

# A DIALOGUE ON DIVERSITY AND PEDAGOGY IN THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM

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*Using a critical classroom incident as a platform for discussion, the authors engage in a dialogue over a range of topics related to controversial issues in Social Work education. The dialogue focuses on a concern that various customs, practices, and assumptions made by schools, faculty, and students act to "sterilize" instruction in social policy and cultural diversity courses. Readers are encouraged to respond to this article via a web-based survey at [www.diversilog.org](http://www.diversilog.org).*



## Introduction

Almost every social work educator has experienced a contentious or divisive moment in the classroom: a statement taken out of context or misunderstood, a thoughtless comment, a slip of the tongue, or an outright inflammatory incident. Educators experiencing an unsettling event in the classroom often struggle to understand their own response to the event and the incident's overall impact on the students and the class environment. In the hands of an experienced and knowledgeable educator, such unexpected classroom events can open doors to greater learning, prompting students and instructors to critically analyze biases or deeply held feelings that ultimately promote honest inquiry and reflection. Conversely, such moments can also fracture classroom cohesion, engender widespread distrust and animosity, and subvert the overall learning goals of the course.

This article begins with a description of an actual classroom incident that involves complex issues of racial identity and cultural sensitivity. The incident then serves as a platform for the authors, in the form of a dialogue, to share thoughts and reflections about diversity and pedagogy in the social work classroom. The paper is intended to act as an entrée into a needed but overlooked discussion in the social work literature. It is

also hoped that the discussion will help facilitate continuing dialogue on the subject. Readers are encouraged to complete a web-based survey regarding their own experiences with classroom incidents, issues of diversity and cultural awareness, and reactions to the paper. The web-site address is [www.diversilog.org](http://www.diversilog.org).

## The Incident

In the spring of 1999, in a large social work program with a national reputation, the following episode took place in a course on community organizing. The course instructor asked one of the authors of this article to recommend a guest speaker who could address interactions between race and class. A personal friend who was a well-known activist in the community, an octogenarian with over sixty years of experience as a labor organizer and civil rights activist, was recommended. The speaker had previously made presentations to the School of Social Work and was known for his vibrant and often evocative style.

The guest lecturer began the presentation by describing his background. Born in Brooklyn in 1916, he had come of age as an activist in his teens by fighting landlords who had evicted tenants during the Great Depression. He became a member of the Communist Party because, as he put it, "the Communists were the only ones doing

something about the suffering and unemployment” created in the aftermath of the stock market crash. During the 1930s, he helped organize labor unions and participated in protests to demand relief from government agencies. Some of these experiences involved violent confrontations with police. He also shared with the class that he was a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of Americans who volunteered to fight in defense of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>1</sup> He discussed his experience as a community organizer in Mississippi in 1964. The speaker thus clearly identified himself as a person of action who had literally put his life on the line in defense of his beliefs in social justice and racial equality.

Returning to the purpose of his presentation, the speaker said that he would like to address the complex intersection of class and race by recounting an event that had occurred in 1936 while he was participating in a labor strike in the “low coal” country of Pennsylvania. During the United Mine Workers strike, members of the National Guard had demonstrated great hostility toward the strikers. Tensions were mounting, and the risk of a violent encounter between the two groups was escalating. At one point, a National Guardsman grabbed an African-American striker and was seriously threatening him in an effort to incite a violent confrontation. Responding immediately to this situation, one of the strikers, a white male from the Deep South, pulled a gun, pointed it at the Guardsman, and said, “If you don’t let that n\*\*\*\*\* go I’m gonna blow your head off.”

As soon as the speaker said this, several students, but one in particular, verbally and through gestures let it be known that they were extremely upset that the “N” word had been used. The speaker responded by saying that he had not used the word, and that he was only recounting a historical incident in which the word had been used. Though

several of the students were still upset, the speaker continued with the story in an effort to make his point. He continued by saying that later that night, when tempers had calmed, a union organizer approached the white southern striker and told him that he had done something very brave but also very offensive. The striker was puzzled about what he had done wrong. The organizer told him that he had rightly come to the aid of a fellow union member, but that he had wrongly called his union brother an offensive name. “What,” said the striker, somewhat incredulously, “he ain’t no white man.” Upon hearing this interaction, the African-American striker, who felt that his life had been saved by the actions of his union colleague, put his arms around the white southerner and said, “That’s okay brother, ‘cuz them was the sweetest words I ever heard.”

