



The Difference Between You and Me **Faculty Identities at Play in the Classroom**

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Abstract: This conversation is a further discussion of the 2010 Center for Inclusive Teaching Conference on Teaching for Transformation presentation made by the authors, which focused on how classroom learning is influenced by faculty and student identities and the resulting identity-based dynamics. In the spirit of the great Freire/Horton conversation, this dialogue engaged the two authors, one a middle-aged white woman and the other a young black woman. The conversation reflects the authors' faculty experiences co-teaching and teaching individually in higher education while engaging relevant literature as well.

Welcome to our conversation! It is a further discussion of our 2010 Center for Inclusive Teaching Conference on Teaching for Transformation presentation which focused on how classroom learning is influenced by faculty and student identities and the resulting identity-based dynamics. In the spirit of the great Freire/Horton conversation, this dialogue engaged the two authors, one a middle-aged white woman and the other a young black woman. The conversation reflects our faculty experiences co-teaching and teaching individually in higher education while engaging relevant literature as well.

Jennifer: So we're going to talk a little bit

about what we actually presented in January of 2010 at UMass Boston about how we've seen our faculty identities play out in the classroom with students.

Suzanne: We want to talk about a few different things today. We want to share a little bit about ourselves and then talk about what Higher Ed looks like right now because that's our context, Higher Ed classrooms. And to discuss a little bit about power and privilege because that's a good foundation for this conversation and then to speak a little bit to the lessons that we've learned and the strategies that we have developed.

Jennifer: Sounds good. So I'll start: I'm

Suzanne M. Buglione is Principal and Lead Consultant of CommunityBuild. CommunityBuild is a collective of skilled consultants, committed to collaboration, unearthing community resources and creative problem solving leading to individual, organizational and community development. *Our Mission is to work with individuals, groups and organizations to build capacity, connections and power.* Suzanne has a Masters Degree in Education and is currently a Doctoral candidate in the Leadership in Higher Education Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston where her research is focused on adult learning, civic engagement and identity. Suzanne is part time faculty at Worcester State College/University and Anna Maria College, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in health science, sociology and education. **Jennifer Safford-Farquharson** is Lead Consultant of CommunityBuild. Jennifer has a Masters Degree in Education and extensive experience in youth development and diversity and social justice education. Jennifer is part time faculty at Worcester State College/University and Anna Maria College, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in health science, sociology and education.

Jennifer Safford-Farquharson and I teach at Worcester State College and Anna Maria College currently as adjunct faculty. I started teaching in 2003, so I've been teaching for about seven (7) years now. And then I work with Suzanne with CommunityBuild and do a lot of other trainings and projects. For this conversation, I will share a little bit about myself in terms of background and identities. I identify as black, and actually as multi-racial. My Father is African American and my Mother is Irish American and I am thirty-three (33) and I guess that's kind of the major identities that I hold onto and I think the biggest identities that play a role in my teaching.

Suzanne: Building on that what Jen said in terms of her identities, I'm Suzanne Buglione and I also teach at Worcester State College and at Anna Maria College as adjunct faculty. I've been teaching since 2001 and also work with Jen at CommunityBuild, which is a consulting and training group. And for me as a white woman that's probably the most prominent of my identities because it's just very distinguishable. As a white woman it has been important to me to think about what it means to be white and not lose the connections to the struggles that women still have. As a white woman who is also fifty (50), the big fifty this year, it also moved me to think about being in an age category that is not so powerful. So that's been sort of a new evolution for me in terms of my identity. All of these things, my age, my race, my gender, play out strongly in the classroom.

Jennifer: I was actually thinking of something to digress somewhat from this as we think about our identities. I was wondering if you could share which identity is most prominent for you on most days. Because I know I go back and forth with which identity is most prominent and it depends on the situation that I'm in but I think that in a general given day my most prominent is my race, which is black. And being a woman is right up there but if I had to chose one identity group that I identified with more, and I

don't know if I identify it more or I feel that I'm always being identified as that. That's an interesting question. So I was curious, Suzanne, about how you felt about your identity group?

