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[[Journal Index](#)]

Standing on the Frontline: Having the Courage to Teach
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Abstract

Issues of race, class, and gender along with many other characteristics that define human differences are inextricably woven into the fabric of the social institutions in the United States of America; the university classroom is not excluded. This article discusses the teaching experiences of an African-American woman teaching associate/doctoral student while teaching at a predominantly white institution and the resistance often encountered from students in the form of challenging authority, questioning credibility and/or grades, and other forms of disrespectful behavior that could be subtle and covert. Despite such challenges, the teaching associate discusses ways in which she used various strategies to successfully manage barriers in the classroom. Dealing with issues of social justice in the classroom inevitably creates a level of discomfort for individuals who have never had to deal with these issues; yet, it is critically important to continue to raise the level of awareness for faculty and administrators of the type of issues women and people of color are faced with in the classroom when dealing with these topics.

"When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing, or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me."-Anna Julia Cooper

"As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, [and] name their history."-bell hooks

Purpose

This study examines my teaching experiences for the purpose of explicating how I was able to overcome challenges in the classroom, and how I navigated my way through the academy's terrain without coming "undone." This narrative provides reflections of days gone by while I was serving as a teaching associate/doctoral student at a mid-size university, located in the Midwest region of the United States. Not all of these experiences were a series of unfortunate events; however, some of them have brought me to the conclusion that it is important to tell my story and share some of these experiences. This research is grounded in scholarly personal narrative or personal experience narrative as described by Ellis & Bocher

(2003). Personal experience narrative is a method of inquiry that uses an individual's life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture. This type of research provokes, challenges, and illuminates rather than confirms and settles (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). In essence, this narrative will be examined through the analysis of reflexivity, which allows me to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of this research process (Fonow & Cook, 1991). The importance of recording everyday life experiences is immeasurable because it helps those with similar experiences to make better sense of the phenomena when it occurs. It also provides a different way of viewing the world for "outsiders" who do not have these encounters. Additionally, it provides the support or tools for dismantling various hegemonic practices. Women and men of different ethnic backgrounds, who are located in these spaces at majority institutions and have encounters of resistance in the classroom, may feel that their situations are occurring in isolation and not know how to deal with them. Despite such challenges and the encounters I experienced, I offer strategies that were used to navigate my way through the contested terrain of dealing with issues of resistance in the classroom.

Entering the academy as a professional is a landmark achievement for most African-American women who have chosen to be a part of this space, despite the fact that African-American women have served in various roles in higher education for more than a century. Some of the African-American women trailblazers from our past include Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of Bethune-Cookman College; Anna Julia Cooper, President of Freylinghuysen University; and Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first Dean of Women at Howard University. Today, notable African-American women include Johnetta Cole, former President of Spelman College

and current president of Bennett College ; Ruth Simmons, the first African-American President of Brown University ; and Alexis Herman, President of Fisk University. While African-American women have shown notable gains as history makers in higher education, it has not been without sacrifice and many challenges along the way. Despite such challenges, African-American women have been able to sustain themselves through various support systems, and they have succeeded against the odds.

As African-American women succeeding against the odds and accomplishing such landmark achievement, Rassool (1995) notes, they have triumphed against different kinds of oppressions and have made numerous sacrifices in their quest to live their lives as women, according to their own personal, social, and professional definitions. Munro's (1998) research on women teachers discusses the importance of them telling their stories and acknowledging their conversations as more than just "idle talk." It is in the manner of the telling, the authoring of oneself through story, which provides a space for understanding what Bakhtin calls the dialogic of self, the relationship between self and culture (Munro, 1998). Telling the story is important because it helps others with similar experiences to overcome the isolation and ineptitude that can ensue as a result.

