

The Rhinoceros: A Women's Studies Finale

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Abstract: A student describes her experience in one of the first courses she takes in college, an introduction to women's studies. The course setting was a Colorado regional comprehensive university with a student population of 5,000. This introductory course is a survey course, and as such, covers many areas of oppression and discrimination. The student tells her story alongside the instructor's narrative as they move together through the course, getting to know each other better. The student relates her personal experience of difference and strength. The instructor relates her surprise at the final project chosen by the student and shares a thoughtful reminder of being non-judgmental.

Keywords: women's studies; oppression; discrimination

She sat in the front row of the women's studies class. The course was an undergraduate introductory course, and as such, was a survey of readings in substantive areas such as race, gender identity and expression, work and wealth, etc. Twenty-four of her peers ranging in age from 76 to 18 scattered across the rest of the room. There were only two males in the class. The 76-year-old was a woman with a master's degree who had a stroke with accompanying facial paralysis. The paralysis caused great difficulties in understanding her speech, and the drooling that occurred because of her inability to close her mouth also could have been off-putting for students. However, this elegant woman directly addressed her physical issues; in doing so, she put the students at ease, and they felt they could then embrace her. She was a remarkable woman.

The two males in the class came from different life experiences. One was a Hispanic father and grandfather in his 50s. The other was a 21-year-old typical college student. They were not silent, not even on the first day of class. They participated fully in each and every activity and discussion. They did not agree with each other because one considered himself to be a social conservative and the other considered himself to be a social radical. Neither of these students had a particular core of female students who agreed with the stated position. Neither male wanted such a group, either. The group developed as people maintained their individual perspectives, reserving the right to speak to various sides of the issues. The instructor had not taught this particular course for eight years and was

highly cognizant of the nature of courses such as this. They can be lightning rods for the explosive thoughts and feelings that students share. The student who is the subject of this story was unassuming, had blonde curly hair, and nearly always had a smile on her face. She always came a little early, as if she did not want to miss anything. The instructor also arrived a bit early in order to be available to students. That way, the course was being taught necessitated the development of relationships among students and with the instructor.

Christina's Story

As a high school senior, I did not know what to expect going into college. So I picked a major that I was comfortable with, art. As the summer came to an end, I decided to change my major to nursing because I knew I would always have a job in the healthcare system and I wanted to work with children who have cancer. At that time, I was enrolled in my first women's studies class; and I was skeptical because I thought it was going to be a course on just women and their history. By the end of the semester, I felt I had learned more about myself and the world around me.

Instructor

It is true that this particular class make-up somehow gelled in the way that few classes do. Even though there was no mandatory attendance policy, absenteeism was rare. We built a trust early on, and this allowed us to tackle the thorniest of issues. On our first day, most of the one and one-half hours was filled with ice-breaker activities. People needed to

get to know each other quickly because they were going to be working in small groups throughout the course, and they were going to be discussing controversial, consciousness-raising material. The activity that I used to learn people's names is a favorite of mine. I asked students, "If you were a jelly bean, what flavor and color would you be and why?"

Other examples of this exercise are: buffet items, ice cream flavors, rivers, mountains, movie stars, and just about anything else that comes in different shapes and sizes. Ironically, students do learn each other's first names very quickly, but the last names are often replaced by the item they chose, such as Susie Paper (as in paper or plastic). I began the class in a large group and then broke down into a series of small groups for the first two weeks. We continued with the readings, and I distributed some paperwork that accompanied the readings but made the content personal. An example of the paperwork asks the student to describe one time they experienced some sort of discrimination. No one was forced to participate, but everyone was encouraged to discuss the content with which they felt comfortable.

At first, there was silence with perhaps one person talking. Before long, I heard laughter coming from nearly every group. I rotated people around the room so that they began to know everyone. She rotated through the small group formations just as other students, and I noticed her participating.

There were several times where I asked her to physically move her chair to more of a "belonging" position in the group. Taking a diversity walk helped to solidify some of the similarities among the students, and after this walk, people seemed to feel more free to tackle some tough issues in interpersonal dialogues. A diversity walk utilizes movement among various groups of "same" and "different."

Several examples are: (1) you have experienced grief or loss in your life; (2) you work part-time; and (3) you own your own vehicle. Through moving from group to group as students physically answer each question, they are able to place themselves with those with similar experiences and those with different experiences. The day that I did

this activity resulted in three small groups staying after class to exchange contact information and to learn more about each other.

