

## Teaching at the Crossroad: A Philosophy of Teaching

Effective teaching has taken place in my classroom when I have used the interdisciplinary methods of my discipline (American Studies) to foster student learning. In so many ways, my teaching is steeped in the belief that through multi-disciplinary approaches both students and teachers can collaborate in the process of shining a light into the otherwise dark corners of American society. What motivates me to teach in this way is the amazing opportunity to use my research and scholarly training to raise students' level of consciousness about racism, class-ism, and sexism and to inform them about how these –isms so frequently result in injustice and inequality. The purpose of consciousness-raising through effective teaching is twofold: students learn to critique American culture by interrogating it from multiple disciplines and students are encouraged to put into practice the knowledge they gain in class. To achieve these ends, I apply three central elements to my teaching: 1.) diversity and issues of identity in American life, 2.) interdisciplinary approaches to critiquing those issues of diversity, and 3.) a variety of teaching methods designed to enhance student learning.

The crossroad at which these elements meet stands as a site for dynamic teaching, learning, and growth to take place; nevertheless, many challenges also emerge at the crossroad. My own identity as an under-represented (African-American) minority faculty who teaches very contentious courses on issues of race, gender, and class in university settings that are increasingly divided by debates about Affirmative Action and equal access to higher education could certainly lay the foundation for a potentially unproductive classroom were both teacher and student assumptions and stereotypes preclude effective collaborative learning. To prevent this occurrence, I am very clear with students about who I am and why I teach. I make it clear that although I have a racial identity which brings with it particular experiences that inform my opinions on the course content, my opinions are not the only ones that matter and as such I do not intend to force my views on anyone else.

Students in my course know that I believe we all bring unique experiences and points of view to the table. I help students get comfortable sharing their views by having them do ice-breakers which incorporate questions and issues relevant to the course. I also assign students to small discussion groups, but this only take place after we have thoroughly reviewed the list of ground-rules for productive and respectful dialogue in the classroom.

Once it is clear that we can all share our thoughts on complex issues in a productive way, the uniqueness of AC with its focus on interdisciplinary methods of analysis begins to take center stage. This focus on interdisciplinary approaches means that even if I choose to organize a course thematically around the issue of racism in selected 20<sup>th</sup> century African American fiction, the students' engagement with the fiction will not be limited to their own readings of it. For example, in an upcoming course titled "Re-making Race: Race and Racism in American Literature and Culture" I plan to teach one unit about the ways in which both whiteness and blackness are constructed when race, sex, and violence intersect. I will accomplish this goal by having them read *Blues for Mr. Charlie*—a play by James Baldwin which is based on the life and death of Emmett Till, a young black boy murdered for whistling at a white woman—and by supplementing their readings with a variety of other homework and in-class activities.

To assess the students' basic comprehension of the play, I will ask them to identify a short passage from the text that most effectively and thoroughly encapsulates the play's theme.

They will then have to write a one-page response which explains their choice. After discussing their passages in class, I will then give a mini-lecture which will introduce the concept of the race, sex, violence intersection and situate James Baldwin and *Blues for Mr. Charlie* within their appropriate historical context. To supplement the lecture and to show students a real life example of how race is constructed through violence, we will view portions of the Marlon Ross film-documentary on Jack Johnson, a black boxer whose defeat of the white heavyweight champion and marriage to a white woman set off a fire-storm of violence that ended in multiple deaths. To get students actively involved in the learning process, their next homework assignment will be to conduct independent research on the Emmett Till case—specifically students will be asked to locate and view the *Jet Magazine* which included images of Till's body—and read an article by historian Gail Bederman which explains how turn of the century notions of civilization and definitions of white manhood were so closely connected to the violence of lynching.

The series of assignments, lectures, and readings will not only enable student to construct a more nuanced analysis of the play, but also demonstrate to them how information on a single topic (the intersection of race, sex, and violence) when approached from multiple disciplines (literature, history, sports, film, magazines, etc.) can be used to uncover aspects of American culture that we may not have otherwise noticed had we only examined the topic from within one discipline. In order to assess students' internalization of the lessons taught during the unit, the final assignment will require that each student identify an example – either historical or contemporary – of race, sex, and violence intersecting and explain in a two-page reflection paper the social implications of this incident. To accomplish this goal, students will have to understand how race is constructed, who it benefits, and how to research and analyze historical and social context so that they can look at contemporary cases like O.J. Simpson or Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas (“high-tech lynching”) and offer a nuanced reading of what the underlying factors of race and sex are in those situations. When I sit down at my desk to read the students' papers and it is evident to me that they have successfully use the skills learned in class to demonstrate that their raised levels of consciousness have enabled them to both identify and explain race and gender at work in the world around them, I will know without a doubt that my decision to teach at the crossroad has effected change in the world, one course at a time and one student at a time.