



*Research Articles*

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## **On Love and Learning: Reflections of a White Professor “Teaching” Black Adult Students**

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*“White and black folk are bound together, even when we breathe very different meanings into race.”*

*--Michael Eric Dyson (2017) Tears we cannot stop: A sermon to white America*

### **Recognizing my Whiteness**

**F**or years, I have been reading, writing, thinking, and talking (mostly to myself) about race. During Barack Obama’s eight years in the White House, and certainly more intensely since Donald Trump was elected to the Presidency, I have been re-imagining the United States of America as a *United* country, especially around the life and death experiences of race. I know that this is not the story of America. I have also been thinking about how black and white people have different experiences of race, different understandings of history, and starkly unequal access to power and opportunity (DuBois, 1994; Dyson, 2017a; Dyson, 2017b; Sublette & Sublette, 2016; Washington, 1901).

Growing up in a white suburban New Jersey town, I had barely a superficial awareness of the complexities of race, racism, or the vulnerabilities associated with being black. Whiteness, at least in part, defined who I was and how freely I grew up in the world. For reasons I now recognize have more to do with an existential search for belonging and connectedness, rather than an explanation for my light olive skin and thick wavy hair, I have always wondered if I was “a little” black. This admission exposes how little I consciously knew that the U.S. was built on the de-humanization of black people and on the systemic superiority of white people (Anderson, 2016; Dyson, 2017a; Sublette & Sublette, 2016). Beginning in my early 20s, I wanted to be black or I suspected I was, in some way, “of color.” I see the danger of cooptation – falsely claiming some version of blackness for my own benefit (see Blow’s 2015 editorial on Rachel Dolezal). At that time, what I knew of my genealogy was that I was vaguely “English, Irish, French and

Dutch,” as my parents told my siblings and me when we asked. We learned to repeat this phrase in a sing-song way, the words strung together like a jump rope song. “Whiteness is an invention...When your ancestors got to America,” Michael Eric Dyson tells us in *Tears we cannot stop: A sermon to white America*, “All your polkas, pubs, or pizzas, and more got tossed into a crucible of race where European ethnicities got pulverized into whiteness” (p. 45). Moreover, Ruth Frankenberg, in her collection of essays on the meaning of whiteness, emphasizes the critical importance of making whiteness visible. She writes: “Critical attention to whiteness offers a ground not only for the examination of white selves, but also for the excavation of the foundations of all racial and cultural positionings” (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 16). As with many other white people, I felt that I had no distinct culture or ethnicity. “You don’t get whiteness from your genes. It is a social inheritance that is passed on to you as a member of a particular group” (Dyson, 2017a, p. 44). Still, I longed to know who I was, genetically speaking.

Last summer, while reading Jesmyn Ward’s edited collection on race, *The Fire this Time* (Ward, 2016) and her personal essay, “Cracking the Code,” something in particular caught my attention. Ward writes of her desire to “unlock” her genetic code. In her quest, she and her family members had their DNA tested. Surprised by her results, Ward writes: “I had thought that my genetic makeup would confirm the identity that I’d grown up with—one that located Africa as my ancestors’ primary point of origin, and that allowed me to claim a legacy of black resistance and strength. So it was discomfiting to find that my ancestry was forty percent European” (Ward, 2016, p.129).

After reading these words, I immediately went to Ancestry.com and ordered a kit for myself. Here was my chance to uncover my ancestral roots. After two weeks, the kit arrived. I spat into the vial and sent it off to be analyzed. Six weeks later, the results came in: 100 percent European; not a hint of African ancestry. I recognize that a white person’s ancestral search is not the same as a black person’s search. Even if my DNA had revealed roots beyond Europe—and I keep wondering, aren’t we all rooted in Ethiopia? (see Wilford, 2006) – I am still a white person, born into a white family, with socially enforced superiority unfairly granted to me. The longing to know where I am from – and to have some of my curiosity scientifically satisfied—intensified in me a passion for learning about and from black and African American people, namely my adult students. As a strong commentary against the rhetoric and violence of white nationalism that characterizes the Trump administration, and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and sister social justice movements, I feel emboldened to talk openly and honestly about race. I write not as someone who has the answers, but as one who has many questions. I want to learn about myself, about what it means to be a black or a white person in the socially constructed narrative of race. The primary purpose of this essay is to show how talking together across our differences in an informed and open and empathic way, is a bridge of sorts, an empowering and necessary social justice process. The more I can work to uncover and make visible my assumptions about the world, about my students, about race and power and love and friendship, the more, as my reflections here show, I am able to be open to knowing myself, and genuinely learning about and from my students. This learning ultimately is for my students.

For several reasons, talking openly about race and racism—between and among people who are from “different” races—can be a difficult and complicated process with no road map. First, there’s fear (see Frank, 2015). A white person might experience defensiveness once the word

*race* is spoken (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Linn, 2009). Black people have long experienced insults, slights, and injuries, as well as being systematically ignored, silenced, and murdered. Compounding the problem is the fact that faculty are not taught how to teach about culture or how to navigate conversations about race (or gender or sexual orientation for that matter). Students, specifically students of color, bear the brunt of this weakness in their learning experiences (see Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, Garrison-Wade, 2008). Faculty might say to themselves: “I am afraid of offending a student. I am afraid of being blamed for something that has ‘nothing’ to do with me. I am afraid of not knowing enough about a certain group or culture.” These are fears that I have heard and experienced. The first step is to acknowledge being unsure and afraid. This essay is my effort to share some of my uncertainties.

In my relationships with black students, I feel the complexity of my whiteness, as well as the interlocking forces of fear, learning and of love. Through listening to my students’ experiences, as they engage in the intellectual and emotional preparation to work in Human Services, I have gotten to know them. I have also learned about myself, as a person, as a teacher and a learner. In subtler ways, living as a lesbian has insulated me from owning my own culpability of whiteness. I sometimes feel that being a lesbian—married with two elementary-school-aged daughters—has given me a small opening into understanding how it feels to live as a (sexual) minority. Of course, there are significant differences between sexual orientation and race, specifically that race is clearly visible and sexual orientation can, arguably, be hidden.