A few of the students reacted even more vehemently upon hearing the rest of the story. The speaker was somewhat puzzled by their reaction and again maintained that he himself had not personally said the word but that he was only retelling a historical event as it happened in order to make a larger point. One of the students who seemed to be the most visibly upset identified herself as an African-American. She responded that he did not have to use the word, that the story could be told just as forcefully without using the word, and that the word was bigger and more profoundly negative than any moral that could be drawn from the story. Several students seemed to agree with her.

In response, rather than attempting to explicate the moral of his story, the speaker continued with another story. He said he had spent nine months in Mississippi in 1964 living with a radical, African-American civil rights activist named Hartman Turnbow. Mr. Turnbow had been the first African-American to register to vote in the county since Reconstruction. During his time living with Mr. Turnbow, the speaker indicated that the KKK

had blown up the speaker's car and that he and Mr. Turnbow had engaged in numerous gun battles with the local police. On the day he was to leave Mississippi, Mr. Turnbow looked him in the eye and said, "You know, even though you white on the outside, on the inside you a nigga just like me." As he said this, the same members of the class literally erupted. Some of them physically turned their backs to the speaker. He almost had to shout the rest of his story, which was to say that what Mr. Turnbow had said was "the highest compliment anyone had ever given me." He then sat down angrily and the professor tried to restore order as the students, one of the authors included, heatedly debated different issues that the speaker's remarks had elicited.



There are two caveats to the story that must be included to understand the full nature of the issue as it presented itself to the class on that day. First, the instructor of the course, a tenured, Anglo professor close to retirement, had several weeks earlier also used the "N" word in describing a historical event in which he had been involved. After one or two students reproached him for using the word in historically recounting what had been said, he began the next class with a profuse apology for saying the "N" word.<sup>2</sup>

The second event involved another guest speaker and took place after the professor's apology, one week prior to the speaker mentioned above. In that class, an African-American minister from the community used the "N" word when describing how he greeted young African-American males in his church's neighborhood. After saying this, he paused for a moment but quickly said that his use of the word was simply the way things were said in his neighborhood. No students

acknowledged that they were offended in any way by his casual use of the word.

### The Dialogue

MIGUEL: I recommended the guest speaker and witnessed firsthand the series of classroom events described above. My first reaction was one of shock. I could not believe students were responding in such a way. I was also stunned to see students in their early to mid-twenties so rudely treat the guest speaker (one or two of them made rude gestures while he was trying to finish his story). Although I am a personal friend of the guest speaker, I believe I would have felt the same way about any speaker with such an illustrious and extensive history of activism. Other things ran through my mind. I mentioned to the class that I had just completed research that documented a strong correlation between African-American infant mortality and hospital closure rates in Chicago. Literally, black folks were dying as a result of the striking number of hospital closures that have taken place in Chicago since 1970. In the heat of the moment, I accused students of being more concerned about words than life and death issues facing African-Americans.

LORI: Miguel, thanks for the powerful account and your honest reaction of shock at the students' reactions and "rudeness." I do not think that your reaction of accusing the students of being more concerned with words than life and death issues is inappropriate. However, when I imagine myself, a Jew, hearing someone tell the story if "kike" had been the word, I'm sure my heart would have pounded into my throat and that I probably would have felt an obligation to somehow demonstrate disapproval or disdain for the word as a responsibility to my group, so small in number. On another level, I am surprised that a student would want, or even expect, a recounted historical event to be altered to omit an "offensive" word. I am immediately

reminded of an issue that occurred while preparing for my doctoral dissertation defense. My study was an ethnographic analysis of aspects of the ethnic identity of Chicano/a adolescents. I was advised by my committee chair to avoid the use of the word "wetback" even when quoting the informants, so as not to run the risk of offending members of my audience. Not only was this term crucial to the narratives of the participants, it was a word used readily in the culture that I was attempting to describe. In fact, there is a gang that calls itself "Wetback Power." I did decide to use the "taboo" word when quoting the informants, and no negative repercussions followed. Perhaps I should have called it the "w" word!?