Modes of Inquiry

As noted by many scholars, narratives, stories, and storytelling play a vital role in the meaning making process in qualitative inquiry (Berger & Quinney, 2005; Geertz, 1995; Munro, 1998). Both narrative inquiry and feminist/womanist literature inform this research. Women's ways of knowing, of being, of teaching, and of leading in the academy have been recorded in narrative form to give women "voice" in the ways in which they make meaning of

their lives in constructing their own knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1996). Collins (2000) notes the importance of doing research about Black women by having them assert their own standpoint and speak for themselves as an oppressed group. This embraces the position that women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing, while dismantling the positivist notions of inquiry that traditionally have

been male-centered.

In *Retaining Each Other: Narratives of Two African-American Women in the Academy*, Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) note the marginalization of African-American graduate students and faculty of color at predominantly white institutions, the subject of research over the past 40 years. They also documented the obstacles and negative experiences these individuals have encountered in navigating their way through the ranks of the academy. Hence, understanding the challenges faced by African-Americans in higher education is important because it points to ways in which the academy can create a more just and equitable environment for its members.

A Frontline Narrative: Here the Journey Began

I remember when I was first asked to teach *Sociocultural Studies in Education*, a seminar course addressing issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other types of differences in education. This course focused on examining and deconstructing media images with particular focus on how different ethnic groups were portrayed in the media. I was informed that I would be teaching this class less than an hour before it began, which meant I did not have any preparation time. A syllabus was out of the question.

Prior to this assignment, I had wondered what it would be like teaching this course. I had heard many stories about the resistance that took place in the classroom between the students and the teaching associates. These reflections were from both men and women of color who were either United States nationals or students from abroad. Admittedly, I was forewarned about this phenomenon of resistance that took place when teaching this particular class. My own concerns centered on several questions: (a) What made this such a difficult course for some of the teaching associates? and (b) What would this experience mean for me standing before a class comprised of a majority of European-American students? By all accounts, I had every reason to ponder these questions. As I learned during my first semester teaching, there were a number of variables that were part of the equation. While I was teaching, this phenomenon of "strange happenings" became apparent to me, and I began to understand why other doctoral students had complaints. What became apparent is (a) students questioned my authority as an African-American woman; (b) students assumed a sense of entitlement because of their race; and (c) students assumed a sense of power and entitlement because of their parents' wealth. For example, many students felt that since their parents were paying for their education, it was their prerogative, rather than that of the instructor, to determine how the course should be structured. "Determining what the course should be" had to do with the students' resistance in talking about issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other types of difference. The most difficult topic for students, however, had to do with discussing the subject of race and race ideology. Dealing with and discussing issues of race for many white students becomes a highly charged emotional experience resulting in resistance, misunderstanding, rage, and feelings of inefficacy (Tatum, 1994). At certain points during classroom discussion, as I raised questions regarding

related text on the subject of race, I would find myself examining blank stares on the students' faces and long moments of silence. Clearly, it was uncomfortable for many students who never had to really think about issues of race and their white privilege. As noted by Peggy McIntosh (1998), white privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets where privilege is assumed and taken for granted by the dominant culture in American society. McIntosh parallels white privilege with men's reluctance to acknowledge male privilege. Consequently, we must consciously address practices of entitlement when we see them perpetuated upon women of color and traditionally marginalized groups.

In part, students' discomfort in discussing their ideas on race and race ideology was related to their lack of knowledge about different groups of people, stereotypes portrayed in the media, and lack of interaction with ethnically diverse groups of people in their schools and communities. Students felt vulnerable as a result of exposing themselves, their discomfort, and their uncertainty before me, an African-American woman.

Initially, I found their lack of knowledge about racial issues surprising. The more I engaged in discussions with students and reflected on the teaching-learning experience, I began to understand that most of the students had lived in very sheltered, isolated worlds with limited, if any, experiences with diverse groups of people. This had a critical impact on the way they viewed the world around them. In many ways, their sheltered experiences affirmed to them that the only thing that was important in life was who they were, to the point of placing and seeing different groups of people as being invisible. The shroud of others' "invisibility" was shattered when I walked into the classroom and stood before students clothed in my brown skin; clearly, I did not blend into the manila walls that stood behind me. Nor was I silenced in the presence of their dominance. By the end of the semester,

many students admitted that I was their first African-American teacher. As I reflected upon my day-to-day experiences in the classroom, I realized that these students needed to have this educational and cultural experience with me, which strengthened my will, desire, and courage to teach, despite some of the challenges I faced.

