Nancy Hoffman

Drawing on metaphors and narratives of classroom interactions, this article stresses the problem of building a community in classrooms, and takes into account not only individual differences between students, and between students and teacher, but also racial, ethnic, gender, and other highly charged group differences. It suggests strategies for teaching students to think about thinking and emphasizes the importance of the standpoint of the perceiver—her discipline as well as her race, class, and other group identities. The article argues that the teacher can maintain the integrity of her own perspective, while modeling openness to views that are not her own.

"But Here and Now We Are Together"

Teaching about Differences and Building Community

Every teacher would do well to have a metaphor or an image for teaching, preferably one from her own discipline. It should represent the interaction she strives to create in the classroom. In my case, the metaphor comes from Virginia Woolf. At the center of *The Waves*, at high noon, when "everything was without shadow," the young adults of the story come together at a restaurant to bid goodbye to Percival who is going to India. Says Bernard, the historian of the group:

> "But here and now we are together. We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion....We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis's house of business) to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution."
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> "After the capricious fires, the abysmal dullness of youth," said Neville, "the light falls upon real objects now. Here are knives and forks. The world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk." (Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* [London: Hogarth Press, 1931], 263)

Here is one vision of an ideal classroom. It is high noon, there are no shadows, and real objects—"knives and forks," texts—are displayed. It is a particular historical moment, a particular physical place to which students and teacher come out of shared emotion—love of learning we might call it—to make one thing, to come to one understanding of the object of study, to make meaning which is constructed of many meanings, a whole flower, as Bernard says, to which every eye brings its own contribution. In this classroom, the world (or a particular object of study) is displayed, and the students and teacher, too, as Neville adds,—so that we can talk.

My metaphor, then, represents a classroom as a temporary, particular community in which numerous perspectives are brought to bear on the subject of study. In it, the teacher has as her challenge the task of bringing forth considered and thoughtful differences between students, and between students and teacher. She orchestrates (to mix metaphors) the construction of a twenty-five sided flower, to which every person brings a respected and acknowledged contribution. Were I to teach Virginia Woolf's six young adults—all English, all white, all of the same social class—orchestration would be a challenge. Each student comes with her own psychological makeup, prior educational experience, skills, and interests. But many of us face greater challenges of difference as faculty today. I address myself specifically to those of us whose classrooms are constituted of individual students who think of themselves or represent to others (willingly and unwillingly) racial, ethnic, gender, and other identity groups. They are Latinos, women, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, African-Americans. Usually, we are white, male teachers. Our classrooms sometimes feel as if they are filled with charged particles repelling each other and in constant motion.

If we enter the classroom with a combination of enthusiasm and trepidation, so do our students. My experience has been that our minority students, especially, carry with them the divisive and angry temper of our times, in addition to the normal worries of students. Fair and unfair, they make assumptions about what they will encounter working with us; their fears and questions are the substance of student discussion on campus when they choose their classes; suspicion and skepticism are in the air. Our students ask not only, "Will I like statistics?" but "Will he think I can't do math?" "Will she have seen my mediocre score on the entering essay and missed my 'A' in advanced placement English?" "Will she call on me every time there's a question about race?" "Do I want her to?" "Will he include the psychology of women in our discussion?" "Will he understand (or treat with sensitivity) my struggle with English?" "Will I have the courage to speak up if he ignores or misrepresents my culture?" As a subtext to the questions we and they ask aloud, these questions, at least, distract

from and, at most, seriously impede our students' learning and our ability to construct a community.

A great deal has been written in response to the problem I raise here. In particular, personal essays and research speak to transforming the curriculum to include material about women, minority groups, and international perspectives. One goal of this work is to reassure students that the author is a pluralist who recognizes the narrowness of the traditional curriculum. This work is effective and useful.

