

Race, Social Studies Content, and Pedagogy: Wrestling through Discomfort Together

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Introduction (Walter Gershon)

This autobiographical piece of collaborative discensus (Gershon, 2008; Gershon, Peel & Bilinovich, 2009) presents our interwoven perspectives about the challenges we faced as we talked about race in a pre-service social studies class. Race is not only a concept central to social studies content in Canada (cf. Solomon, 1997; Wright & Sears, 1998) and the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2003; www.socialstudies.org), it is of particular importance for pre-service teachers in Northeast Ohio because the majority of jobs available to students upon graduation are in our urban centers with large if not majority African American populations (e.g., Cleveland, Akron, and Youngstown).

As the literature in suggests, in spite of the many ways in which race impacts all classrooms (e.g. Banks, 1986; Liggett, 2008; Lipman, 1998; Valenzuela, 2005), teaching about race to pre-service teachers is often fraught with difficulties in both the United States and Canada (e.g. Daniel, 2008, Ellsworth, 1989; Solomon, 1997). This is particularly the case when either most students in the class are Anglo (e.g. Chaisson, 2004; Delpit, 2005; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

Our composite inquiry here builds on this literature in two key ways. First, there is a tendency for educators to talk to student teachers *about* the difficulties of teaching the ways in which race shapes identities, practices, and so on rather than *with* student teachers about the difficulties they are having in conducting such lessons. This topic is of particular importance when suburban, Anglo students with limited experience either in cities or with students of color are assigned or request to teach in urban schools with majority non-Anglo populations (see Sleeter, 2001). Second, there is little talk about contexts in which pre-service teachers use their available agency (Metz, 1978; Pace & Hemmings, 2006; Page, 1991; Gershon, 2007) to skillfully negotiate *not* having to talk about race.

Our work here, then, is an explicit effort to reveal the ways in which we each negotiated these issues during a shared semester of pre-service course work in social studies methods (a second methods course for students which meets concurrently with students' practicum). To this end, we utilize a framework called collaborative discensus (Gershon, 2008; Gershon, Peel & Bilinovich, 2009). This framing is a process that enables each of us to speak to and with one another in such a way that we do not need to compromise on language, content, or concepts; yet, we have opportunities to respond to one another.

Where Carrie represents the majority voice in our room – students who were very disgruntled with the course’s content and pedagogy – Amanda voices the minority student perspective as one troubled by her peers’ lack of inquiry about social studies concepts and their delivery in daily lessons. Not only do we have contrasting perspectives and roles but we are also markers of differences in social capital and status. For example, I am the only male, their former professor, the only one of us with an advanced degree, and have considerably more teaching experience.

Our talk in this piece is more akin to uses of autobiography in curriculum studies (Casemore, 2007; Pinar, 1994; Whitlock, 2007) employed as a form of *currere* (Pinar, 1994)—in which our stories explicate our ideas, ideals, emotions, and interactions so that the might be both critically examined for their meanings and serve as an exemplar of given ways of knowing—than it is an instance of narrative inquiry (e.g. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, this work is inherently narrative in nature as we thread our individual perspectives to form a rich narrative tapestry.

In sum, our work here serves two main purposes. First it is an opportunity for a teacher and two former students to think about the difficulties pre-service social studies teachers had in conceptualizing and talking about the relationship between race and social studies content. Second, this transparent discussion also serves as an opportunity to consider what such understandings of social studies might mean in practice.

Carrie’s Experience

In all my previous social studies and education courses, race and social studies were presented as separate from one another and race was considered as something “different” to be accounted for in school settings. Additionally, I was always given the impression that talking about race made it “an issue;” if you as a teacher recognized race but did not dwell on it then there would not be a problem. For example, I was told to not look at a class by the racial make up but, instead, rather look at the class in the aspect of qualities such as performance and attendance. While student academic performance and attendance are important, this way of thinking did not prepare me for Walter’s class or the situations I was faced with during student teaching.