On a Tuesday in February, I took a break from my thinking and dreaming to see Raoul Peck’s riveting, unsettling documentary *I am Not your Negro*. I decided to write this essay after seeing the film. Shown in black and white and narrated with beautiful precision by Samuel L. Jackson, the film centers on the prescient writer James Baldwin. When the theater lights dimmed and I sat back in my seat, I felt a heaviness settling in my chest, an intense sadness. The usher took my ticket and thanked me for spending part of Valentine’s Day at the movies. I had not thought of the significance of Valentine’s Day, although now I understand *I am not Your Negro* as a film about love, not the feel good, easy kind of love, but the complicated love of humanness. More starkly, it is a film about white denial and white culpability in the creation and legacy of racism in America. *I am not your Negro* is a mandatory history lesson, a love story for Baldwin and an urgent call to action.

This essay is my call to action. In these pages, I reflect on my love for teaching and, especially, for my students. In an essay on James Baldwin’s contribution to education, Frank (2015) writes: “Love unmask[s] illusions, allowing us the possibility to discover who we might be. It is tough and it calls on us to grow”. Of course, there is much more that I need and want to learn about my students, about teaching, and about the complicated love of humanness. This essay is one offering. Throughout, I show my reflective process during a semester of teaching *Cultural Competency in Human Services* to a class of mostly black, African American and Caribbean American adult students, mostly women, at Empire State College (part of the State University of New York system). Through excerpts of my personal teaching journals and student writing, as well as my thinking, questioning, and wondering in response to these examples, I hope to initiate a conversation about race, racism, and other topics that are often unspoken or invisible for white faculty in particular to openly address in their teaching (see for example King, 2000). The joys of teaching adult students are many, including the rich opportunities to learn about

students' lives, specific to the course, and in turn, to learn about my own life, including acknowledging my privileged standpoint.

### Teaching about Cultural Differences

Many college curricula offer courses on understanding cultures, including *Cultural Competency*, *Cultural Diversity* and *Human Diversity*, among others. With similar purposes and learning objectives, most of these courses emphasize learning about oneself, maintaining an open mind and a sense of curiosity about “difference” and “otherness” and bringing to awareness the idea of micro-aggressions, everyday insults that people of color, and other groups such as members of LGBTQ communities, are forced to endure (Sue & Sue, 2012). These courses are framed by a social justice context where students are introduced to concepts such as “identity” and “intersectionality” and “power” and “privilege,” “oppression” and “hegemony” (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Morgan & Marin, 2016; Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015; Sue & Sue, 2012; Sue et al., 2009; Tharp, 2017; Tatum, 1992).

For teachers working with students at any grade level—elementary, middle school, high school, college and even professional and graduate schools—the ability to facilitate an honest and informed conversation about race and racism is both necessary and inherently tough. Talking about race and racism is especially complex and challenging for white faculty who are responsible for teaching black and multicultural students. Increasingly, faculty need support to address all aspects of human diversity, attending to the intersectionality of oppression and identity (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Educators need the tools and institutional support to teach about diversity in timely, meaningful, and thoughtful ways. The pursuit of learning for black people and the dedication of both black and white teachers to offer caring and attentive approaches to teaching has been an educational commitment since the Civil War (Washington, 1901). In her February 2017 State of the City address in Brooklyn, New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito said: “Educators have a pressing responsibility to discuss diversity, to advance this dialogue and to get it right.” She called for “critically conscious educators” to be trained to engage in conversations about race (New York City Council, 2017).

There is a lot that can go wrong in teaching about culture or mentoring students from different cultures (Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Morgan & Marin, 2016; Merriweather, 2012). For example, a teacher who is not open to learning about others or who is unaware or defensive may not have the tools to successfully create safety in the class environment (Sue & Sue, 2012). Merriweather, Hunn, Guy, & Manglitz, (2006) in their research on classroom discussions on culture, found that conversations about race were the least explored and came across as “stilted and shallow.” Students may not be encouraged to be themselves or to express their opinions, especially if these opinions differ from the perspective of the teachers. Even in fields where there is a mandate to prepare students to skillfully engage with different cultures, such as social work, teacher education, and psychology, teaching specifically about race and racism has its challenges. Thomas writes about “race dilemmas” in teaching about race within a literature class.

These are “moments in conversation about race that have the potential for conflict.” Paradoxes emerge in talking and teaching about race. Thomas (2015) continues: “Talking about race matters and talking about race does not matter” (p. 156). In other words, race is not a subject teachers or other practitioners can ignore; discussions and reflections on race require openness, confidence and following the students’ lead.

### Social Work Influence

Social work, a profession grounded in a commitment to social justice and anti-oppression, informs my thinking and practice with adult students. The mission of the social work profession is “to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, [NASW], 2014). Relatedly, social work’s *Code of Ethics* specifies appropriate and ethical treatment of clients.

Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. Social workers treat people in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination (NASW, 2008).

Consistent with reflective teaching and adult learning, social work strives for a socially just, inclusive society. Akin to reflective and critical pedagogy, social work also emphasizes reciprocity in the helping relationship (Lee, 2009). Social work has a dual focus: to help individuals cope with social problems, such as poverty, racism, and sexual violence, and to engage broadly on the community and policy levels for systemic change to confront and alter the forces that contribute to and perpetuate these inequalities. Although a “clinical” social work career is sought after by students who want to work as individual therapists and/or who aspire to have a private practice to see clients, social work is rooted in community and group work practice. Group work was one of the first ways social work was practiced and is informed by humanistic and democratic values parallel to concepts and ideas of reflective teaching and pedagogy. For example, Glassman, writing in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups*, reminds us that “Group work’s history has emphasized democracy, the rights of members, freedom of expression, and social responsibility” (Glassman, 2009, p. 39).

