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Teaching Philosophy

AfriWomanism: A Framework

Like John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, I support education as the practice of freedom. However, because American schools are (super)structured as systems through which the hegemony indirectly, but systematically, reproduces social inequalities—thus maintaining what hooks terms America’s “imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy”—students enter the classroom unconscious consumers poised for lessons in a hidden curriculum¹ requiring either Freire’s banking concept of education or the neoliberalist’s meritocracy, neither of which offers Black students, especially, a liberatory education void of the “spirit murder”² that occurs when students are taught by teachers who are just as unaware as they are regarding the status quo by which teachers instruct. I teach, therefore, via a liberatory praxis aimed to counter the academic system historically organized to indoctrinate and dispirit Black students. In what I have termed “AfriWomanism,” my teaching philosophy borrows from Dona Marimba Richards’ African-American ethos³ and Alice Walker’s “womanist.”⁴

Richards’ African-American ethos is applied as an epistemology concerned with teaching African diasporic people how to exist humanely in dehumanizing systems. According to Richards, the cultural expressions (language, music, dance, thought patterns) of enslaved Africans “were the vehicles through which the African ethos expressed itself in America” (14)—thus the term “African-American ethos.” These cultural expressions surfaced as colonizers attempted to annihilate enslaved Africans, who, instead of dying and/or losing their humanity, recreated themselves in the New World. Thus, African spirituality as philosophy acknowledges the African-American ethos as an authentic source of creative knowledge that supports Black students’ humanity, and therefore, when invited into the classroom, has the potential to ensure students do more than survive, but that they thrive, too.

Because the white supremacist capitalist emphasis on “detachment, objectivity, positivism, conformity, and a mythic meritocracy” contribute to the underachievement of Black literacy,⁵ as a composition teacher, I aim to reconnect Black students to their mind-body-soul selves through an African spirituality privileging their African-American ethos. In other words, I encourage composition students to bring their *whole* selves, especially their languages and thought patterns, into the traditional writing classroom so they may creatively and freely write themselves into an authentic existence.

Coupled with Richards’ African-American ethos, Alice Walker’s womanism provides Black students a critical lens through which they can critically *and* compassionately read and write the world and their relationship to it. As response to both feminism, whose white members historically omitted Black people from its movement,

¹ See Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s “Citizenship Education for a Segregated Nation” in *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 41-60.

² See Bettina Love’s *We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Beacon Press, 2019, pp. 34-39.

³ See *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*, The Red Sea Press, Incorporated, 1992.

⁴ See *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1982.

⁵ Black compositionist theorist Elaine Richardson’s views on traditional English education, as paraphrased in Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks’ *On African-American Rhetoric*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 109-110.

and Black feminism, whose attachments to respectability politics⁶ marginalized non-Christians and lesbians, Walker's womanism is a philosophy defined in four parts that invites students to acknowledge and contemplate the intersections of race, class, and gender as well as sexuality, age, and religion/spirituality of *all* people. A womanist, defines Walker, is "[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist . . . Traditionally universalist . . . Loves the Spirit. . . Loves herself" (p. xi-xii). With that said, Walker's womanism not only provides students a critical lens through which they consider intersectionality, but it also insists on a queered reading curriculum⁷ that decenters white heteronormativity—or *activity*—such as the patriarchal ways by which English is often instructed. In other words, womanism as a queered reading and writing approach privileges marginalized ways of knowing.

Walker's womanism and Dona Marimba Richards' African-American ethos, therefore, is an AfriWomanist teaching philosophy, a liberatory theory, that counters America's "imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" by exercising a course praxis that reflects an *active* democracy wherein its student populace reads and writes themselves into a liberatory existence. Although America has yet to realize its democratic promise since separating from the British 244 years ago, my teaching aims to make that promise more possible through America's school children—our future stewards.

Mindfulness Writing⁸ as Contemplative Practice: A Pedagogy

As a composition professor, I rely on mindfulness exercises, like freewriting, as contemplative practices so expressed in the works of Peter Elbow, Mary Rose O'Reilly, Natalie Goldberg, Parker Palmer, and Thich Nhat Hanh.⁹ Mindful writing activities are contemplative practices that support the AfriWomanist theory intended to give Black composition students a liberatory education. Mindfulness practices situate students and teacher in the present moment—free of judgments, free of preconceived ideas and structures, free of constraints, free of the "monkey mind" that deters human beings from connecting to their mind-body-soul selves and that of others. In other words, mindfulness writing practices, such as free writing, journaling, and personal narrative writing (as brain"raining" activities) invite students into their most authentic, humane selves, uninhibited by external ideas intended to distract, decenter, and dehumanize them—most of which students receive from mainstream propaganda.

⁶ "Respectability politics" was first articulated in 1993, by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, to address the taking off of one's culture to assume the attitudes and behaviors of a culture thought to be more acceptable and thus, promotive.

⁷ See D. Britzman's D. "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or Stop Reading Straight." *Educational Theory*, 45, 1995, pp. 151-165.

⁸ Writing for and in the university composition classroom requires mindful reading and listening, although I may not mention or explicate those practices here. However, mindful reading practices, such as *lectio divina*, contribute to creating the contemplative writing classroom. Additionally, exercising a mindfulness classroom is not limited to reading and writing activities, but classroom interactions, too.

⁹ Although I advocate for an AfriWomanist pedagogy that centers Blackness, the theorists from whom I borrow my mindfulness practices are all white except for Thich Nhat Hanh. However, using white theorists do not center white voices, but perhaps speaks more to the dominant culture privileged to serve as experts publishing in the field.