In terms of the class, none of my other education professors challenged me to think or guided me (and my classmates) to answer our own questions as Walter did. From the very first session, he wanted to have discussions not only about teaching practice but more open-ended thinking about ideas, like how race and social studies are related. As with most of my classmates I was reluctant to do so, both because I did not feel comfortable talking about topics in this way with people I did not know well and I did not want Walter challenging my ideas about race. While I usually had no problem sharing my ideas in class, I was intimidated by this inquiry-based teaching style and was hesitant to share my thoughts because I was afraid of his questions.

I became annoyed rather quickly and did not even want to hear anything about race because I believed that this was not a topic worthy of so much conversation, that

Walter was making a bigger deal out of the topic than necessary. I did not understand why he was trying so hard to engage us in talk about race—my understanding of his persistence did not become clear until months after the course ended.

However, one incident in Walter's class that related to my student teaching changed how I experienced my semester there. As a student teacher, I tried to "fold" racial diversity into my lessons in a surface kind of way, mention a couple of key points or ideas about how race impacted historical events and move on. I thought this was how you related race and social studies together, an idea that did not seem difficult until I was faced with a very uncomfortable situation in the classroom where I student taught.

I was teaching a lesson about the working conditions for slaves on plantations in the South and factory conditions for women in the North and tried to present these two topics in an equal manner in order to show the harshness both populations faced. When I created my lessons, I did not account for the fact, or even consider, that African American students might ask different questions than the ones I had in mind about the topic and was unprepared for the question one of my African American male students asked.

In the middle of the lesson, this young man raised his hand and asked about the inappropriate relationships slave owners had with their female slaves. I was stunned and did not know what to make of the situation; I wondered how I was to answer his question and concluded that he asked this question just to show off to his friends and/or to disrupt the lesson. As a result, I blew him off as being a troublemaker without considering the legitimacy of the question or how race might help me understand his actions.

I talked about this in Walter's class one night because one of my classmates was faced with a similar situation and was looking for a way to handle it, a decision I soon regretted. Walter shortly followed my response by asking me if the student in question was African American. At the time, I did not feel the student's race was relevant to the discussion, I was just trying to share how I "handled" the "situation."

I did not understand why Walter chose to keep asking me about the student's race, and, as a result of this experience, I became very upset with him and disconnected from the class. I wanted nothing more to do with Walter or his class. I just wanted to get through the semester and move on with my career, felt like he was trying to make what was supposed to be a happy time for me miserable, and finished the semester still confused state about what happened and how that would impact me as a teacher.

However, I started to come to terms with the semester as Walter, Amanda, and I began to write together (Gershon, Peel & Bilinovich, 2009). As I reflect back on my college course, I now see why discussing social studies and race was so important. When teaching social studies, it is not enough to simply note racial diversity in the lessons. Instead, teachers need to take into account the racial composite of students and take the time to consider how a given lesson might affect students as well as thinking about the kinds of questions the discussion might raise. Not only does race impact all classrooms

and content but it is of particular importance to the questions about economy, history, and geography that are social studies education.

Amanda's Experience

At first I was excited. It was the last semester...student teaching. I had been considering all that I learned in the last year about what it means to be a "powerful" social studies teacher. When Walter approached the subject of race as it relates to content during the second week of class, I was ready for the discussion. I knew from meeting with my cooperating teacher that I would be responsible for teaching the 1960s and 1970s in my U.S. History classes, two decades where the textbook we used was loaded with discussions of race, class, gender and other concepts central to social studies. However, I was not necessarily surprised when none of my classmates were eager to participate in the discussion.

I knew that we had all read Loewen (2008), Zinn (2005), and other authors that challenge the dominant narrative in American history as we had discussed how race, class and gender operate in the content and in our classrooms with previous professors. I thought my classmates and I had a pretty good grasp of these concepts, although arriving at these understandings had been difficult and uncomfortable for most of us.

