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STUDENT VOICES

Some Powerful Event: Civic Engagement And Storytelling as Tools for Addressing Privilege

MacKenzie Lovell

Abstract

Scholars have argued that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to cultivate students into citizens who are engaged with the social injustices facing the populace. This idealistic view, however, does not confront the myriad ways in which White privilege affects students as they enter higher education classrooms. The central argument herein is that student involvement in civic engagement initiatives, namely social justice oriented education and service-learning experiences, are key facets to the exploration of privilege and identity. Through the use of storytelling, students will be able to recognize and begin digesting the significance of privilege in their daily lives, with the ultimate goal of conscientiously engaging with greater community by becoming engaged citizens.

College is a time of great personal growth for many students, as they encounter, perhaps for the first time, perspectives on the world which are different from their own. For some, this will be the first time that they interact with a person of color. While this statement seems out of place in 2015, it remains true, and is inextricably tied to White privilege. Understanding White privilege in the higher education classroom is important in order to tease out concepts of racism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and engaged citizenship. The tradition of civic engagement is used to provide an entrée into racial identity construction for many of these White students, as these pedagogies put students in direct contact with racial otherness, allowing them space to recognize their own race and the privileges that accompany it.

Contact with the racial other can take many forms. Serving the consumers at community service partner sites, or community partners, is one way to allow college students to begin thinking about privilege. Civic engagement initiatives, such as service-learning experiences or classes with a focus on social justice, trigger an awakening in students that allows them to begin thinking about systematic oppression of identities. Specifically, students can begin to deconstruct the hegemony of Whiteness and move toward a greater understand-

ing of society as they continue to encounter otherness through their academic and social careers.

When discussing civic engagement initiatives, it is important to understand the inherent economic gap, and often racial divide, between those serving and those served. It is paramount for students to be open to experiences with the community while being critical of their prejudgments. Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) refer to this as an “encountered situation.” An encountered situation has three key components: education, activity, and reflection. In a social justice oriented classroom, or service-learning experience, these components are necessary for the success of the project, and for the identity development of the students.

Social Justice and Service Learning

Social justice education is critically conscious education focused on examining the root causes of inequality and working toward corrective solutions, as described by Freire (1970). It introduces participants to the politics of recognition, or the argument that lack of recognition is the crux of social injustice. This politic allows students to bear witness to the defense of identities, work to end cultural domination, and to win recognition for non-dominant groups (North, 2006). Service-learning is a subcategory of social justice ed-

ucation, wherein students are involved in community service and reflection as components of their graded coursework. Through service-learning initiatives, students open themselves as witness to suffering of others, physical, material, and psychological (North, 2006). The purpose of these two styles of education is to “promote knowledge, skills, and habits of mind necessary for engaged citizenship,” (Ben-Porath, Pupik-Dean, & Summers, 2010, p. 1). These pedagogies put students in direct contact with “the other,” often a racial other, and produce internal change processes, while simultaneously allowing students to reexamine their own realities. Using these types of educational policies and practices works to view social injustices on the macro-level (North, 2006).

Telling Stories: The Narrative of a Racial Identity

Storytelling is an important part of communication. Indeed, most communication revolves around the sharing of stories. One of the easiest ways for students to discuss their race (and racial privilege, even if they would not use those terms) is by sharing stories. People ascribe meaning to events by forming them into a narrative (Apple, 1997; Green, 2003). The ways in which the intersection of race, class, and gender can take form in students are numerous and complex, as described by Critical Race Theory (Collins, 2009; Freeman, 2012). Using narratives to navigate these social identities and hierarchies is a good way to make sense of these disparate pieces, as stories serve as social representations of each of us (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). These narratives can take several forms: the personal fable, the memoir, the victim's story, and the color-blind narrative.

Personal fable. Dunlap (1997) refers to a concept he coins the personal fable, or the impression that each person has of her own unique heroic purpose. Adolescents and late-adolescents (18-22 year olds) grapple with the struggles of the people they serve while attempting to better the situation of those they are serving with and for. As students move through the process of a service-learning experience, they move from a heroic vision to one of feeling guilty about their privilege. This shift is an important first step towards identity restructuring. When students face issues such as racism, poverty, and socioeconomic oppression they react with feelings of guilt and anger. These feelings, serve as an important tool in moving forward with identity restructuring.

As students move away from the heroic personal fable from the resulting guilt and anger (Dunlap, 1997), they begin to become aware of the societal and structural oppressions occurring to keep the people they serve in a position of need. This stage of consciousness is the goal for all service-learning and social-justice-oriented work, as it is the place where students can begin to reconstruct their societal perceptions around these new ideas.

