

**Challenging Student Identities:
Confronting Race and Class**

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1) Introduction: Why I teach General Education?

When I was asked my Alma Clayton-Pedersen to present at this conference centered around General Education, my initial response was to say thanks, but no thanks. Though I have taught at three different institutions of higher learning and experienced two others as a student, I was not a big fan of general education courses. My own undergraduate institution, Harvard College, had trumpeted out its core curriculum, a new and improved version of liberal education, just after I arrived on campus, and I had dutifully taken those courses and enjoyed very few. Like many undergraduates, I simply had taken courses to fulfill requirements early on in my education, and never really understood the purpose of these “foundations in liberal education” and wasn’t quite sure if my professor did either. So for 15 years as a faculty member, I had assiduously avoided teaching general education, even while flourishing as an instructor of undergraduate lectures and seminars, as well as graduate students.

But Alma had called at one of my vulnerable moments. I had agreed to teach my first general education course in the Spring of 2004, and figured I might be able to

provide some insights to you regarding a first-timer's experience—not as an instructor, but as a general education teacher. Unlike the more specialized environments we professors normally reside in, only teaching students who have chosen to specialize along with us in history or English or biology, I was entering the world of “liberal education”—a world populated, I felt, primarily by people who tell faculty what to do—deans, assistant deans, provosts, vice provosts, presidents, vice presidents, chancellors—who extol the virtues of a well-rounded student while rarely stepping into the classroom itself, or at least no longer holding up a four or six or eight course load, various service responsibilities, and, of course, major research projects.

Moreover, I was teaching a new general education course at the University of Southern California from a program I had played a role in building, the program in American Studies & Ethnicity. Because I am the director of this program, I thought it important that I display for my growing faculty a commitment to undergraduate teaching generally, and to general education specifically, since I was trying to convince them to offer more of these courses because of my dean's pressure on me as a program director. It was a typical administrative move—if I can do it, busy and fully committed faculty member that I am, then you, fellow faculty member, can certainly develop and teach a similar course! While I'm not sure if I have actually convinced any of my colleagues to take the plunge with me, I know that my experience in the classroom has transformed my own reason for teaching GE. This semester I am back in touch with a major reason why I entered the professoriate—the challenge, responsibility and joys of confronting young minds—and I hope that my own transformation can enlighten your discussions here this weekend.

2) Overview of General Education at USC

In order to provide you a mapping of the intellectual terrain that I entered this term, it is important that I provide a brief history of the world of general education at the University of Southern California, my current employer. (I really can't avoid this, since my training as a historian forces me to turn to my most comfortable analytic tools!) USC, when I arrived there in 1997, had recently revamped its entire general education program as part of the strengthening of its entire undergraduate education profile. GE before the 1990s as USC had been an odd cacophony of courses offered by all thirteen USC schools of instruction, mostly operated to hold potential majors hostage by a particular school, in order to reap the benefit of each tuition dollar of an unsuspecting undergraduate. Therefore, the business school offered introductory writing, while the cinema school offered history courses. In the 1990s, the Provost and the entire faculty agreed to place the entire role of general education under the rubric of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, to the consternation of many other deans, but to the benefit of all undergraduates, I believe.

Its purpose was “to provide a coherent, integrated introduction to the breadth of knowledge [a student] will need to consider [him/herself] a generally well-educated person.” Through a series of tense, but productive faculty committee discussions and debates, the faculty agreed to design a program that would “help students understand the cultural and historical context of their lives, to think analytically about texts, events, scientific evidence, and arguments, and to write clearly and effectively.” Two principal

goals were identified by faculty for the General Education Program. The faculty wanted each each student to (1) locate him/herself in his or her own moment of cultural and intellectual history; and (2) to think critically about the books one read, the arguments one confronted and the evidence offered for and against theories in the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences.

SLIDE TWO: GENERAL EDUCATION AT USC

The program was therefore divided into two parts, which one can see in this slide. Part One was called “Foundations,” intended to give students a “big picture” into (1) the development of western European and American culture, as well as (2) alternative cultural traditions; and (3) the basic principles of scientific inquiry. The second part was called “Case Studies,” since it provided opportunities for student to sharpen their critical intelligence by considering specific (1) applications of science and technology; (2) works of literature, philosophy and art; and (3) contemporary social issues of urgency and importance. In addition to these basic requirements, students would take a semester of writing while co-registered for a course in Social Issues, as well as a course designated as fulfilling a diversity requirement somewhere in their curriculum. Moreover at USC, only tenure-track faculty in the College are allowed to teach GE courses, so this is a burden, usually happily accepted, by only regular faculty and provides for undergraduates a connection to regular faculty mentorship often bypassed at other institutions.

