

Case Studies for Faculty Development

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“Racist bullshit.” The words echoed in Brian Davis’s head as he sat in his office after class. What had happened? How had the best class of freshman students he had taught, the best teaching experience of his twenty-year career, come down to “Racist bullshit?”

Brian couldn’t remember feeling better about his teaching than he had earlier that evening as he prepared for class. He liked teaching freshman composition; he liked helping students develop their writing abilities; and he particularly liked night classes because the students were older and more mature. He looked forward to helping the mostly working-class students who attended his university. And it seemed to him that this was his best freshman composition class in the twenty years he had been teaching. Not only did he have some older students who brought maturity to the discussions, but he had five minority students in a class of twenty-four, three of whom were outstanding writers. They were bringing a perspective to the class discussions that was richer than anything Brian could say.

As usual, Brian had organized his class around language. He wanted his students to understand how language determined their images of themselves and their worlds. In particular, he wanted them to see that ideas about race, gender, and social roles were

locked into the everyday language they used. All of this, of course, would be revealed in the academic arena through free discussion of ideas. Brian believed passionately that the classroom was a place where disparate views of the world could be juxtaposed against one another, and out of that juxtaposition would come learning. He felt sure that if he could establish the right classroom atmosphere and introduce important issues through carefully selected readings, learning would follow naturally from the environment he had constructed. This class presented his best opportunity yet — it was the perfect mix of background, ability, and maturity.

Brian entered the classroom confidently earlier that evening, feeling almost buoyant about how well his students were progressing. The first weeks had been a little slow, but once he began the unit on freedom of speech, the pace had quickened. A few of his students had written outstanding position papers on issues related to freedom of speech, and he was secretly delighted that the students overwhelmingly supported his belief that freedom of speech was essential in the academic world. He wanted them to know that they could discuss any issues freely in his classroom and that he respected their right to their own beliefs. Of course, he intended to transform those beliefs, but that’s what teaching was all about.

It was about getting students to understand themselves and their beliefs more fully. It was about transforming students.

This evening his students were beginning their oral presentations on language as it connected to race and/or gender. For this assignment he had divided them into groups of four. Each group had chosen a topic from the options Brian had provided, researched the topic, and written an eight to ten page paper. Today two groups were presenting their information. The first group had investigated the policies on sexist language of three newspapers, and the second group had researched social attitudes toward dialects. Brian felt the first report would be predictable; two of the group members, Kellie and Jim, intended to be journalists, and the other two, Sylvia and Phil, had been quiet and cooperative all semester. Brian suspected that the group was going to present and then endorse the policies of the three newspapers.

The second group contained four of Brian's favorite students. Cassandra, a young African-American woman, was an outstanding presenter and spoke her mind freely. Carlos was an older Chicano student who had decided that college was necessary for his future success. He was among the best writers in the class, and his comments in discussion were direct yet tactful. Wilma was another older student, an African-American who was bright and mature. Brian worried about her because she never said anything controversial; she seemed to want to keep everyone happy. The last member of the group was Kevin, a white student who wrote radical papers but said nothing during class discussions. Once Kevin had come in during Brian's office hours to show Brian his poetry. Brian was accustomed to mediocre, sentimental poetry from his first-year students, but Kevin's poetry was surprisingly sophisticated—perhaps a little quirky, but carefully structured with powerful images. Kevin's poetry only reinforced Brian's belief that this class was some kind of mysterious gift from the gods.

The students' desks were arranged in a horseshoe with the teacher's desk at the open end. Brian threw his black corduroy jacket on the desk and then moved it to the corner. As he lined up the four desks for the presenters, carefully putting them where the teacher's desk had been, Parker approached him. Parker was another of Brian's favorite students. Brian liked him because he was always ready to take a controversial position. He was only an average writer, but when a discussion began to drag, Parker was

usually the one to say, "I suppose you're all going to say I'm crazy, but I think" Parker was a catalyst, a student who liked to argue. His presence in the class was another reason why it was working out so well.

"Hey, Brian," Parker said. "You need any help with room arrangement?"

Brian smiled. "Thanks, but I've got it under control. Is your group ready to go on Wednesday?"