Social group work, a way of bringing people together for a common purpose, began during the Settlement House Movement, which sought to strengthen poor communities. Mutual aid, a set of group dynamics through which people help one another, helps to explain and teach the potential in any group to be a source of growth, support and power to its members. Mutual aid can be broken down into 10 specific dynamics; three are specifically relevant to this essay: 1) Data sharing: when group members (in this case, students) share information and ideas to begin the group process of learning together; 2) dialectical process: recognizing, sharing, exploring different points of view in a safe environment; 3) Discussion of taboos: when topics are encouraged that may not be raised or discussed in a comfortable way in everyday life (Clemans, 2011; Steinberg, 2004). Beyond the mission of social justice, social work emphasizes a worker’s self-reflection or “tuning into oneself” (Shulman, 1999). Self-awareness is the process of

learning about oneself, exploring questions such as: How does one's personal history, misperceptions, or struggles create windows into strengthening one's practice? Self-awareness can develop through conversations, or internal dialogue or through reflective writing, such as journals or process recordings.

Learning about oneself as a first step to helping others is woven into assignments and course expectations. Social work, teacher preparation, and nursing are three of numerous examples in the literature (see for example Epp, 2008; Lenette, 2014; Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Rai, 2006; Shedrow, 2017). Self-awareness and the related skill, conscious use of self, are core functions in social work education and in the professional development of college faculty (Ashwin et al., 2015; NASW, 2008). Self-awareness describes one's (practitioner, educator, or social worker's) ongoing commitment to be open to learning about oneself. The sometimes painful ongoing process of becoming self-aware is not only to benefit the practitioner (social worker or teacher) but to strengthen the outcome of the relationship with clients and/or students. In college teaching, self-awareness can be transferred from the "client" environment to the "classroom." Reflective teaching, "to systematically re-evaluate our teaching experiences in order to change our future teaching practices" (Ashwin et al., 2015) is a parallel concept to self-awareness. Reflective teaching is an especially crucial process for white faculty who are "teaching" about race and racism. Cultural humility, a related term, refers to "an important facet of professional identity that encourages "self-evolvement and evolvement of self through one's professional life" (National Association of Social Workers, [NASW], 2014). A first step toward developing cultural humility is understanding one's self, even—and I argue, especially—as a white person.

### **Reflective Teaching with Adult Students**

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. The learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.

--bell hooks (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*

**N**on-traditional students, by some estimates, are the "new majority" (National Adult Learner Coalition [NALC], 2017). Non-traditional students "have constituted the majority of U.S. undergraduates for the past quarter of a century" (NALC, 2017). Traditional-aged students who are fresh from high school constitute about 26% of undergraduate students and an estimated 43% of college students are 25 or older (Scobey, 2016). As with a growing majority of today's college students, Empire State College students are adults, many with long work histories in human services, others trying to change careers, some determined to finish a bachelor's degree that was interrupted for reasons such as illness, parenting, incarceration, or financial struggles. Scobey, in an exploration on student well-being, stresses that non-traditional students, a large umbrella term for various groups of students enrolled in college as adults, have several commonalities that inform their experience of learning. They must fit their educational pursuits into a complicated life of other "stressors and roles." More invisible

perhaps, adult students also have to manage overlapping challenges of being an adult student, a process “fraught with emotional complexity, mostly expressed by students feeling ‘less than’ in one way or another” (Scobey, 2016). There are many complex ways that race informs students’ success in college. One example is Shapiro et al. (2017) who found that in addition to experiencing the highest stop- out rates, black students also had the lowest completion rates at 4-year public universities.

Although adult students bring stress, anticipation, and unmet learning goals to their college experiences, the dedicated undertaking of returning to college offers rewards for students, teachers and mentors. One of the many rewards of working with adult students is the reciprocity afforded the relationship. Students learn and students teach. Mezirow & Taylor (2009) write: “[Transformative learning] involves significant learning in adulthood, that of communicative learning, which entails the identification of problematic ideas, beliefs, values, and feelings; critically assessing their underlying assumptions; testing their justification through rational discourse; and striving for decisions through consensus building” (p. 64).

When I first started mentoring and teaching adult students, I was mindful to keep a professional distance between my students and me. Over time, I have consciously relaxed and worried less about boundaries and more about connecting and showing genuine openness and commitment to my students. When talking to family and friends about my work, I am aware that more than any other word, I say “love” to describe my feelings for my students. Mikita Brottman, author of *Maximum Security Book Club: Reading Literature in a Men’s Prison*, writes about love of her students, who are incarcerated men:

I’ve always taken a personal interest in my students; we often remain close friends. I’ve never been able to separate my life from my work. I’ve never wanted to...Although I wasn’t aware of it at the time, now, looking back, I think I may have been a little bit in love (Brottman, 2016, p. xix).

The first time an adult student told me she loved me, I leaned into the comfort of my social work training. I smiled. I nodded. I changed the subject. And I missed an opportunity for authentic connection. The next time, another student came to talk with me and she confided something tragic and deeply personal. As we were wrapping up, she looked at me closely and said, “I love you.” Without hesitation, I told her I loved her too. But what do I mean by love? Writing of the erotic, not in its usual sexual way, Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, writes of the erotic as a powerful force for learning and knowledge:

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, ‘it feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, to clarify, that knowledge deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all of our deepest knowledge” (p. 56).

Another way of explaining the love I feel for my students, and the love between other students and teachers, is *caritas*, which comes from the Greek word meaning to cherish, to appreciate, to give special attention to. Jean Watson, a nurse, developed a compelling philosophy of caring,

particular to nursing and relevant to teaching and mentoring. Her theory includes ten “curative factors” necessary to create a caring bond based in *caritas*, three of which are especially relevant to skillfully engage adult learners:

- Practicing loving kindness and equanimity within the context of caring consciousness;
- Being present to and supportive of the expression of both negative and positive feelings;
- Engaging in genuine teaching-learning experience that attends to wholeness and meaning, attempting to stay within other’s frame of reference (Watson, 2008).