SCOTT: Well, should we be surprised about anything that happens in the classroom anymore? In particular, given the ongoing polarization that exists (both on campus and off) regarding issues of "race," the type of student reactions that occurred in Miguel's class will continue. For example, last semester I used a memoir *All Souls: A Family Story From Southie* (MacDonald, 1999), in a course I taught on Human Behavior with Groups, Organizations and Communities. The book offered an excellent practical example of the way in which communities influence and shape people's behavior. It focused on life in one of the poorest neighborhoods (South Boston) in the United States, a community populated largely by low-income whites. Covering the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, the book also described the turmoil that engulfed Boston when school desegregation was mandated via busing of black and white students to surrounding neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, the book had numerous references to the "N" word. During a class discussion about the text, one African-American student interrupted a white student discussing the book to voice her discomfort with the use of the "N" word, and

strongly asked that we use a different descriptor. To the credit of both students, there was no direct confrontation, no defensiveness, and no fault or blame assigned. Both were able to articulate their points of view about the use of the "N" word. Class continued, and our discussion went well. (As an aside, another African-American student later told me that she had no problem with the use of the "N" word, especially since it was an integral part of the text and thus could be seen as part of the historical record.) Clearly, my circumstance was different from Miguel's. But the question I have regarding both situations is this: could we/should we, as instructors, have done more in the heat of the moment to take advantage of these (all too infrequent) "teaching moments?" In other words, thinking toward the future, what can we do to help students feel safe in talking about issues of race that clearly generate strong emotional responses? How can we ensure that, rather than creating divisions in the classroom, content on race, diversity, and multiculturalism provides an avenue for thoughtful, honest, and productive dialogue?

LORI: It is a relief to hear anecdotal evidence that there may be more student willingness to tread where few have gone before. Scott regarded the stances as race-related polarizations, and this is a testament to the either-or tendency of students. I, too, find that when students feel passionate enough to take the risk of speaking up in class, it is often "for" or "against." Students who have not explored these issues before tend to sit quietly, afraid of stepping on their own tongues. I have talked with my students about this and they report that they are not only afraid of offending their classmates, but also afraid to "not sound like a social worker." Does this mean that they are afraid of discovering their own biases, which are counter to social work values? In my Master's program, in a course on racism, we read D.T. Wellman's *Portraits*

of *White Racism* (1993) and wrote a paper on our own racist beliefs and actions. The provocative dialogues that followed were terrifying and enlightening and were my first experience of the "spiritual stretch" that it takes to honestly confront racism. Clearly, books such as this and *All Souls* are a powerful springboard for crucial teaching moments. Self-disclosure in class regarding my own journey-in-progress from color blindness to cultural competence has also been a useful tool for creating what Satir (1964) refers to as a "safe holding environment." Are there other ways to set the stage for the sharing of spectrums of experiences rather than the polarizations we seem to be witnessing in class?

MIGUEL: We seem to find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma. There is a real tension involved in promoting thoughtful, honest, and productive dialogue in a safe and non-divisive classroom environment. I doubt this tension can be resolved easily, if at all. At a basic level, what one student considers a thoughtful comment or honest reflection may be considered by another to be offensive and insulting. Further, my concern is that most instructors will tend to value the latter issue ("safety" or "non-polarization") above the former ("thoughtful dialogue"). For example, when I spoke with the instructor of the class after the critical incident took place, it was clear that, in the future, provocative guest speakers would be avoided. I suspect that for many instructors it is simply not worth it to expose students to certain ideas, readings, and speakers. The end result is an impulse to redirect the focus to another, less polarizing context, avoid certain subjects altogether, or sterilize class content in other ways. Even using Scott's more benign example, I wonder how many instructors would be inclined to continue using the book in question, for fear that a more controversial debate would ensue.

Writing on the subject of cultural diversity and social work pedagogy, Garcia and Van Soest (2000) suggest that faculty develop (and be ready to apply) guidelines to deal with contentious issues in the classroom. For my part, I begin each course by informing students of my desire that the class become a safe haven for the free expression of any and all ideas, except those that are meant to intentionally harm or be cruel. Although this is an admittedly vague guideline, I do not believe use of the "N" word in historical context or the example Scott mentions come close to crossing over these criteria.

