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Uncovering Hegemonic Assumptions

Critical reflection is reflection informed by the critical theory tradition, and central to that tradition are two ideas: power and hegemony. In this chapter I want to reexamine the concept of hegemony outlined in chapter 1. In particular, I want to explore some widely held hegemonic assumptions embedded in "common-sense" understandings of teaching.

To recap very briefly, hegemony is the process by which an existing order secures the consent of people to the legitimacy of that order, even when it disadvantages them greatly. In the wider society hegemony serves to stop people challenging the status quo. Major economic recessions or depressions are seen as being as unpredictable and uncontrollable as natural weather phenomena, such as blizzards, typhoons, or hurricanes. People batten down the hatches, make do with whatever supplies are at hand, and wait it out till the weather clears. When massive layoffs threaten or public facilities (schools, hospitals, day-care centers, parks) close, people "make do." Growing up in England we had a phrase—"mustn't grumble." Essentially this meant that because you couldn't do anything about most misfortunes in life you might as well accept them stoically and get on as best you can within the constraints of the situation.

When hegemony is in place the system purrs along smoothly with no threat of revolution or insurrection. Essentially it stops people grumbling. Convince people that the world is organized for

their own good and that inequality is a normal and natural state of affairs, and you have the perfect system of social control. However, when people start to question whether or not their own taken-for-granted beliefs really are the immutable laws of nature they imagine, then hegemony is threatened.

Insert the notion of hegemony into the discourse of critically reflective teaching and you create a particular project: uncovering hegemonic assumptions about teaching. Such assumptions meet three conditions:

- They're accepted as representing commonsense truth and are widely regarded as accurate depictions of teaching and learning dynamics.
- They're viewed by teachers as working to support their best interests.
- In actuality, they harm teachers and serve to keep an irrational and injurious system intact.

Hegemonic assumptions are typically paradigmatic, so much a part of who we are that when they're challenged we respond, "that's not an assumption, that's just the way things are!" Uncovering these kinds of assumptions on our own is incredibly difficult. This is because we read our experiences in such a way as to bolster our long-standing analysis of how the world works. When bad things happen we explain them away as the unpredictable workings of things we can't understand, the fault of our ineptitude, or the vicissitudes of fate. The only way a deeply ingrained perspective on experience is challenged is if some external event jerks us out of our comfort zone, some little bomb of dissonance shatters our habitual rationales for doing the self-destructive things we do. These are the "disorienting dilemmas" that transformative learning theorists (Taylor and Cranton, 2012) refer to so frequently.

The four lenses of critically reflective teaching are all important sources of disorienting information. Students' comments, colleagues' critiques, or reading a new and surprising analysis of a familiar situation can interrupt our habitual narratives in a productively disturbing way. Personal experience sometimes shocks us in a visceral and emotional way. In the rest of this chapter I review some common assumptions of teaching that I regard as hegemonic and show how these are challenged.

I Must Motivate My Students by My Charismatic Singularity

Similar to many hegemonic assumptions this springs from a place of compassion. When students seem not to share our primal enthusiasm for our subject we often respond by striving to create in them the same passion for learning it that we feel. Boiled down to its simplest statement, we say we wish to motivate students.

The idea of motivating students is typically embedded in an individualistic conception of learning. The idea is that somehow, by sheer force of our own example, we can create an interest in something that didn't exist before. Two ideas are at play here. First, there's the notion drawn from medicine of determining the pathology of a disease, in this case the absence of motivation. Here an appropriate diagnostic response is to inject a dose of motivational fluid into the patient. If we uncover the particular inhibitor to the learner feeling a natural state of motivation, and then administer the appropriate drug that will lower this inhibitor, we'll release the motivational endorphins lying dormant in the learner's cells.

Second, there's the idea of charismatic singularity. Here we take it on ourselves to be such an exemplar of excited engagement in our subject that students, through some sort of pedagogic osmosis, will absorb our level of interest. To use another medical analogy, our passion will be communicated like an airborne virus resulting in students breathing in the spores of our contagious enthusiasm.