Furthermore, some teachers have been persuaded by the literature on learning styles and patterns of thought associated (controversially, in some cases) with race, class, ethnicity, or gender to design assignments and pedagogical practices that depart from the traditional analytic, abstract, logical modes of thought of academia. The writing on this topic is also fairly extensive and useful. Curricular change strategies and learning style differences are reviewed, for example, in one useful and representative handbook: *Minorities on Campus, A Handbook for Enhancing Diversity* (American Council on Education, 1988). It seems to me, however, that relatively little has been written about the dynamics of our classrooms, the stance or frame of mind we adopt as we actually stand in front of our twenty-five or forty students, or sit with them in a circle. How can we maintain the integrity of our own expert knowledge, yet model genuine openness to, and interest in, perspectives very different from our own? What can we do to reduce, or bring to the surface, the anxieties embedded in the subtextual questions? There are many ways to do so, but I am going to argue here that the single most important strategy to keep in mind as you plan and conduct your class, is that you teach your students to think about thinking, and that you do so by providing explicit help in, and commentary on, how problems are posed, how questions are structured, and how disciplines, along with race, class, gender, and other group and individual differences, shape our language and our minds. Our purpose is to make difference problematic, to rescue it both from angry denial and from easy rhetorical acceptance.

I demonstrate what I mean in phrasing my own questions for this article. I might ask: How do we teach diverse students? But the question has to be rephrased, for the word "diverse" used in this way implies that we—the teachers—are somehow a fixed center—the majority culture from which our minority students diverge or differ—when, in fact, we have no more claim to the center than they do. The question rephrased is: *How do we acknowledge and incorporate into the learning community or classroom a variety of standpoints both individual and group? If we hold a goal of constructing a community in the classroom, what are resources and techniques that are helpful*? I begin with a story of a classroom interaction.

Asking about the Woman in the Ox Cart OR Thinking Differently about Your Material.

At a large, northeastern university not long ago, I observed a sophomore-level class, "Health Issues in International Perspective." (The facts are changed slightly to preserve anonymity.) The syllabus was designed to meet the requirement that students take a course about non-Western issues. The day I observed, the professor, an anthropologist, began with a poignant story. In a small West African village, a woman had been in labor for twenty-four hours. Her labor was not going well, but no one in the village was able to help her. So the villagers put her in an ox cart in the hope of getting her to a midwife at a health center, which was twelve miles away over poor roads. They sent word, house to house, that the woman was on her way. As the cart drew near the town, news came back that, rather than attend to this one woman in the ox cart who was likely to die, the midwife had gone off to a distant village, where more than a hundred women were pregnant and in need of a midwife.

Having described the situation, the professor stepped back and, with a certain air of "guess what I have in mind," addressed his questions to the class. "What is the problem here?" he asked. The students called out answers. "There is no real health care system." "The midwife didn't know how to plan." "The road system prevented the woman from arriving quickly." "The village received X percent of the country's health care dollars, thus had to prioritize." Then a young woman in a red sweater raised her hand. "*Isn't the problem the way the woman in the ox cart perceives it*?" she asked. The anthropologist blinked several times. He scratched his head. "Hmmmm," he said, and went on to another answer. He was baffled, and understandably so, for the young woman in the red sweater had not given an answer; rather, she had questioned stunningly the way questions are formulated. She tried to insist that the class think about its thinking and, more specifically, that teacher and students be clear about the role of the perceiver in the analysis of any problem. What might the difference be between the distinguished anthropologist's formulation of the problem and that of the dying woman in the ox cart? The first formulation requires that we refer to policy documents with data about midwives per capita and dollars spent on health care. The second requires that we sit for a moment in the ox cart in a West African village, that we think about pain and fate and fewer mouths to feed, that we think about time and progress and modern medicine.

She tried to insist that the class think about its thinking.

