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## **A University Serving the Oppressed: A Liberatory Teaching Paradigm for the College Student of the Future**

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The demographic makeup of the students who will be attending college in the future is undergoing significant changes, as more students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds seek higher education. These changes present the need and opportunity for higher education faculty and administrators to rethink assumptions about the culture of higher education and to develop pedagogical practices best suited to serve students of the future. Following the insights of Paulo Freire, this pedagogy must be responsive to the distinct cultural needs and perspectives of these students. The author posits six dimensions of this new liberatory teaching paradigm.

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A major shift is occurring in the demographic composition of students seeking a college education. While these changing demographics present a major challenge to the current state of higher education, they also provide an opportunity to rethink pedagogical practices and underlying cultural assumptions. Rather than primarily reinforcing the position of the elite few, institutions of higher learning have the opportunity to become entities that serve members of oppressed populations by not only providing access, but also approaching the pedagogical task with a radically different paradigm. In the process, these universities can become the testing ground for dramatic changes needing to occur in the political and economic landscape of U.S. society at large.

### **Shifting Demographics, New Challenges**

In July 2005, educators and higher education administrators gathered in Philadelphia to discuss projected U.S. student demographic trends expected over the next 15 years (College Board, 2005). The starting point for the discussion was a series of projections put forth by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), entitled *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State, Income, and*

*Race/Ethnicity, 1988-2018* (WICHE, 2003). This report contained the following projections:

- In 2009-2010 the number of high school graduates in the United States will peak at approximately 3.2 million students; after that there will be a gradual decline in numbers overall, although the decline will vary by region and state.
- In 2014, only about half of high school graduates will be White, non-Hispanics. About 20% of the graduates will be Hispanic, while 13% will be African American and nearly 7% will be Asian/Pacific islander.
- Higher percentages of students will come from families with low incomes, particularly in some states and regions, such as the West.

These trends mirror similar changes in the overall demographic makeup of the U.S. population. For example, the U.S. Census (2004) projects that by 2020 White non-Hispanics will decline to 61.3% of the U.S. population (from 80% in 1980) while Hispanics (16%) and Asians (6.5%) will be growing, and African Americans will remain steady (13%). By 2050, White non-Hispanics will comprise 50.1% of the population and Hispanics will comprise nearly a quarter (24.4%), while African Americans (14.5%) and Asians (8%) will gain a greater share of the overall percentage of population. Such numbers portend a major shift in the racial and cultural makeup of college student populations.

In response to these projections, the College Board has formed task forces to address aspects of the report regarding access, financial concerns, and the role of community colleges (College Board, 2008). Likewise, WICHE (2008) continues to update and revise its projections each year. Faculty and administrators within higher education increasingly are recognizing the need for their institutions to find ways to make education accessible to historically underrepresented groups. At the same time, there seems to be a reluctance to adjust approaches and policies that might provide greater access, which is perceived as lowering standards (ASHE, 2006).

Both the College Board (2005) and WICHE (2003, 2008) have pointed out that increased racial/ethnic and income diversity of future high school graduates will not automatically translate into more diverse college communities. While the percentages of Hispanics and African Americans attending college are expected to increase significantly over the next 40 years, they still are expected to lag significantly behind the rate of Whites. Only Asian/Pacific Islander college-going rates are significantly higher than White students and will continue to be so (Carter & Wilson, 1993).

While there are many factors contributing to this “achievement gap” (Bok, 2003, Carey & Dillon, 2008; Lynch, 2006; Roach, 2005, Rothstein, 2004), it is clear that the current U.S. educational system has historically benefited students of wealthy status at the expense of poorer urban and rural students. Gross inequities in per capita funding are a result of state funding formulas based largely on property taxes. Furthermore, prestigious private schools are generally

available to the extremely wealthy or exceptionally gifted. This phenomenon is only one example of a global economic system that perpetuates economic inequality and socio-political oppression and regards racialized and poor communities as “members of the disposable and expendable class” (Darder, 2002, p. 14). As Darder writes,

The impact of the political economy on the educational conditions of students from subordinate cultures is clearly visible in a variety of ways. For example, the intellectual expectations, the types of resources, and the educational opportunities for academic success are in extreme contrast to those found in private schools that educate the wealthy. (p. 73)

This discrepancy is also present among public school districts. Kozol (1991, 2005) has documented that skin color and socioeconomic background routinely provide privileges for middle and upper middle class White students, while increasing and solidifying the gaps in educational and economic opportunity confronting poor Whites and people of color. Urban school districts, largely comprised of students of color and poor Whites, are routinely characterized by substandard facilities, overcrowded classrooms, limited extracurricular offerings, and rote teaching and learning techniques. Even within school districts, predominately White schools receive benefits not experienced by schools populated mostly by African-Americans and Hispanics. As Darder (2002) points out, instead of being a means of providing equal access, public schools serve to reinforce the control of the social, political and economic systems by the dominant class.