This idea meets all the conditions of a hegemonic assumption. First, it's broadly accepted as a commonsense idea about good teaching. When I've asked teachers to tell me what they'd most like their students to say about their courses, one of the most frequent responses is that they want students to feel that their instructors generate excitement in learning. Second, it's an assumption teachers usually interpret as working in their best interests. We remember with pleasure teachers who awakened our own interest in learning and often cite them as the inspiration for our choice of teaching as a career. Third, it's an assumption that, without our knowledge, harms us and serves the interests of those who wish to keep a system intact.

How can this assumption be deemed harmful? The answer lies in its individualistic crafting. According to this assumption teaching and learning are framed as a relationship between an individual student or particular group of students and an individual educator. The question of how to encourage learning is thus reduced to ensuring that the specific dynamics of a particular classroom are correct. And at the heart of these dynamics is determined to be the presence, or lack thereof, of charisma displayed by the teacher. All the responsibility for creating a motivated learner falls squarely on the teacher's shoulder. If you're a sufficiently charismatic performer you'll ignite your students enthusiasm for learning. If not they'll remain disinterested and apathetic.

This understanding of successful teaching completely sidesteps the reality of broader social conditions. It regards the classroom as a bubble, totally isolated and unaffected by the culture, history, economics, and politics in which it's situated. In reality, the world a student brings into the classroom is a social, political, cultural, and economic one. Students are not just individual cognitive centers or information-processing mechanisms. Despite the undoubted importance of research into brain chemistry, we need to understand students in terms of their social locations and identities.

Take the strength of gender, racial, or class formation as examples. Before even opening his or her mouth an instructor of color

walking into a predominantly white classroom has the history of racism and white supremacy framing students' perceptions of their teacher's competence. As teachers of color report (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, and Griffin, 2009), they're sometimes initially viewed as secretaries and custodial staff members. Even when it's clear they're the teacher they're viewed as being there only because of affirmative action guidelines. The same is true for a woman teaching a predominantly male class who faces the ideology and history of patriarchy. None of these teachers needs to say or do anything to create these complex responses in students. The simple presence of their body is enough.

Switch racial identities and have a white teacher facing a multiracial class, and another complex set of responses, also framed by the reality of racism and white supremacy, are called forth. Here the instructor is likely to be viewed as a representative of power as usual and viewed with suspicion borne of history and experience. Again no words are spoken; identity says everything. As Yancy has shown, the black gaze on whites (Yancy, 2012) and the white gaze on blacks (Yancy and Guadalupe Davidson, 2014) is strong and enduring.

When social class is concerned, accent and vocabulary are typical determinants of class location. Even in a racially homogenous class the history of classism inserts itself immediately into the proceedings. When an upper-class teacher faces a working-class group of students, or in the reverse situation, class identity frames all subsequent interactions. A working-class teacher has to prove she or he belongs in academe. An upper-class teacher has to prove he or she has the best interests of working-class students at heart. This is why five decades ago Paulo Freire in the original publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire and Bergman, 2000) urged middle- and upper-class teachers to commit class suicide.

Given the power of history, politics, and culture it's insane for any teacher to imagine that he or she can walk into a classroom and overturn centuries of racial, gender, and class exploitation. Students' resistance to learning is clearly generated by many factors, but prime among them must be students' social locations.

If I as a white teacher, I think I can walk into a room of students of color and, by the sheer force of any charismatic energy I might summon, turn their suspicion into enthusiastic endorsement, I am hurtling into hurt. Yet, this is precisely what I have done for most of my career.

So the assumption that teachers can create motivated students by the power of their charismatic energy is deeply harmful. Subscribing to it means you constantly blame yourself for being unable to convert students into eager advocates of learning. Several images come to mind when I think of the naivety of this assumption. I'm in a kayak paddling furiously as I try to turn an ocean liner around. I'm in a pickup truck with my bumper against the Rockies, gears screeching as I attempt to move them further westward. These are metaphors of exhausted futility. Measuring your success as a teacher by how well you create motivated students through your personal efforts leads to a life of demoralized failure.