Before I go on, let me say that I faced a dilemma faced by many instructors of General Education courses. Because I arrived at USC after this new GE program was instituted, I had not gone through the evangelizing experience of transforming the curriculum like so many of my colleagues. I was new, and everything I have presented to

you has come from my research for this talk, and a bit from my administrative knowledge. While I still run into colleagues that were part of the transformation, I started my efforts at constructing my course with only the vaguest notions of how my course would or should fit into this larger picture—and this is a dilemma at most schools that I have seen. Newcomers are barely integrated into the purposes of their departmental cultures and traditions; the goals of a campus-wide initiative like general education reform are rarely communicated in effective ways to new faculty who very well might make up the bulk of instructors of GE for any campus, like USC, involved in a major hiring initiative.

SLIDE 3: SOCIAL ISSUES

Anyway, the course I was about to teach, which is entitled “Race and Class in Los Angeles” fell under the rubric of “Social Issues,” so let me tell you a bit more specifically about this category. The “social issues” category was intended to prepare students with certain analytical and critical skills that would be familiar to any social scientist. Each course was designed to prepare students for informed citizenship, by teaching them to analyze compelling local, national and/or international issues or problems. My course would involve focusing on two of the major issues of modern society—race and class—in a particular local setting of our home institution—Los Angeles. The analytical tools students would need to examine these issues should be developed systematically so that students could redeploy these later to understand a broad range of social phenomena. My course, and most others in this category, would deal with complex issues that could not easily find “solutions,” and therefore I knew that my students had to become

intellectually comfortable with ambiguity, argument, and disagreement in a social environment where these issues often can provoke anger and resentment.

3) Overview of American Studies & Ethnicity

Luckily, my own training over the past decade or so has been in the interdisciplinary worlds of American Studies and Ethnic Studies, where these issues are raised pretty often and there is a whole pedagogical discussion about how to raise difficult issues and help students work through some of the most complex issues of our time. Ironically, the current administration in Washington, as well as some that should know better in our own state like Ward Connerly, often attack Ethnic Studies scholars for simply providing a comfortable environment for students of color where they will not have to confront difficult issues and instead have all their prejudices affirmed. Another line of attack has been to put forward the notion that Ethnic Studies, as well as other supposedly “identity-based” programs, engage in a version of mind-control, putting conflictual models into impressionable young minds. Neither of these strategies, of course, could be employed in a successful general education course, in which students are being asked to develop analytical skills that help them deal with complex questions.

SLIDE 4: THE WEST OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Indeed my program at USC, the Program in American Studies and Ethnicity explicitly tries to develop these analytical skills at every level. On our website is the following line of poetry which captures our philosophical approach to these issues. We believe that the only way that students will be able to function effectively in the 21st

century is to develop the skills of listening and understanding in a diverse environment. Los Angeles, for us, is a sort of laboratory where we can develop those skills on the ground that will be needed, if they are not already, for any community in the United States. A striking feature of our faculty is that, with 21core faculty, we have about 50 percent of all the Black and Latino faculty in the College at USC with us, so these issues are both intellectual and personal.

What I mean by that is that a topic of conversation among all our faculty is that we are faculty of color who may be the very first person of color that some of our students have ever confronted. In particular, when we teach general education courses, this issue often comes out, sometimes as a source of pride for minority undergraduates who have never seen someone of their own racial background with a Ph.D., and sometimes in doubts about our own ability to provide “objective” perspectives on these issues. This kind of problematic for faculty of color is something rarely discussed in most departments, but something that almost all of our faculty regularly talk about. Over the years, I have developed strategies within any course to both display to students the range of my knowledge early on, and therefore my expertise in these issues, without distancing myself from the very students who I want to engage with as students and potential scholars on issues of race, class, ethnicity and gender.

4) Class Itself

a. Format

The course itself attracts students because of its title, “Race and Class in Los Angeles.” For beginning students who want to understand the very city in which their undergraduate education is taking place, and the social issues it confronts, this course is an excellent primer. The course currently has 105 students and is taught in a lecture format, 80 minutes long twice a week. In addition, I have two teaching assistants from the Ph.D. student population of American Studies and Ethnicity. Lata Murti teaches two sections and is herself studying the racial constructions of immigrants from India in southern California as they negotiate an ethnic terrain increasingly shaped by Latinos. Karen Yonemoto also teaches two sections, and her research concentrates on the transition of pan-Asian congregations in Los Angeles into multicultural ones attempting to keep Asian traditions while increasingly welcoming others as congregants.