Suzanne: To me it's pretty clear. I identify most strongly as a woman and I think there is a few reasons for that in my own reflection. One is that it's only really since my adult life that I have even thought about the fact that I was white. It was not something that I gave much consideration to previously and I think that has been a developmental journey for me. It's not as if it's in my face in any way, literally, but it just doesn't come up for me and I think that's an experience for a lot of white people. And also, I think, a contributing factor to the situation of my identity as a woman being most prominent is that I identify very largely with the women's movement. And I think some of that probably comes from my mother's influence on my development and my own experiences both as a child and an adult in feeling some elements of struggle with that identity. But it's a good question. I recall that we've done some activities with some students around where they had to 'throw away' pieces of their identity. I think those are hard choices to think about which one would you abandon and what's their order of importance for you. It's always helpful to continue that conversation, I think. So for us when we look at the campuses that we work on, which are two, Worcester State and Anna Maria College they are different but they have some similarities.

Jennifer: Yes, definitely!

Suzanne: So my experience at Worcester State—I've been there longest of the two—has been one in which I'm a little bit excited at the increase of the diversity of my students. However, there's still a significant minority of students of color in my classes. And it's frequent that I think about how they must feel to be the only gay person, openly gay, in class or to be the only Latino or the only person to identify as black. Often there is a single person from a particular

group and that comes to my mind frequently when I think about the constituency of my classes. Would you say that's a similar experience for you at Worcester State?

Jennifer: Yes. And as a graduate of Worcester State, when I did my undergrad work there, it was the same and I think that there hasn't been all that much movement because I would typically be the only student identified as black in any one of my given classes and at this point in time I think it might be a little more diverse but typically in any class that I'm teaching you have maybe one person who identifies as something other than white or heterosexual in any class so. I think that's still the case, largely.

Suzanne: It's interesting to me too that when I think about age we do have probably a more diverse student body in that we have students in their mid 20s but once you pass that sort of age range, the student of other ages are few and far between. I'm also a graduate of Worcester State College and often felt like the oldest person in the group because of the path that I particularly took. How do you think that compares to Anna Maria?

Jennifer: When I think [about it] our experience at Anna Maria is a little bit different in that we teach classes in the evening to grad students in the education department so typically our students are largely teachers themselves. They're grad students so they might be older and sort of a mix in terms of age usually. But in terms of race, I think, it's similar to Worcester State and that we might occasionally have one or two students that are not identifying as white but typically they are. The other place where I see even less diversity actually at Anna Maria in the program we teach in is in gender. We typically will have zero to one male student in any class so we don't have a large population of men.

Suzanne: Yes, I think that is true and I think it speaks to the fact that we don't have as many men in the education field as we

might hope or wish for.

Jennifer: So looking at the faculty among the schools, I think I can speak more to the faculty of Worcester State only because I know more faculty there; in terms of diversity of faculty I don't really see as much diversity there either. I really couldn't speak to percentages. But in terms of the people I see, I think it varies a lot by department. So I'm not really sure but I think there is a little bit of diversity, I think probably faculty diversity probably reflects the student population somewhat.

Suzanne: I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't a mirror. I don't know Anna Maria as well as Worcester State, only having spent more time there, but it's my observation that the faculty in the education department is largely white.

Jennifer: I agree. The piece about how it makes a difference in the classroom is where I have a lot to speak about. When I teach a course, say at Worcester State where I have a class of predominately white students, I think that my most predominate identity, being black, absolutely comes into play. The reaction that I have from students is typically one of disbelief. When I walk into the front of the class they look as if they are shocked that I am their teacher. I think I've been tested a little bit more by students in terms of their being skeptical about whether or not I have the knowledge and experience to be their instructor. And I think I have to work a lot harder to earn their respect as an instructor.

Suzanne: You know when we co-teach, those are my observations as well. And I think that it's reflective of the larger social issue which is that people are not really aware of the paradigms of power and privilege in our society. You and I make a very intentional effort to teach about this so that we can bring it out into the light. And so I think that when students are reacting that way to you, Jen, they are not aware of their own privilege or of the power dynamics that exist in a larger society, never mind in an institution like Higher Ed. So I think that it

creates a really strong impetus given our experience to make sure we address that in the curriculum and in our experiences wherever we can, not one lesson and that's the end of it but to make sure that we are continuously revisiting what the real paradigm looks like in our institutions and our societies.