On the Frontline: A Few Unfortunate Events

Scenario One

During one of my class discussions, we discussed McIntosh's (1998) article on "white privilege and male privilege." This discussion was quite unsettling for many students. Students' lack of knowledge and inept awareness of their "white privilege" became clear to me when a white female stated to the class after reading the article, "I can do all of this! What's the point?" The student's shrill in her voice, as if it was a waste of time reading the article, and the disgusted look on her face indicated to me that she did not understand the author's point. After hearing this statement, I knew it was going to be a long day. When talking about race, education, and culture, many of the students acknowledged that they had never had a person of color as a teacher in their K-12 educational experience, and I was the first person of color as their college instructor. Many of them acknowledged that there were only "white" students who lived in their communities and attended their schools while growing up. Although there was some discomfort, students began to think more critically about the ways in which they had been enculturated, and their belief that certain media images and stereotypes were the "truth." As I continued to engage with this student population, the "real" critical thinking began as we began to dispel the myths and stereotypes they had learned about different cultural groups, and the importance of understanding how this thinking marginalized individuals and groups of people. Since the majority of the students in this

class were education majors, I was determined to keep "pushing the envelope" to get students to think more critically about the different types of children they might encounter in their future classrooms, and how their biases and stereotypes could have a negative impact upon these children's lives if they were not aware of them. One of the main ideas I conveyed in this class regarding differences is that children do not determine their race, class, learning ability, or economic status when they are born, and all children deserve to have a fair chance in the educational process. Initially, there were days when students' limited worldviews became frightening, as I thought deeply about who would be teaching our children and future generations. Yet, there were other days when I was very hopeful as some students were willing to push themselves beyond their comfort zone and think about certain ideas more critically without becoming defensive or resistant. I am glad I maintained the sense of hope and the courage to teach; especially since our vastly changing global marketplace is creating a sense of urgency for our students (and Americans) to learn, know, understand, and embrace cultural differences in the classroom and in the workplace, if we are to remain a country known as a global leader.

Scenario Two

On another occasion, I was challenged by a white female when I asked her to see me after class with her teammate. These two students had received a failing grade on their paper. I wanted to talk with them to provide an opportunity to revise the paper and resubmit. As I spoke with the two female students after class, I noticed several other students waiting to see me. I asked the two females to schedule an appointment to meet privately in my office to discuss what went wrong. Before I could finish my sentence, one student indignantly exclaimed, "I want to talk

about it now!" After hearing her indignant tone of voice, I had to step back and ask myself, "What is really going on here?" When I told her we needed to meet privately, she insisted that the only time she could talk about the assignment was right then. Therefore, I asked her teammate if she could meet with me, and we set up an appointment. It was quite obvious to me that the female student who indignantly told me that she did not have any other time available forgot who was the student and who was the instructor. That day, I walked away thinking, "If an instructor was going to allow me an opportunity to resubmit an assignment, I would make myself available to find out what I needed to do to achieve a better grade."

Scenario Three

Another incident occurred with a white male student who insisted that he deserved a higher grade than he had received in my class. This student missed several classes, he was always late, there was very little class participation, and he did not actively participate with his group members on their final project. According to his reasoning, he was supposed to receive an "A" in my class. This student came to me a week before the end of the semester to inform me that he was an engineering student and he needed an "A" in my class. I think he thought his meeting with me would be enough to tell me what grade to give him regardless of his performance. His performance in class showed differently; therefore, he did not receive an "A." He insisted to "press the issue" by having his parents call the chair of the department. After rounds of discussions and, finally, a three-way conversation with his mother on the phone (initially, I did not know she was on the phone), he admitted that he had not done his part to achieve the "A." Based on the syllabus criteria, this student should have failed the class due to his lack of attendance and participation, which were a part of the grading process. As a doctoral student, still holding onto my sense of hope and courage to teach, I felt it was difficult for me to fail any student. In reflecting on this experience, I realize that my sensitivity in wanting all students to succeed made it difficult for me to fail a student. Afterward, I had conversations with other faculty of color and learned that we held similar beliefs on how difficult it is to fail a student. I wonder why this is the case when the student has actually failed him- or herself by not doing the work. Consciously reflecting upon the situation made me ask myself, "What other things could I have done to help the student become more successful?" Experiences like these expose our own vulnerabilities and require us to closely examine how we model the changes we wish to see in our students.