Whose interests are served by this assumption? Well, as is typical with hegemonic assumptions, we must start with the system. Viewing teaching as the activation of charismatic singularity cultivates the view that student success depends on the teacher. This makes it easy to imagine that change is extremely simple. If students are underperforming just fire existing teachers and hire better ones. This protects the system from critical examination and means that structural inequities are ignored. Everything is down to the individual teacher; good teachers produce motivated learners who excel in taking tests and poor teachers produce disinterested students who fail.

This *Stand By Me*, *Dead Poets Society*, or *Dangerous Minds* model of teaching elides the need to fund education properly, reduce class sizes, provide proper infrastructure, and support staff development. If the responsibility for learning comes down to whether or not you possess the requisite charisma then legislators can dismiss requests for resources.

It's All under Control

If there's one thing I've learned about teaching it's that I have far less control over classroom events than I assume. Yet the concept of teachers being able to control learning undergirds pretty much all evaluation. Purposeful intentional teaching generally seeks to guide students toward predetermined learning outcomes that are then measured by some kind of assessment protocol. Behind this organizational practice is the notion that control over classrooms and learning is possible. As a young adjunct instructor moving from college to college I was often told to establish control early on and then ease up as the term progressed. I learned to put a lot of pressure on myself to appear cool, calm, and collected and never to appear flustered. Inside I was a roiling sea of nervous anxiety but externally I was Mr. Unflappable, or at least trying to be.

Yet every time I initiate a class discussion, try out a new activity, or make any attempt to get students to think critically I know that the extent of my control over what happens is questionable. And the more I use classroom-response systems to find out what students are thinking the more I realize I often have no idea at all about their inner mental landscape. I remember copresenting a session one afternoon in England recently and asking the audience what needed to happen next for us to be able to help students think more critically. The social media tool I was using that day—TodaysMeet (www.todaysmeet.com)—lit up with comments essentially saying, "Tea PLEASE!" Here I was thinking minds were dealing with the intricacies of critical thinking, when in fact they were focused on beverages.

When I move into analyzing a contentious issue such as racism I know I'm entering an essentially chaotic universe. So-called hot topics (Nash, LaSha Bradley, and Chickering, 2008) hit raw spots and generate strong emotional responses. The one thing I can pretty much depend on is that very quickly I'll start to feel I'm

losing control. Views will be expressed and things will be spoken that will offend and inspire and the conversation will take turns I can't anticipate.

This assumption that it's all under control causes multiple injuries. First, as you struggle to look as though you know what you're doing even as things go awry, your sense of impostorship—the feeling that you're faking it until a "real" teacher comes along—will be overwhelming. If you measure your effectiveness by how well you keep control you're going to feel pretty ineffective for long periods of time. Second, the internal voice telling you to "get things back on track" whenever the class goes in a surprising direction robs you of one of the greatest pleasures of teaching—the "teachable moment." Such moments are ones full of rich surprise. Regarding them as unfortunate aberrations to be shortened or avoided entirely means you lose the option to enjoy unexpected chances to help your students grow.

Having your control questioned can also be very interesting. When students challenge me because what I'm teaching is, in their minds, boring and irrelevant or because I'm acting in a way that seems arbitrary or unfair, this is inherently destabilizing. That destabilization is productively insurrectional. If I respond to every student challenge by cutting it off or stamping it down then not only do I dismiss the legitimacy of student criticisms but also I lose the chance to learn. One of the consequences of seeking feedback from your students is that sometimes they'll tell you things you don't want to hear and that complicate your life. Because the lens of students' eyes is so crucial we *have* to take seriously what this lens reveals. If you ignore or dismiss student critiques because they challenge your sense of control you'll probably never think very deeply about your exercise of teacher power. The same holds true for critiques from colleagues. A colleague asking me why my work was race blind was hardly a question I wanted to hear, but it launched me on a journey from which there was no turning back.