It is, of course, not such a distance from the perspective of the woman in the ox cart to that of various students in the classroom. Could I construct the stream of thought that led the young woman in the red sweater to ask the

question, it would go something like this: she was thinking not about road systems, but about the pain of labor that she might experience someday, about the mother's fear for her unborn child and herself, about whether this coming death was a good or a bad thing, about the voice of the "client" silenced by statistics and policy statements. Had the anthropologist been willing to engage with her, he might have discovered this line of thought and, in the process, reassured students that they might formulate a question, too. Indeed, he might even have been able to reassure the women students as a group that he could think, with a reminder, from a woman's perspective.

To sum up, it is always good to think about how we think and to articulate for students the assumptions which underlie the formulation of problem-statements or questions. But further, it is even more important and powerful to step outside of our disciplines to put the question from a variety of perspectives, even perspectives that do not interest us much or that we are unable to amplify. In order to draw out and confirm diverse perspectives in the classroom, we need to make our own thinking open to question and become model skeptics ourselves. And it is most important to engage students in the posing of questions and the formulation of problems, too. There are a few articles and books about thinking that have been particularly helpful to me and to other teachers. These are Clifford Geertz's chapter in *Local Knowledge*, "The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought," which discusses disciplines as ways of being in the world; the work on stages or phases of intellectual development by William Perry (*Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years)* and Mary Belenky et al. *(Women's Way of Knowing)*, and Kenneth Bruffee and Richard Rorty's work on the social construction of knowledge (see Suggested Readings). None of these, however, was written with particular attention to the highly charged differences I have been discussing—those based on group identity. The first addresses academic cultures, and the others present observations about the methods for improving student thinking capacities. You will see, I hope, that the emphasis on thinking about thinking, on labeling explicitly and comparing perspectives, becomes even more important when students perceive themselves to be members of a group that sees differently than a professor. But you will have to adapt the literature cited previously yourselves.

Sitting in the Ox Cart OR Teaching Material by and about Non-Whites.

If you agree that it is an effective and intellectually sound strategy to ask fresh questions about your material and encourage students to do so too, while talking with them about your own, and their, ways of thinking, I will, then, suggest you take the next step. This is what I have called "sitting in the

ox cart yourself." What I mean here is that all teachers, but especially white ones, should take the risk of teaching material about and from the perspectives of American minority groups. First of all, many of us will have no choice but to do so, because we have revised our syllabi to include works that attend to the history, culture, politics, literature, and philosophy of American minority groups. Second, teaching such material is an extremely powerful means—if you are willing to be vulnerable—of demonstrating your openness to perspectives and experiences that are not your own.

I take as an example—to move from Virginia Woolf and the ox cart in West Africa to black literature—a white female teaching a novel by Alice Walker. I choose this particular piece of writing, because it brings us face-to-face with the reality of group identity, the distortions of stereotypes, and the problems of materials that are emotionally and politically charged. The passage is from *Meridian*, Walker's 1976 novel about the civil rights movement. The name of the spiritual, prophetic heroine, Meridian—to return to Woolf's metaphor of noon as the time without shadow—also is associated with the full and shadowless light of midday. The book is wonderful to teach to traditional-aged college students, because it is a study of a young woman's adolescent transformation of values and beliefs, her entry into the public world, and her construction of a nonviolent, female leadership role. It also is set, in part, on the campus of a very proper, historically black women's college, and many white students may not know that such colleges have existed since the Civil War.

The passage below (which I urge you to read as if you're reading it aloud to a class) is funny and bittersweet; it dismisses white women and mythologizes the power, verve, and daring of black women. But it is also a passage in which the black woman heroine, Meridian, first experiences a rejection in which race and gender intersect. Under circumstances which I know are a source of humiliation and anger for many black women, a Northern black man, Truman, rejects Meridian in favor of a white, Northern woman. Naive young Southerner that she is, this is Meridian's shocking first encounter with such a possibility (although black, male lovers of white women are stock characters in works by James Baldwin, Imamu Baraka, Ralph Ellison, and others). Meridian is "bewildered" by Truman's preference. "It went against everything she had been taught to expect." Walker writes:

> ....nobody wanted white girls except their empty-headed, effeminate counterparts—white boys—whom her mother assured her smelled (in the mouth) of boiled corn and (in the body) of thirty-nine-cent glue. As far back as she could remember it seemed something understood : that while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers—"for the experience"—white women were considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all. ...Who would dream, in her home town, of kissing a white girl?

