were reversed. Unbeknownst to them, my students were teaching me a great deal about the many ways even in our best attempts, we make the road to higher education success more difficult than it needs to be.

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End Notes

ⁱ I use the term “African American church culture” loosely, fully aware that African- American churches, like predominantly White churches, exhibit a wide range of theological and worship styles. In particular I am thinking of Baptist and Pentecostal churches, which tend to be more emotive in their worship expression. Furthermore, in using this label, I do not refer to any particular research on the topic, but rather to my personal experience and observations in such church settings.

ⁱⁱ Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice in their book, *More Than Equals*, refer to this tendency of whites to overlook obvious racist distinctions and practices as “white blinders.” With regard to the nature of the INST 150 curriculum, I had certainly had white blinders on.