LORI: I've been thinking about what Miguel said: "Most instructors will tend to value the latter issue ('safety' or 'non-polarization') above the former ('thoughtful dialogue')." I can't help but wonder why. If, perhaps, we were to gain awareness about the impediments to "thoughtful dialogues," perhaps we could begin to explore viable solutions. I suspect that barriers include, but are by no means limited to, the following:

(1) The peaceful nature of helping professionals that leads to a desire for democratic or mediated environments often resulting in oppressive, superficial pseudo-discussions;

(2) A lack of insight into the complexity and richness of issues of power, privilege, race, ethnicity, diversity, and, most importantly, one's own biases and blind spots;

(3) Grandiosity and a lack of personal "teachability" leading to pedantic lectures about diversity;

(4) Fear of repercussions, primarily political (i.e., I need good student evaluations, I don't want any complaints while I await the tenure process, etc.); and/or

(5) Ignorance regarding how to manage conflict in the classroom.

One more thought. I know that many minority students are, as one of my students



powerfully articulated, "sick and tired of representing entire cultures, especially ones I don't even belong to." I think this is an important caveat to our discussion.

SCOTT: Based on my experience teaching and interacting with university students and faculty for more than four years, I agree with both of you on a key point. Many (if not most) instructors in social work seek the relative safety of non-confrontation in the classroom, often at the expense of passionate and engaged dialogue (especially regarding issues of diversity/difference and oppression). I link the two concepts of passion and engagement because I believe we cannot fully engage social work students on these topics without bringing our own passion about them to the classroom.

And herein lies the rub. Based on conversations with numerous students, as well as personal observation and interaction with other faculty, the lack of passion by instructors is a significant impediment to thoughtful classroom dialogue on critical social issues. While I grant that ignorance over how to manage classroom conflict, and the "peaceful nature" of the helping professions, may indeed contribute to this, I suggest that larger forces are at work. Specifically, given the middle-class nature of the profession, and the elitism that is higher education, in particular, the granting of Ph.D.s to a chosen few, most of those charged with the task of teaching are a largely homogeneous lot. Thus, the diversity that we so desperately seek among our students, and that we earnestly wish to confront and discuss in the classroom, is largely lacking among those of us in the academy who teach.

As the bi-racial son of a single mother who worked as a secretary for nearly 25 years to raise three sons, and as someone who has spent considerable time working (both paid and volunteer) on social justice issues, I bring a unique perspective to the classroom. I, and

others with shared or similar backgrounds, *do* bring (to quote Lori) "insight into the complexity and richness of issues of power, privilege, race, ethnicity, diversity...". In fact, for me, it is precisely those issues, and the realization that social justice is still a long time coming, which has led me to the classroom. In my teaching, I bring passion and a sense of outrage at the way society is structured to reproduce inequality. The problem is, in my opinion, most of my colleagues *do not* share either a similar background or history that would help provide them crucial (personal) insight into these issues. Hence, while most can appreciate and address such issues on a largely theoretical level, few have little in the way of passion around these issues. Thus, if these issues are addressed, they are often done in a "safe" manner so as to avoid offending anyone's sensibilities.

While this may sound like a generalization, information about the relative lack of diversity (economic/class, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, etc.) among university professors is well documented. Perhaps less understood, and hence more in need of inquiry, is the composition of those who teach classes specifically devoted to diversity issues or the extent to which these topics are truly integrated into our curriculum. In short, I'm suggesting that the lack of personal knowledge of oppression and diversity issues by many faculty members contributes to an often widespread reluctance to address these topics. It would only make sense that such tendencies would be reinforced when the inevitable classroom conflict arises when we do struggle with these themes.