According to Peter Elbow,¹⁰ “Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive.” However, says Audre Lorde, “I feel, therefore, I am free.”¹¹ Considered together, if composition students are taught to practice mindful writing exercises just as the meditator practices mindful breathing, then students can *feel* their way through their *thoughts* and birth a *perception* of themselves for themselves. To aid students in feeling and touching those feelings, however, understanding mindfulness writing as a practice stemming from a contemplative pedagogy is necessary.

A contemplative pedagogy is a process, style, strategy, or approach to instruction that *infuses* learning with the experience of present awareness, which is honed through the training of mindfulness meditation practice, like writing. It is a method of instruction intended to assist students, as well as their teachers, in awakening and opening their minds to new learning possibilities and more effective ways of being in the classroom. In other words, by way of mindfulness writing practices like freewriting, students can actively rid themselves of society’s background noise that deters them from “thinking outside of the box” or makes them believe they are inferior when measured against a status quo meant to curtail their genius. Students’ mindful writing practice, therefore, makes room for free—perhaps untapped—space for inquiry, creativity, self-reflection, and self-intimacy within the traditional learning environment, which, argues Lisa Delpit, is an environment that—although demands abolishment¹²—is a system in which Black students must learn to effectively operate.¹³ As a composition teacher, however, I aim to offer Black students more than efficacy; they deserve humanity and freedom.

And so, an Afriwomanist philosophy, supported with mindful writing exercises as contemplative practice, enables Black students to “write themselves into existence.”¹⁴ If students can be free in their *own* voices, as well as be free (and feel brave and safe) in the present moment, then they will not only avoid writing traditional texts in what Ken Macrorie calls “English,”¹⁵ but such mindfulness practices will also help students to cultivate compassion, respect, community, understanding, and appreciation for *themselves* and others outside of the classroom. Conjuring such virtues, then, will also help to foster brave, trust-worthy, loving relationships, which is vital to sustaining *all* humanity.

¹⁰ Composition theorist noted for the 10-minute free write exercise. See *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, Oxford, 1981.

¹¹ See “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, p. 38.

¹² See Bettina Love’s *We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Beacon Press, 2019.

¹³ According to Lisa Delpit’s in her “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” from *Harvard Educational Review*, 1988, pp. 280-297, students of color need instruction re: composition skills that will enable them to enter the culture in power, thus being able to contribute, at least, linguistically.

¹⁴ Phrase borrowed from Robert Altobello’s “Concentration and Contemplation: A Lesson in Learning to Learn,” *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5.4, 2007, pp. 354-371.

¹⁵ In *Telling Writing* (1970), Ken Macrorie coined the term “English” to mean the academic language or language that conceals rather than reveals a students’ personal self.

I-Thou: A University Classroom

Finally, as a Black, lesbian, middle-age, Jesus-loving professor with over 20 years of teaching experience, building relationships with my students are vital to the teaching philosophy and practice I carry into the composition classroom. Building relationships with my students fosters the classroom community that invites us into a mutual trust through which I am *trusted* to teach students, and they are open to receiving my instruction. When my Black students see themselves in me, and I in them, we “good to go.” An AfriWomanist philosophy supported by a mindfulness writing practice, therefore, supports such relationship building, for mindfulness practices—as simple as my acknowledging a student’s presence by calling her by her—*stimulates* student and teacher engagement in a loving-kindness relationship with one another. To teach my students, I must love them. And, I do. But the loving happens *inside* the present moment—free from histories of untruths and “fake news.” When student and teacher are engaged in the present moment, they are not attached to their preconceived judgments of the other but are open to receiving each other and the world just as they are.

As I build relationships with my students, I, too, open myself to being a learner who receives the knowledge my students can impart on me. As open receiver, therefore, I transfer my authority to students, releasing the binaries and titles promoting hierarchy and mistrust. I am not an expert, nor am I the beginning and ending of anyone’s existence. Each of us, student and teacher, has a genius (called spirit) we can share and play with each other. The classroom space is not mine; it is *ours*, and so, it reflects the universe upon which the “university” derives its name. Therefore, if students and I can practice being a community of learners within a diverse student body, then we can collectively carry our creative knowledge (and love) outside the Ivory Tower, thus helping to transform societies broken and dispirited by imperialist white male heteronormativity. That is why I teach: to remind students of their humanity (and my own), with hopes we can usher in a new generation “full of healing.”¹⁶

Furthermore, to be in relationship with my students, for more “practical” reasons, invites me into their popular culture interests, their personal barriers, as well as some of their daily happenings—all of which afford me the opportunity to create more relative, and therefore, meaningful classroom lessons. By relationshiping with my students, often, they become more transparent and relaxed with me, thus allowing me to tailor my instruction and their assignments to their immediate needs as human beings navigating a school system whose lessons and structural histories can exhaust and depress their spirits. If school was institutionalized to teach students how to be democratic, then composing assignments that tend to students’ head *and* heart makes more possible independent students who can courageously—with sound mind, body, and heart—contribute their genius to democratizing a nation. “When a group of people share a common heritage, a common set of experience and a common culture,” writes Ani, “an emotional bond is created between them” (2). In that bonding, she explains, they are made one, “and their oneness creates a commonness of spirit” (3). An Afriwomanist philosophy grounded in mindfulness practices makes possible that common spirit connecting my students and me into a universe/ity classroom where liberation reigns and students can know themselves as themselves.

¹⁶ Line from Margaret Walker’s 1942 poem, “For My People.”