Whose interests are served by the assumption that it's all under control? First are the balance sheets of the many companies

producing assessment and evaluation instruments to measure student learning. Rating teachers by how well their students perform on standardized tests assumes that all the teachers involved have equal control over their classrooms. Visit two schools on the same day in pretty much any city—a magnet school on Manhattan's Upper East Side and a neighborhood school in Bedford Stuyvesant perhaps—and the ludicrousness of this assumption is clear. But as long as the system parlays the myth that teachers have enough control in their classrooms for valid comparisons of teachers and schools to be drawn from test results, then these tests are immensely appealing. They parlay into another myth of simplistic measurement. Of course, the profits quickly mount up for companies paid a fee every time a particular instrument is used.

Most college teachers live in a pedagogic demilitarized zone caught between institutional demands and the rhythms of teaching and learning. Bureaucracies assume learning can be neatly managed and packaged—commodified to use the language of critical theory (Brookfield, 2004)—but brains and hearts dictate otherwise. Learning that's complex and demanding never follows a neat institutional design. It goes off in unexpected directions, sometimes takes much longer than anticipated, and requires constant pedagogic adaptation. To assume you can control what's happening in your classroom is to ignore reality.

Washing Clean the Stain of Resistance

Educational institutions, even those funded by the state, operate in a capitalist system. We're selling a product and students, or their parents, are shopping around for the best deal. Institutional brochures and web presences are replete with images of smiling students, usually conversing in multicultural rainbows. The message is clear: learning is fun and satisfying as students reach their potential, be all they can be, and generally self-actualize for four pleasurable years. Banned are images of frustration or struggle, of slogging repeatedly to learn difficult content or skills. Colleagues

often complain that so-called millennials (Bonner, Marbley, and Howard-Hamilton, 2011; Knowlton and Hagopian, 2013) bring a sense of entitlement to higher education. They expect learning to be entertaining, to earn automatic As for attendance, and to receive social promotion through a four-year curriculum. If that's true then the enticing websites, glossy brochures, and social media marketing efforts of colleges have a lot to do with it.

In a competitive marketplace, teachers not surprisingly feel the pressure from administrators and students to make difficult and complex learning "fun." I've had teachers at multiple institutions consult me regarding their poor teaching evaluations, received largely because students experience the course as too difficult or challenging. They ask me how to combat student resistance and remove it from the classroom. It's almost as if resistance is a dirty stain that can be removed with some pedagogic detergent: "Wash your classroom free of those stubborn blemishes of student disinterest or apathy!"

Resistance is a complex phenomenon. Sometimes it's completely justified, such as when we neglect to build a case for learning, don't demonstrate our own commitment to it, send conflicting messages regarding its importance, or provide examples that confuse rather than clarify. The truth is that any learning that stretches students beyond where they are, that introduces them to complexity, or that asks them to think critically can pretty much be guaranteed to induce resistance on the part of some students.

A lot of resistance is caused by factors totally beyond our control. Any time learning is institutionally coerced there's a possibility of resistance. Resistance can be linked to students' poor self-images as learners or to a history of being burned by teachers of the subject you're asking them to study. Maybe they're afraid of committing cultural suicide or looking uncool or foolish. And student development theorists frequently document the cognitive struggle eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds face to move from binary, dualistic thinking to appreciate contextuality (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn, 2010).

Speaking personally I know I focus on students who seem resistant far more than I do on those who appear enthusiastically engaged. In a discussion I'm often worrying about students who aren't speaking rather than listening to those who are. Online I obsess about students who post rarely and briefly. When giving a presentation I'm easily distracted by expressionless faces and start to panic thinking that I've lost the room. Of course, these may not be signs of resistance at all, just deep processing. As a student I often participate little in discussions that I find fascinating, because I'm too busy doing the mental work of listening carefully. I don't make enthusiastic eye contact or nod my head in lectures that I'm taking seriously; instead, I lower my head and doodle. A note pad that's covered in doodles signifies deep engagement and cognitive processing on my part.