This was a new semester with a new professor, and no one wanted to be the first to speak to this difficult topic, myself included. I remember talking with my peers after that first attempt at a discussion. They all seemed very annoyed that Walter had even broached the subject of race (Do we really have to talk about this again? Who is this guy anyway?). They doubted that this topic had anything to do with student teaching. Although I disagreed, I decided not to say anything at the time. I considered these people to be friends and I did not want to put them in an awkward situation in class thinking my peers be more willing to discuss the topic when it came up in their classrooms. This is social studies, I thought, it has come up sooner or later. I had no idea that the stony silence would last an entire semester.

Over the next couple of weeks, Walter attempted to have discussions about race and content to no avail. In my student teaching experience, my students and I were having frequent discussions not only of race, class, and gender, but also about citizenship, social change, and personal agency. I found these discussions to be difficult and was often in need of support yet received very little response from my peers in class or via the class blog that Walter had established for the class to communicate while we were in the field.

This was a very isolating experience, especially because my peers had always been supportive in the past. We had frequently traded advice about professors, assignments and difficult experiences in the field, but now it seemed as if we were total strangers. I often felt like I had missed something in those previous classes and experiences. How was it that I seemed to have such a different idea of what it means to

teach social studies? What did they know that I did not? I couldn't understand how I was suddenly the "odd girl out," and it was not long before my isolation turned to frustration.

It was around this time that I began meeting with Walter during office hours and after class in order to help me better understand and contextualize my experience. I first met with Walter during his office hours because I needed guidance on some of the assignments for the course and the lessons I was planning. Our talk inevitably turned to my frustration with the class' refusal to discuss not only race but also other concepts central to social studies. If we could not discuss these topics as peers, then how would we discuss them with our students? How would we, as teachers, guide students toward complex understandings if we could not have a constructive discussion of race? I often wondered if my students would be better served if I simply prepared them for the Ohio Graduation Test required for graduation.

Meanwhile, most of my classmates never did make the connection between issues involving race, class and gender in their questions about management, how to make content more meaningful for students, or which instructional strategies were appropriate in different situations. During these discussions, the class seemed to be saying, "Tell me what to do. Tell me how to teach. Tell me what to think." They did not seem to realize the impossibility of their request, that how one teaches is a choice informed by one's own values and what one perceives to be most beneficial for students. My peers did not want to hear that they must decide on their own what kind of teachers they would become, an understanding that meant they needed to have a clear conceptualization of their own values and beliefs. Instead, the more Walter asked them to think about such relationships, the more resistant and angry they became.

By the end of the semester, I had resigned myself to the fact that I was not going to get support from my classmates when it came to discussing the relationships between social studies content and aspects of society and culture like race, class, and gender—I relied heavily on Walter for these discussions and he helped me through some of the more difficult days I had in my own classroom.

I am of two minds as reflect on my experiences in my program. On one hand, I loved the program because it had a great impact on how I perceive what it is to be a social studies teacher and how I choose to live in the world. On the other, my classmates did not seem to be similarly inspired. When placed side-by-side, my experiences in this class raises questions about of the possibilities of teacher education programs to provide future educators the necessary ideas and skills to teach against their privilege, convincing them that it is possible, and helping them navigate between theory and practice. I think that it this was a large part of the difference between my classmates' experience in Walter's class and my own.

Walter's Experience

As Carrie and Amanda have presented, their class had a very difficult time thinking and talking about race, a position that is in many ways contrary to national

understandings meaningful social studies teaching and learning (www.socialstudies.org). The majority of students' perspectives generally fell into two oppositional perspectives, creating a vortex of possibility for talk about race. On one hand, students stated they had "covered" race in their previous classes and any discussion of race was redundant. On the other, when asked open-ended questions about race—what is the relationship between race and education, how might one approach questions of race in lessons about slavery—students claimed to be uncomfortable talking about race, some going so far as to say they were "tired of being blamed for race problems." It is important to note that although the presentation of race and social studies may have been more in terms of questions of content, my colleagues did indeed introduce connections between race and social studies in previous classes, discussions that helped students construct their paradoxical heard-it-already/am-uncomfortable-with-the-topic position.

