



Framing Cultural Diversity Courses Post U.S. 2008 Presidential Elections

Marjorie Jones

Lesley University

mjones@lesley.edu

Abstract: Historical events are often used both as descriptors and 'projections' of the tenor of a nation. The election of Barak Obama as the 44th president of the United States was seen as a turning point in U.S. history. How should this historical event inform the framing and teaching of higher education courses which focus on race and cultural issues in the U.S.? This question was asked of adult learners enrolled in a course examining the African American experience in the U.S. Since the higher education classroom provides a unique opportunity to present, explore and understand many controversial issues citizens grapple with in the U.S. and the world this paper presents and discusses the ways in which the higher education classroom can respond to this question. This paper shares the tenor of the nation related in the literature—the historical, pre-election and post-election period—and students' identification of themes and issues such as tolerance, respect for each others' perspectives, culture and open-mindedness, that are essential to the curriculum in order to increase knowledge, provide a forum for mutual exchange which can improve racial understanding.

The higher education classroom provides a unique opportunity to present, explore and understand many controversial issues citizens grapple with in the U.S. and the world. It brings together people from a variety of backgrounds, perspectives and professions and in some aspects is a microcosm of society. This diversity provides a meaningful laboratory for the exchange of views in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

My participation in the classroom is both as a facilitator of learning and as a citizen. As citizen, I have experienced acts such as the willful burning of property and invisibility, experiences that citizens of Af-

rican ancestry can relate to. I come to the experience with both personal knowledge of acts of intolerance and racism and professional preparedness to facilitate the presentation and exchange of information, the sharing of perspectives and experiences that could contribute to overcoming those barriers that divide racial/ethnic groups within the U.S.

The discussion of issues related to race in the U.S. has been volatile or totally avoided in many forums, particularly public forums. In classrooms comprised of undergraduate students or adult learners I have found specific topics, with related

Marjorie Jones is an Associate Professor in the Division of Education, Lesley College, Lesley University. She also teaches courses in the Division of Social Sciences and the Center for the Adult Learner and serves as a Senior Advisor in the Ph.D. in Educational Studies Program. She has taught English at the secondary level and has worked in higher education training teachers and principals and has developed curricula used nationally and internationally.

readings, resources and assignments, to be beneficial in teaching and learning about racial and cultural issues, because as long as the rules for honoring and respecting perspectives are set and adhered to, both faculty and students are able to engage in conversations that may not be possible in some other contexts. There are a variety of 'separation factors' such as class, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity and residential patterns that prohibit the exchange of experiences and perspectives on mutually respectful grounds. As citizens, we are not afforded the opportunity to learn from the experiences of those different from ourselves and engage the information in non-confrontational ways. Hence, I see the classroom as a safe forum for faculty and students to bring and expand their knowledge and experience to a discussion of the various cultures present within the larger U.S. culture.

Historical events are often used both as descriptors and projections of the tenor of a nation. This essay, based on a presentation made at the 2010 Annual Teaching for Transformation Conference organized by CIT (Center for Improvement of Teaching) at UMass Boston, examines the ways in which the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States can inform the content and framing of courses related to race and race relations and issues relating to cultural diversity in the United States. Immediately after the election of Obama many in the nation and around the world perceived his election as a turning point in U.S. race and ethnic relations where there may be less need to consider issues related to cultural diversity. Though the election itself marked a significant milestone, could it also be viewed as a single indicator of deeper racial understanding and acceptance?

That the Constitution of the United States still stands after more than two hundred years attests to the fact that it is a highly regarded document developed by

educated and thoughtful men. Yet this document has been amended twenty-seven times, providing evidence that sections of the document needed to receive additional consideration. One notable imperfection of the document was related to the designation of slaves as three-fifths of a person, which deprived them of the right of suffrage. As a result of this and other laws and experiences, conflict and distrust have existed among whites and blacks throughout the history of the United States. The specific reasons for these conflicts are not always known to those who occupy the seats in higher education classrooms, yet they bring to the classroom an awareness of the conflict and tension, even a sense of being purveyors of that conflict and an inability to comprehend ways in which the conflict can be reduced. According to Gwen Ifill,

Throughout our nation's history, the most eventful change has often been driven by racial conflict. Wars have been fought, marches have been led and movements have been nurtured from the pain and discovery of our evolving debate over the politics of difference. (Ifill, p. 18)

The election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States is noteworthy for many reasons, one of which is that, as observed by Ifill, "In 1958, more than half of Americans responding to a Gallup poll said they would not vote for a black candidate. By 1984, that number had dropped to 16 percent. By 2007, only 4 percent told Newsweek they would not. In 2008, 43 percent of white Americans cast their votes for Obama. This sounds unimpressive until you notice that John Kerry, a white candidate, got only 41 percent of the white vote in 2004" (Ifill, p. 16).

