

Reflections from a Black Instructor: Teaching when the Minority is the Majority

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My identity as a Black woman, first-generation student, influenced how I navigated higher education spaces. I attended a small, liberal arts college for my undergraduate degree, which was populated by mostly White students. I was one of only ten other Black students out of a total of 600, which proved to be a culture shock for me. I dealt with multiple racist incidents, heard racial slurs hurled at me, and filed several reports of discrimination, and nothing was ever done. As a result of such turmoil, I gained a few new diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With all my new labels, I had one that motivated me to keep going: instructor. I had the opportunity to be a supplemental instructor during my undergraduate career, and it brought me much joy and happiness. It was the only source that filled my cup when I often felt empty.

Completing my undergraduate degree was challenging and I was often isolated and lonely, but I know that my pain had a purpose. While going through so many challenges, I would always think to myself, "How can I make sure that nobody else ever has to experience this level of pain?" Which led me to pursue my doctorate degree in higher education. Teaching has always been a passion of mine, and I knew that I would be able to reach students if I interacted with them regularly in the classroom. My teaching philosophy roots from previous experiences in the classroom that were not always so pleasant, and I will continue to challenge that narrative for my students.

One experience that stood out to me, and that I will mainly discuss, is when I taught a social justice class, which will be referred to as *PED 120: Social Justice and Pedagogy*, with all

Black women students in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. This experience was enriching and fruitful. I was proud to be able to mentor, teach, and learn with other Black women. They reminded me so much of myself when I was an undergraduate student struggling to find my way in a White dominated space. While all of this was comforting and validating, I had to think about what diversity meant to me when everyone that I am teaching looks like me. Was it fair to teach material and only make references to the Black community (despite the historic oppression our community has endured)? How can diversity be defined when the minority is the majority? These are the questions I wrestled with while teaching this course. Although the Black American experience is unique and complex, it is essential that I addressed all identities and perspectives to my Black women students. I did not want them to be close-minded, and adopt a framework where Blackness is the only diversity, and adopt ways of thinking that mirror majoritarian populations.

Teaching strategies

Some of the teaching strategies I used to ensure clarity of material and deep understanding were structured discussions, repetition, scaffolding, and building rapport with students. I gave students the opportunity to share their opinions, and speak on issues that are not normalized, such as identities, intersectionality, and race. My goal was to challenge students' method of thinking, and encourage them to have more open-minded thoughts while decreasing their implicit biases. To encourage open-mindedness and accountability for personal biases, I had students complete a 'Privilege List' activity where they were asked to circle all the privileges they have. Some privileges included living in a safe neighborhood, remaining calm when dealing with law enforcement, and being able to openly practice their religious beliefs. Some students circled many privileges while others only had a few. This introductory activity sparked conversations regarding who is valuable in our social world and how certain communities inherently have more privileges than others, which is fundamental to social justice topics.

Repetition came into play by revisiting social justice topics frequently. Diversity work is often just a one-stop-shop, and I ensured that my students understood what it meant to live as a non-Black minoritized individual. I enjoyed using the scaffolding technique because it is a powerful tool for teaching and learning that allows students to celebrate their progress and develop deeper understandings of course content. I would begin my lessons slowly then build up to deeper topics. Lastly, I believe that building relationships with students is the most pertinent aspect of the student-faculty relationship. Nurturing relationships with students help to establish trust and comfort. It is essential to note that having homogeneous identity with my students made it easier for me to cultivate trust and create a safe, vulnerable environment where individuals could express themselves freely. The persistence of racism and discrimination within higher education exacerbates the need for racial similarity as it cultivates belonging, all of which were evident in my class. My social and racial identities assisted me in creating trust and a healthy classroom dynamic. However, instructors with more privileged identities would likely have to break barriers between students with more minoritized identities due to the historical nature of racial tensions in the United States.

Apart from paralleling racial identities, I fostered trust in the classroom by listening to my students' concerns, and applying their feedback on my teaching to improve the classroom environment. For example, my students expressed how they prefer to have breaks and group discussions instead of lectures, and I made the necessary adjustments to enhance their learning experience while increasing their classroom participation. Moreover, I shared my personal experiences from my undergraduate career and made myself more approachable and relatable, so students felt comfortable sharing personal aspects about themselves. Combining all these strategies led to a strong sense of belonging and community in the classroom. My students confided in me about their personal issues and other academic struggles. Fostering an inclusive classroom was not only useful for the students, but it was validating for me as well. I felt that I successfully met the course learning objectives while giving my students space to be free and advance their education.

Widening Intersectionality

Teaching all Black women was a beautiful experience, but I had to ensure that I addressed the identities and positionalities of other groups while addressing the diversity within the Black community. Minoritized communities are usually thought of and spoken about in monolithic terms, thus leading to stereotypes and generalizations. However, minoritized communities have ethnic and other variations of diversity. To migrate and encourage intersectionality, I engaged students with reflective activities and discussions that made them think about how their identities influence their educational experiences. For example, I would present questions such as, “How do you show up in your STEM classes? How do your identities influence how you navigate this space? How do the identities of your counterparts impact you?” Moreover, I would show videos with diverse groups and have students read literature from scholars with Native and Indigenous backgrounds to emphasize diversity. It was paramount that I did not create a binary between diverse communities, which is commonplace within education. Even though my race is a salient identity, it should not be projected onto my students.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

I found that creating community and demonstrating humanity in the classroom was the most effective way to engage my students. Utilizing teaching strategies such as repetition and scaffolding were useful, but facilitating practical discussions was the most effective. Introducing students to the Privilege List activity was useful for challenging internal biases while encouraging open-mindedness for clarity of social justice topics. Activities such as these increase students’ critical thinking skills while holding them accountable for their biases; all of which can be useful for students with various demographics.

Practicing self-awareness and addressing my own biases aided in promoting diverse perspectives in student learning. To bridge gaps of racism and discrimination, honest conversations are fundamental, and self-reflection is paramount. Furthermore, I found that working on myself and addressing my own shortcomings made me a better instructor. I had to

dig deep into myself and understand my purpose and constantly remind myself of past painful experiences so that my students would not have to endure similar encounters.

Being an instructor is a continuous learning process. Students grow and develop and have different needs each school year. While I have refined and vastly improved my teaching skills, I still have areas for opportunity. To promote my growth as an educator, I will continue to invest in my own education by challenging myself to learn material outside of my comfort zones while continuing to open my mind to new experiences. I will continue to advocate for myself and marginalized students who do not have a voice. I owe it to my community to be an effective educator and break cycles of poverty, first-generation college student status, and unhealthy practices. I will continue to learn more about novel teaching methods and apply them to my lessons. I will work to be the best instructor I possibly can while challenging myself and my students. Teaching is my calling and life purpose, and I know that every student I touch will walk away better than they came.