### **The Impact of Culture**

Higher education officials have generally assumed that money and academic preparation are the key factors in providing access to underrepresented groups (Adelman, 2007; Harrington & Sum, 1999). However, in addition to the obvious strains of economics and deficient academic skills, higher education culture itself is major barrier to many students of color and students from low income backgrounds. Higher education culture tends to favor reason over feeling, logical thinking over story telling, theory over experience, objectivity over subjectivity, and individual achievement over group identity (Adams, 1992; Boyd, 2007; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). For many African-Americans, Latinos, and working class Whites, the college campus and its ethos represent a foreign land that must be navigated before one can begin to address the academic and social tasks at hand. Numerous studies have documented that often students of color experience social and cultural isolation (Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Loo & Rollison, 1988; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). Other studies have noted that different cultural groups tend to favor certain learning styles (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Lynch, 2006) and therefore are motivated differently (Wlodkowski, 1999). In some cases students of color feel they must develop a “raceless persona” in order to achieve academic success (Fordham, 1988).

Some students of color, particularly African American males, regard academic success as a “white” phenomenon, which lead them to believe they must choose between their ethnic identity and success in school (Ogbu, 1992, 2003). Furthermore, schools often replicate the political and social alienation experienced by many working class White students (Shor, 1996). While a number of studies have noted the importance of a welcoming cultural climate to help underrepresented minorities on predominantly White college campuses overcome their sense of social isolation and cultural alienation (Allen, 2006; Davis, 2002; Hamilton, 2006; Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000), relatively few studies (Taylor, 1999; Ware, 2006) have actually identified the specific cultural factors for each racial/ethnic group that need to be addressed in the dominant cultural climate.

In their report, the College Board (2005) indirectly acknowledged these overarching cultural issues. A number of questions were put to institutions as they looked to the students of the future. Those questions included the following:

- Are there any curricular changes that should be considered?
- Is our faculty prepared to teach students who have different academic and personal backgrounds from current students?
- If more “at-risk” students are anticipated, are there any changes that might help ensure college completion?
- Does the campus (particularly the faculty and administrators) resemble in any way the composition of future student bodies?
- Does the institution want to intentionally target new groups of students or will it simply adapt to changes as they occur?
- What are the financial resources (including financial aid) necessary to meet the institution’s enrollment goals? (p. 8)

While primarily focused on administrative and policy changes, these questions point to cultural factors in that they raise the issue as to how previously marginalized groups can “fit” into academic culture.

Most studies, like that of the College Board and WICHE, tend to approach the issue from a deficit perspective, exploring how institutions can shore up student financial, academic, or cultural deficits to make their programs more accessible to students of color or students from working class backgrounds. Thus, efforts are made to develop programs for summer preparation, remedial education, and mentoring. Emphasis is placed on how to increase public and private financial aid funding. What is not specifically addressed is how the culture of higher education may need to change as well.

Moreover, this deficit approach overlooks the contributions these previously underrepresented groups have to offer the college campus in terms of new and diverse perspectives. However, to see this opportunity, institutions need to undergo a dramatic paradigm shift that goes to the heart of academic culture. As Taylor (1999) suggests, this cultural shift will involve “decentering the

dominant Eurocentric perspective and recentering the view with multiple cultures as reference points, so that the behavioral standards, symbols and language on campus reflect the many heritages, rather than only one, of American culture” (p. 16).