But there's no denying that every teacher sooner or later faces overt resistance in college classrooms. Students often have no qualms in asking, "why do we need to know this?" or "will this be on the test?" They'll try to bargain you down on the number of pages in a homework assignment paper or the number of posts to the chat room required of them. They can also sabotage you by refusing to ask or answer questions. Sometimes I hear students say I'm asking too much of them, that there's too much reading, too many assignments, and too little time. When I stress the need to think critically and develop their own independent judgments regarding a difficult issue I'm often asked to say what the correct opinion or response really is. In discussions of racism I have had students accuse me of being racist, of my seeing race everywhere when it's really not an issue, and of creating a classroom environment in which they can't say anything without fear of seeming prejudiced.

The assumption that it's your responsibility to remove student resistance completely overlooks the fact that resistance is a natural rhythm of learning. Any time you push students to confront complexity, increase their skill level, or think more critically you're going to get substantial pushback. To interpret that as a sign of bad

teaching is insane. In fact, if you're *not* getting resistance, you're probably not doing your job. Your responsibility is not just to support students but also to challenge them.

Similar to any hegemonic assumption, the belief that we must wash away the stain of resistance in order to consider ourselves good teachers is one many of us eagerly embrace, but it's one that harms us. If resistance is an essential rhythm of significant learning and completely predictable, then its presence can legitimately be regarded as a sign of your pedagogic effectiveness, not the opposite. If you put pressure on yourself to remove it then you're setting yourself up for permanent failure. I say it again: resistance is completely natural, indeed necessary. Plus, because it's often caused by factors totally outside your control, you're often powerless to affect it. So you can't, or shouldn't, want to remove resistance. Of course you want to respond to it in a way that keeps students engaged in learning. But don't automatically conclude that because it's there you've somehow failed.

As with most hegemonic assumptions, the interests this assumption serves are institutions and organizations set up to perpetuate themselves and to expand their reach. If learning can be sold as a perpetually joyful and smoothly enervating increase in students' command of knowledge and skill then the customers keep rolling in. No president, provost, or board of trustees ever instructs alumni relations, admissions, or the development office to send a message to prospective students that studying at their college will be a long, hard slog full of difficulty and involving painful self-appraisal. So the fiction is maintained: "come to us and be bathed in the warm glow of permanent self-actualization!"

The Perfect-Ten Syndrome

Many teachers take an understandable pride in their craft wisdom and knowledge. They want to be good at what they do and, consequently, they put great store in students' evaluations of their teaching. When these are less than perfect—as is almost inevitable

for the reasons explored in the last assumption—teachers assume the worst. All those evaluations are forgotten and the negative ones assume disproportionate significance. Indeed, the inference is often made that bad evaluations must, by definition, be written by students with heightened powers of discrimination: "if they're critical of me they must realize I'm only one step ahead of them." Conversely, good evaluations are thought to be produced by students who are half-asleep.

This constant inability to receive uniformly good evaluations can lead to feelings of guilt concerning one's supposed incompetence. When we keep these evaluations to ourselves (as is typical given the privatized culture of many college campuses) the sense of failure becomes almost intolerable. We're convinced that we're the only ones who receive bad evaluations and that everyone else is universally loved. In this way an admirable desire to do good work, and the assumption that good evaluations signify this, turns into a source of demoralization. Once again, a belief that seems self-evidently good becomes hegemonic, harming us in the process.

A critically reflective teacher recognizes the error of assuming that only the receipt of uniformly good student evaluations signals the presence of good teaching. She knows that the complexities of learning and the diversity of college classrooms mean that no action a teacher takes can ever be experienced as universally and uniformly positive. She knows, too, that teacher assessment and performance-appraisal mechanisms that reward perfect scores don't serve students' interests. For one thing, good evaluations are sometimes the result of teachers pandering to students' prejudices. Teachers are almost bound to be liked if they never challenge students' taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving or if they allow them to work only within their preferred learning styles. Because letting people stick with what comes easy to them is a form of cognitive imprisonment, one could argue that anyone who consistently scores a perfect ten is just as likely to be doing something wrong as something right.