Engaging adult learners has rewards, challenges, complexities and nuances. Robertson (2005) writes eloquently about contradictions in what he called “learner-centered college teaching.” His three contradictions are especially relevant here:

- Individual mentor/group learning leader: Here, a teacher/mentor is balancing what an individual student might need or what to learn, and with the needs or interests whole group or class.
- Loving the student/loving the subject: How do teachers/mentors balance a love of the student and a love of the student’s learning, with love and interest in whatever a teacher/mentor’s subject is?
- Caring for the student/caring for yourself: Sometimes educators are taught to care about all aspects of our students, but what does that mean for ourselves? How do teachers/mentors care for themselves? (Robertson, 2005).

A key aspect of effectively and thoughtfully teaching about culture is a teacher’s willingness to reflect on a class and think carefully and honestly about what was hoped for and what was actually accomplished. “Reflective teaching [is] to systematically re-evaluate our teaching experiences in order to change our future teaching practices” (Ashwin et al., 2015, p. 134). To carefully and deliberately develop a reflective teaching practice that brings together openness about one’s own identity, cultural heritage, and emotional accessibility requires faculty who care not only about their students, but also about education as a form of civic engagement. Woven closely within civic engagement is the goal of social justice, which does not magically happen with the open-hearted intentions of a teacher. Social justice begins with “scrutinizing one’s assumptions [and] listening to the voices of the ‘other’ and actively seeking diverse opinions to better inform one’s own and to direct one’s actions” (Nelson & Witte, 2017).

### **Purpose**

**M**ost broadly, this paper is my quest to examine my teaching process as a way to understand and improve my work with students, particularly adult students of color. I also hope that my work will benefit other faculty as they work to learn about themselves as teachers and learners. Social justice is a “long term journey” for both educators and students (Nelson & Witte, 2017, p. 16). With particular attention to the complexity of issues black adult students have to navigate, “critical reflection must be part of any social justice action” (Nelson & Witte, 2017, p. 16). Through my careful examination and reflection of one specific course, including taking an honest look at my assumptions, ideas, feelings and questions,



I intend to continue to improve and strengthen my approach to teaching and mentoring adult students of color. In other words, in my privileged stance, I wanted to offer my students a positive and potentially affirming learning experience, which I see as a form of social justice.

Although I include parts of a course syllabus and examples of assignments, I also show process elements of the joys, complexities, and challenges of considering race and racism in work with adult students. The class examples, including my own and my students' writing, are placed within a larger context of adult learning, reflective teaching, feminism, social work, and intersectionality (see Collins & Bilge, 2016; hooks, 1994; Herman & Mandell, 2004; Freire, 1998; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Shulman, 1999; Schon, 1983). I hope to show the deliberate, reflective process of learning about the connections between my students and me in open, sometimes painful, often exhilarating ways that resonate with me long past the end of a particular semester. I believe firmly that listening and sharing together across our differences and similarities, and learning from difference, is quiet form of a social justice (see for example, Boyce & Clemans, 2015). This essay, as I mentioned previously, is my effort to examine my teaching experience beginning with my internal reflections. This essay is for teachers and thus has as the focus teaching examples and writing reflections. As a part 1 in a series of reflective essays, this particular essay does not include examples of my students' learning or transgression beyond the examples of course writing assignments. This necessary information and perspective will be the subject of a second essay.

Reflective teaching requires self-awareness, openness to learning, and an ability to look closely at a certain aspect of practice. This careful analysis is a beginning step toward social justice for the students. Using one course as an example, I examine my teaching journals and snippets of student writing to show the development of my process of teaching. Although most research on journals as learning tools focuses on student journals rather than faculty teaching journals, there are benefits of journal writing, including personal growth, connecting theory to practice, and strengthening self-assessment skills. One of the challenges of journals for teaching is the lack of specific protocols or guidelines (Dyment & O'Connell, 2014). Finally, my intention is to share in order to create a model of sorts that can be replicated or adapted by other teachers working with similar groups of adult learners.

### **Reflective Illustrations**

*“A reflective teacher is always open to learning” (Ashwin et al., 2015)*

**R**eflective writing is one method that teachers learn and develop to improve their own practice approaches (Prain & Hand, 2016). Last spring, in anticipation of an upcoming sabbatical, I committed myself to keeping a teaching journal to record my thoughts, feelings, and overall reflections on my experience teaching *Cultural Competency* to a group of adult students studying Human Services. My purpose is to learn about myself as a teacher through looking closely at my planning, facilitating, while taking a “second look” at my teaching journals to gain fresh insights with the passage of time. This “Reflective Illustrations” section is organized by first describing the goals and philosophy of the course *Cultural Competency*, an overview of the students in general, as adult learners with full lives and challenges. I then include

parts of my teaching journal with a “second look,” reflections where I comment on how the journal entry resonates with me now. I also include several examples of student writing and offer my reflections on these examples as well.

### Cultural Competency Group Study

Founded as an innovative college for adults, Empire State College emphasizes self-directed student learning. To this end, faculty are encouraged to work with students to identify and meet individual learning goals. According to the syllabus, *Cultural Competency* “is an interactive study that provides students with the opportunity to learn...specifically what it means to provide effective and professional services to people from different cultural backgrounds.” Although this article emphasizes race and racism as particular points for learning and communication, the course itself incorporates an intersecting framework of culture to include: race, ethnicity, religion, immigration, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other factors that make us who we are, as well as content that conceptualizes race, gender, and social class as socially constructed and maintained systems of power, privilege, and inequality. At the completion of the course, students were expected to strengthen their ability to recognize personal biases in working with different groups of people. Moreover, students learn about the permeability of identity, specifically how one’s identity, life history, and assumptions influence how one understands and navigates “difference” in others, particularly human services clients or consumers.