### **Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire (1970) recognized the important role culture played in the acquisition and development of knowledge. Freire believed and educational theorists have confirmed (Gay, 2000; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Rovai, Galiien, & Wighting, 2005) that information is mediated and knowledge is constructed through cultural forms. Moreover, Freire stressed that the value placed on particular stocks of knowledge is essentially political, resulting in certain values, histories, and psychosocial perspectives being suppressed or de-legitimized in favor of others. This de-legitimization process participates in an overall system of subjugation that oppresses and dehumanizes certain political, socio-economic or racial/ethnic groups. In response Freire developed a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” which took as its starting point the culture and experience of the students with whom he was working. Through a process of *conscientization*, he believed oppressed persons could become aware of the larger sociopolitical forces impacting their lives and gain the tools necessary to change the system that oppressed them. He also believed that there is no such thing as “neutral” or “objective” knowledge, but that all knowledge is learned and developed in a particular political context. Educators such as Jane Vella (2004, 2008), Henry Giroux (1997), bell hooks (1994), Peter McLaren (1997), Antonia Darder (2002) and Ira Shor (1987, 1992, 1996) have expanded on Freire’s ideas in ways that seek to engage students at the point of their social and cultural experience and thereby bridge the alienation they experience from the typical college classroom.

Much has been written recently about culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and the need for educators to create an inclusive educational experience. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). She goes on to characterize CRT as validating and affirming of cultural differences, culturally comprehensive and multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. Adams (1992) adds that culturally responsive teaching recognizes and affirms cultural differences, creates inclusive learning environments, uses multicultural approaches to teaching, and engages students in a way that ultimately benefits all. Culturally competent teachers must regularly review their own assumptions about teaching and learning and take into account the social factors shaping the lives of their students. Lynch (2006) points out that CRT attends to both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning, thereby creating an environment where the students feel valued and capable of success.

I propose the adoption of a liberatory paradigm that incorporates all the elements of effective CRT, while at the same time challenging and equipping students to confront, overcome, and change the socio-cultural barriers they face. Shor (1992) distinguishes this liberatory paradigm as “a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change” (p. 15). Building on the work of Paulo Freire, Shor (1987) has proposed an educational approach “that is participatory, critical, values-oriented, multicultural, student-centered, experiential, research-minded and interdisciplinary” (p. 22). As such the liberatory approach goes beyond inclusion to the goal of transformation.

Teachers who practice liberatory pedagogy often find themselves at odds with administrators in an educational system that views its mission as perpetuating rather than challenging dominant ideologies and inequities (Darder, 2002). Furthermore, as McLaren (1997) points out, sometimes liberatory educators who are well placed in the higher education system are resistant to sacrifice their own well-being, thus perpetuating the very hegemony they challenge. Therefore, it is unrealistic that a wholesale shift in focus and pedagogy will occur without a great deal of conflict and struggle. Faculty must see themselves as participating in “subversive maneuvering” (p. 55) by using a pedagogical approach that raises questions about the relevance and efficacy of the dominant cultural discourse. Such an approach is subversive in that it equips students to critically challenge the dominant culture, while at the same time empowering them to survive and succeed in that culture. However, because many colleges must find a way to help previously underrepresented students to be successful, the time is ripe for experimenting with different pedagogical paradigms and for examining unexamined cultural assumptions.

### **A Liberatory Teaching Paradigm**

What does a liberatory paradigm look like? How might a university serving the needs of the oppressed approach the practice of teaching in this new era? Because wholesale institutional transformation is complex and time-consuming, one approach for initiating change is to establish satellite campuses or institutes within institutions designed to serve oppressed students. Currently, I teach in such a program on the urban campus of a small, private faith-based college whose main campus is located in a wealthy suburb. We offer a one-year program for students who come primarily from an under-resourced urban school system. In that year students take the same core courses as first-year students on the main campus. The program’s goal is to equip and prepare these students to successfully transition to the main campus for their succeeding years of college. Most of the students are African-American and nearly all come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The program’s mission is tied to the university mission statement, which contains a strong commitment to social justice and access to a college education for students of all backgrounds and economic means. In this context I have been developing a liberatory paradigm incorporating the following elements: (1) “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo,

1987); (2) encouraging the development of double-consciousness (Dubois, 1903/1995); (3) using the city as educational text; (4) developing basic academic skills; (5) teaching through dialogue; and (6) creating a democratic classroom.

