

## “OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!”: Why We Can’t Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education

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*As educators who work with preservice teachers on critical multicultural education, we often struggle with our students’ desire for us to provide them with the how-to’s of multicultural education—a kind of “answer list.” In this paper, we share the analogies we have developed and found effective in explaining to our students why the list that they imagine not only doesn’t guarantee success, but could actually result in undermining core principles of critical multicultural education.*

The notion that a quick eight-step approach could be used to have people become engaged in culture, learning, institutional change, diversity, racism, and many other highly complex areas of inquiry conflicts with the notion that critical learning and engagement involves an on-going process, not just a lesson plan. . . . While content certainly has a place in education, the context is pivotal to education and schooling. (Carr, P., 2008, p. 81)

### Introduction

If you’re reading this essay you are likely a teacher educator who’s engaged in multicultural education, in its various forms. If you are engaged in multicultural education, it is probable that your courses are required in your program. If you are in elementary education, your students are predominately white females from a suburban middle class background, the demographic of the vast majority of elementary education students (Sleeter, 2001). In your class, students are discussing key concepts such as *socialization*, *oppression*, and *privilege*,

and doing coursework that challenges their worldview by suggesting that they are not as “open-minded” or “color-blind” as they may have thought. Your students are encountering evidence that structural inequities in society not only *exist*, but are deeply embedded in schooling. They are beginning to realize that contrary to what they have always believed, socially-constructed categories of difference (such as gender, race, ability) rather than merit alone, *do* matter and contribute significantly to students’ experiences, outcomes for success, and future life opportunities. They are likely starting to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of inequity, and alarmed at how invisible and normal it all looked to them before. Your students are ready—even anxious—to get to the solution, and frustrated that you are telling them about the problems but not providing them with any answers. They do not need any more evidence of inequality, they claim; what they need is for you to tell them how to *do* multicultural education; to provide the specific methods for dealing with the difference and inequities that exist in North America’s public schools. “OK, enough about the problems, I get it!” they lament. “Now just tell us how to do it!”

This essay speaks to this common frustration among the education students who take our courses in critical multicultural education. By “critical multicultural education” we refer to those approaches within education programs that explicitly address relations of inequitable power and how these relations manifest in schools (such as multicultural education, social justice education, critical pedagogy, anti-colonial, feminist, and other anti-oppression oriented courses). We appreciate our students and believe that their intentions in seeking concrete answers come from genuine concerns. We do not blame them for their frustration, anxiety, and desire for answers, for our K–12 schooling (especially in North America) has taught us all that we must get “the right answer,” or fail. We write this essay to support other teacher educators

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who teach similar courses and share the explanations we use for why professors of critical multicultural education cannot give students the answers they seek—why we cannot just tell them how to deal with social difference and inequality.

## Realizing that there are no easy answers, they are thereby less concerned about memorizing a set of quick-fix classroom strategies and more willing to continue in the practice of critical analysis

In seeking to move our students away from a *formulaic solution*-orientation to multicultural pedagogy towards a *discursive and structural*-orientation, we have developed a collection of analogies. These analogies, because they are relevant to our students' experiences, have proven to be effective in guiding our students' conceptualization of what multicultural education is. We follow each of these analogies with our version of a "how to" list. Although our list is not what our students originally envision, our analogies have supported their ability to reshape their conceptual models. With the shift in conceptualization of multicultural education as a complex, life-long process rather than as an event, their anxiety for getting "answers" is eased. Thus, our students gain more insight from the activities and exercises throughout the remainder of the course. Realizing that there are no easy answers, they are thereby less concerned about memorizing a set of quick-fix classroom strategies and more willing to continue in the practice of critical analysis.

In the following section we share these analogies in hopes that they may be useful to other teacher educators wrestling with the "tell us what to do" dilemma. We use the teacher-to-student voice to capture the sense that we are speaking directly to our students.

### Analogy I:

*We can't just tell you how to do it because: We want you to see complexity*

Most of us know the basic rules of basketball. There are two teams, and each team is trying to get the ball into the opposing team's basket while simultaneously preventing the other team from doing the same. Every time you get the ball in the basket, you get points. Each player has a position on her team and a novice player

focuses on her assigned role. However, a skilled player is able to see beyond her own position and synthesize all of the dynamics in play in order to think strategically about her every move. This player considers the positions of every other player in relation to her own, and bases her decision—her next "moves"—on multiple, shifting and contextual factors. She does not follow a rigid plan and likely does not make the exact same decision twice. Instead, she is always taking into account the bigger picture based on her knowledge of the other players, the rules of the game, which other players are nearby to support her, as well as her own developing skill level as she makes decisions about her next move.

