

For the past sixteen years I have taught a course to undergraduates at Temple University in the honors program, "The Politics of Diversity: Focus on Race and Gender." This course meets the Studies in Race requirement of the University Core Curriculum. It is also a writing intensive course. The course is cross-listed between the Honors Program and Women's Studies. The course generally enrolls from 25-35 students. The students come from every school and college at the University, and although the majority is Liberal Arts students, there are always a fairly high proportion of students from the film and arts programs, social work and education, with a sprinkling of business and biology majors. The mix of interests, race, age, and background (less of gender, this course generally enrolls no more than 5 men) and the very engaging subject matter makes the course lively and interesting to teach, and amenable to encouraging students to make a careful examination of how race and gender function in their lives and in society.

The goals of this course are: to make students aware of the ways in which the issues of race and gender are present in social and cultural institutions in the United States and in our everyday lives; to provide an opportunity to learn how to discuss issues of race and gender among people of diverse backgrounds; and to see the ways in which issues of race and gender intersect in our society. The reading and writing assignments and class discussions all are focused on developing these themes.

In introducing the course I spend a fair amount of time going over the syllabus and explaining the assignments. I also hand out "Sue Wendell's Rules of the Classroom" and discuss ground rules for conversations about potentially divisive topics. I generally ask students to take turns reading this document aloud to make sure we cover all the points raised. The document often engenders important conversations about how class discussions can be conducted in a respectful manner and why it is problematic to ask people to represent their race or gender in class discussions. The readings for the second week provide a theoretical framework for our conversations. The main focus is on an article by Iris Marion Young, which traces the history of racism and sexism in Western societies and makes the argument that the problem we face today is dealing with the racist and sexist ideology accreted over the centuries which may have been subject to legal remedies but which remains in the unconscious and produces what can be termed "discrimination by default." The article is difficult for the students, and we spend most of the class time developing an understanding of the ideas presented there. We also read a chapter from Lu-n Wang's *Discrimination by Default*. That reading reinforces the ideas Young presents, and brings examples of current practices of discrimination that are not unlike those that students learn to look out for in this course.

For our conversation I want to highlight an assignment that I have developed that gives students an opportunity to observe how race and gender function in their daily experiences and to reflect on those experiences so that they can see how such commonplace events are woven into the pattern of social discrimination by default.

The assignment begins with writing a one page descriptive narrative that recounts the details of an experience they have had. The subjects may be classroom interactions, interactions at their place of work or extracurricular activities, conversations with friends and family or scenes they observe on the street. (They should not be about things they've seen on television or read about in the news, but things they've observed in their own lives.) The experiences they describe vary, from observing how retail associates working in suburban malls deal with African American customers to different parenting styles on the local bus. I ask them not to analyze this experience, but merely to describe it in detail. This exercise is repeated three times over the course of the semester. It is always interesting to watch the change in the level of sophistication

in these observations as students become more familiar with the theoretical constructs around race and gender that we are working with in class and apply them to their daily lives.

At the end of the course, students take the three narratives they have written, and in small groups they share their observations and help one another decide which narrative to use for an oral presentation in class. To prepare for this experience, the students read a very accessible novel, Brothers and Sisters by Bebe Moore Campbell, and they watch the feature film “Crash.” Although the film and novel may lack serious artistic merit, they do a wonderful job of presenting, albeit in rather stereotypic fashion, most of the issues that have arisen in their narratives. The assignment attached to this week is to write a narrative like the ones they had been writing about their own lives in the voice of one of the characters in either the film or the novel. We pick a few of them to discuss in class to help the students learn how they might make any of those scenes a subject for their final analytical project.

Over the next few sessions, students present their stories and the class brainstorms about how to analyze each event, beginning by connecting the event to what we have learned in class and in the readings. The students’ oral presentations are the highlight of the course. Students challenge one another on their perceptions and ideas. They also get a rich tableau of all of the ways in which their lives are defined by race and gender. They often comment that they never would have noticed or thought about the experience they described, if they didn’t have to for this assignment.

For the final assignment, they write a 5-7 page analysis of the ways in which their chosen narrative illustrates larger social issues. They build and revise the analysis based on the suggestions they receive from their classmates during the oral presentation. The written analysis must incorporate insights from the readings we’ve done, and also additional library research.

This assignment usually achieves its goals of making students more conscious of issues of race and gender in society and how those social issues relate to their own life experiences. I have nominated several of these papers over the years for presentation at the Temple Undergraduate Research Forum. When students come to my office to discuss what they’ve written about, we spend time expanding their focus, but also thinking about what their role might be in interrupting what they observed, or what factors might contribute to enabling the scenarios to unfold differently. It’s of interest to me that as the neighborhood around Temple gentrifies, more and more of the narratives focus on street interactions between the students and their neighbors. In the final papers, students are exploring some of the problems that have ensued because of their presence in the neighborhood. As a result, they are much more self-conscious about how they interact with the people who live here and the impact the students’ presence has on their lives.

In the current environment in public universities where “liberal professors” are the target of scrutiny by legislators looking for politicized and biased teaching, it is important to remember that giving students the opportunity to observe for themselves what is going on in their worlds and subject those experiences to reflection and conversation provides an opportunity to teach for change.