Parker smiled back almost mischievously. "We're going to knock your socks off, man."

The class chatted casually until Brian called them to order. He carefully explained the procedure. Each group would present its information for ten to fifteen minutes, and then the group would hold an open discussion for five minutes. At the end of each presentation the observers would fill out an evaluation form. Evaluation forms would go to Brian at the end of class and be given to the group at the next class meeting.

The first presentation went smoothly, and as Brian had expected it wasn't very analytical. The group described in detail the policies of three newspapers on racist and sexist language, pointed out some minor differences, and then endorsed the status quo. Brian sat in the corner of the classroom out of the presenters' view and hoped for some good questions.

Phil had been designated by his group to handle the question session. After a few innocuous questions, Brian was delighted that Cassandra asked the one he was waiting for.

"Phil, do you think these newspaper policies go far enough? You know, I think they're just coming up with policies so that they can avoid trouble. They don't really care about changing racism or sexism."

Phil seemed surprised. His face started to turn red. "I don't see what you're talking about. Newspapers report news. They aren't supposed to correct social problems. Besides the real problem with language is people's inability to use it correctly."

Brian made a "T" with his hands and said, "Time, people. Let's hold that discussion for now so that the other group has enough time. We'll get back to some of these issues after the other presentation."

Brian felt guilty cutting off what could have been a good discussion, but he was afraid that the inevitable debate about language would begin too soon. He didn't want Cassandra bringing out issues now that would be part of her group's report. Brian had helped her group find appropriate readings on

dialects, and he wanted the ideas gleaned from those readings presented to the class as a background for a more sophisticated discussion that would occur after the next presentation.

He noticed that both Phil and Cassandra were uncomfortable with his intervention. In fact, Phil was clearly upset as he returned to his seat, but Brian knew he would get another chance in a few minutes.

The next presentation was everything that Brian had hoped. Cassandra, Carlos, Wilma, and Kevin were outstanding. They had read the articles Brian had recommended, and they presented a strong position. They were making a case that the major difference between dialects was social prestige. The belief that people who spoke non-prestigious dialects used language poorly was rooted in prejudice. Brian was glad to see that Cassandra was leading the discussion; she had been particularly articulate during the presentation. "Any questions?"

Jim raised his hand. "Why should we accept your opinion on dialects? I went to school with black students. They talked one way with their friends and another way in class. They used language correctly when they wanted to."

Cassandra answered immediately. "It's not a question of accuracy. Why should black students have to change the way they talk? How would you feel if you had to talk one way with your friends and another way in school?"

Jim thought for a few seconds. "I wouldn't like it, but if that's the way people spoke, I would adjust. I wouldn't want to go around using language sloppily."

Brian wasn't surprised by Jim's comments. A lot of students believed that dialects represented sloppy usage. It was a belief that he constantly waged war against. He felt he could convince students to think differently by the end of the term. At least nobody would be saying that dialects reflected sloppy language.

Cassandra's eyes flashed, but before she could respond, Carlos intervened.

"Jim, you don't know what it feels like. I know I sound a lot like you, but my parents don't. Remember that essay by Richard Rodriguez. Don't you think he suffered? Why should people suffer because of prejudice?"

"You know," Phil added, "that's just it. People keep talking about prejudice. I just don't understand. What does language have to do with prejudice?"

Parker's hand was up. "Nothing. It's not preju-

dice. Rodriguez learned English, and his essay is an argument against bilingualism. Look at Malcolm X. That piece from his autobiography knocked my socks off. That man can write. Not learning to write and speak properly is just laziness."

"I don't understand," added Sylvia. "Why are we talking about laziness and racism? I thought we were just learning what words to use."

Kevin spoke voluntarily for the first time all semester. He ignored Sylvia, addressing his comments directly to Parker. "I'm the only white person in this group, and I want to say one thing. Parker, you are making it too simple. The essays we read show conclusively that we live in a racist society, and the biggest racist institution is the school system. Blacks and Chicanos don't have a chance. They are told from day one that they are dumb because they don't use the language like middle-class white Americans. Every essay we read on dialects said the same thing. Blacks and Chicanos don't have an equal chance."