Memoir. Students may also participate in the creation of a service memoir. Ellsworth (1997) provides one example of how this memoir could take shape. Students work to string together important instances from their service experience in order to draw a greater meaning from it. Ellsworth creates a memoir of her racial identity through a discussion about her family's racist past. Ellsworth concludes from her story that Whiteness is “always more than one thing” and “never the same thing twice,” (p. 260). In other words, Whiteness is a performance, one that is neither the same as the performance before nor will ever be the same again. Race is a flexible, man-made category, and therefore can be embodied differently in different locations and contexts (Freeman, 2012). This is the moral of Ellsworth's piece, an acknowledgement that Whiteness is ever changing. In the memoir paradigm of storytelling, students work towards finding their own moral for their narrative of service, working to make the experience real and tangible for themselves and others.

By working to create meaning in this way, students are priming their stories to be shared. This type of service memoir helps students retell their encounters, and process the experience along the way. Unfortunately, this service memoir is lacking in one important way; it does not encourage students to see the structural oppression that they have worked within and against. By turning their service experiences into a story to be shared, students are, in many ways, sanitizing the story to make it universal. Universalizing their stories is useful when trying to recruit others, or sell someone on the personal value of service. However, this universalization or sanitation of the memoir is not useful when trying to explore the racial implications of service. These devices work directly against the context-specific ways in which service-learning confronts racial inequality.

Creating a victim's story. Students often fall into the trap of creating a victim's story. This narrative can take two forms. A student can write about

how they are ashamed to be White, hence they are victims of their birth (Thompson, 1999). The second form of the victim's story comes when students turn away from critical self-reflection and create a narrative of being the victim because of "reverse racism." Reverse racism is a controversial term. It signifies the perceived discrimination or prejudice against the traditional dominant group, in this case White middle-class Americans, although it is experienced by other, non-dominant classes of White groups members as well. This term is controversial because members of the dominant group often use it to explain away feelings of being jilted. In the minds of White students, reverse racism is occurring when students of color receive opportunities that White students do not because of racial difference. One popular example that White students cite is affirmative action policies (Perry, 2002). This argument, however, does not recognize the racism that has allowed the structural oppression which created the need for policies such as Affirmative Action. Additionally, students participating in service may claim to experience reverse racism if they do not feel accepted by the population they are serving due to their racial difference. Feeling like an outsider is a normal occurrence for many people of color, but can cause strong feelings of discomfort in white students (Carter, 1997; Ellsworth, 1997; Frankenberg, 1994).

Color-blind narratives. Blum (2002) speculated that ceasing to use racial terms would, in turn, stop racism. If there is no race, how can we be racist? However, this idea does not take into account the ways in which a person's culture is tied to her identity, racial identity included. This is the trap that students fall into when creating a color-blind narrative.

Students telling their story from a color-blind vantage point once again eliminate critical examination of the experience (as in the victim's story). Pollock (2006) refers to this as color muteness, implying that people do not use racial terms because they believe it makes race less important. However, this model is different from the victim's narrative because students employ a variety of rhetorical moves in order to convey that they do not believe that racism is a contemporary issue. Color-blindness is commonly held to be a strategy for promoting social justice, because people believe that if we do not discuss race then we must be post-racial (Helms, 2008; Pollock, 2006). Color-blindness is a societal problem, however, and a social justice education should challenge this practice.

Bonilla-Silva (2010) writes extensively on the language that students use to downplay the effects of racism on their peers of color. The most common example is the "trinity formula" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010,

p. 95). This method employs three segments of storytelling through which the student conveys their color-blind narrative. In the first segment, students confess to knowing a racist, or to seeing prejudice performed by someone close to them. In the second segment, students give an example of the actions of the person they described in segment one (e.g. my dad told me he didn't want me hanging out with "those kind of people,"). Finally, in segment three, students use the presentation of segment one and two to suggest that they are not like the racists that they know (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Cliché phrases such as "My best friend is black," and "I'm not a racist but..." are frames traditionally used by White individuals to discuss matters of race in decidedly nonracial terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 2008). Bonilla-Silva (2010) refers to this model as *laissez faire racism*, intimating the way that race and racism are allowed to persist because dominant groups simply refuse to address them.

Students will each weave a unique story of service and identity through their civic engagement experiences. Much of the important work to be done comes in connecting the stories of the students with the stories of others (Hartley, 2010). Multicultural education works to bring many diverse narratives together in order to confront institutionalized racism (Hu-Dehart, 1994). However, creating a civically engaged identity means struggling for a more emancipatory, anti-racist form of education (Apple, 1997). Indeed, it means struggling for a more emancipatory, anti-racist form of ourselves.

By putting students in direct contact with racialized others, they are entering into an opportunity to develop an anti-racist identity. Through guided reflection exercises facilitated by the course professor or members of the professional civic engagement staff, students can examine social injustices, structural race-based discrimination, and possible solutions for these issues. The importance of civic engagement lies with its ability to transform popular discourse and to awaken the critical consciousness within students through interaction with otherness and storytelling. Only in creating a space where these two practices can occur can we begin to deconstruct hegemony in the classroom. This is not an easy undertaking, as it requires much work and self-reflection for all members involved, but it is an important one.

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MacKenzie Lovell is a doctoral student in Urban Education at Temple University.