

Our Responsibilities as Antiracist Educators

Douglas Fleming

Sandra Kouritzin's *Word from the Editor* in the last issue of *TCJ* is a refreshingly heartfelt and honest appraisal of her own take on the subject positions we occupy as second-language educators in terms of class, race, or (as is my case) gender. In our relatively privileged profession, we have ambiguous relationships with our learners, who more often than not hold disadvantaged positions in our society as recent immigrants.

Like many in our profession, I struggle with the same questions. British-based culture, from which my own heritage draws, has been especially privileged in Canada. I have also been guilty of racist and sexist thought and conduct, much to my shame and consternation. However, like many of us in the profession (and I count Sandie Kouritzin in that number), I have actively engaged in antiracist work both in and out of the classroom. To my mind, the important thing about living in today's world is what we do with the subject and material positions we inherit.

Do we challenge patriarchal and hegemonic structures to the best of our ability? Are we vigilant in recognizing our own limitations and shortcomings so as to learn from our mistakes? And as educators do we build on this awareness to offer our students tools that can be used to combat poverty, exploitation, and discrimination?

I believe that it is important not to group all privileged or disadvantaged peoples into the same amorphous blocks. Race is an ideological construct that is to a large extent part of imperialist projects (Ricento, 2000). In my opinion, it is best viewed in the light of recent theories related to identity construction (Norton, 2000). Despite what the religious and political fundamentalists in today's world would have us believe, we are all complicated creatures who occupy various subject positions concurrently. We all change, exhibit contradictions, and perform acts that are at various times progressive or regressive.

In my own work I am very much aware of my role as an ESL teacher in relationship to the nation state to which I belong. My students will become Canadian citizens, and like others in our profession I have an important role in their progress toward this goal. I continually ask myself if the vision of Canada that I present to my students is emancipatory. Am I replicating a

vision of the nation as a set of stereotypes that once again reinforce privilege? Or am I challenging my students to seize hold of Canada as their own creation to mold?

Privilege certainly does exist in real and concrete ways. However, identifying and personalizing guilt is not productive. As Wilhak (2004) recently noted in this journal, it is difficult for us as educators to move beyond an analytical appraisal of one's own privileged position to action. Guilt, as has often been noted, is a useless emotion. We must move beyond it to embrace change.

Sandie's remarks are important and very welcome in a journal such as ours. Let's keep the dialogue going!

The Author

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References

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