SLIDE 6: RACE IN RELATION

The single most important concept we discuss in this course is the concept of race, moving students from thinking about it in biological terms to understanding the ways in which social scientists now discuss the social construction of race. But race is not a concept that can be discussed in isolation of other important social categories. So in this course we specifically link the concept of race to how it is related to major political identities in Los Angeles, to economic issues, to gender constructions, and to other social dynamics in the city. We discuss these concepts as they have developed historically in Los Angeles, as well as in the contemporary moment. As a historian, I tend to linger more than most in the past; when my colleague sociologist Leland Saito teaches the course, he tends to spend more time in the contemporary moment.

SLIDE 7: THEORIES

The theories we cover would be familiar to any urban theorist, and begin with how we actually study the development of urban regions. As I mentioned before, the social construction of race is probably the most difficult concept for them to understand, not in theory but actually in its practical application to modern social science. We give a brief history of eugenics, which usually convinces them that race is not a significant biological category; but what is much harder is to move away from strict racial categories and help them understand that the categories they use to understand race are constructed through the historical moment they live in. When race is placed next to power, they learn that racial difference has real material consequences and is not simply a reflection of individual prejudice or desire. Finally, race itself has usually worked in relation to economic inequality, and it is sometimes jarring for them to understand that their own privileged positions, for some of them, may be a result of actual racial advantage passed on through generations by the wealth that allowed some to invest in homes or businesses in well-off communities while others were barred.

SLIDE 8: TOPICS

SLIDE 9: REQUIRED TEXTS

b. Boyle Heights as focus

One example of the sort of data that I ask students to analyze is this information on the population diversity of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles from 1940 to 1990. I'm currently writing a book about racial diversity in this neighborhood over time, and I want

them to realize that one must use multiple approaches and theories to understand neighborhood change.

SLIDES 10-16: BOYLE HEIGHTS DATA

5) The Students

a. Survey of Class

One aspect of the challenge of teaching general education courses, particularly for those of us farther and farther removed from the ages of most of today's freshmen, is to understand the social and historical context that these students have for understanding concepts such as race and ethnicity. Almost all of the students in the classroom were born during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, so for them civil rights and segregation laws are part of the distant past. One way I have found to get to know them and work with the knowledge they bring to the classroom is by asking them to fill out a "Personal Information Inventory"—or what social scientists would call a survey—on the very first day of class. Their answers allow for much discussion regarding the saliency of race and class for their generation, as well as giving me a gauge of what they know about Los Angeles.

SLIDES 17-20: CLASS SURVEY

6) Challenges of Course

a. Beyond Student Identities

Even with knowing as much as one can about the actual students you are lecturing to, there are still many challenges that one faces in getting to know this generation of students. Clearly the meaning behind the ways in which they describe themselves are nuanced and are not simple reflections of their upbringings or social backgrounds. It is as likely to find major disagreements between two students who identify themselves as black or Latino, as it is between students of completely different backgrounds. But I also find it important to let them know that they live in a particular historical moment in which their attitudes towards race, class and other forms of identity are shaped historical and contemporary factors. This is more than telling them that it was bad in the past. In describing the racial category “multiracial” for example, I make it clear that as late as 15 years ago, those that used that category for racial classification would not have done so. The very category “multiracial” is a social construction of our time, which has to do with culture and politics much more than with biology and miscegenation.

It is also critical to me that they understand that race is not simply an “ethnic choice” but something deeply rooted in the social and economic framework of the United States. Their generation has a tendency to think that racial background is simply what one calls oneself for government or college forms or the decennial census. When we discuss the category of “whiteness,” for example, I am clear about how that category has power in society. European immigrants at the turn of the century were not considered “white,” but over time they were brought into the powerful tent of whiteness through law and custom. And when the housing practices of the federal government made it easier for white ethnics to buy property in white suburbs by penalizing potential minority homebuyers and mixed racial communities in the city, this custom became embedded in

economic privilege. The economic advantage given to some parents or grandparents to buy homes where they wanted would be the single most important resource of accumulated wealth passed down to their generation. Indeed, many parents today use their home equity, if they have been fortunate enough to possess any, to finance the students' very education at USC. In this way, racial privilege is passed on to them, without them even thinking about it.

b. Transforming Previous "Knowledge"

They enter college believing they know what race is and how it operates in society, no matter what political perspective they come from. I think part of our job in general education is to examine where this knowledge comes from, to question its truthfulness, and to show alternative ways of knowing that come from innovative social theory and methodology. What they know should be valued, but should not be accepted uncritically. This is important for both majority and minority students, since unexamined knowledge about race runs rampant in every community.