MIGUEL: After ruminating on Scott's response, I tend to agree that the lack of diversity (in its plural forms) among Social Work faculty may be the most robust correlate of sterilized instruction. Other related factors also come into play. For example, in my own doctoral experience, the professors primarily

responsible for teaching social policy courses were tenured, white males who owned expensive homes in all-white neighborhoods. In their housing decisions they had moved themselves, consciously or otherwise, far away from the low-income populations whose concerns they sought to illustrate in the classroom. Since I was living at the time in a predominantly low-income African-American neighborhood, it was clear to me that most of



the issues discussed in class were derived from readings, not real-life experience. Indeed, the one professor who did have experience working directly with low-income populations relied on experiences working as a social worker some thirty years earlier. I mention this not to deride past experience as ineffectual but to provide anecdotal information from personal experience to support Scott's contention about passion in the classroom.

The other issue that Scott rightly addresses is doctoral education. For the most part, the composition of social work academics (to say nothing of their competence) will be only as diverse as the pool of candidates graduating from the 60-plus social work schools with doctoral programs nationwide. For example, although my own doctoral program is nationally ranked, it has graduated only one African-American woman in the 25 years of its existence. The pool is further limited by the significant number of international students in social work doctoral programs who have no intention of teaching in the United States and by the large number of students who choose to pursue clinical, research, or administrative careers rather than tenure-track academics. The stark reality is that those who have a personal knowledge of oppression and diversity (not to mention other important characteristics) have, for the most part, been

winnowed out long before a divisive issue erupts in a classroom.

LORI: I write this response upon my return from a week-long national research training institute on "Minorities and Substance Abuse." A well-respected academician made one poignant comment. She essentially expressed that the problem with social work education is that the profession is primarily composed of middle-class white women who are ignorant about issues of race and oppression. In response, I would never deny the structural barriers and inequities of dominant white culture. I know that I, and other white people, will never know "death by one thousand nicks" (i.e., the everyday comments, prejudices, stereotypes, racist reactions in the dominant culture). But I must note that it would be erroneous for our discussion to imply that professors from the white majority cannot bring insight into the complexity and richness of issues of power, privilege, race, ethnicity, and diversity. Miguel referred to the importance of real life experience. Clearly it is an oversimplification to assume that the profundity of life experiences and subsequent capacity for empathic connections can be defined by whether or not someone is a person of color. I have worked in the addictions field for over a dozen years. I have witnessed, in white and ethnic clients, a depth of desperation and despair that cannot be denied as a quintessential transformative experience. I believe that the self-hatred and personal self-destructive actions that I have witnessed strike a chord and resemble the reactions that I have come to understand as internalized racism.

I am not a woman of color. I would not for a minute make the grandiose assumption that I know the experience of being a woman of color. But, along with passion for cultural competence and continuing exposure to the issues we educate around, I would add two more key ingredients in effectively teaching

“un-sterilized” versions of diversity in social work education: humility and teachability. As a professor, I can impart my knowledge and also recount the times that I took a risk to get to know someone of another culture and stuck my foot in my mouth. For example, after several months conducting an ethnographic study of Mexican-American adolescents in the Southwest, I asked the group of teens that I had spent time with, “So, do you know a lot of kids in gangs?” They looked at each other and burst into laughter, clarifying that they were *all* gang members. The teens proceeded to shower me with stories of their gang experiences.

There is distinct value in taking the role that Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) refer to as “acceptable incompetent.” From this place, I am able to publish sensitive works that contribute to the knowledge base about this population. My students benefit from the balance between my professional knowledge and expertise as well as my imperfect humanness. I can celebrate these moments of profound connection that came from my distinct knowledge that I was *not* the expert in someone else’s life experience. One layer of our discussion is the “micro” view (e.g., relationship of teacher and student, need for passionate classroom discussion of diversity, and fear of classroom conflicts) and the other is the broader “macro” view (e.g., societal/structural barriers leading to a lack of heterogeneity and diversity of doctoral students and professors.) Don’t the solutions lie in both arenas?

MIGUEL: I’m not sure there are solutions per se, but informed responses to meet the issues we raise here certainly must come from multiple arenas. However, for the sake of argument, here I would like to interject a different point. From the beginning of this dialogue, we have focused on the characteristics, attributes, and experience of social work *instructors*. The fundamental

assumption is that faculty biases, shortcomings, comments, or (re)actions are the source of cultural conflicts in the classroom, or at least what is most in need of attention. This parallels the focus of numerous studies regarding classroom issues and diversity (Chesler & Malani, 1993, Garcia & Van Soest, 1999; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Van Soest, Garcia, & Graff, 2001).

