

Feminist Pedagogy

Volume 4
Issue 4 *Graduate Student Pedagogy: Feminist
Approaches to Graduate Level Instruction and
Mentorship*

Article 9

April 2024

"I Thought I Knew": Teaching Graduate Students New Ways of Understanding Meanings of Diverse Social Identities

Maria S. Johnson
Black Women and Girls Fund, mjohnson@bwgfund.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Maria S. (2024) "'I Thought I Knew": Teaching Graduate Students New Ways of Understanding Meanings of Diverse Social Identities," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol4/iss4/9>

This Original Teaching Activity is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@calpoly.edu.

“I Thought I Knew”: Teaching Graduate Students New Ways of Understanding Meanings of Diverse Social Identities

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Zakiya Luna, Lynn Verduzco-Baker, special issue reviewers, and editors for your feedback and insights.

“I Thought I Knew”: Teaching Graduate Students New Ways of Understanding Meanings of Diverse Social Identities

Introduction

Many students are uncomfortable talking about social identities in the classroom, and some classrooms can be alienating and hostile spaces. Faculty must cultivate classroom environments that increase students’ understandings of social identities to establish safer and braver classroom environments (Verduzco-Baker, 2018). Over a decade ago, I created an activity to help undergraduate students understand terminology for various social identities, particularly ones related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. I initially developed the assignment, “What’s in a name?” for a 400-level undergraduate course I designed focused on social inequality and public policy. I was aware that the course would attract students from different disciplinary backgrounds and experiences discussing race, ethnicity, and gender. Thus, I designed the activity to help students develop shared understandings of social identity terms used daily and the power dynamics associated with the creation and usage of terms.

When it came time for me to teach a graduate sociology course about racial stratification for masters and doctoral students, I was unsure about whether to use the activity. I was concerned that graduate students would think the assignment was too elementary. However, upon assigning a modified version of the activity, I found it helped graduate students sharpen their understandings of various terminology and supported my efforts to create classes in which graduate students felt braver, safer, and more knowledgeable. Furthermore, the activity reinforced that we would approach talking and thinking about social identities in ways that were grounded in humanity, rather than just social markers of characteristics.

Rationale

My rationale for creating the activity “What’s in a name?” draws from Black feminist pedagogies that resist racist, sexist, patriarchal norms in both standard university curriculums and classroom interactions. Black feminist educators have advocated for curriculum and teaching approaches that empower students of diverse backgrounds (Omolade, 1987; White, 2011), encourage student engagement (hooks, 1994; Omolade, 1987), and disrupt racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia in curriculum and classroom interaction (Henry, 2005; Higginbotham, 1997). Black feminist pedagogies are also attuned to the experiences of instructors and advocate for classroom experiences that support the humanity of instructors, particularly Black women, who often face student resistance and opposition. (Davis & Brown, 2017; Higginbotham, 1997). Many

Black feminists have advocated for curricular transformation in women's studies and other fields of study. Black feminist pedagogies emphasize "analyses of the social constructions of race, nationality, culture, gender, sexuality, and class as important for understanding Western patriarchy, and that these constructs remain central to understanding historical and societal phenomena" (Henry, 2005, p.95). As Henry (2005) also noted, academics must also acknowledge that "these social and historical phenomena are present in the classroom and need to be addressed in our relationships with our students" (p. 95). Thus, learning activities must not only help students learn about society but also clarify social dynamics that exist even in the classroom. As Black feminist sociologist, Higginbotham (1997) wrote, "Learning to identify myth and misinformation about people of color is a critical task in course and classroom dynamics" (p. 242).

I created "What's in a name" to cultivate inclusive classroom environments and to help students become more attuned to the meanings, power, and social structures related to social identity terms used in the United States. Although I initially developed the graduate-level version of this activity for an in-person sociology course for masters and doctoral students, the activity is valuable and adaptable for various disciplines and course structures. The activity has the potential to positively shape classroom dynamics as well as equip students with understandings that can shape their in- and out-of-classroom experiences.

Learning Objectives

After completing the activity, students should be able to:

- Define various racial ethnic, gender, and sexuality terminology.
- Describe some historical and contemporary transitions in the names and labels used to identify various groups.
- Collaborate with peers to create shared definitions.
- Reflect on power dynamics and histories involved in creation of categories.

