

THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by Karen Sue Grosz, Santa Monica College

American education has failed in recent years to meet the needs of a growing number of students, but not because of lack of effort, money, or concern. Rather, the fault lies in the educational process itself, for the overwhelming majority of educators are white middle class individuals whose perceptions are so different from those of the minority students they sometimes struggle to help that they simply cannot perceive the nature of the problem.

These educators sometimes believe that students have the “right” to fail and will argue that perception at academic meetings. After all, they remember their own college experience when failure was an overt act, a direct result of too much partying and too little studying. Comfortably settled into the role as teacher of a discipline which, after years of presentation, has become extremely familiar, these faculty members often lose touch with the frustration and anger that accompany the student's struggle to master a strange subject matter. While they may superficially recognize the student's struggle, deep down they blame the student for lack of effort.

These educators fail to recognize that the methods and materials that enabled them to learn some 20 or 30 years ago now are relevant to a shrinking number of white middle-class students, if they are relevant at all. But for the Black or Hispanic students, those methods may not only alienate but antagonize, even as the instructor works to help. Working at cross purposes, student and instructor both suffer; while both may care and desperately want to succeed, neither recognizes that the expectations of the other are culturally bound.

The challenge of Assembly Bill 1725 lies before us. As we work to implement the various reforms of that legislation, we should remind ourselves periodically of the intent language of the bill:

The people of California should have the opportunity to be proud of a system of community colleges which instills pride among its students and faculty, where rigor and standards are an assumed part of a shared effort to educate, where the hugely diverse needs of students are a challenge rather than a threat, where the community colleges serve as models for the new curricula and innovative teaching, where learning is what we care about most.

The most recent volume of the Harvard Educational Review addresses this problem in a special issue dedicated to “Race, Racism, and American Education: Perspectives of Asian American, Blacks, Latinos, and Native American.” In the introduction, the editors note that modern educators have adopted the myth that racism is dead. One need only read recent news reports of problems at UCLA or Stanford or other institutions across the country to know that racism is not dead. Why, then, have educators adopted this myth?

The editors of the Harvard Educational Review point to the use of the term “at-risk” as one

which “serves to mask the concept of race,” noting that “...the prevailing perception among educators is that whatever the causes are, they emerge from the lives, abilities, skills, families, or communities of the 'at-risk' students,” but not from any failure on the part of the teacher or the educational system. In fact, when 42 percent of Hispanic high school students drop out of the school, the focus could just as well be placed not upon the students but upon the schools and reported as a “failure of the schools to graduate 42 percent of all Latino students” (p.v). Only because white middle-class educators view the situation through their own perception filters do they fail to perceive the failure as theirs, not the students'. Lisa Delpit of the Baltimore City Schools notes that

...both sides need to be able to listen, and I contend that it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process.

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. (p. 297)

Perhaps these well-meaning educators have replicated the mistake that many make when visiting a foreign country: if the individual to whom they are speaking does not understand, they speak more slowly and perhaps a little louder, but still in a foreign language. Many remedial English instructors appear to make the same mistake: if a student does not understand the syntax of a sentence, the well-meaning English instructor slows down and focuses upon each word, one at a time demanding to know whether it is noun, adjective, or adverb. Why the student should understand the syntax of the sentence any better a word at a time is the ultimate mystery of teaching English.

Phil Daro, the director of the California Mathematics Project, has written an insightful paper about the failure of remedial instruction at the high school level. When students have problems with the content of the course, Daro states, they are put in remedial classes from this all content has been removed. What exactly is the “content” of a remedial class? I have discovered, after years of experimentation, that college remedial English students respond enthusiastically to novels; their writing improves when they have something to write about; and lessons in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary are more meaningful when they are based upon the content of the literature rather than taught in isolation.

In her report on the status of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney quotes Maya Angelou:

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, (Maya Angelou) told about growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, a poetry-loving child nourished by Shakespeare and Langston Hughes, Edgar Allan Poe and Paul Laurence Dunbar. One day when she was 12, she determined that she would do what youngsters she admired greatly did: “render a rendition of poetry before the congregation of the C.M.E. Church.”

“I decided that I would render Portia's speech from The Merchant of Venice,” Angelou said in Cedar Rapids:

“I had it choreographed; it was going to be fantastic, but then Momma (as I called my grandmother) asked me, 'Sister, what are you planning to render?' So I told her, 'A piece from Shakespeare, Momma.' Momma asked, 'Now sister, who is this very Shakespeare?' I had to tell her that Shakespeare was white, and Momma felt the less we said about whites the better, and if we didn't mention them at all, maybe they'd just get up and leave. I couldn't lie to her, so I told her, 'Momma, it's a piece written by William Shakespeare who is white, but he's dead and has been dead for centuries!' Now, I thought that she would forgive him that little idiosyncrasy. Momma said, 'Sister, you will render a piece of Mister Langston Hughes, Mister Countee Cullen, Mister James Weldon Johnson, or Mister Paul Laurence Dunbar. Yes, ma'am, little mistress, you will!'