Beyond the Frontline: Having the Courage to Teach and Negotiating Spaces

In asking myself, "How have I been able to negotiate these spaces of difference and maintain my sense of being, along with my sense of sanity in teaching a course like this?" I would like to suggest that it has been through my spirituality, which has served as a form of empowering resistance. This type of resistance recognizes the obstacles, challenges, and contestations of everyday life; thus, focusing on liberating the situation by moving through or over the obstacle, and ultimately focusing on succeeding-the victory (Garner, 2004). I came to realize that despite topics that were most uncomfortable for the students, I had to find a way to broach the subject without making them feel intimidated or defensive, and this was not an easy task. It was critical for me to find a way to help students understand the importance of why we needed to talk about these ideas in a meaningful way, and how ultimately the way we view the world around us and within our communities has a direct impact on who we are or would become. Bringing to bear a critical pedagogy, I entered the classroom with a need to build community in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. I informed my students that we were all responsible in the teaching/learning process,

and I served as the classroom facilitator (not the bearer of all knowledge) because we all could teach and learn from each other in our community. Taking this stance was risky, but I felt it was important to help students understand their level of responsibility in our community and in the teaching-learning process. This level of engagement was necessary because it allowed me to be a co-teacher and a co-learner, to talk the talk and to walk the walk. Like bell hooks (1994) in *Teaching to Transgress*, I believe that a sense of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us. hooks notes that we all have a desire to learn and to receive knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. One way to bring together community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each student's voice, and to develop a sense of respect for our various opinions when discussing very difficult issues.

After teaching this course several times, I developed a process for asking all students, "What does community mean to you?" Then, I asked each student to give me a word to describe community. Each word had to be different. By the time we finished the list, there were 30-40 words describing community, and within this list of words *respect* appeared consistently. After examining the list, students were asked to commit to the standards of our community. Today, I still use this exercise, and I create the "Community" list the first day of class.

As I have encountered resistance and tension in the classroom, it has required me to lean on my spiritual discernment and ask myself, "What is really going on, and what is causing the resistance at the time?" Spiritual discernment means saying two words in the midst of the discussion when things go awry, and those two words I say silently are "Lord help!" Spiritual discernment for me can be described as Palmer (1999) offers in *Leading From Within*:

The great insight of our spiritual traditions is that we co-create the world that we live in and through complex interaction of spirit and matter, a complex interaction of what is inside of us and what is "out there." The insight of our spiritual traditions is not to deny the reality of the outer world, in part, by projecting our spirit on it-for better or worse. (p. 3)

My spiritual discernment helps me to focus on how I project my spirit onto others. In projecting my spirit on the situation, especially challenging situations in the classroom, I think of myself as remaining positive and projecting a spirit of enthusiasm and encouragement in teaching and working with students. Prior to pursuing my doctorate, I was a counselor at a small university in the Northeast, which prepared me for dealing with some of the difficult situations I encountered. There were times when I had to revert to the counseling mode to determine the issue at hand. Doing so helped me to *reflect* and *read* the situation better.