Similar to the requirements of skilled basketball playing, critical multicultural teaching requires the ability to consider multiple and constantly shifting factors. To take these multiple factors into consideration, you must first obtain a fundamental understanding of the social, political, and historic dimensions of the situation—the rules of the game. You need a basic understanding of how power relations work in society, and your own position in the matrix of these relations. And for many students who do not have personal, first-hand experiences "playing the game" (i.e., by belonging to a socially-marginalized group), your knowledge must be acquired "second hand," and thus will take longer. For example, as a female you are in the *target* position (not a beneficiary of gender privilege) and therefore more likely to be aware of sexism; while as a white person you are in the *dominant* position (a beneficiary of race privilege), and thus less likely to be aware of racism. Our positions intersect and interact in complex ways, and we will need to ask ourselves several questions as we approach a given situation. The ability to generate quality "moves" on the playing field comes from a deep understanding of underlying factors. Similarly, the more complexity you can see in social dynamics, the more complex (and less superficial) your multicultural "moves" will be.

*So, in order to do critical multicultural education, one must:*

- Think in terms of structures and patterns, not individual acts and people;
- Assume a stance of humility as a life long learner whose moves will shift and develop as one gains more knowledge and skills;
- Understand that how we respond to the world (actions/practices/solutions) comes from how we see the world (perspective/theory/consciousness). When we see more complexity, we have more complex responses, therefore we must never consider our learning to be finished;
- Recognize that we are social beings, always in contextual and dynamic relation to one another. Teachers do not impart knowledge on their students, they co-produce

it within a socio-historical framework and cultural context.

### **Analogy 2:**

*We can't just tell you how to do it because: One size does not fit all*

Imagine you are taking a class in which the professor has outlined in the syllabus a very detailed policy about absences. Your professor has a non-negotiable zero-tolerance attendance policy that reduces your final grade by one step for each class missed (so if you earned a "B," your final grade will drop to B- for one class missed, to C+ for 2 classes missed, and so on). Your professor bases this policy on her past experiences with irresponsible students who had poor attendance records, and when you first heard it, it seemed fair. You aren't worried because you don't anticipate any absences. But one morning your dog has a seizure and you must take her to the veterinary hospital, so you miss class. You explain your absence to your professor, who expresses sympathy, but simply reiterates the policy ending the discussion. Now you see your professor's policy as unfair because it is based on one-size-fits-all assumptions about how to deal with students. While she has had real experiences with students who are irresponsible about attending class and this non-negotiable policy makes her recordkeeping and classroom management easier, it clearly does not work in every case. You want her to be flexible and take your unique circumstances into account, but she claims that would be making a special accommodation for you and would be unfair to the other students in class.

**Similar to the requirements of skilled basketball playing, critical multicultural teaching requires the ability to consider multiple and constantly shifting factors.**

The teacher education population is an alarmingly homogenous group (close to 93% of elementary education students are white and female and in fact this homogeneity is increasing rather than decreasing). This is of great concern to critical multiculturalists as we wrestle with the dilemma of how to provide a basic understanding of groups with whom the majority of students have no authentic relationships. On the one hand you need to understand the history, struggles, and perspectives of these groups in relation to your own. On the other hand, our task is to provide this understanding to you

without increasing your stereotypes through simplistic and general statements such as, "People from Group X feel this way about a situation."

You need to be able to consider *both* the macro (big picture) level of observable, well-documented patterns (i.e., there is consistent and often unconscious racial discrimination from Whites towards people of Color in every aspect of society), and the micro (individual) variation within that big picture (not all people of Color experience this discrimination in the same way). Giving you "the answer" or what we think of as a "recipe card" for dealing with Group X, Y, or Z, may appear to you to be the most obvious solution, but is actually counter to our goals. One of the ways we reconcile our dilemma is by starting our examination with how *you* have been socialized to view Group X, Y, or Z (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006).

One of the primary tenets of critical multicultural education is the need for each of us to examine *our own* socialized stereotypes and assumptions about marginalized groups to which we do not belong, and how this socialization shapes our relationships with those groups, both at the macro level (we live in segregated neighborhoods) and at the micro level (I mistakenly assume my Indigenous students will have few if any books in their homes, or that undergraduate students at state colleges are unprepared and are less likely to be serious students). Starting with oneself takes a lifetime of practice, reflection, and personal courage. Recipe cards (if they actually existed) would be quick, easy, and comfortable but would only reinforce the simplistic approaches that critical multicultural education problematize. In such a homogenous teacher education context, *just tell me how to do it* generally means tell "us" how to teach "them," which externalizes race and "otherness" and does not compel dominant group members to look at ourselves. Without the skills to deeply analyze one's own relationship to social others, fixed "answers" end up serving dominant needs—something that I apply to you in order to get the desired result I want from you—to perform according to my unproblematized expectations.