Well, I did, but years later, when I physically and psychologically left that country, that condition, which is Stamps, Arkansas...I found myself and still find myself, whenever I like, stepping back into Shakespeare. Whenever I like, I pull him to me. He wrote it for me. 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,/ I all alone bewep my outcast state/
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries/
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd/
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least...' Of course he wrote it for me; that is a condition of the black woman. I understand that. Nobody else understands it, but I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman. That is the role of art in life.” (Chronicle of Higher Education, September 3)

Of course, Momma was right to insist that Maya Angelou know her cultural heritage, for without that heritage Angelou would be incomplete. But Angelou was also right that Shakespeare was a black woman, for Angelou has been able to shake off her own perception filter and open up to the best that Shakespeare has to offer. We all must step outside ourselves periodically and attempt to see the world through others' eyes and perceptions. Without such an attempt, we are impoverished, for we will not be able to fly with the black protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel Song of Solomon or to experience Love in the Time of Cholera.

Cameron McCarthy says in “Rethinking Liberal and Radical Perspectives on Racial Inequality in Schooling: Making the Case of Non-Synchrony” that Black and Hispanic students drop out of high school because of the perception that white racism among American employers will bar even the best prepared minority applicant from begin hired. Other authors in the special issue of the Harvard Educational Review make implicit the idea that white middle-class teachers are the racists who discourage these new majority students. No doubt they are right. But we are all racists in that we interpret reality in terms of our individual perception filters, failing to step into the other person's shoes to see the world from a different perspective.

With the reforms of Assembly Bill 1725 before us, community college faculty must grasp this opportunity to change the color of our faculty, to change teaching styles to meet the needs of a changing student population, to work together as counselors, librarians, faculty and specialists serving all the needs of all our students. We will have \$1,00,000 in faculty and staff diversity funds and \$5,000,000 in faculty and staff development funds available after January 1, 1989. We must begin now discussions of how those funds can best be used to serve our students.

Faculty of all colors should attend academic senate meetings and request participation as the district affirmative action plan is reviewed. Faculty of all colors should attend academic senate meetings and request participation as the district affirmative action plan is reviewed. Faculty of all colors should run for office in the academic senate and work to institutionalize affirmative action from within the faculty power structure. Faculty of color should offer to train those white middle-class faculty who volunteer to serve as affirmative action representatives on hiring committees.

If we work together we can avoid future lawsuits such as that against Fullerton College, and we can help to realize the vision offered in Assembly Bill 1725:

Since the development of the original master plan, there has been a significant change in the populations served by the community colleges, and in the anticipated needs of the state as we move into the 21st century. The state's population will grow by 22 percent between 1986 and 2000, from 27 million to roughly 33 million. By the turn of the century, California will have a cultural and ethnic pluralism unknown elsewhere in the mainland United States. Fifty-one percent of the schoolage children in 1989 will be minorities; the majority of the population will be nonwhite in the following decade.

...But inside the economic center--not just at its margin--the workers of the future will learn new literacy skills, and more ability to communicate and learn on their own...

The convergence of these tendencies--both demographic and economic--lead to the possibility of an increasingly stratified society. This can include what has been called a "permanent underclass" mostly minority, and a semipermanent, semiemployable stratum of low-skilled workers. The consequences of this development would be dire: the permanent underutilization of the energies and talents of our people, the deepening of racial resentments and fears, and the constant anxiety among more and more of us that the future has no place for us.

...It is important in this regard to honor those who teach basic skills and literacy, as well as those who teach Shakespeare and Plato, to facilitate effective communication between "vocational" and "liberal arts" departments in an epoch where all vocations will require deeper and more subtle forms of literacy, and to build a new and diverse curriculum which engages all our diverse students, and demands the best of their minds and spirits.

(Assembly Bill 1725, intent language)

How can educators fulfill the promise of hundreds of thousands of students? First, educators of all color need to work together not only so that students see the cooperation and beneficial influence of such cooperation, but also so that they can learn from one another as colleagues. Over time, with patience on all sides, educators can learn to see beyond their own perceptions and recognize different perception filters. In addition, Lisa Delpit suggests that educators must

1. Recognize that people are "experts on their own lives."
2. Not be too hasty in denying others' interpretations.
3. Act rationally and believe others are rational.

4. Be “vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness.”
5. Seek out those whose perspectives differ most.
6. Understand one another's power and be unafraid to question discrimination.

(Harvard Educational Review, P. 297)

Only then will content once again appear in remedial courses, and only then will all students be able to progress through the educational system. Only when that happens will students be able to recognize the Shakespeare was a black woman.

Reprinted from the Forum Volume VII, Summer 1990