After high school, Walker continues, white girls married and "sank into a permanent oblivion. One never heard of them *doing* anything that was interesting." By contrast:

> ...black women were always imitating Harriet Tubman—escaping to become something unheard of. Outrageous. One of her sister's friends had become, somehow, a sergeant in the army and knew everything...about enemy installations.... A couple of girls her brothers knew had gone away broke and come back, years later, as a doctor and a schoolteacher.... But even in more conventional things, black women struck out for the unknown. They left home scared, poor black girls and came back...successful secretaries and typists (this had seemed amazing to everyone, that there should be firms in Atlanta...that would *hire* black secretaries). They returned, their hair bleached auburn or streaked with silver, or perhaps they wore a wig.
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> ...Then there were simply the good-time girls who came home full of bawdy stories of their exploits in the big city; one watched them seduce the local men with dazzling ease.... In their cheap, loud clothing, their newly repaired teeth, their flashy cars, their too-gold shimmering watches and pendants—they were still a success. They commanded attention. ...Only the rejects—not of men, but of experience, adventure—fell into the domestic morass that even the most intelligent white girls appeared to be destined for. There seemed nothing about white women that was enviable. Perhaps one might covet a length of hair, if it swung long and particularly fine (Alice Walker, *Meridian* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976], 103–6).

Although Walker amuses us in her dismissal of white women and mythologizing of black women, there is a strongly competitive dynamic in the contrasting portraits. Walker takes over ownership of the conventions with which black women are often stereotyped and dismissed by whites. She celebrates in a passage prescient for its time narratives of black women's lives. She praises unconventional qualities that are the very antithesis of Southern ladyhood: outrageous drama, wit and strength, independence, sexual liberty, a love of adventure. And while exalting black women, she renders white women impotent.

The act of reading aloud allows me to listen for student responses, to watch faces, to read gestures.

I have read this passage aloud many times. Each time, despite the humor, my own feeling of tension is almost unbearable, the complexity of my own response, difficult to sort out. I try to see through Meridian's eyes, to speak with her voice. The act of reading aloud allows me to listen for student responses, to watch faces, to read gestures: surprise at the caricatured portrait of white women; silence at the portrait of white men who climb

on top of black women old enough to be their mothers; startled and sympathetic laughter at the portrait of daring, outrageous black women. The passage has power to shock us. It has shocked my black students, because they didn't think anyone would dare to say what they have always known. It has shocked white students, because they have rarely been asked to think from a black woman's perspective about black men who chose white women. The students may believe in interracial dating as a way of ending racism, but many will not be aware that black women significantly outnumber black men in college and as graduates. To Meridian, white women are first "objects" or "others," and then they are competitors.

Would a black teacher make the same observations? Probably not. She would be less worried than I about relations between blacks and whites and more worried about the integrity of the black culture portrayed, perhaps. She simply would have a good laugh at the pallid, useless white women of Walker's *Meridian*; and she would, of course, not share my fear of getting the facts wrong or generalizing inappropriately as I try to get students to talk about why black women might covet a length of hair that swung long and fine. (I do know something about "nappy" hair, the problems of curling irons and grease, the pain of braiding tight cornrows. But still I fear being thought racist, or just plain ignorant.) I have talked about this passage as if in dialogue with myself. But in the classroom, I force myself to talk about my tension, the difficulty and ambivalence with which I read this passage and then generalize from it, especially when there are few or no black students in the class to help me.

How the Ox Cart Is Made OR Doing Hard Work with Texts.