Brian was pleased with the way the discussion was going. Not everyone understood what was being debated, but the battle lines were being drawn. The ideas were being debated, and all Brian had to do was listen and wait for the right moment to stop the discussion. He might not even have to sum up what had been debated because the students were being so articulate. He knew the argument wouldn't be resolved tonight, but the semester was only half over.

Phil jumped in next. Brian noticed that he was almost trembling.

"My grandfather came over to this country not knowing one word of English. He struggled with language all his life, so he made sure my father got a good education. Now my father is making sure that I know how to use language correctly. I don't see why everyone can't learn to use language correctly if they want to. I'm tired of people feeling sorry for themselves while they're getting all the breaks. I don't see anybody here suffering. We all have the same opportunities. Some people just work harder."

Brian liked Phil, but he was concerned that Phil just didn't see the big picture, the institutional prejudice, the years of suffering minorities had endured. When Brian tuned back into the discussion, he heard Cassandra responding. Her voice had an edge on it.

"I don't care whether your grandfather and father can recite the dictionary backwards. They aren't African Americans, and they weren't slaves. They weren't bought and sold and beaten and lynched. Your grandfather and father were probably busy keeping my grandfather and father from having a

chance. Why don't you try being African American?"

Brian shifted uneasily. Phil and Cassandra were stating their beliefs in very personal ways. He didn't want to intervene because out of their conflicting ideas he knew he could help them construct knowledge, yet he also knew this issue could be explosive.

"That's just an excuse," Phil countered. "Lots of minorities learn. They only need to work at it. Look at Malcolm X. He taught himself how to use language correctly while he was in prison. He wrote books."

Wilma spoke. "Phil, Cassandra's right. You don't know what it's like being black. I lived in an integrated neighborhood, and I wanted to belong. Once when I was in high school, my so-called white friends got me to ride in the trunk of the car because they didn't want to be seen with me. I'm ashamed that I went along. Another time I was going door-to-door asking people if they wanted their sidewalks shoveled. A woman said she did. I shoveled for two hours, and she told me I was a good girl and gave me a candy bar. I went home and cried. My uncle gave me five dollars, but no one said anything to that woman. And in junior high, the principal hit me. He hit other black kids, too. But he never hit a white kid. You just don't understand. We aren't lazy. We just don't have the same chances."

Brian felt like standing up and applauding. At last Wilma had spoken her feelings, and she had done it well.

"So what," Phil responded. "You learned how to use language correctly. So did Cassandra. So did Carlos. People who are willing to work will learn."

Brian was feeling frustrated with Phil. Why did he keep saying the same thing over and over. Wasn't he listening?

Cassandra was steaming. "You know what your problem is, Phil? You're a fucking racist. You want to oppress minorities."

Brian was caught off guard. It was no longer a discussion; it was a confrontation. He knew Phil and

Cassandra were out of control, and he didn't know what they would say next.

Phil's face was scarlet. "You're the fucking racist. You want to use race as an excuse."

Brian jumped to his feet to get between Cassandra and Phil so that he could cut off the confrontation before things got even worse.

"You know," Cassandra shot back, "I get tired of sitting in classrooms surrounded by white racists and playing the game."

Brian spoke firmly and calmly, but his stomach tightened, and his hands were clenched. "We need to get this discussion back on track. We aren't discussing the issues. We're calling names."

Cassandra snapped back, "What's the point of discussing the issues with people who don't listen? I would do better talking to the wall than Phil."

Phil was almost crying. "I've got a right to my beliefs, too. Can't I say what I believe in this classroom? This freedom of speech thing is bullshit."

Brian didn't know what to do. "We need to stop this discussion," he almost shouted. "We need to get back to the issues."

The class quieted.

Parker's hand rose. Brian didn't want to call on him, but he believed Parker had a right to be heard.

"Yes, Parker."

"Didn't you say that these conflicts are what freedom of speech is all about? When you talk about some issues, people get their feelings hurt. That's life."

Cassandra was gathering her books as Parker spoke. Brian felt helpless. He didn't know what to say.

"Racist bullshit!" Cassandra slammed the door as she left.

Brian looked at his class. Their faces reflected their discomfort. He felt they were waiting for his response. ■