As Amanda and Carrie note, the duality of their position (already know about race/don't want to talk about race) created a context in which any move to discuss race could be quickly discounted. Foley (1990) refers to these kinds of student tactics as "make out games" (p. 112), a term he borrows from Burawoy (1979) who uses it to describe how workers elude the constraints of their jobs on the factory floor. Similar to other discussions about students' classroom interactions (e.g. Mulooley & Varenne, 2006; Willis, 1977), Foley argues that students use make out games to get the teacher off task or otherwise derail daily lessons. I unwittingly played into students' make out games, consistently returning to questions about race in order to fulfill what I saw (and see) as my pedagogical obligation to assist students in considering key subject matter concepts. The result was a semester-long discussion *around* rather than *about* race.

Students wanted answers, not questions. As Carrie and Amanda indicate, the majority of students believed there were indeed always correct answers in approaches to classroom interactions, content and its delivery. What students often did not see was how their quest for correctness erased most of the very social studies curriculum they sought to deliver to their students. For example, as Carrie notes, at no time were questions of race positively connoted; race was always an "issue" that needed a solution.

That students would actively seek to circumvent formal and informal curriculum is not surprising. Not only have I often experienced students' skillful negotiation around, under, and in between the content I sought to deliver (in P-12 classrooms, universities, and in community settings) but it is also a central aspect of many empirical, qualitative studies of classrooms (cf. Erickson, 2004; Metz, 1978; Pace & Hemmings, 2006; Shor, 1996). Instead, what troubled me throughout the semester we spent together, and gnaws at me still, is that this was a group of soon-to-be-teachers worked very hard at not-teaching while explicitly and implicitly demonstrating their distaste for the concepts and constructs central to their future profession (e.g., race as – and its intersections with – social studies content and classrooms contexts). In other words, the very people on whom much of the responsibility to teach core ideas of citizenship will rest—local and non-local historical perspectives, the relationships of individuals to the state and those between nations, societies and cultures, the sociocultural contexts and precepts that inform our norms and values, as well as notions of economy and finances—would prefer to provide

relatively narrow, single correct answers to America's next generation of thinkers. What I thought I heard in our classroom was an opening to discuss key social studies ideas and ideals; what students were looking for was another set of interlocking beads that would add to their linear and sequential understanding of social studies content.

A Reflective Conclusion (Walter, Carrie & Amanda)

In light of the spatial constraints of this article, rather than each reflectively respond to each other in an individual or dialogic (e.g. scripted) fashion, we sat down together for a recorded conversation about how we thought and felt after reading each other's writing. Over the course of our conversation, three central themes emerged.

The first theme regards questions of the role of comfort in discussions of social studies content. All three of us, for different reasons, were uncomfortable with talking about race during our semester together. For Amanda it was the topic in general. For Carrie it was the topic and that she had come from a regional campus, her lack of time with her peers adding to her discomfort. For Walter it was this group of future social studies teacher's lack of engagement and willingness to think about race. In terms of these difficulties, we would like to echo one of Amanda's thoughts during our discussion, "just because something's uncomfortable doesn't mean it's not important to think or talk about."

Second, we all found this article somewhat difficult to write, in part because of the ways in which our talk intersects with the personal and the professional, and in part because we have all grown much since this experience. Finally, and in keeping with the previous two themes, all three of us feel strongly that more discussions of this nature are not only important but also vital to growth in understanding social studies content, guiding others through that content, and in our selves as educator's and individuals. It is our hope that the kind of candid, transparent talk we present here can serve as one possible model for others to wrestle with difficult educational interactions rather than sweep such misgivings and discomfort under the proverbial rug.

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