So whose interest does the perfect-ten assumption serve if not that of students and teachers? Primarily, it confirms the belief of those with a reductionist cast of mind that the dynamics, complexities, and contradictions of teaching can be reduced to a linear, quantifiable rating system. Epistemologically challenged people like this sometimes end up in positions of administrative and legislative power. Believing that learning and teaching are one-dimensional phenomena, they carve curricula into discrete units and create standardized objectives that are meant to be context and culture proof. In their minds teaching becomes the simple implementation of centrally produced curricula and objectives. Good or bad teaching then becomes measured by how closely these are followed and implemented. Call it the "Pearsonization" of American higher education; the way that Pearson Education PLC (the corporation producing widely adopted tests in over 70 countries) fundamentally shapes how learning is assessed and how schools and teachers are evaluated.

The perfect-ten syndrome also makes life easier for those who have the responsibility of deciding which members of their staff are to be promoted. All they need to do is consult student ratings because according to this assumption the best teachers are obviously those with the highest scores. This turns professional advancement into a contest in which the winners are those who get the most students to say they like them. Judging teaching by how many people say they like what you do supports a divisive professional ethic that rewards those who are the most popular. Administrators who use this ratings system are not venal or oppressive. They are tired and burned out from making an unworkable system look like it's working. So if a neat solution (giving promotion to those with the highest scores on student evaluations) appears to a difficult problem (deciding who of their staff advances) we can hardly blame them for embracing it.

Deep Space Nine: The Answer Must Be out There Somewhere

For many teachers the first response to encountering a problem of practice is to look for a manual, workshop, or person who can solve it. Students refusing to learn? Buy a book on dealing with resistance to learning. Classes full of students with different racial and cultural identities, ethnic backgrounds, ability levels, and experiences? Enroll in that summer institute on dealing with diversity. Running discussions that are dominated by a handful of confident, articulate students? Go and see how that colleague across campus whom everyone raves about creates democratic classrooms.

All these resources for dealing with problems are useful and necessary. I myself have written books that have dealt with resistance to learning, have run workshops on dealing with diversity, and have invited colleagues to watch me teach, so I don't want to decry the importance of doing these things. But I do want to point out that although reading books, attending workshops, and watching colleagues can give you some useful insights and techniques, it's wrong to assume that at some point in these activities you'll inevitably stumble on the exact answer to the problem you're experiencing.

To think this way is to fall victim to a fundamental epistemological distortion. This distortion holds that someone, or something, out there has the knowledge that constitutes the answer to our problems. We think that if we just look long and hard enough we'll find the manual, workshop, or person who will tell us exactly what we need to do. Occasionally I suppose this might just happen. But much more often than not, any ideas or suggestions we pick up will have to be sculpted to fit the local conditions in which we work. And that goes for all the suggestions I make in this book on how to become critically reflective.

Unless we challenge this epistemological distortion we risk spending a great deal of energy castigating ourselves for our inability to make externally prescribed solutions fit the problems we're facing. It might never occur to us that what needs questioning is the assumption that neat answers to our problems are always waiting to be discovered. It can take many demoralizing disappointments as our application of rules, protocols, and models misfire before we realize the fruitlessness of the quest for standardized certainty. Once again an assumption that we think represents commonsense wisdom—that if we look long enough we'll find the neat answer to an intractable problem—becomes hegemonic. As each promised activity or process fails we berate ourselves for our failure to implement the "solution" we've discovered correctly or for falsely diagnosing our problem in the first place.