Jennifer: I think to just illustrate that a little bit more, when I teach by myself those are my observations and I think when I teach with you, Suzanne they are confirmed. Because physically the first few encounters with students I'll find that they'll direct their questions to Suzanne. If they have a question about anything we've gone over or the materials they'll come up and talk to Suzanne. And a lot of times they will, even if it's by email, just communicate with Suzanne. When they write their papers often times, unless we make it clear, its professor Buglione. It's that she comes first or that she's the professor. A lot of times I'm treated, by them, as the teaching assistant and it's not until I assert myself and begin answering their questions even when I'm not asked the question that they realize that they can and should come to me also. I'm able to see that is what happens when students are in the classroom when we are both there.

Suzanne: It's really a new experience for many students and they go back to the norms that they have experienced forever and they stay with those norms because it's comfortable for them. And there are times literally when someone will address a question to me I will turn my body and look to you, trying to push them to think about the fact that you initiated the conversation and that they are responding to me. I think it requires a good bit of observation and reflection so that we can try to shift the paradigm as much as possible with our own behavior. It's interesting because I think you and I have taught in a number of different departments as traveling adjuncts in education and sociology and health science and the phenomenon transcends those subjects. So it

doesn't seem to produce itself only when we are talking about using a sociological lens to look at the world or about multiculturalism in a particular health area. It's bigger than that.

Jennifer: I think it's also interesting because we do have our focus on diversity, social justice, and multicultural issues because we are able to have those discussions and know that it can help move students along. However, I think the initial discussion can be a little bit difficult particularly if I'm teaching by myself when I have to bring up issues related to my primary identities, particularly having to talk about race, discrimination, oppression, etc. When I'm discussing these topics I'm made to feel as though it's my agenda and students will often times disagree with what I say or test what I say. If I'm able to teach with you Suzanne, and you raise the same issues, the conversation goes a little bit differently. The students are able to take your explanations as fact a little bit more than they are for me because they don't believe that biases, such as 'my own agenda,' could be inserted in the teaching.

Suzanne: I think that they often tend to think that you would think that particular way because you are black.

Jennifer: Right!

Suzanne: Or perhaps that this is your experience and that's the only reason why you might think it to be true, rather than it be grounded in data or grounded in reality of some sort. I think the other piece that I've come to understand is that as a white person I can be a model for other white people about how to use my power and privilege, how to be an ally. That gives me another opportunity. When we co-teach we have been very intentional about who should present what material and who should facilitate what discussions so that they can be the best received and we can also present multiple perspectives.

Jennifer: When I present in class about power dynamics I think that different things happen obviously with different students.

For some students, who have never had a teacher of color before, it throws them off and I think it takes awhile for them to be able to really grasp what it is that I'm saying because they are struggling with their idea and their notion of who should be in power and who has the right to be faculty. I think for students of color sometimes that can also happen for them only because it hasn't been their experience again of having a teacher of color. But very quickly they typically are able to perform very well. I had the same experience not having a faculty of color until I was in college. I think that when we talk about power and privilege one of the things that I find very difficult is to stand in front of a group of students who have more power and privilege in a lot of other areas in society than I do. So my power and privilege, at the moment, is that I am the faculty member but beyond that often times they hold more power and more privileges in society than I do.

Suzanne: That's very, very true. I think the other piece of it, that you began to mention, is the power and privilege that comes with being a faculty member and that's always a challenge for me too to try to figure out how much power I want to exert because I want to create a community of learners and part of that requires that I be a part of the community. I want to create an opportunity where people are going to feel collegial and so there's little dance that happens when you need to exert power and when you really want to just give power over or have power with. I think that that's far less complex then when you have to add race into the picture or age for that matter. It just multiplies in terms of complexity. So do you think, Jen, that because of your experiences as a faculty of color you have to be different or be differently prepared for class?

Jennifer: I do, specifically for the classes that I'm teaching by myself, I have to be extremely prepared for the class, having information to back up what I say in the beginning because students won't take my, the information that I'm providing them

with, as fact. So I need to provide them with resources to understand how I know this to be true.

Suzanne: To cite your references?

Jennifer: Yes, pretty much. Even in terms of just dressing professionally until the students really have a comfort level with me I need to look like the typical professor in terms of the business attire, etc. And I also kind of set myself up to be a little more, I guess, authoritarian during the first class or so because I have to establish the power that's not really there.