*So, in order to do critical multicultural education, one must:*

- Develop meaningful relationships with people who don't share your identity locations;
- Practice seeing and articulating both micro and macro-level analyses of any dynamic involving social groups. Ask: how is this situation (or my interpretation) based on my individual experiences with this individual, *as well as* based on the historical and socio-political patterns among the social groups we both belong to;
- Develop stamina and courage to talk about issues that you and your peers have been socialized not to talk about.

Challenge your comfort zone. Begin to use language (privilege, socialization, power) that may have been foreign to you until now. Expect this to take time and practice.

### Analogy 3:

*We can't just tell you how to do it because:* We want you to understand the historical dimensions of inter-group relations

In a recent music video for her song “Stupid Girls,” (2006) pop singer P!nk mocks the vapid superficiality she sees in contemporary celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and the Olsen twins. Most members of her target audience “get” the joke because they know the history of the celebrity culture and the various public antics of the best-known people (Britney crashing her car while talking on her cell phone, Mary Kate Olsen wearing homeless-chic bohemian outfits while drinking \$6 Starbucks coffees, etc.). Someone who does *not* follow popular culture would not get the video’s satire nor understand the larger social critique embedded in the parodies. In order to explain what is so bold about the video, you would have to know the background and history—the players, the context, what happened previously, etc.

**Having a historical perspective is a critical part of understanding the present moment. Our inter-group relations have not emerged in a vacuum, they are the outcome of our history.**

Having a historical perspective is a critical part of understanding the present moment. Our inter-group relations have not emerged in a vacuum, they are the outcome of our history. For example, following the viewing of the PBS three part film series: *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003), one of our students stated that she was not interested in the past—she preferred to base her views on her current, lived experiences. What this student failed to understand is that her lived experiences are the culmination of the past. Like many of our students, her experience was growing up in a predominately White neighborhood, having all White teachers, and going to predominately White schools. In order to gain a more sophisticated understanding of her lived experience today, she needed to know what led up

to it (such as the conditions and housing policies that led to “White flight” to the suburbs). Without that, she must rely on simplistic explanations such as, “people just like to be with their own kind.”

Taking the example of racism deeper, Canada and the United States were founded on slavery, colonization, and genocide, yet racism did not end when slavery ended. In the United States, people of Color were denied the FHA housing loans in the 1950s that allowed a generation of whites to attain middle class status through home ownership. Home ownership is critical in the U.S. because it is how the “average” family builds and passes down wealth, providing the starting point for the next generation. People of Color were systematically denied this opportunity and today the average White family has eight times the wealth of the average Black or Latino family (Federal Reserve Board, 2007). Excluding people of Color from mechanisms of society that allow the building of wealth continues today through illegal but common practices such as higher mortgage rates, more difficulty getting loans, real estate agents steering them away from “good” neighborhoods, discrimination in hiring, unequal school funding, etc. And of course all of these dynamics contribute to the disparity in educational achievement rates between White students and major groups of students of Color. If you insist that only the present is relevant, you participate in concealing White advantage at every level of our past and present society though superficial platitudes such as “I didn’t own slaves so I have not benefited from racism.” If you can’t think historically, you end up blaming the victim (“they just don’t value education”).

*So, in order to do critical multicultural education, one must:*

- Understand how the experiences of people of Color and other marginalized groups has been obscured in mainstream curricula, giving us an incomplete picture of our nation’s histories. Read research and scholarship on multicultural education and ethnic group histories in continuation of your education;
- Attend conferences that are open to academics and practicing teachers;
- Subscribe to journals and websites that address culturally responsive teaching, such as *Multicultural Perspectives*, *Rethinking Schools*, *Radical Teacher*, [multiculturalcanada.ca](http://multiculturalcanada.ca), and become active in your community’s local historical association;
- Study history through films and books that take a critical perspective, such as the PBS film series *Race: The Power of an Illusion* and Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, or Chris Harman’s *A People’s History of the World*, and Eva Mackey’s *The House of Difference*;

Join organizations and study groups devoted to enhancing cross-cultural communication and skills.