Moreover, they need to confront the fact that not every group or society thinks about race in the same way that they do. I like to tell a story that I got from another group of students I was teaching in 2000, when that year's census was disseminated and families were asked to fill them out. I was teaching Latino history, and I asked all of my students—34 of 35 were Latino—to report back to me exactly how their families had filled out the forms. The typical story that came back is that they or one of their siblings filled out the forms for the family as a whole, asking each member the specific individual

questions. In particular, they reported that they would ask the mother, “What race are you?” and she might reply “white.” The father would answer the same question with the answer, “Mexican.” Then the children might answer “mixed race” or “Indian” based on their own self-identity. So, in the end, in one family, every single member checked off a different racial answer, even though they all came from one “racial stock.” The point is not that these families were purposefully making it hard for every social scientists to use the census data; it is that families from Latin America had a much more fluid notion of race than most in the United States, and that this sort of fluidity was a result of the comfortability with racial mixture south of our borders.

c. Creating Active Learning

More than anything else in class, I try to promote an environment of active learning where they become investigators of social problems. To do this is difficult in the lecture format, but I often turn to them to discuss issues and debate them, even with over 100 students in class. Luckily, they are accustomed to shows like Oprah Winfrey or Phil Donahue in which the audience participates. Yet, they must be reminded that talking about race and class is not the same as analyzing it, and they must be encouraged to incorporate the insights of the readings and the lectures into the way they discuss race and class in the context of this course. I want to challenge them to defend their positions, but also to be open to new ways of looking at the social world.

My teaching assistants told me that a big smile came over my face when I had the opportunity to prepare them for the midterm examination last week. It is this part of the

course I enjoy so much, when their competitive juices start to flow—or simply fear of failure—in preparation for being graded. I enjoy it not because I like to stand in judgment, but because I know that is the part of the course in which they must become active learners, thinking creatively about what they have been reading in their textbooks and hearing in class lectures. They must now apply that knowledge. It is time for them to work to learn, and for me to slow down and not work so hard to teach. I feel a dialogue for the first time in class, one that hopefully continues until the end of the semester. While some may go back into their slumber until the final, I know that I've caught the attention of some when I return their questions with questions, asking them to fill out for each other the contours of the course.

7) Conclusion: Are Armenians white?

This past week I received an email from one in my class that showed me that some of my explanations had gotten through. Moreover, this student was beginning to incorporate some of the classroom insights into the way he was thinking about race. This student wrote that he had missed a lecture, but was studying from the notes of one of his classmates. “One portion I specifically missed was your topic on race and immigration law. According to notes from one of my classmates, in 1909 Armenians were deemed white. Is this true? How did this happen? And why?” What this student was referring to was a U.S. Supreme Court decision which allowed Armenian immigrants to the United States to naturalize and become U.S. citizens at a time when naturalization was only open to immigrants deemed white and to the freed slaves. A decade later, in the *Ozawa* and

Third cases, both Japanese and Indian immigrants would be deemed non-white and ineligible for naturalization. So, indeed, Armenians had been ruled white, and this had major consequences for their incorporation into American life.

But it was this student's explanation for his question that most intrigued me. "I am asking you these questions because as an Armenian-American, I don't see myself as white nor do I categorize myself that way. Obviously this highlights social construction and how racial categorizations don't always map on to the way people experience race in the United States." This insight, that law designed to allow some to become U.S. citizens and others to be denied that right on the basis of race, had implications despite individual desires was a critical base of knowledge that this student had gotten. The fact that it forced him to think about his own self-identity, and map that next to the way in which the government had determined his racial background, made for a perfect teaching moment. This exchange reminded me of the joy I get from teaching, opening up worlds of inquiry to students that are not separated from their own worlds, but can connect them with the worlds of scholarship and theory that I know. It reminds me of the very best that general education in "liberal education" can provide, creating informed citizens from the multitude of experiences and backgrounds we see in the classroom.