Christina's Story

I have always been a conservative person when I am introduced to a new environment. The first day in class, meeting everyone was a little nerve wracking, but by the end, I felt more comfortable in my new college environment. As the semester went on, we got into small and large groups. I felt this really helped us all connect as individuals and as a class. I really enjoyed the material that was presented; I knew most of the issues we discussed like racism, sexism, and so on, went on in the world. Also, many of the issues that were discussed really hit close to home for the majority of the students in the class. There were a few topics that were presented like disability, and how women of color experience the most discrimination. For me, these topics were really new because in my generation these two topics are not very prominent in my education or society. As I grew up, I became knowledgeable about all the organizations for people with disabilities and how they helped. So I was very shocked to hear that perfectly healthy people had something against those who are disadvantaged.

Every day that the class was in session, I arrived an hour early to start my day. I did this so I could relax and prepare for what the day was going to bring. As people trickled in one by one, I got to talk to and get to know them. One day when class was canceled, a few students showed up and some stayed and talked to one another. I was one of them. We talked about everyday things, our family life, shared pictures, and when we parted for the rest of our classes of the day, I felt like part of something bigger than just another class. The instructor was also one of my favorite people in the course; she came up with activities and movies for us to elaborate on and discuss. She was also non-judgmental, unlike other teachers from local schools. I believe that she has a lot of life experience about many of the topics we discussed, which gave her an advantage when it came to teaching us.

Instructor

Her demeanor never changed. She never looked upset, frustrated, angry, sad, or anything other than her soft, smiling, crinkly, blue-eyed self. In short,

her expression never changed. She was hard to read for that reason. And there were occasions when I wanted to be able to read people and gauge the level of tension in the room. She did not react when someone asked why we talk so disparagingly about “female mutilation” when we do not even mention male circumcision—is that not mutilation, too? Others did; she didn't. When a peer suggested that all whites are racist, even if they try not to be, classmates were about to strangle him; she sat and smiled. Having taught this course for many years, but not having taught it within the past eight years or so, my experience was that eventually, all students experience the overpowering need to speak up. Nearly everyone in the class was taking deep breaths, waving hands in the air to be noticed, and/or physically turning away from a person or subject that was a sensitive topic. She had no readable facial expressions or other nonverbal communication indicating stimulation; she appeared to be neutral about topics that had others up in arms.

Since the content of this course is controversial, I required journals so that I could respond privately to things that students might not have wanted to address in class and to make sure that people were keeping up with the reading. A typical journal entry might include commentary about a website video that a student stumbled across, “The Southern Avenger.” A student might have responded that she agreed that the focus in the United States was no longer on race (racism), but was instead on social class (classism). My response would typically be challenging; “Are you sure you agree? He tried to take the focus off “white” by talking about the elite. Who are the elites? Who has the power?”

Other comments I made included, “Speak up more in class. I love your energy!” Her journals were usually straight-forward. “I didn't know this, or I can't believe this is still happening, or I disagree with the author.” I issued the same sort of challenges to “dig deeper” or “what would happen if...” to her as to other students. However, her journals continued to be on the same level of response, just barely past the surface observations. I began to think that she might be overwhelmed with what she was learning because so much of the content seemed to be new information to her. I never had an indication of the depth that was about to emerge.

One of the readings was about ableism. In her journal, she disclosed her own disability. She wrote an entire page about the diagnosis and how it has affected her life. The disability is not one that is clearly visible. Instead, people would not know unless she divulged this information. In my responses to her, I said that I was glad the reading had so resonated with her. The journals then assumed their usual tone. Through the rest of the course, no other entry demonstrated such engagement with the content. I would say that her entries were “safe.”

Christina's Story

As we followed the subject of disabilities and discrimination against them, I thought about sharing some of the disabilities I have encountered in my family. I know it is wrong to be afraid of or hate someone for something they could not control. So in my journal, I finally came out of my shell and talked about me and what disability I have. I am a severe asthmatic and a little overweight, due to not being able to play sports or even participate in a physical education class. This has caused many upsetting factors in my life because I wanted to do some sports in middle and high school. I finally was able to fill the hole that had grown inside me with other non-physical activities, such as Art Honor Society, the LINK Crew, and the Drama Club. In these clubs, I found myself and what I was good at doing. I realized that there are more opportunities than just the “popular” choices. Even though this is not a visible disability, I still do not like people to know about it because they do not understand; and they think that it is automatically fixable with more exercise or medication. This is why I want to be a nurse, to help heal, and let people know that there are people out there who do understand what they are going through themselves or with a family member.