I have tried above to construct or reconstruct one teacher's contribution to the many-petalled flower—to keep Woolf's metaphor. I have tried—to use the second metaphor—to demonstrate how one gets into the ox cart, actually how it feels. Finally, I turn to the issue of helping students not to feel "comfortable"—I dislike that word—with diversity, but to engage with it at a working level, to find out the facts about the ox cart or, if they are white, about blacks' hair. The strategy I outline has both a pleasing simplicity and an immediate payoff in enhancing students' capacities for careful reading and discussion. In other words, it is now time for *The Waves'* pedestrian image of "knives and forks."

In an article on questioning in the book, *The Art and the Craft of Teaching* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1982), Thomas Kasulis suggests that teachers begin their classes with "fact" questions—warm-ups to see if everyone is alert before the real stuff begins—interpretation, argument, and so forth. This idea is a useful one; students always need to be reminded of the hard work of reading, or checking comprehension of texts

and their contexts. This is important particularly when the material to be discussed is highly charged and the intent of the instructor is to raise painful and potentially explosive questions.

Here is what I mean. In my courses, usually we begin each meeting with warm-ups. Students may, for example, present all the vocabulary they had to look up after being asked to concentrate particularly on words that are "conceptual"—the dictionary will tell you, for example, that bourgeoisie means middle class, but you need to know more when reading Karl Marx. Working in groups, they may find five places in the text that were difficult to understand, that got them stuck, and they try to explain these to the rest of the class. They may write ten questions that they used to test their own understanding of a passage or chapter.

Safe experimentation will raise the difficult questions of values.

Such work with "knives and forks," words and concepts, has several purposes. First, it permits the teacher to hear and see her students at work so she can better assess their capacities. Second, such work focuses students not on getting the right answer, but on identifying their difficulties, their problems. (We talk all too often about "right answers" in class when what we should be doing is explicating "wrong" or puzzling ones.) Third, such work encourages safe experimentation with the myriad details, which cumulatively will raise the difficult questions of values. Who is Harriet Tubman? my students might ask when doing warm-ups with the passage from *Meridian*; what is a "domestic morass"? and why should Walker say that hair "only if oiled" would shine? This allows the whole class to de-escalate the tension, to focus on tools for understanding rather than on abstract generalizations. I am particularly committed to such exercises at the beginning of a course, not only because of the habits they establish, but also because of the climate they invoke. In the phrase of Neal Bruss ("Successful Learning Without Confidence," *Teaching at an Urban University* [Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1987]), such exercises serve to "de-idealize" learning, to take away some of the onus of being wrong; it's one thing to have the whole idea wrong, to misconstrue Alice Walker's perspective entirely; it's another to misunderstand a word or phrase or a reference. Such exercises build confidence that together a group can figure out the puzzles in texts and lectures. It is only when safety to be wrong or puzzled or confused has been established that the class may be able to venture into discussions that require risk-taking and willing vulnerability.

It is the teacher's task, it seems to me, to orchestrate the transition from the pedestrian, but crucial, questioning of elements of texts to the more subjective personal questions of value and experience, which, for example, are raised by the passage from *Meridian*. What measure of safety might it take to engage young white students in a discussion of interracial relation-

ships that takes into account their historical context, other literary examples, as well as the students' experience? What if all students were to read Walker's essay, "Advancing Luna" (*Ms. Magazine*, July 1977, pp. 75–79), about the rape by a black man of a close, white, woman friend and were to rewrite it from Luna's perspective? It is only after careful work with the text that I can even imagine doing justice to *Meridian* as a work of literature with its suggestive symbolism, its rich juxtaposition of segments of text, its oblique references to Christ, Thoreau, and Gandhi *and* attend to my larger purpose of building a community in the classroom where students can think about thinking and embrace the perspectives of very different perceivers.

To return finally to Virginia Woolf and *The Waves*, Louis speaks as he waits in the restaurant for Percival and regards the red carnation. "We differ," he says, "it may be too profoundly for explanation. But let us attempt it."

Suggested Readings

Belenky, Mary et al, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Bruffee, Kenneth A., "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay," *College English*, Vol. 48, No. 8 (December 1986): 773–790.

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Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.