Teaching *Cultural Competency* as a survey through different groups is an impossible and superficial task (see Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015). This and related *Cultural Competency* courses incorporated many small group exercises, including a Peer Interview assignment where students interview each other in class about holidays, discrimination, favorite foods, family traditions and the like, informed by the core belief that talking across difference is a powerful, even transformative, learning experience. A formula used with students learning to be culturally competent is  $A+K=S$ , which means  $A$  for self-awareness, plus  $K$  for Knowledge of self and others, equals  $S$ , the Skills of cultural competency. Engaging students in an honest and productive conversation about culture requires faculty to put into practice these principles:

- Acknowledge emotions and feelings of students and self
- Openly share challenges and fears
- Actively engage in dialogue with students and internal dialogue with self
- Create feelings of safety to encourage openness and taking risks  
(Clemans, 2011; Sue et al., 2009).

*Cultural Competency* included 15 adult students—12 women and three men. All but two identified as black, African-American, Caribbean, or Latino. The focus of this article is primarily on black students. The Brooklyn-based group study met once a week for 15 weeks. Most of the students were developing undergraduate degree plans in some aspect of Human Services.

Every student encounter reminds me of the challenges adults face as they return to or begin college. The juggling act to balance work, parenting, health care, and other obligations of a

mature life is tenuous at best; sometimes a ball will drop and a dream is deferred, again. Adult students may experience attacks to their confidence, as well as a determination to persevere despite the doubters, as this example from a student autobiography (a class assignment to be discussed to follow) illustrates:

I remember when I went to school for my associate's degree, my uncle said "why are you going to school wasting those professor's time, you're not going to finish." Many times, I felt like quitting but remembered what he said to me and that was my drive to finish.  
~student autobiography

Reading this, I am reminded of how easy it was for me to get a college degree. The work was hard, yes, but I had a college-educated and supportive mother who made sure college was a family priority. I am impressed by the determination and motivation this student demonstrates to continue in school despite naysayers in the family. I am also struck by how important it is for college teachers and mentors, like myself, "to get it right."

Part of maintaining a reflective teaching practice is to prepare for class sessions in a thoughtful, organized way, while remaining flexible to "going with the flow" and responding to the interests and learning goals of the students. Ashwin et al. (2015) describe the inclusiveness of reflective teaching: "our awareness as teachers before we teach; our experiences of teaching; and our reflections on our teaching after we teach." (p. 161). Over the years, I have developed a particular approach to class preparation. For the two hours prior to class time, I block out my calendar with the words "in the zone" and spend this time mentally preparing for meeting with my students. I also spend some of this time writing in my teaching journal, as this example shows "in the zone" for class #1:

I'm getting ready for Cultural Competency. Thinking about how difficult and important it is to talk openly and directly about issues of race/power/identity and difference. My plan—to "normalize" nervousness around talking openly about taboo subjects. Create a safe community. Focus on learning hopes and goals. Focus on fears. ~Teaching journal

I read my words and recognize my deliberate efforts to tap into my pre-class feelings. I know that even if I am nervous, my students are also nervous. What I also see in my journal entry is an organized vision for the class session. When I write "focus on fears" I wonder whose fears? Mine? The students? Both?

After the first class meeting, I made sure to document my impressions of the class session.

First class went well. I was conscious of my high comfort level...all people of color, except one student. Did scavenger hunt exercise\* and really felt that students were nervous about sexuality/race questions—a lot of laughter around: "white" "—what came up is the 1-drop rule\*\*. [On my mind] Black lives matter. Privilege. The "only" other white person always sits next to me and she is my appointed time keeper. I realized today that maybe I am privileging her a bit? Something to be aware of. I was conscious of helping the group begin to establish a community as I always do. I looked out at all of (my students) faces, almost all people of color, all different, so aware of my whiteness.

My teaching goal is to help facilitate a community of curious learners, to keep us on task, and to allow/honor the individual voices, perspectives, and realities. ~Teaching journal

Notes:

\*For “The Scavenger Hunt” exercise, students are given a sheet of paper with various “categories” to search for among class members, for example: a member of the LGBTQ community; a person who speaks Spanish; a grandparent; a person who lives in a house, etc. Once found, students must sign the sheet. Mostly used as a fun, interactive ice breaker, The Scavenger Hunt requires participants to collect as many signatures as possible in a set period of time, usually 5 minutes.

\*\*1-drop rule of African American categorization: Raises the question: Who is considered black in the United States? A consequence of Jim Crow, black people were considered anyone with any known African ancestry. “A single drop of black blood makes a person black” (see Jordan, 2014; Perry, 2011).

This next section focuses on class assignments, which provide in-depth material to think about and offer responses. One of the first assignments in this study calls for students to write an autobiography. Requiring students to write self-narratives or autobiographies is a common assignment for graduate students in social work (Hollinsworth, 2013), preservice teachers (Seungyoun, 2012) and for adult learners (Karpiak, 2010).

When I introduced this assignment in class, one student declared, “*This is our chance to be famous!*”

Before I discussed this assignment with the class, I sat down and tried to write my own autobiography (some of which is included in the introduction to this paper). Struggling to write as honestly about my life as I could, I realize how challenging an assignment this is. This excerpt from a student autobiography caught my attention, especially the student’s grandmother’s “deep hate for white folk.”

My neighborhood consisted of mostly black people, who migrated from the south who were ‘pro-black’ but believed all things were made possible through God and religion. [One] belief that I inherited from my family was not to trust white people. This was due largely in part to my uncle. He was murdered for having interracial relationship with a white woman. As a child, I was told stories by grandparents of how their grandparents were slaves and their parents were sharecroppers and how they were mistreated by Caucasians. My grandmother would express a deep hate for “White Folk” as she eloquently called them, for all the troubling experiences she herself encountered with them.

~Student autobiography

### Autobiography Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is for you to spend time thinking about **who** you are and about your personal story. Understanding ourselves (our history, assumptions, biases, difficulties, family culture, etc.) is an important first step in understanding others.

**Questions 1:** Imagine one day, you are walking down the street in a neighborhood that is not yours, and a person you don't know comes up to you and asks, "Where are you from?" What would you say?

