

Making a Case for Transformation

A. An Incident that Raised the Need for an Action/Reflection Model

I have taught for over ten years in four-year public universities, primarily in undergraduate programs in women's/gender studies, American Indian studies, and religious studies. I have a Ph.D. in religious studies, specializing in the study of American Indian religious traditions and women and religion. Although not trained in theology, I maintain an interest in feminist, womanist, mujerista and Latina, Asian feminist, and other theologies and theology, in part because of my own interest in the potential for indigenous, non-Christian theologies.

I teach a range of courses, but nearly all of them engage in some way in analyses of oppression on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and/or nation. Although the specific incidents escape me, I have come to identify in my courses on American Indian women, religious traditions, and contemporary issues several challenges that I will characterize, for the moment, as “problems,” because they seem to manifest as “problems students have.” For the sake of brevity, I will over-generalize: 1) Students appear to be alienated from themselves; 2) Students appear to be alienated from others; 3) Students appear to be apathetic when it comes to social change; and 4) Students appear to have little real knowledge about American Indians.

B. Social Analysis of the Factors Causing the Problem in that Context

Although many of the factors that cause these problems lie outside the classroom, I would like to address the factors that exacerbate these problems inside the classroom. One of the main resources we have as teachers to foster social change is the classroom. So in part the “problems” that students appear to have are mirrored by the “problems” we as teachers appear to have. Again, these are over-generalizations: 1) Teachers (in public institutions) believe we have little responsibility for offering students opportunities for self-knowledge; 2) Teachers believe we have great responsibility for preparing students to enter into the work world; 3) Teachers believe we are supposed to teach rather than provide opportunities for students to learn; 4) Teachers believe we are the experts on our subjects.

C. Theological/Ethical/Biblical/Pastoral/Historical Issue that is Addressed

At the heart of these apparent “problems,” in my analysis, is the issue of disconnection, not only for our students also for us as teachers. Both students and faculty share, at least at times, feelings of self-alienation, especially in the face of outer demands for success and accomplishment (graduation, tenure/job security) and inner needs for meaning and fulfillment, which often conflict. These external demands are shaped by Western societal privileging of competition over cooperation and individual acclaim over community solidarity. As a result, both students and teachers often co-create a context in the classroom that supports competition and individual attainment, a context that western universities consider normative. Such normalizing of competition and individual consciousness inhibits connection with others, the recognition of interdependence with others—indeed, interbeing as one another—and the joint assumption of social change as the work of all of us (versus “that’s ‘their’ problem, not my problem”).

Such disconnection from self and other concerns many religious and spiritual traditions. In fact, in the case of religious/spiritual practice, the two are usually inseparable, for knowledge

of the self leads to recognition that self and other are indivisible. In the case of the Lakota, the expression “*Mitakuye oyasin*”—all our relations—speaks to the profound interconnection all life shares, not just humans and animals and plants but all beings—rocks, clouds, stars included. Such non-dualism characterizes Buddhism as well, with monk Thich Nhat Hahn’s term “interbeing” capturing the essence of the identity (oneness) of all and everything.

D. Action Taken and Its Impact on the Pedagogy of the Class

In translating non-dualism into the classroom, I have kept many ideas in mind, including: 1) “A teacher’s main purpose is not to deliver content to receivers of that content, but to deliver human beings to themselves” (Maria Harris); 2) “When you teach someone something, you’ve robbed the person of the experience of learning it. You need to be cautious before you take that experience away from someone else” (Native American pedagogical approach); and 3) “What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need” (Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch).

For this consultation, I will focus on a strategy I have used twice in my teaching career, the case method. I first attempted this approach in the course *Indians and Allies: Approaches to Social and Cultural Issues Facing Native Americans*, which I taught in American Indian and Native Studies at the University of Iowa in 2004. The enrollment was small, approximately 12 students. I used this method again in 2006 in my Women’s Studies course *American Indian Women* at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Thirty-five students were enrolled in this course.

Known for its effectiveness in medical and business schools, case-based learning is an innovative method that teachers in a variety of fields have begun to attempt and adopt. Instead of learning how as a part of a medical team to diagnose and treat a sick patient or how as part of a board of a company to resurrect a failing business, students in fields such as women’s studies and ethnic studies, learn how to assess and approach problems affecting our communities and society, problems in which gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion and nation play crucial roles.

The case method entails the use of one or more cases—sets of facts presented in narrative form. Each case features one or more real-life problems or conflicts to be resolved and a cast of role-players, each of whom has an interest in the outcome of the case and a unique role within the case. The students research their roles in preparation for a culminating role-play, an enactment of an event in which the players meet to explore the problem and possible resolutions. The event is not scripted; each player simply plays her or his part to the fullest, allowing the discussion/debate/collaboration to unfold as it will.

The approach is still a “work in progress” for me (and it is not without its problems), but the initial results are promising. Students learn about themselves—their assumptions, fears, strengths—and they learn about some of the concrete realities Native Americans experience and the role of religious traditions for real people in living communities. The scenarios prompt students to see the inseparability of Native and non-Native peoples and problems. The method also approximates what students may encounter in the real world. Finally, it decentralizes my role as the teacher and facilitates real connection with the students and among them.