Methods and practices imported from outside rarely fit snugly into the contours of our classrooms, and difficult problems never have simple, standardized solutions. At best, they call forth a multiplicity of partial responses. The assumption that complex problems of practice, such as creating an inclusive classroom that teaches students about racism, can be dealt with by following standardized guidelines serves the interests of those who accrue power, prestige, and financial reward from designing and producing these guidelines. Consultants, authors, and production companies rarely say of their products, "these might be useful but only if you research your local conditions and adapt what is here to your own circumstances." Neither do they advocate a mixing and matching of their products with elements from others marketed by their rivals. The promise that somewhere someone will take care of our problems for us removes from our shoulders the tiresome responsibility of having to research our contexts critically.

We Meet Everyone's Needs

When asked to explain why they've made a particular decision, administrators will often justify what they've done by saying that

they're meeting the community's, the faculty's, or the students' needs. Likewise, teachers will say that the best classes are those in which every student feels his or her needs have been met. The assumption that good teachers meet all students' needs all the time is guaranteed to leave us feeling incompetent and demoralized. Because meeting everyone's needs is impossible we enthusiastically set ourselves up for failure, the sure sign of a hegemonic assumption.

One problem with the meeting-needs rationale is that students' articulation of exactly what those needs are is sometimes done in a distorted and harmful way. For some students the primary need is an easy A with the least possible effort. Others define their need as staying within their existing comfortable ways of thinking, acting, and learning and avoiding any topic that comes with trigger warnings. Someone who expresses a need of never being challenged in college is not in the best position to judge what's in his or her own best interests. So although meeting everyone's needs sounds compassionate and student-centered it's pedagogically unsound and psychologically demoralizing. Clinging to this assumption causes us to carry around a permanent burden of guilt at our inability to live up to this impossible task. What seems to be an admirable guiding rule for teachers, and one that we're all tempted to embrace, ends up destroying us.

Who is served by this assumption? Primarily those who believe that educational processes can be understood and practiced as a business. Higher education becomes a marketplace in which different companies (colleges) compete for a limited number of customers. Private colleges depend on tuition revenue to survive but even state colleges need to attract and graduate large numbers of students if they're to continue to secure funding from the legislature. Under such circumstances keeping the consumers (students) happy enough so that they don't buy the product (education) elsewhere is the bottom line for institutional success. Those who survive because they have enough consumers are viewed, by definition, as doing a good job. And one way to entice paying customers is to promise that you will meet their needs.

The meeting needs assumption means that we devote a lot of energy to keeping the customers satisfied. We definitely don't want them to feel confused or angry because we have asked them to do something they find difficult and would rather avoid. But this view simply ignores pedagogic reality. As has already been pointed out, anytime someone attempts to learn a challenging or complex theory, or anytime people are pushed to think critically, an ambivalent mix of feelings and emotions is prompted, in which anger and confusion are as prominent as pleasure and clarity. The most hallowed rule of business—that the customer is always right—is often pedagogically wrong. Equating good teaching with how many students feel you have done what they wanted is a dead end that prevents significant learning.

I Can Fix Racism (Sexism, Classism, Ableism)

Zeal and righteous outrage animate many teachers eager to use education as a way to change the world. Turning on the pilot light of your anger at the clear injustice and inequity you see all around gives you the necessary energy to get through days when you'd otherwise feel your work was meaningless. But, as Myles Horton (1997) was fond of saying, you can't let the slow burn of anger consume you in its fire. Burning out is a danger all activist-oriented teachers face as they try to effect social change from inside the academy.

As with several of the hegemonic assumptions we've examined, the assumption that "I can fix racism" harms teachers by inducing enormous guilt when external factors prevent this from happening. If you've gone into teaching fired with an antiracist passion it's demoralizing in the extreme to confront the reality that neither colleagues nor students share this passion. I've spent many hours in conversations with colleagues who feel like quitting because they don't seem to be getting anywhere despite their best efforts. Just as they think they're making progress with a group of students

someone says something in class that makes them realize that nothing really significant is happening. They report taking one step forward only to fall two steps back as racist views are expressed in a class where they felt change was taking place.