**Question 2:** Imagine that this person tells you that she or he is making a film about people from "different cultures" and she or he wants you to be part of the film. (You will be paid for your time). She or he asks you to talk into the camera for 5 minutes about your culture. What would you say?

Take your time to really think about your response. There is no right or wrong way to talk about how you identify yourself. These questions will help guide your response:

- What does culture mean to me?
- What does identity mean to me?
- What do I want people to know about me?
- What do I **not** want people to know about me?
- Would the **culture of the filmmaker** make a difference to me? Why or why not?

As I read this now, my heart races. I try to imagine how this student feels, given the history explained in the autobiography. Although I am aware of the history of lynching and of miscegenation laws, I feel particularly sad and angry to learn about this student's experience of murder and hate; I also recognize that violence, mass incarceration, and early death--caused by complex factors such as lack of adequate health care, economic barriers, and violence—of black people is a narrative of America that white people cannot ignore or deny (Anderson, 2011). Moreover, black people do not have the luxury of forgetting or the privilege to ignore. I feel grateful that the student was able to share this much detail, and I realize how little I know about the black South. This next autobiography excerpt illustrates the complexity of color and ethnicity for the writer:

I was always interested in knowing more about my father's history. So, having "Indian blood" was very rewarding being a light skinned black princess. Unfortunately, in today's society I am just an African American but to my family and me I am Indian-Black.  
~Student autobiography

As I read this passage now, I am struck by the description: "light skinned black princess." And I wonder: why does she have to be a princess? What is powerful about being a princess? I know my white feminist upbringing taught me to question the power of princesses. Are they really

powerful? I also recognize that this student is seen one way by those in her inner circle, her family for example, and another way by outsiders, for example white onlookers.

This next student tells the story of strength, perseverance, and love for family. Reading it, I wonder what helped her stay standing? What has she been through? I hope as the class progresses; I will be able to learn more.

I identify myself as a strong black independent woman who's has been through a lot and still standing. I am also loving and caring and willing to help anyone in need. I always have an ear to listen to someone who may be in need. I love being around my family and always have a good time. ~Student autobiography

As the second class approached, I continued to think about my whiteness.

Preparing for class #2. Met a few students yesterday [in the hallway]. They had positive things to say about class. Focus tonight on creating a class community. Clarifying questions about expectations. Should I ask: How do you feel about having a white teacher? Note to self: Take your time. ~Teaching journal

After the second class, I wrote my impressions. I wonder if nervousness was related to making visible topics of race and racism?

I felt a little nervous today—more so than I normally do. All my years of teaching and I still feel nervous! I think using/attending to the nervous energy keeps me “on my toes” and focused. On the train now for a meeting tomorrow and I know I was a little distracted by the quick turnover/turnaround from energy of class to catching a train. ~Teaching journal

Re-reading these passages from my teaching journal, I notice how frequently I use the words “class community.” A community is a group of people with a common purpose, objective, or goal. In my teaching, creating and maintaining a class community are essential accomplishments as a teacher. A community develops and thrives when a teacher makes sure everyone knows what is expected and gives all students a chance to participate. With adult students, flexibility is also important, so students know that their particular interests or learning goals are recognized and valued. Additionally, faculty need to make sure students introduce themselves. Careful introductions, especially in the early weeks, communicate to students, “you matter and you have something important to contribute.”

One of the ongoing class assignments is the Reading/Reflection log.

Race and racism are sometimes subjects that are difficult for faculty and students to discuss openly and honestly. Here, a black student demands to know why difference is often viewed as “less than”:

Will there ever be a time when all cultures can be one without any differences? Why must a person's culture be a reason to look down on them or not want anything to do with

them? Why it is that whites till this day think blacks are below them when there are blacks [who are] making the same pay as them or even higher? ~Student reading log

### **Assignment 1: Reading/Reflection (R&R) Logs**

The purpose of this assignment is to help you read, think about and ask questions relevant to the course readings. Each week, I will invite students to talk briefly about their R&R logs with the class. Logs are due 4-5 times during the term. Due dates and reading assignments are below.

Each R&R Log needs to be approximately 2-4 pages.

In your logs, please address each of these questions:

1. What is the author's main point (or thesis)?
2. What is something new that you learned after reading?
3. What questions do you have about the reading? (Include 3-5 questions).
4. Is this reading relevant to your work? How so? Please give an example.
5. What else would you like to say?

It is hard to read these words but I know that I have to take them in, digest and internalize them.

On the third class session, the assigned reading was "*Unpacking the invisible knapsack*" by Peggy McIntosh (1990), a seminal essay on white privilege. My journal captures my trepidation about engaging this topic:

Before class, I worried that this piece would not be especially relevant to the black and students of color. I fear this essay is intended for a white audience. I wonder—do students of color really need more lessons on white superiority? I am worried. During class, students submitted their reading reflections on white privilege. I see now how relevant this reading is. I also feel angry that white supremacy continues to reign.  
~Teaching journal

I was wrong in my assumptions as this example from a student reading log shows. Everyone can benefit from reading and making visible (in order to dismantle) white privilege.

[The article] encourages those that are in denial about the lack of equality to look a little further, explore a little deeper to see the many ways that society is set up to create a platform for white Americans to remain the dominant and most catered to race. ~Student reading log

This student makes a strong point about the value of empathy and understanding:

In my opinion it is the reader's perspective that until one owns and acknowledges the fact that white supremacy still exists in many facets that white America cannot relate, be

empathetic, understanding nor respectful to the plight and views of African American people. I would venture to say that a deep level of understanding and respect for this issue would at least improve racial relations and without its acknowledgement, professional helping relationships between mixed races will continue to be strained and compromised on occasions. ~Student reading log

“Class community,” as mentioned in the teaching journals, seems to be related to a certain leap of faith that students can (and do) learn together in a safe and empathic class atmosphere.

This next reading log is powerful and straightforward in recognizing “there really is no considerations for other races.”