In another sense, I am disposed to understanding the tensions in the classroom as a way to push students to thinking and responding on a deeper level. Though students may become uncomfortable, I think it is a part of the challenge to intellectually engage them in a way that would be different from their traditional way of learning and thinking about the world. What then occurs becomes a paradoxical way of teaching and learning. Palmer (1998) discusses paradox in *The Courage to Teach*, by stating,

Good teachers find their way through such minefields every day by allowing the tension itself to pull them open to a larger and larger love, a love that resolves these dilemmas by looking past the tension within ourselves toward the best interest of the student.. (p. 84)

The paradox of the love with the tension taking place, as Palmer (1998) suggests, is in the suffering,

We will not be able to teach in the power of the paradox until we are willing to suffer the tension of opposites, until we understand that such suffering is neither to be avoided nor merely to be survived but must be actively embraced for the way it expands our own hearts.. We cannot teach our students at the

deepest levels when we are unable to bear the suffering that opens into those levels. By holding the tension of opposites, we hold the gateway to inquiry open, inviting students into a territory in which we all can learn. (p.85)

Ultimately, having the courage to teach increases our vulnerability as teachers, as we expect students to increase their vulnerability by pushing them to deeper levels of thinking and critically engaging in the teaching-learning process.

Understanding the cultural codes of students has served as another critical factor in the teaching-learning process. Two important questions I often reflected upon in getting to know my students include (a) What do I need to know about my students that I do not already know? and (b) What do they need to know about me? Something as simple as the way I greeted students when entering the classroom had a significant impact on the way we connected. For example, I used to walk into the classroom and say, "Good Afternoon," and the students would barely open their mouths until I said "Good Afternoon" a second time. At the beginning of each semester, I found myself explaining to students that it was important for me culturally, socially, personally, and professionally to greet my students and to have a reciprocal response. After having conversations with some of the students, I learned that they were not used to their instructors greeting them at the beginning of the class. Instead, these students were used to their instructors walking into the classroom and beginning the lecture without a greeting. While walking to class one day, I decided to try something different. I walked in the classroom and said, "How ya'll doing?" and just about everyone in the class responded like a chorus. With a smile on my face and eyebrows raised, I said, "Wow!" I explained to the students that "How ya'll doing?" was not my usual way of speaking; however, I noticed that a lot of people in the Midwest used this terminology and I decided to try it to see what type of response I would receive. Since the response was positive, as the students agreed they liked "How, ya'll doing?" versus my "Good Afternoon" greeting, I decided to keep the "How ya'll doing?" On the one hand, I should have known that the preferred greeting would be more to the liking of these students because many of them were from rural communities surrounded by cornfields and farmland, and "How ya'll doing" was common to their vernacular. I learned that this language was more familiar than what I knew or understood. On the other hand, my "Good Afternoon" symbolized characteristics I valued about myself. Yet, I learned that the less formal greeting helped to change the classroom culture and set the tone for students to feel more comfortable in talking about their own life experiences as it related to educational issues. If this change meant it would deepen the level of thinking and communications among students, the new greeting was worth it.

As an African-American woman, standing on the frontline has not been an easy task; however, I decided that the mere fact that I was given the responsibility of being in the classroom meant that I was supposed to be there, and I was determined to have an impact on changing students' attitudes and behaviors toward those who were different from themselves. As a woman and a person of color, one must have a strong sense of self when teaching at majority institutions. Collins (2000) notes that Black women's self-definition speaks to their power by rejecting externally defined and controlling images of Black womanhood. "The emphasis that Black feminist thinkers have placed on respect illustrates the significance of self-valuation" (p. 115). In a culture where people do not feel obligated to respect African-American women, we have admonished each other to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others (Collins, 2000). This same respect is necessary when dealing with resistance in the classroom. One must maintain a high level of respect in having the courage to teach, the courage to challenge the status quo, and the courage to push students to a new level of thinking beyond the familiar "banking system of education" as described by Paulo Freire (1993). Like Palmer (1998, 1999) and hooks (1994), it is the teaching from the heart and soul that pushes students and the learning process to a much deeper level.

The challenges, contradictions, and forms of resistance may always be in the classroom. It is when we become clear about our purpose that we have the courage to teach and to challenge ourselves in the process,

to make a difference in the lives of students who sorely need the experience.

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