#### **Analogy 4:**

*We can't just tell you how to do it because:* We want you to be able to recognize patterns—within yourself and your society

Individualism is a very powerful ideology in the West, and as a result many of us see ourselves as unique individuals; each different from one another. We do not tend to see ourselves as socialized group members, especially when we are in the dominant group (i.e., White, able-bodied, heterosexual). For example, we might look around our teacher education courses and within a virtually 100% White, female, and middle-class group still see a diverse room of students, each conceived as unique and independent. Because we are in the dominant group and segregation is normal for us, we don't tend to see how alike we are in terms of a major organizing forces of society: race, class, and gender. This is a key dynamic of social dominance—one is allowed the privilege of seeing themselves as an individual rather than as a socialized member of a group (such as a racial group of White students, or a gendered group of White women, or a classed group of middle class White women). Given the privilege of being seen as an individual, we imagine ourselves (and our setting) to be unaffected by the relentless social messages we receive on a daily basis from films, advertising, textbooks, teachers, relatives, shared stories, silence, the absence of information, segregated schools and neighborhoods, and countless other dimensions of social life.

In order to get a sense of the power of our socialization and how it shapes all of our interactions and relationships, consider this thought experiment. Imagine yourself going about your day and engaging in conversations with the following players: your friends, your romantic partner, your parents, and your professor. You might be joking with your friends, sweet-talking with your romantic partner, talking with formality to your professor, and talking irritably with your parents. Now go beyond the players and add a layer of context: your friends in the classroom before class versus on the weekend at the bar, your romantic partner while walking across campus versus alone in your dorm room, your parents when they are pleased with you versus when they are disappointed, and your professor when you are answering a question in class versus explaining several unexcused absences back in her office. In each of these scenarios you are navigating power relations, and these power relations inform *how* you speak—your tone, the kinds of words you use, and even your facial expressions. These power navigations

are the result of our socialization and not at the conscious level. You don't need to pause and figure out how to switch gears from your friends to your professor; your awareness of the power relations are so internalized that you code-switch effortlessly.

Awareness of yourself as a socialized member of a number of intersecting social groups within a particular culture in a particular time and place (social location) will increase your multicultural vision. We want you to see the general patterns of your socialization and be aware of yourself in shifting contexts. In other words, we want you to step back and become aware of yourself code-switching and examine the assumptions these switches are based on. When interacting cross-culturally with members of groups that you are less familiar with, the codes you rely on are more likely to be based on stereotypical assumptions and messages. People from marginalized groups have to know not only their own codes but those of the dominant group in order to survive and are usually much more able to see how these invisible internalized navigations occur. For those of us who belong to dominant groups, the task is more challenging, for we haven't had to learn about, consider, or build relationships with marginalized group members in order to survive. A key goal of critical multicultural education is to raise your awareness of these patterned codes. When you are more conscious of them you are more equipped to change them when they are based upon misinformation about social others.

*So, in order to do critical multicultural education, one must:*

- Understand that racism, sexism, classism, etc., are *always* operating in every social setting (not just when an incident occurs), and continually practice recognizing and articulating how they are operating;
- As you build your critical thinking skills, build your practice skills by working to challenge the manifestation of oppression that you see;
- Attend trainings on anti-racism. Participate in racial caucuses and other exercises designed to expose you to differing world views and experiences;
- Create a support network to find other multicultural educators;
- Find out who the multicultural support staff/ workers are in your school district, and get in touch with them. Begin to build a relationship with this support person.

#### **Conclusion**

As can be seen from our suggestions, we do of course tell our students “what to do.” The problem is, they don't often like what we tell them. Critical multicultural

education challenges our worldview and our sense of ourselves in relation to others. It asks us to connect ourselves to uncomfortable concepts such as prejudice, privilege, and oppression. It challenges the self-delusion in simplistic platitudes such as “I don’t see color” and “I treat all my students as unique individuals.” It would be so much easier if we had a toolbox with its easy to understand lists of dos and don’ts. Yet such an approach would avoid the life-altering changes critical multicultural education asks of us. We wouldn’t have to face the history of oppression in our nation states and how that history continues to impact us today, or think deeply, engage in uncomfortable self-reflection, strive for humility in the face of the unknown, admit to our prejudices and assumptions, and build relationships with people who are different from ourselves. We would have to acknowledge that our achievements are not simply or solely the result of merit and hard work, and that in many ways we have benefited from other people’s disadvantages. In short, we would have to rebuild our very identities. Developing a critical multicultural perspective is a lifetime of work and is not completed midway through a course. One of the dilemmas when we are members of a dominant group is the lack of humility our position engenders—for example, thinking that we can live our entire lives socially segregated by race and class, etc., and then learn how to bridge this separation (and the blindness it produces) in a single course. A critical multicultural pedagogy requires a deep and sophisticated analysis, self-awareness, inter-

group experience, and on-going education. That is why we can’t just tell you how to do it.

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