I can see it and fully understand these feelings in a time where the reality is we are all still living in a white dominated world...we live in a society where we are led by White Euro-American norms. There really in no consideration for other races. It is all very sad in this day and age that our leaders are so ignorant and insensitive to the needs and well-being of the changing world.

~Student reading log

This section explored the meaning of a class community, a theme that was apparent in several student writing examples and teacher journals. Many students in *Cultural Competency* and at Empire State College are working class—the firsts in their families to pursue (or earn) a college degree. In learning about *Cultural Competency*, students may understand the concepts and ideas, but they may not yet have learned the academic words or terms. However, learning the academic language is part of what higher education offers adult students.

In the class, we talked about everything from the Common Core to the price of MetroCards, to “black on black” crime to gentrification. In the sixth class session, we tackled *The Case for reparations* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, which exposes generations of harshly discriminatory housing policies and practices in Chicago, illuminating long-term effects on black people’s opportunities to own homes and to accumulate wealth to pass on to future generations. Calling for injuries to be paid in the form of reparations, Coates’ piece also describes the practice of predatory lending and its pernicious contribution to generations of black poverty (Coates, 2014). My teaching journal reflects my fear and ambivalence to talk openly about a subject—reparations—that was relatively new to me.

Discussing “The case for reparations” was challenging. For two weeks, I felt myself avoiding this discussion, but finally last night, after reading the students’ reading logs, we discussed the reading in great detail. The class had so much to say! much pain, sadness, anger, and deep acknowledgment of the injuries and damage of slavery. I listened, listened, listened, heard, and learned. I felt that I was the white person who benefitted from real estate discussed in Coates’ piece. ~ teaching journal

For a few of the students, the practice of predatory lending was new information, as seen in this writing example:



You must read it yourself if you are an African American person. No, really, you must. The essay's content makes it difficult to absorb all at once, because you are so angry. It is a case about the effect of a long, winding history of discrimination... While reading the [article], I realized you can't discredit Black people's anger and all the suffering [that is] associated with the Black experience. Because reparations are about more than money, it is [also] about exposing the injustice that happened to African Americans. Although it has been over 400 years since Blacks [were] shipped to America via slave ships, the misfortune did not stop with the ending of slavery. I placed myself in a position of the Chicago natives who put all their trust in the hands of the realtors, who had no intention of providing their clients a legitimate service. The owners of the properties manipulated the system and a lot of the victims lost their entire life savings. ~Student reading log

I am struck by the above student's declaration that African American people must read the Coates' article. I wonder if the information and story of reparations are new to some of them? I wonder if this student has felt discredited for being angry.

This next example shows a student's weariness and frustration about "another casualty of race":

Despite my reservations about the effectiveness of reparations, I completely support compensation for all African Americans. However, African Americans have a way bigger battle to fight in America. Blacks still bear the scars of slavery, and have to deal with discrimination. I am simply tired of watching the news and watching another black causality of a race related crime. So what was Coates trying to accomplish with the piece? ... So as redundant as I may sound [in every reading log], How do we fix it? And will it ever get better? ~Student reading log

Self-awareness and recognizing the pain connected with hearing about history come through in this next student log:

I perceive what I read as a discrete way of killing that which does not look, talk, walk like white America... white America does not have the courage to admit to the atrocities against the African American culture/ethnicity. To pay for what they stole...through trickery and false incarceration would mean to admit its cultural incompetence, insensitivity, racism. Readings this [and parts of the textbook] I was able to take a deep look at myself and understand why I fit at both ends of the spectrum. ~student reading log

Although no one can change history, teaching provides a class community where painful issues in history can be openly discussed and mutual learning can happen. In social work with groups, what is described as the "middle phase" (also referred to as the "work phase") occurs when a class community develops and students begin the process of getting to know each other and bonding over complex topics. During the middle phase (also mid-semester), "real" work happens (Shulman, 1999). In *Cultural Competency*, as hard and painful as it was for us as a class community to write honestly about and openly discuss *The case for reparations*, the experience actually strengthened the class community, as I write in my teaching journal:

I have not had the energy to write for a while—and after hearing their sadness and outrage, mourning and longing for a different world, and (me) not learning before about homeownership, etc. The case for reparations grounded us as a class. ~teaching journal

The poet activist Audre Lorde famously wrote “there is no hierarchy of oppressions” (1983). Everyone owns many “identities.” Although this essay centers on race as a social construct, it is impossible to separate gender, sexual orientation, language, and age from a constructive dialogue about culture, identity, and power. Especially in a Human Services course with adults, being sensitive to intersectionality is paramount.

Last night we discussed LGBTQ issues and two students gave passionate explanations and shared personal anecdotes about being gay—powerful to hear about Latina Catholic lesbian, living with her partner but still loving God and the church. Mostly students expressed compassion, sensitivity, curiosity. I wanted to help elevate the conversation beyond personal anecdotes and tie [the discussion] to [the topic of] micro aggressions and to larger social issues. I think the students were not quite there yet. ~teaching journal

These detailed examples of reflective teaching show the benefit of examining and re-examining student and my writing (having a “second look”) in order to deepen my learning. Without question, I was the person in power in the classroom. My learning is only the beginning of what I consider here to be an unfolding process of social justice for me and my students. I needed to understand my privilege, my assumptions, my hesitancy and my learning in order to be open to learn from about my students. Moreover, I focused on creating a classroom community where all voices are valued and given space and opportunity. As I wrap up this section, I revisit the words from a student reflection shared earlier in this essay. When asked to consider the relationship between black and white people in the socially-constructed narrative of race, one student wrote: “How do we fix it? Will it ever get better?”