To be sure, these are important aspects of the equation, and it goes without saying that what an instructor brings to the classroom is an integral part of the learning experience. But I think we can assume that social work instructors are, in general, culturally competent. In the vignette that began this dialogue, it was a student who disrupted classroom learning on an important subject (the intersection of class and race). Thus, contrary to a statement Lori made about students being tired of representing entire cultures, in this instance (and others I have witnessed) it is clear that “in-group” members of a minority are often only too willing to speak as self-appointed representatives of the whole. When this happens, most non-members of the group don’t feel they have a right to respond and even members of the in-group may hesitate to share an opposing view for fear of being labeled an “Uncle Tom” or “proving” the extent to which they have internalized oppression.

SCOTT: Miguel asks what of students? It would be a generalization to suggest that minority group members routinely act as self-appointed representatives in the classroom, though clearly this does happen. Of perhaps more interest is Miguel’s other point: that this behavior often silences other such group members, in particular those with opposing points of view. Clearly this latter behavior *is* common and reflects larger tensions and contradictions within various “minority” communities on certain issues (such as affirmative action). Going back to where we



started this conversation, such behaviors challenge us as educators to provide space for all viewpoints to emerge and for students to feel safe in taking risks when they express their opinion, ask questions, or dialogue with each other. I would also suggest that this silencing is not exclusive to members of racial/ethnic groups. That is, social work students with strong "conservative" or religious points of view are routinely silenced in the classroom in a variety of ways. The biggest fear of such students, from my teaching experience, is of being attacked by other students for not thinking the "right way" or not rigidly holding social work values as understood by most students.

To address a different point made earlier by Lori: Yes, it would be "an oversimplification" to assume that one must be a person of color to have *deep* understanding of issues of power, privilege, race, etc. As both Lori and Miguel note, the opportunity for real life experience is often key to this process. In this respect, both students and instructors have a valuable role to play. While race/ethnicity is most often the focal point of issues of oppression and privilege, social work educators must be able to foster recognition of and discussion about the multiple identities we all hold. Thus, while white women may obtain privilege based on their "racial" status, their gender is often a source of discrimination and inequality. Conversely, young black men, historically the target of multiple forms of oppression, *may* enjoy privilege due to their sexual orientation, gender, age, income, or physical ability. Consciously or not, these multiple and often interchangeable identities construct our behavior and the way others view us (for example, as someone who does or does not have power). A conversation of the multiple identities we all hold, how this informs our interactions with others, and the implications this has for social work practice and for challenging oppression is key to bridging the

divide inside (and outside) the classroom. This dialogue can provide an opportunity for students and instructors to find common cause in the struggle to achieve social justice and to recognize that in different ways we all suffer and benefit from different forms of oppression. There may be no more important task for social work education.

In addition, a crucial question remains: how do our largely white, middle-income colleagues (social work educators) relate to these topics without some personal connection beyond the task of engaging in research? One could suggest that the individual attributes of social work educators and researchers should not matter, that we have some special ability to understand the struggles of diverse and oppressed populations or empathize with the victims of structural inequality. From this we are thus empowered to fight with and on behalf of "the wretched of the earth." Yet, based on the history of our profession and the overarching course of social welfare policy, one could just as easily argue that social work has maintained its professional status by perpetuating (or at least failing to adequately oppose) a system that reinforces class, racial, and gender hierarchies. This extends to the process of social work education, which is more concerned with training "professional" practitioners than challenging structures of oppression. Until we in the academy begin the process of honest and critical self-reflection about our activities both inside and outside the classroom, I'm afraid the status quo will remain our primary product.

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Abe Lincoln Brigade is memorialized in Hemingway's classic *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

<sup>2</sup> The authors are not satisfied with the professor's response to the students' concerns. We believe he should have acknowledged the concerns the students raised and used the topic as a point of class discussion. Instead, his abject apology deprived the class of an opportunity to discuss the issues in depth and signaled to the rest of the students that no other point of view would be tolerated.

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