The I-can-fix-racism assumption overstates the individual power of teachers. "Isms" such as racism, classism, sexism, and ableism are historically produced and systemically embedded. They comprise beliefs and practices entrenched in the culture and reinforced through lifelong socialization. People can push back against these dominant ideologies by naming and challenging them and they can strive to educate students and each other about how to take effective antiracist action. But they can't be fixed by individual agency. A systemic function can be altered only systemically, through, for example, revolutionary political parties or well-organized social movements.

Obviously I'm not saying it's pointless to engage in antiracist work in academe. I spend a lot of time and energy in this work myself and I don't consider it futile, naive, or ill-intentioned. I do it because it's the right thing to do but without any expectation that it will make much difference. Of course I hope it will have some small but significant consequences, but I try not to measure my efforts by how far I've fixed institutional racism. It's hard enough to work on combatting the racism I carry in myself, without thinking I can fix it in anyone else, let alone a whole system.

When you use the kinds of critically reflective lenses outlined in this book you tend to start thinking in big-picture ways and get a better understanding of the constraints to and limitations of your action. Critical reflection helps you situate your classroom and your practices in the structures and systems of the outside world. Although we might like to think that we exercise sole authority over our classroom domain, the reality is that everything we do is framed by history, politics, and culture. Once we start to think structurally we're quick to see that our individual actions, although important and valuable, can't fix systemic problems.

I suppose some might find it pessimistic and demoralizing to realize that their actions will have much smaller consequences than they'd like. To me, however, it's a necessary corrective that helps you stay in this work when not much seems to be happening because of your efforts. I think of it as a kind of critical optometry: getting a new pair of glasses that reveals everything that's going on rather than just what's in front of you.

The I-can-fix-racism assumption serves the interests of institutions that perpetuate racism. If you convince people that instituting a faculty development program, creating a new office of diversity, or changing mission language will address racism in a way that removes the problem from organizational life, then you can convince yourself that the issue has been effectively addressed. Setting up mandatory workshops on dealing with racism or requiring all faculty members to read *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Tatum, 2003) make it appear that serious change is happening. I've visited many campuses where the college or university concerned has created a diversity office run by the only person of color on the senior leadership team. This looks good in institutional brochures but it doesn't fix the problem of embedded systemic racism. That will only be the case if everyone in the institution, from the trustees to the custodial staff, engage in a sustained analysis of the racism embedded within hiring practices, budgetary processes, curriculum, staffing, and myriad daily institutional interactions.

Lest it be thought I'm saying that workshops, appointments, or changes to the mission statement are a waste of time, I want to emphasize that this is *not* the case. I run lots of workshops on teaching about racism and wholeheartedly support efforts to diversify the institution's personnel or to refocus the mission. But I also know these things won't fix racism. They're the daily bread of activism that often leads to desirable and worthwhile small changes. But fixing racism is the job of movements and parties and something that probably will never be fully realized.

At the very least it will take decades to conduct a sustained, painful, and raw societal self-study supported by massive structural change in economic, legal, and political systems. So although introducing racial issues into the classroom, meeting with student groups, and teaching courses on race is important and necessary work, we should abandon the idea that doing these things will fix racism. Address it, absolutely, but don't assess your effectiveness by how much you fix it in individual students, let alone the department, division, or institution.

Conclusion

Hegemonic assumptions are elusive in their ordinariness. When we're immersed in a system that shapes our instincts and responses it's hard to see how it harms us. One key to unraveling hegemony lies in the collaborative process of critical reflection with colleagues explored in chapter 7. When you're running in circles and caught inside a closed loop, it takes questions from someone outside that loop to jerk you into a realization of its insanity.

In this chapter and the ones preceding it I've done my best to define what constitutes critically reflective teaching. To recap, critical reflection happens when we unearth and challenge assumptions that undergird our actions and practices, primarily by viewing those through the four lenses of students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, personal experiences, and theory. What makes reflection critical is its grounding in critical theory and its consequent focus on illuminating power and uncovering hegemony.

It's time now to start examining the nuts and bolts of the practice of critical reflection, particularly the way that each of the four lenses can be used to uncover our assumptions. In chapter 4 I provide an overview of how these lenses work.