As it came closer to having to pick a project to show what we had gained from the class, I really wanted to do something that showed me as a person and how I viewed people after I took this class. As I thought about it, I wanted to draw a mosaic to represent the people in the world. I chose to draw a rhinoceros because that is one of the animals in the world that is going extinct and deserves more credit for being a strong but beautiful animal. With its build, strength, and endurance, it reminded me of

the human race and how we as individuals have overcome so many different obstacles in our lives. The inside of the rhino was made up of many different flowers and plants to show the world as a whole, but there are all kinds of different flowers. These were to represent humans of all races, people with disabilities, females, males, different social classes, and all the other different aspects of lives all over globe. I like that it shows different shapes, sizes, and colors within the rhino. I feel that it shows how strong the human race is as a whole, like a rhinoceros. After I presented my picture, I felt that the students in the class understood me and realized that I did have an opinion about things we had discussed. They were intrigued by what I had created, and this made me feel like they understood the real meaning of the collage. I also had a feeling of pride because not all the students knew what I was about or what I was able to do as a student.

Instructor

I might have been misled by such journaling and have thought that she was an average student, except for the final activity. The assignment was to do an action or advocacy project. Students are encouraged to write poems, produce art works, join a march, contribute to a cause, write an organization, etc. One student became involved with the Hispanic effort to challenge the City Council's decision-making regarding activities for children and youth in one section of town. Another student participated in the Gay Rights Parade in New York City. The place kicker for the football team wrote two poems that probably deserved publication. A young immigrant from Africa wrote a profound poem she named, "The Scar," describing her experiences in the United States with racism—the glances, the distance, and all the ways she had been made to feel invisible.

Christina was among the first to volunteer to present her activity to the class. I was stunned by her activity because it was not what I would have predicted. She held up a picture, a really big picture, of a rhinoceros. On closer inspection, you could see that there were flowers and leaves that made up the mosaic of the animal. There were roses and chrysanthemums, palms and lilies. Christina had carefully crafted the rhinoceros with a sea of colors, reds, pinks, greens, yellows, purples, blues, and oranges. It was an incredibly beautiful

rhinoceros. The prose that accompanied the picture spoke of difference and beauty, of the need for space and acceptance, and how in our own unique ways, we all contribute so much to the whole. She put the entire semester's readings together with her carefully-chosen and carefully-drawn figures. She had absorbed so much more than her in-class responses or her journal entries disclosed. Her classmates appeared momentarily stunned, too. After a moment of silence, they gave Christina a standing ovation. They engaged in dialogue, too, regarding the beauty of the beast and the perfection in having chosen a rhinoceros—one of the toughest, "don't mess with me" animals around. "Just like women," they said. She had been barely visible for most of the semester, but her visibility now skyrocketed! She blushed and smiled the biggest smile I have ever seen. I am convinced that the young woman who entered that class and the one who left are not entirely the same person.

Christina's Story

At the end of this class, as a freshman in college in my first semester, I feel it has given me a better understanding of what to expect in the world and how some people can behave toward one another. As for me, I learned that I should speak out more and show my true self, so people will not be so shocked when I do show my real abilities. I also learned that people are all different and come from different backgrounds, so we should give everyone a chance, even if it is uncomfortable at first.

Instructor

I hope that Christina has learned a bit more about herself and will be open to new adventures as her collegiate career progresses. This class was one of the first she took, and I am sure she did not know what to expect. This class was an introductory course, and one of the emphases was developing relationships. She now has a better idea of what to expect. As for me, I have had to re-learn something that I was not aware I had forgotten. I had assumed that what she showed was what she was willing to show, and was only that with which she was comfortable. Those things may be true. But I had grown so used to her ordinariness that I had also assumed that what she gave was all that there was to give. I was so wrong! Having taught for nearly 26 years in post-secondary settings and preferring experiential learning, I had somehow convinced

myself that I had heard or seen it all. Ironically, I still believe that within every group of students resides a “key” to heightening experience and learning. I have spent some time trying to understand why I thought that I was not able to find the key to Christina, and the reasons continue to be her lack of in-depth response. She certainly chose the last moment possible to reveal how much she had grown across the semester. I have also spent some time wondering if I should have prodded her more or should have had private conversations with her. I have ultimately decided that the journals were the private conversations, and I apparently did not have to prod her more. I believe that she received various messages from this course. She learned that racism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism, and classism still exist. She learned that she might be subjected to one of the “isms” and needed to be able to recognize it if it appeared. Christina learned that she is a beautiful, gifted, powerful, young woman who will make a difference in the world, first, because she knows how discrimination feels and second, because she will no longer be silent. She will speak up and confront that which needs confronting.

I have not had Christina in any other courses, but I have continued to be in touch with a number of students from that class. It was an exceptional experience for the students and for me, and I am deeply grateful for the reminders that came to me because of the profound interactions in the class.

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