The liberatory paradigm I use begins with what Freire calls “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), which has to do with beginning the examination of a subject from the world of the student’s experience. Through a process of “problem-posing” (Freire, 1970, p. 66-67), I encourage students to examine their personal experiences in light of a larger social, cultural, and political context. So for instance, in an introductory first-year seminar I often ask students to discuss their experiences with learning in high school. One student described how he was given meaningless service projects by a high school administrator so he could earn enough credits to graduate. Even though he graduated, he realized he had been passed along, and while he was grateful he was also critical of the administrator. Moreover, he devalued his diploma because he felt he had not truly earned it. As other students related similar experiences, it became clear that this student’s ambivalence about his diploma was shared by many of his classmates. We discussed how these experiences were part of a larger pattern playing out in many overextended, under-resourced urban schools. I presented students with recent data on public school funding patterns and had them note the differences in per capita funding between the wealthy suburban districts just outside the city limits and the urban schools they attended. Through this problem-posing process, students were able to recognize that their personal learning experiences were affected by a socio-political system that distributed resources in an inequitable manner. As a result they were able to see that their current struggles in college were not due to some failure on their part, but rather to larger socioeconomic forces impacting them through their K-12 experience.

Second, closely aligned with reading the world is helping students become aware of what Dubois (1903/1995) refers to as “double-consciousness.” Dubois writes that the African-American experiences a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 45). Bonner (2006) refers to this double-consciousness as “the dual roles people of color perceive they are forced to play in broader society” and the need to engage in what sociolinguists call “code switching” (p. 85). Code switching “requires individuals to move back and forth between separate identities” and at times “put their ethnic selves on the shelf” (p. 85). With my students this has meant helping them distinguish between professional (or dominant culture) behavior and language and the behavior and language of the neighborhoods where they live. I talk about the game students must play in terms of self-presentation in order to make impressions that will give them greater entree and opportunity to be heard. At the same time I encourage them to find their voice (hooks, 1994), and to offer their perspective, stressing that even though it may not be widely represented in the dominant culture it is desperately needed. I encourage presentations and assignments to be given in forms and subjects reflective of their cultural background, while I also institute a code of speech and behavior in the classroom that approximates the expectation of the higher education culture toward which they are moving. One of my

colleagues will even stop students when they speak in street language and encourage them to write their thoughts down before they speak, so as to become more aware of the differences between street and professional language. In this way we seek to help students know how to present themselves appropriately in various cultural contexts.

A third aspect of the liberatory paradigm is to use the city as an educational text. Gruenewald (2003b) has written about the importance of place-conscious education. While the “pedagogy of place” has largely been focused on environmental and outdoor educational experiences, the principle is equally applicable in urban environments. He writes, “Places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the places we occupy” (p. 621). Building on Freire’s notion that learning begins with human beings recognizing their socio-cultural situation, Gruenewald (2003a) extends Freire’s concept of situation to include geographical space and location.

In my classes using the city as educational text has taken three forms: service learning, trips to local institutions, and reflection on experience. Service learning has enabled students to become contributors to the well-being of the community while having opportunity to reflect on their experiences in class. The proximity of museums, ethnic cultural centers, and community agencies enables me to take students on class trips to places where the topics of inquiry are discussed and displayed. For instance, in a course on social justice a class visited an agency serving homeless people in our city and was presented with the multiple levels of assistance (personal, family, community, and legislative) that can be provided to address the needs of displaced people. As in the example above about high school learning experiences, I use places familiar to students as a springboard for discussion about larger social and cultural issues affecting them. In using the city as text, my intention is for students to value their environment and appreciate the rich learning resources that exist there.

This leads to the fourth dimension of liberatory pedagogy, which is dialogical. Traditionally, higher education has relied heavily on a monological teaching method: the lecture. In the monological paradigm, the teacher is the source of knowledge and the students are the recipients, whereas in dialogue both teacher and student join together in the search for understanding and creation of knowledge (Wegerif, 2006).

Dialogue is much more than simply engaging students in class discussions. Through dialogue “knowledge is constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed” (Wegerif, 2006, p. 59). In dialogue, students not only learn to listen and express their views, but also come to know themselves as thinkers (Shor & Freire, 1987) and to see themselves as active subjects rather than passive objects of knowledge (Darder, 2002). In the end, dialogue is not simply a method of teaching, but rather an overall philosophy of teaching and learning that is “for freedom and against domination,” and is “a cultural action inside or outside the classroom where the status quo is challenged, where the myths of the official curriculum and mass culture are illuminated” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 97). The heart of the dialogical process is

the recognition “that human beings come to learning with some appetite, and that they can and will make intelligent choices” (Vella, 2004, p. 5). Through dialogue students name their reality, are empowered in their speech and action, and come to know themselves as part of a community with a voice that is able to transcend the socio-political barriers that often block them as individuals.