Explanation

I assigned "What's in a name?" within the first two weeks of class. Assigning the activity early in the semester helps students establish shared understanding and build their confidence before most in-depth course discussions about social identities. The initial part of the activity required, as homework, graduate students to research historical and contemporary uses of terminology for various social identities, particularly ones related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. I created a list of questions based on racial/ethnic, gender, and sexuality terminology that I anticipated students may use or need to understand for course readings and discussions. Examples of questions asked include:

- What is the difference between the racial categories of “African American” and “Black”? Why was the term “African American” created?
- What are the origins of the terms “Latino/a/e/x,” “Chicano/a,” and “Hispanic”? Why is “Hispanic” a controversial term?
- Why do some people prefer the term “American Indian” to “Native American”? What is the difference between “tribe” and “nation”? What do “first people” and “indigenous” mean?
- Which ethnic groups are included in the term “Asian”? What is the difference between “Asian,” “Asian American,” or nationality-specific labels such as “Korean American”? When is it appropriate to use each term?
- Do the terms “Caucasian,” “White,” and “European American” signify the same group of people? Why or why not?
- What is the meaning and history of the racial term “colored”?
- What does the term “people of color” mean?
- Which ethnic groups are included in the term “Arabs”? Which countries are included in the “Middle East”? How is the term “Muslims” defined? Which countries are included in the “Muslim World”?
- What is the difference between “gender” and “sex”? Define and learn the pronunciation of “LGBTQIA+,” “ze,” and “hir.”

Early course readings covered definitions of conceptual terms like “race,” “antisemitism,” and “ethnicity,” so I did not include them and others in the assignment. However, I encourage anyone planning to implement this activity to use questions that are relevant to their course and context.

Students were expected to answer the questions using reputable sources, such as university glossaries, newspaper articles, or statements written by political/affinity groups and associations. Afterwards, in class, students shared their responses in small groups and developed agreed upon definitions to present to the class. As they developed shared definitions and presented their groups’ definitions in class, they identified similarities and differences in their sources, interpretations of definitions, and notions of politically correct terminology. Through the assignment, students engaged class conversations more informed and worked collectively to deepen their knowledge.

The assignment gives students the chance to research questions themselves, to work in small groups to share their responses and develop shared definitions, and to present and discuss groups answers in the larger class. The assignment is also a form of feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007), as it requires students to examine definitions and meanings, the power, institutions, and ideologies that are connected, and how terms are produced and maintained. Further, this activity helps students develop language and understanding to engage peers, communities, and the research literature more fully, and question “myths and misinformation” they may have encountered.

Debriefing

Numerous students shared, informally, that the assignment inspired them to reflect on the intersections of their social identities and prior knowledge and assumptions. One White woman graduate student with extensive experience working on progressive women's issues commented that she was surprised by how much she did not know that she thought she knew. A Black woman shared that the activity helped her think through different aspects of her racial and ethnic identities, especially non-Black ones. Additionally, the assignment helps students to identify some invisible or marginalized identities and feel more empowered to engage in difficult conversations. For example, a Black woman student told me that the terms she learned in the course helped her to feel more comfortable in my class and others sharing her views and experiences, particularly in spaces where she was the only person of color. The assignment prompts students to not only consider singular social identity categories but to consider their identities at the intersections.

There are certain topics instructors should be prepared to discuss. Some of my students wanted to talk about formal definitions of certain terms in comparison to what they knew anecdotally. Often the questions concerned self-definition especially within group terms that are not widely used or adopted in academic spaces, and the influence of social institutions like the government or schools. For example, a student mentioned that some older Latinos in New York, particularly people of Puerto Rican or Dominican backgrounds, use the term "Spanish" more than "Latina" or "Hispanic." Questions may also emerge about disciplinary or research norms like capitalization of racial/ethnic terms or inconsistent use of sex and gender terms. Additionally, conversations regarding the body are likely to emerge, such as how perceptions of phenotype and body may influence how people are treated and experience their social identities. It is important that instructors not only prepare to facilitate these and other topics but also know that some topics will not have simple answers. Part of the work of this assignment is to get at the complexity of terms we use daily to categorize.

Instructors' social identities and knowledge base influence how the activity flows. I find transparency about my own identities, when possible, enables open conversations. As a Black cisgender woman, I have used my different social identities, both marginal and privileged, to ease or deepen conversations. Being willing to call attention to my various identities, particularly ones linked to racist and sexist experiences and minimization, certainly requires bravery and vulnerability. However, it is important to model for students the type of vulnerability and inclusiveness that is expected in the class.

Any instructor who facilitates this activity should deepen their own knowledge related to the terms and be open to facilitating challenging discussions

related to social identities. Another issue of vulnerability for instructors may be their knowledge of social identity terms. As a sociologist who specializes in race, gender, and policy, I have years of research and teaching related to the terms and concepts highlighted in the activity. Nevertheless, I continue to update my knowledge and understanding to keep up with changing norms to update the activity. I recognize it may be intimidating or extra work, yet it is important that instructors who use this activity be knowledgeable about the terminology and their histories. Facilitating the activity without proper understanding could cause harm if an instructor is unable to adequately respond to questions or facilitate dialogue. That said, I recommend instructors admit when students raise an issue or topic with which they have limited knowledge. In those instances, I recommend that instructors tell students that they will get back to them before or during the next class with a more in-depth response. It also may be useful to ask students to research the question and have an in-class conversation about your collective responses. This approach requires vulnerability, particularly for instructors who may have social identities that students are more likely to question their expertise.