The euphoria of the election results provided an opportune moment to reflect on the work that was being undertaken in

courses considering race and ethnic relations and issues related to cultural diversity. According to Cornell West,

A wholesale critical inventory of ourselves and our communities of struggle is neither self-indulgent autobiography nor self-righteous reminiscence. Rather it is a historical situating and location of our choices, sufferings, anxieties and efforts in light of the circumscribed options and alternatives available to us. We are all born into and build on circumstances, traditions and situations not of our own choosing; yet we do make certain choices that constitute who we are and how we live in light of these fluid circumstances, traditions and situations. (West, p. 3)

It is this process of self-reflection that I embrace as I seek to examine with students the framing of courses which inform their knowledge and response to issues of race and ethnic relations and issues of cultural diversity. I teach two courses that examine issues related to race and culture in the U.S., "Race and Ethnic Relations" and "Cultural Diversity: The African American Experience." Adult learners are the population in the latter course which is being used in this appraisal of the framing of such courses. Responses from the adult learners to the question about framing cultural diversity courses post the 2008 presidential elections are those that I reflect on in this essay as this population is comprised of adults who have been voters for many years, are heads of families and are professionals working in communities in Massachusetts.

"Cultural Diversity: The African American Experience" engages the adult learners in a study of Africans being brought to America, the impact of this forced migration, the ebb and flow of struggles and vic-

tories, the development of what is termed the African American experience and the contributions to the culture of the U.S. and the New World. The course addresses what Martin Marger views as central to the experience of African Americans:

The experience of African Americans is unique among American ethnic minorities. No other group entered the society as involuntary immigrants, and no other group was subsequently victimized by two centuries of slavery. The vestiges of these social facts account for the uninterrupted, if vacillating, conflict between whites and blacks throughout American history and the agonizing nature of the adjustment of blacks to a predominantly white society. (p. 164)

A review of the objectives of "Cultural Diversity: The African American Experience" is one way of assessing the framing of the courses. For this purpose, I will briefly review, while reflecting on student perceptions, three of the objectives of the course.

1. To increase understanding of the socio-historical context of the African American experience

Students enrolled in this course often note that they are unfamiliar with many of the experiences and many of the ways in which the society is structured so as to be able to consciously influence the ways in which African Americans participate as full citizens. The understanding of these experiences is critical to the ways in which professionals understand contemporary practices in society, for themselves as citizens and for their roles as professionals. One student noted that it was important to "bring back the past to the classroom and connect it with the present." This reflection pointed to the importance of the ways in

which historical information can provide a lens for determining present actions.

Another student noted that "It is important to talk/think/know what happened historically to get us to a place where we can have a black president." In this comment the student acknowledged the benefits of engaging in discussion and critical reflection as a way of understanding the results of the political process.

2. To explore one's own cultural identity and how lives are shaped by political realities

The course provides the opportunity for each student to identify the national origin of their ancestors, their own national origin, and the ways in which they identify themselves, as one method of permitting each learner to begin with oneself as the course embarks on an examination of how lives are shaped by political realities. Becoming more aware of the settlement and assimilation experiences of their own racial/ethnic group provides a lens from which they could view the African American experience. Students identify this historical lens as an important frame from which to view the present social, economic and political realities as they note that much of the historical information was not learned in school or in the larger society.

3. To develop an appreciation of cultural differences and confront the realities of racism

Obama received Secret Service protection earlier than any other candidate in history. In the days after he won the November election, law enforcement agencies reported that threats directed at the newly elected president spiked dramatically. Such serious safety concerns made some of the racial gibes

aimed at Obama during the campaign seem juvenile, but they acted as reminders that not all of American was buying into the notion of racial transcendence. (Ifill, p. 59)

Ifill's observation above indicates that within the U.S. intense negative responses on issues related to race still exist. Racism exists in subtle and intense forms. In the course "Cultural Diversity: The African American Experience," black and white students have challenged each other while being able to learn from these exchanges and continuing to communicate with each other in mutually respectful ways. The exchange allows students to gain an 'appreciation' of the ways in which experiences are understood by various groups. The course has shown that both students of European ancestry and African ancestry are unfamiliar with a great deal of historical information and that a lack of knowledge of that information has contributed to fear, misrepresentation and hostility.

Students also note that issues such as tolerance and respect for each other's perspectives can neither be mandated nor dispensed with but they believe, noting their own experiences in the college classroom, that understanding and developing an open mind comes through education and therefore history related to the experiences of African Americans should be part of the curriculum throughout the schooling process.

Some students note that their interactions with African Americans come through television programs. Another benefit of providing safety in the classroom is that students are able to confront their own realities, reducing the possibility of shame and enriching the discourse on personal experiences and possible future actions. Field activities provided in the course enable students to participate in cultural activities and interact with individuals and groups. It is remarkable to note how quickly students

overcome their apprehensions about visiting an 'unfamiliar' neighborhood or participating in an activity related to a culture which was never portrayed to them in positive terms.

I take note that these students regard the historical information as critical to understanding present situations and accomplishments and that the past and present need to be connected to provide a clearer understanding of the issues related to race and ethnicity and cultural diversity in the U.S. Based on student responses, the current framing of the course seems to be valid in relation to the outcomes but one student observation suggests that an examination of current issues is essential in informing their education as citizens and professionals while providing a mutually respectful forum for the conversations that are critical to the understanding of and improvement of race relations in the U.S.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Back, Les and Solomos, John (2009). *Theories of Race and Racism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ifill, Gwen (2009). *The Break Through. Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. New York: Doubleday.
- Marger, Martin (2009). *Race and Ethnic Relations*. 8th ed. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- West, Cornell (1999). *The Cornell West Reader*. New York: Basic Books.