

Evaluating Evaluations: Answering the Unasked Question

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Abstract:

Green comments on the inability of Americans to speak frankly about racial tensions and conflicts in America. After feeling dismayed by how little her students know about African-Americans, Green suggests that it is time to construct effective ways to address these problems so that hard-working professors are not penalized or abused for their race, gender, nationality or the subject they teach.

Article:

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: ...They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately...[The unasked question is:] How does it feel to be a problem?"

Du Bois eloquently captures the essence of the problem - that is, the inability of Americans to speak frankly about racial tensions and conflicts in our country.

I have been a tenure-track professor of African-American literature and studies at two universities - a historically Black university in Louisiana and currently at a predominately White one in Arizona. Since I have been here, I have been dismayed by how little my students know about African-Americans. I was surprised to find that many students could not define lynching and were not familiar with the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Many had not even met an African-American before going to college. During my first semester, I felt like I was teaching in another country and not just another state, but I navigated the situation as best I could.

Despite the challenges, I thought the semester had been pleasant for them and for me. But I was wrong. After reading my student evaluations, I wondered who the students were describing. Most described me as making them feel uncomfortable, as being unfriendly, and some said they were afraid to speak in class. Not one had a positive comment, except that I knew the subject matter very well. One student projected his/her feelings quite effectively.

"Tara seems to think that fear is good motivation for students to stay on top of coursework. She is very harsh to students who are not," the student wrote. "She seems to do her best to make us feel stupid, or at least ignorant (which many of us are)."

On one hand, the student says that I require them to actually work. On the other hand, the student recognizes his/her lack of knowledge about African-Americans and how this gap in the student's own understanding makes him/her feel.

What I infer from their comments is that my students' frustrations are two-fold. They are frustrated by an education system that has not properly acknowledged the experiences of people of African descent in this country, and they are frustrated by their own upbringing, which did not allow them to interact with the people they studied. I also noted their fear. Why would anybody be afraid of a 110-pound, 30-year-old woman who, according to her peers, "looks like a student?" What is it about me that, for the first time in my life, seems to make so many people feel uncomfortable and downright afraid?

Confused, shocked and angered by their assessment of me, I engaged in conversations with other female faculty of color on my campus who had similar experiences. They suggested that I invite trusted senior faculty to observe my classes; give my own evaluations in addition to departmental ones; require students to come to my office to help alleviate their fears; and ease my grading guidelines. In essence, it was my responsibility to make the students feel comfortable with me, a typical response from people of color and an expectation of our peers.

As the editors of *Race in the College Classroom* observe, the problem with student evaluations is when a professor receives course ratings that are "lower than the mean," they can be used against the professor when it comes to tenure, promotion and merit reviews." Yet, the problem is more than the university's desire that evaluation numbers be high. The evaluations also give students the opportunity to anonymously insult their professors and express their racist biases and fears in a forum provided by the university.

Recently, a dean at my university, in response to this issue, convened a committee to discuss how evaluation questions can be revised or eliminated to avoid the impact of racial and other biases. At least here we have begun to have the conversation. It is time that universities acknowledge that racism is not an issue that checks itself at the door when students enter the classroom. It is time to construct effective ways to address these problems so that hard-working professors are not penalized or abused for their race, gender, nationality or the subject they teach. Refusing to acknowledge the existence of these issues in the classroom, as some professors and administrators would like to do, won't make them go away. It is time to not only ask the unasked questions, it's time to begin to answer them.

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