Assessment

“What’s in a name?” is an ungraded assignment. Thus, my assessment of the activity and student learning came through the responses students shared and my observations regarding their use of terms throughout the semester. Nevertheless, this approach fosters the establishment of shared language that is a powerful tool to use when facing student bias or resistance. As a Black feminist sociologist who has taught race and inequality-focused courses at predominately White universities, I have used “What’s in a name?” to help me navigate some classroom challenges commonly confronted by women of color instructors. Studies and autobiographical essays have noted the long history of opposition faculty of color, particularly women, face in college classrooms (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). For example, students often question Black women professors’ expertise and instructional methods (Davis & Brown, 2017; Henderson, 2023) and submit negative student evaluations and complaints (Wallace et al., 2019). Although I have won teaching awards and nominations and received favorable teaching evaluations, I have also experienced student aggression, minimization, and stereotypes. Students, both undergraduate and graduate, have questioned subject matter I taught, often arguing that it must not be as important since other, usually White, instructors did not teach it. “What’s in a name?” is one of many teaching approaches I have used to cultivate engaged, inclusive classrooms and to provide a shared language to reference when students intentionally or unintentionally use offensive language.

Even after the activity, there were students who resisted using shared terminology. For instance, I once taught an international graduate student of color

who insisted on using the term “the Blacks” instead of people-first language like “Black people.” The student also endorsed stereotypes of Black people, such as racist stereotypes that Black people are lazy and unintelligent, that I often had to address during and after class. Imagine the challenge I faced as a Black woman addressing student prejudice against a racial identity I embody. In that instance, it was helpful to direct the student to shared language that we established early in the course. My experiences with that student reinforced for me the necessity of an assignment that facilitates shared vocabulary and understandings of social identity terms.

I imagine that as teaching topics related to race, gender, and diversity become more contentious in the United States, there are some who worry, and rightly so, about risks associated with teaching an activity such as this. However, the current sociopolitical environment makes it even more important to incorporate this activity into the classroom, when possible, because it requires students to study the meanings, histories, and contemporary debates regarding terms for various social identities. Thus, the activity allows for deeper understanding, richer discussions, and hopefully increased understanding of the stakes involved in public debates regarding such terminology. Therefore, the activity is not only important for classroom dynamics, but also critical for enhancing students’ skills and understanding in everyday conversations, future professional spaces, diverse environments, and broader society. As possible future researchers, leaders, or educators, their ability to use language that is more inclusive will help them connect and build bridges with different communities.

As a Black feminist sociologist, whenever I teach, I find it important to use my power in the classroom to cultivate classroom environments that center marginalized identities and create brave spaces for dialogue. Although it is almost impossible to create completely safe educational spaces, it is critical to create safer and braver spaces grounded in vulnerability not only for students but for instructors (Henry, 1994; Verduzco-Baker, 2018). “What’s in a name?” is a useful activity to ease student apprehension using certain terms, to establish shared understanding, and to reinforce the importance of interrogating prior knowledge and understandings. Perhaps most importantly, the activity helps establish a course culture where students are expected to be thoughtful and mindful as they discuss diverse communities.

References

- Davis, S., & Brown, K. (2017). Automatically discounted: Using Black feminist theory to critically analyze the experiences of Black female faculty. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 12(1), 98–106.

- https://www.icpel.org/uploads/1/5/6/2/15622000/ijelp_volume_12_number_1__spring_2017_.pdf
- Gutiérrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y. F., Gonzalez, C. G., & Harris, A. P. (2012). *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia*. University Press of Colorado.
- Henderson, F. (2023). Black feminist pedagogy in White southern spaces. *Feminist Pedagogy*, 3(1).
<https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss1/12>
- Henry, A. (1994). There are no safe places: Pedagogy as powerful and dangerous terrain. *Action in Teacher Education*, 15(4), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.1994.10463171>
- Henry, A. (2005). Chapter four: Black feminist pedagogy: Critiques and contributions. *Counterpoints*, 237, 89–105.
- Higginbotham, E. (1997). Designing an inclusive curriculum: Bringing all women into the core. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 18(1/2), 7–23.
- hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Lazar, M. M. (2007). Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4(2), 141–164.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900701464816>
- Omolade, B. (1987). A Black feminist pedagogy. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3/4), 32–39.
- Verduzco-Baker, L. (2018). Modified brave spaces: Calling in brave instructors. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(4), 585–592.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218763696>
- Wallace, S. L., Lewis, A. K., & Allen, M. D. (2019). The state of the literature on student evaluations of teaching and an exploratory analysis of written comments: Who benefits most? *College Teaching*, 67(1), 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1483317>
- White, A. M. (2011). Unpacking Black feminist pedagogy in Ethiopia. *Feminist Teacher*, 21(3), 195–211.