To facilitate dialogue I have used small groups extensively in my teaching. I am currently experimenting with “reading circles” (Olds, 2008, p. 344) in which a group learns together from assigned reading materials. Each student is given a role such as discussion director, passage master, illustrator, vocabulary enricher, creative connector, and devil’s advocate. In a circle every member must fulfill each role in the course of a semester, thus enabling all members to participate in different ways, sharing the learning load equally and engaging in a dialogical approach that collaboratively enhances understanding of a given topic (Olds, 2008). Structured this way the students become teachers of one another, and I become the architect, facilitator, and manager of the learning process.

Fifth, liberatory pedagogy is developmental in that it focuses on the enhancement of basic academic skills. Freire (1998) insisted that students master the skills of reading, writing, and study in order that they might become fully active citizens. He also believed that the ability to think critically was linked to the capacity to read and write. As he saw it, the process of writing begins with thinking and is interlaced with a process of reflection that continues even after one has ceased writing. As such, in all my assignments I make writing a component of every grade and provide significant feedback on writing-related concerns. I provide reading guides with thought-provoking questions designed to assist students in reading material critically, and I stress the importance of proper grammar in their written and spoken communication.

However, in stressing basic skills it is also important to help students see the broader perspective as to why such skills are important. Shor (1992) relates how he helped students in a remedial writing course think critically about the larger forces working against their success. The students had been assigned to the course because they failed to achieve a minimum score on a standardized writing test. After allowing them to voice their frustrations, Shor asked them to critique the standardized test by writing about their frustrations and suggesting improvements. His purpose was to help them formulate and express their ideas in such a way that they could be taken seriously. Through a variety of group writing projects, the students came up with a cogent proposal, which he was able to take to his colleagues to propose changes. Approaching the development of basic academic skills in a similar manner, I assist students in seeing the value of effective communication from a larger practical perspective.

Finally, liberatory pedagogy is fundamentally democratic. Authentic democratic education involves more than helping students become active and engaged citizens in the public realm (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007). The truly democratic classroom takes into account the power relationships that exist between student and teacher, student and student, and school and student. Shor (1992) notes that while traditional schools profess to prepare

students for democracy, their “teacher-centered curricula in the classroom and administration-centered power in the school...prepares students to fit into an education and a society not run for them or by them but rather set up for and run by elites” (p. 20). By contrast in the liberatory paradigm the roles of student and teacher are interchangeable. In some cases it means that the teacher even relinquishes some control over the readings and methods used in teaching and invites students to help shape the curriculum and course of study (Shor, 1996).

Lynn (1998) describes an experience in a general psychology course in which she had a group of students representing seven different cultural and language groups. In conversation with the students she realized that the methods of assessment, primarily in-class multiple choice tests, unfairly disadvantaged some of the students in her class. So she worked with the students to devise a variety of assessment methods including written projects, take-home exams, and the option of discussing graded exams. Likewise, I have sought to be open to negotiation with my students about the nature and scope of assignments as long as we hold the course goals in view as we make those adjustments. By allowing students to share power, they become active agents in their own learning. This process of investing students with power to shape their own learning is beneficial for students from all backgrounds, but especially for students who historically have had their voices muted and their perspectives ignored.

The six elements form the framework of the dialogical paradigm: reading the world, double-consciousness, the city as text, development of academic skills, dialogue, and democracy. However, more than simply consisting of certain methodologies, the liberatory paradigm seeks to empower oppressed students by validating them and helping them develop the tools necessary to transform themselves and the social structures that disenfranchise them.

### **Seedbeds of Change**

I believe the prevailing culture of higher education stands as a barrier to the success of marginalized students. If a college is to serve these students well, vast changes need to occur in the policies, structures, pedagogies, and stocks of knowledge valued by that institution. I believe that programs employing a liberatory teaching approach are the seedbeds of change that over time can inform and transform institutions. Because such programs serve historically unrepresented groups, they point the way to future changes that must occur in dominant cultural and pedagogical paradigms of most college campuses. Reports like those conducted by the College Board and WICHE suggest that cultural change is critical for the success of future students and the survival of many institutions. As McLaren (1997) states, “This current historical moment [in education] ... is a bold summons to re-examine our commitment to the forging of history, rather than just its representation, translation or interpretation” (p. 45). While the road we are traveling is largely uncharted, I believe programs such as the one in which I teach demonstrate the need for significant cultural change for

schools serious about opening their doors to students who have been previously excluded and marginalized.

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