

Teacher as Public Art

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Teacher as Public Art chronicles an arts, curriculum, and research project related to issues of race and gender in workplace settings. The presentation outlined for the Hawaii International Conference includes an overview of these projects and highlights in particular a study conducted from November 2002 and May 2003 by Sheila Wright, Ph.D. (Assistant Professor, School of Education) and her colleague Juliet Dinkha, Psy. D. (Assistant Professorial Lecturer, Department of Psychology). The study was designed specifically to examine the experiences of women faculty of color teaching diversity courses. Twelve participants from campuses primarily in the Midwest were interviewed regarding their classroom interactions with students. Faculty members involved participated on a volunteer basis and represented a variety of disciplines in addition to education and psychology. A primary goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of how gender and race influences pedagogy in higher education (particularly on predominantly White campuses). Given that little research exists that addresses pedagogical concerns among women of color as a collective, qualitative methods were employed with the intent of developing grounded theory in this area. As a part of this process, Drs. Wright and Dinkha conducted auto-ethnographies prior to launching the interviews.

All participants in the study shared a central approach to teaching course content: they regularly engaged students in reflection and critical dialogue in which prevailing norms were challenged by the professor using assigned readings selected for this purpose. The results of the interviews revealed three emerging themes from this dynamic that relate to professional identity construction and the retention of women of color in higher education: (1) *challenging authority*, (2) *projecting stereotypes*, and (3) *questioning competence*. Regardless of their particular circumstance, participants perceived they were more likely than their colleagues to have students challenge their authority and viewed that the course purpose as well as their physical presence prompted

students' to question the content presented. Participants' reported working with students who internalized negative beliefs about diversity and projected these beliefs as stereotypes when interacting with them as professors of color. Many reported hostile encounters with students who seemed to harbor beliefs that the professor in question was hired as a result of affirmative action and therefore not qualified to teach the course. Participants noted in these cases that students seemed oblivious to their professional qualifications and expertise in the field of study. In contrast, participants perceived students in this category as readily questioning the validity of course content given that the information emanated from a professor who was also a person of color.

In addition, participants viewed students as generally feeling comfortable questioning competence and pursuing these beliefs with other professors or administrators outside of class. There was consensus among participants that students engaged class in the context of resistance and when challenged, were more likely to use course evaluations as a punitive action intended to "pay the professor back" for exposing multiple perspectives regarding race and gender. Participants also perceived their negative interactions with students as more frequent and intense than those of their male and/or White colleagues. Similarly, participants perceived their classroom interactions in non-diversity related courses differently from those in which they overtly taught race and gender issues. Nevertheless, even in non-diversity courses, participants reported that similar issues of authority, stereotypes and competence emerged especially when students felt challenged by course expectations and/or content.

The type of classroom interaction perceived by participants appeared related to the level of system support provided within the university and/or department. In cases where professors perceived a lack of system support, participants reported feeling more pressure to adopt professional identities that were inconsistent with their cultural identities or did not affirm their unique, individual, and socio-emotional needs. The extent to which participants reported success in accomplishing their professional goals depended heavily upon whether or not they perceived their work as a teacher and scholar as accepted within the university or departmental setting.

Decisions made by participants were influenced by both their socio-cultural needs and professional goals as they related to classroom dynamics and level of system support. In some cases participants reported feeling “forced to leave” particular institutions or higher education altogether in search for a better fit and careers outside of academia.

Educational or scientific importance

Drs. Wright and Dinkha utilized the study noted to develop a cultural integrity model for understanding the relevance of system support when working with faculty of color. In addition, they perceive additional studies to investigate the issues presented and to test the model using quantitative methods. However, the initial study presents a rationale for pursuing a dialogue related to system support in university settings and situating from a larger socio-cultural context. There is also a need to explore ways institutional policies and practices either facilitate or hinder professional identity construction among women professors of color.

The professional experiences encountered by participants in the study presented suggest that socio-cultural contexts may negatively influence retention, promotion, and tenure—especially in cases where colleagues observing a professor’s classroom dynamics or scholarly work fail to see the sociopolitical nature or complexity of the situation. Additional study is therefore useful and may assist understandings of how cultural capital and broader societal influences shape professional identity construction and career motivation in higher education. This type of information may be valuable for university administrators seeking deeper insights on the design of support systems that enhance professors’ career decisions. At the very least, the study and ideas presented in *Teacher as Public Art* highlights a need for respecting the creativity, cultural background, and individual difference among faculty hired in university settings. The challenge for universities is to provide critical support that not only respects the diversity inherent among all professors, but that is also responsive to their unique, individual circumstances regardless of race or gender.