### Conclusion

I have a friend who is fond of saying, “There’s only one race, the human race.” Fifteen years ago when I took my first “leap of faith” to teach *Cultural Competency* to graduate social work students, I glommed onto the neatness of this phrase, the words smooth and reassuring, like a grandmother’s arms engulfing you in hug. Fifteen years ago, although I was a thoughtful and caring teacher and social worker, I was not aware of the discomfort and uncertainty that must come with learning about the “human race”—the human lives of black and African American people and the human lives of white people (and the human lives of everyone whose identity is neither black nor white or who choose not to be labeled or defined). I did not realize then, although my feminist upbringing should have tipped me off, that when there is a “one” of something or someone, one must ask: Which “one”? And “Whose story?” and “Whose truth”? The term “Cultural competence” is a misnomer; no one can learn everything about everyone. Teachers everywhere have an obligation to hone their skills of self-understanding and cultural curiosity.

As I grew in both my style and comfort in teaching *Cultural Competency*, I stand by the equation I wrote about earlier in this essay:  $A+K=S$ , Awareness *plus* Knowledge of self and others *equals* the skills of cultural competency. I believe that we learn about each other through conversations about everyday, ordinary topics: holidays, family, loves, favorite foods, politics, sports, poetry. Small, intimate conversations beginning with openness and wonder spark learning about another person. I have used “Peer Interview” exercises in class, which are opportunities for students to talk informally with each other about these small, however not insignificant, everyday topics. This article is punctuated with moments of everyday conversations—between me and myself, and between my students and me.

To engage adult students in an open and thoughtful way requires planning, organization, time management, and a willingness to take risks of head and heart. Working with adult students on topics as imperative as race, racism and culture does not require “authority” or knowing all the answers. Sometimes, as I illustrate here, the questions, doubts, worries, and insights are needed more than the answers. At the end of every semester, I do the same go-round with my students where I ask them to reflect on their experiences in the class. I also add my own reflections and—not rehearsed—I express the same sentiments semester after semester. I say: “*I feel very lucky to have found a job that I consider a vocation, a calling.*” I then thank my students, specifically for “taking a leap of faith” in joining the class community, and for bringing hope, optimism, and necessary wariness to the learning experience. The conversations and discussions I have with my students about their lives, about difference, power, culture and promise make small steps toward social justice and are in themselves transformative. I want students to look back and remember that their lives mattered. Talking across difference is powerful for both teachers and students. And teachers are also students; I learned and my students taught. Talking across difference can also be fraught with danger. There is no returning to the blind comfort, the reassurance that everything will be OK, or the notion that “I am white but I am not like those other white people” (see for example Frankenberg, 1997; Perry, 2011). There is something more powerful; it is indeed love. I have learned to love the uncertainty of teaching about (and learning about) students’ lives, the leaning back and deeply listening to students, carefully reading their logs, their reflections. In my teaching journal, this phrase appears three times: “*Take your time.*” Then near the middle of the semester, I wrote this sentence: “*Let the process unfold.*” Beyond a little self-encouragement, a pep talk of sorts, these words remind me that a subject as complex as culture, as divisive as race and racism, is not a cursory exercise, not a semester-long undertaking earning one a badge of “competent.” For both student and teacher, cultural competency begins as a long, slow and conscious process of understanding oneself and then another person from that person’s viewpoint, perspective, history and circumstance.

This article focused on race: black and white identities and experiences in learning and in life. My life has been deepened, strengthened, and challenged through my work with black and African American adult students (and all of my students, regardless of their color). As I write these words and think back on my semester teaching adult students in *Cultural Competency*, Donald Trump is the President of the United States; *Moonlight*, the tender coming of age story with an all-black cast, won the Oscar for best picture; and *I am not your Negro* is playing in theaters. I want to turn back the clock to have these months with my students while we are learning *Cultural Competency* together.

I have been thinking about what is most helpful for students in this class, and what is most meaningful to adult students in general. I have learned mainly through my conversations with students that many come to college with “injuries” (emotional, financial, even spiritual) from past college experiences. Their voices were not heard; the details of their lives were not solicited. I keep close in mind that students arrive at college with these past experiences. The following are practice principles I recommend in teaching and mentoring black adult students (especially, but not exclusively as a white teacher/faculty):

- First, do no harm.
- Recognize that learning is reciprocal and is based on a caring and attentive relationship.
- Believe that every student is capable of learning.
- Recognize that teachers are learners too.
- Flexibility goes a long way in helping students.
- Organization helps students feel clear about expectations for learning.
- Patience is necessary as learning is a process, different for each student.
- Strive for a meaningful moment in every class meeting.
- Hang in there through the hard stuff: Opening up a conversation about race, power, etc. is the “hard stuff”— and may be beyond a teacher’s initial comfort level.
- Find a mentor to support and guide new and experienced teachers through everyday teaching and mentoring moments so that students have the best that faculty member can offer.
- Learn about yourself first and make visible your assumptions, beliefs, questions and feelings as these inform the teaching and mentoring process.
- Learn your students’ history –ask questions and show compassion and interest in their lives.

As I finish up writing for the day, my daughters’ babysitter, Ricki, comes home with the children. She is a 24-year-old black woman, born and raised in a Brooklyn neighborhood that is mostly black, poor and working class, not yet choked with an influx of wealthy white residents looking for the next real estate bargain. She did not have the opportunity (yet) to attend college. I am aware of my ability and life circumstance to employ a childcare provider to care for my children while my partner and I work. As the time neared for us to say goodnight to Ricki, she lingered in the kitchen. My partner was preparing turkey chili and our daughters were drawing self-portraits at the table. We discussed movies. I asked Ricki if she had seen *Moonlight*. She had not. I then asked her if she had seen *I am not your Negro*. As the “Negro” escaped my lips, I detected the slightest widening of Ricki’s eyes—as if she was not sure if I actually said “negro.” After a pause, Ricki then asked if we had seen *Get out*. “You have to see it,” implored Ricki, her eyes again wide and serious. The moment is not lost on me: my white family, the black babysitter, a movie about feeling fear in a white home, in a white world.

Ricki is not my student, although she could be. Here there is an inversion of the relationship between student-teacher. I felt love for her too, as I feel for my students. My awareness and openness to learning about the lives of people different from me comes home—beyond the classroom into every day, ordinary life.

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