Suzanne: I think it's interesting, too, the point that you mentioned a little bit ago in our conversation about students of color encountering a faculty of color. My immediate thought is that they're going to do well, but that doesn't always happen in the beginning. And so just as white students are socialized to a norm, students of color are socialized to a norm as well. It's very fascinating for me to see that play out in the classroom. And it challenges me as a white person, to how I want to reach out to students of color. I don't want to be condescending, I don't want them to perceive that I think they need extra help. By the same token I want to encourage them more, in some ways more than the white students knowing that this is a challenging environment for them, that they may be the only person of their identity in the classroom. But I don't want to do that in a way that will isolate them or feel that I don't see them as good enough or prepared enough. You and I have done a lot of service-learning work too and we've seen some interesting things erupt during courses that are asking students to engage in service-learning.

Jennifer: We're here in Worcester, MA, so most of our students are doing service-learning in community organizations or schools in the Worcester area. And we definitely have had some instances where students were going to sites in neighborhoods that are more economically disadvantaged and have a little bit of stigma to them. And some of the students, typically the

students that have had more privilege in life, have expressed concerns. Some of them have decided that they couldn't do it and chosen not to go and have not really been open to the opportunity of the service-learning just purely based on the discomfort of the class differential.

Suzanne: It's interesting. I remember one semester when we were teaching using service-learning, a student went and complained to the department chair about how the site was an unsafe place for them to be. So it's always interesting to see how those class differences play out, not only based on perception but based on reality and whether students are willing to move forward in their own ability—to move toward becoming culturally competent. Speaking of movement, we've seen some movement with graduate students in particular.

Jennifer: I think that it's nice that we're able to teach both grad and undergrad students. We can see progress typically during the semester with the grad students. Even for students who haven't had the experience of having a teacher of color they have the discussions and confront their own experiences and biases a little bit more quickly than the undergrad students and use it as a learning experience.

Suzanne: Yes, it's a nice thing to see. So it brings us to something that you and I laugh about which is that the 'messenger matters'. Who delivers what material, who initiates what discussion, who asks what questions makes a difference in the classroom. And when you and I teach together we have the advantage of being able to choose, be intentional about 'who the messenger is.'

Jennifer: It's true. Even when you begin a class at the first meeting I notice a difference. If I'm the one that introduces the course—introduces us—I think that I have taken the power that people might not perceive that I have and used it to the best of my ability to set the tone. I find that that's a little bit more helpful for students recognizing

that I am an instructor versus going the other way, which then just takes longer. Even at that first encounter by doing that simple task, it makes a big difference. I think that you and I have learned you have to be intentional about it. Likewise, I think for you to introduce concepts of racism are a good idea.

Suzanne: Students think you'd have something to say about racism, you're black. But when I introduce these topics, students respond differently and I think the response is more like: "Oh, you think it's still around? You think that stuff still happens?" And then, of course, as we can engage as much data and evidence as possible, that gives credibility to our conversations. But who delivers it is, as we've learned, a really important choice.

Jennifer: Yes, this is true. Specifically from the start of walking through the door you seem to have credibility. Because of that paradigm I have to kind of earn it with them or they have to hear it from you first.

Suzanne: Right! I think that's really a good way to frame it as it comes down to earned versus unearned privilege. It really does. So what do you think about our students' post-Obama thinking? It's been interesting to hear them in discussions, to hear their perceptions now that we have a black president.

Jennifer: I think it's kind of scary! The idea many students hold is that racism is no longer happening and pretty much credited to the fact that people of America elected Obama. I think that we have to battle against that.

Suzanne: I'm alarmed by it—this idea that all of the systematic and internal and external elements of discrimination, of power and privilege are gone—puff—based on the fact that we have a black president. I think it's important to challenge that thinking, to challenge that paradigm and to help our students to understand that our President is but one decision maker and really understand how the power structures make decisions in our country both in a public and

a private way.

Jennifer: Thinking about this just now, I'm wondering if one way we can go about challenging the perceptions of post-racial peace is to really talk about: "ok, Obama's president but now what's going on with that?" Unfortunately we can back up with data and fact that racism is alive and well. Four hundred percent more death threats in a day than any other President, ever; the kind of scrutiny that's gone on and the name calling, heckling, openly on the congressional floor—that has never happened to that degree. This lack of respect is really related to race, I think, is a place where we can probably have more discussion with students and challenge some of this thinking.

Suzanne: Yes. I think that raises another question that you and I have talked about. Is post-racial peace our goal? Is that what success looks like—for us to not see race? And what does that mean for those of us who identify in different ways? What does that mean, it means our differences are non-existent?

Jennifer: Right! I had said before that my most prominent identity is that of a black person and I think that for us to say that race is no longer an issue or doesn't need to be talked about means that a huge part of me is just gone. And I think, we're talking about racism, that anybody who is a person of color will tell you on any given day that racism is not gone—most people will tell you because they experience it on a daily basis still. So I definitely have an issue with this thinking.

Suzanne: I think it raises a lot more questions for us to consider as we move forward with changing times.

Jennifer: So I think that what has been really nice with the classes we have taught is that we have created lots of opportunities for students to discuss these issues. So they have opportunity to first look at themselves, which I don't think people do frequently enough, so they really look at who they are as individuals and their identities and the

privileges they've been afforded or challenges that they've encountered. We create opportunities for them to do that both through discussion and written work. And we also create opportunities for them to explore other identities that they are not familiar with as much. And so it creates a learning opportunity and a place for them to begin talking to other people because we will specifically ask them to conduct interviews with other people to research about different identity groups, really see what's out there in terms of resources. So I think that the beauty of the assignments that we develop is that it creates opportunities for all of this dialogue to continue to happen.

Suzanne: And again, that really can easily transcend different subjects that we teach and different disciplines that we teach and can just give students another aspect of comparison. I think it's important for us to intervene and correct language, we've learned that's a really important strategy. That we want to create an environment in the classroom that we can comment on each other's language where it's not an attack but rather this is a more appreciated term or this is a term that is less offensive to people or this is a term that my identity prefers to be called, so that we can encourage inclusive language and no matter what the conversation so that language won't be such a divisive tool.

Jennifer: I think that one of the other things that I love about the classes that we teach is that we are able to use our own experiences and we disclose information to students that I think not all faculty members disclose about identities and experiences and we use all of that, our experiences and the student's experiences as teachable moments. I don't think that happens enough in classrooms.

Suzanne: I think we've found an interesting balance because it's not disclosure for disclosure's sake or for shock value or for any of those kinds of things but really disclosure that mirrors what we ask of them. So it's a mutual conversation that says here's

a place that we can talk about these things, where we can try to understand health, we can try to understand education, we can try to understand sociology grounded in where we come from as individuals. The other thing that we do that I think has been really helpful is to try to bring in other voices of identities that we don't represent or that are not necessarily represented in class. Sometimes even if they are represented among our students, it's important that we don't ask our students to speak for all people who are gay, or for all people who are Latino. Bringing in speakers has been a very helpful tool.

Jennifer: it has been and also it's created a forum for students to be able to ask the difficult questions they always wanted to ask and never really had the forum to ask those questions or to make those comments. I think it's so necessary for students to be able to move along in their journey and to be able to ask those questions in a safe place.

Suzanne: There's such a real strong social norm that says "don't, shhh, don't say anything. Don't ask a person who is in a wheelchair what happened. Don't ask a person who is different looking to help you understand". And so when we bring in a speaker—such as recently, when for the first time we had someone come to class that was transgendered—how important that was because when do you have an opportunity to have a conversation with someone who has that lived experience and really try to understand? You just don't have that. We've talked a lot about data and fact and I think that can't be underscored enough. Then the conversation gets removed from our opinions and our experiences. The example that you gave of post Obama and what kind of horrible hate crimes are still happening was a really good example.

Jennifer: I think another strategy that we engage is when we have students bring in articles that they've found because then they are able to hear many more voices of people across the country or world even that have had these types of experiences and it

really helps to back up these messages.

Suzanne: I think there's a realization at that point that this is not just "stuff that happened historically." I think that for you and I one of the other values of team teaching has been our opportunities for reflection and I don't have a lot of places in my life where I can sit and talk about these things. After class we can process, sometimes during class we can process if something is hugely awry, we can get a little time out by giving an individual assignment and have some time to regroup and reflect. I know for myself it helps me assess my own biases and my own assumptions. And that help me think about how other people are going to see me as well, specifically students. Well, Jen, I'm really glad we had this conversation. You know for me it's not done, it's just the beginning and I appreciate the opportunity that it gives to me.

Jennifer: I agree. I think the more we have these experiences in the classroom the more learning, actually comes from it, which I love.

Suzanne: And hopefully our learning means better learning for our students.

Jennifer: I agree!

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