

To: UGC
From: Paul Engelking
Multicultural review—possible outcomes and issues.

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For the purposes of UGC responsibilities, policy formation and program oversight, the experience we gain from the examination of a body of multicultural courses is more important than the examination of any one particular course.

Looking ahead at the overall product of this review, now that we have completed a significant slice of our review, I started jotting down some questions that might be addressed by a report. Here are some issues that have arisen here, or elsewhere, that we might address.

Information on Multicultural Courses—For more than half of the syllabi that were reviewed, over half of the reviewers did not find a clear explanation of why the course satisfied multicultural requirements. Should the MC description be required for the syllabus and on-line extended course description, as was done for group satisfying courses?

Structure of courses—How much should this requirement parallel other general education requirements?

What is the role of 400/500 level courses?

Approval process—Should the approval of the multicultural courses be a responsibility of the ICGER Committee (Inter-College General Education Review Committee)? Should that committee or its charge be modified?

Topics courses—are they consistent with original intent and approval?
Can they be made to be consistent with original multicultural goals? Retain consistency?

Boundaries of areas—

The American Cultures group names specific groups, two or more of which should be compared in class. Should these be enlarged to include others?

Should we consider cultural relationships within other North American countries?
“American Cultures” is itself considered improper terminology by some when referring to just “U.S. cultures.” Could this be “North American Cultures,” including comparative cultural experiences in Canadian, Mexican, and Central American nations? (e.g. French Canadian, Mayan, ...).

The groups named in American Cultures transcend national boundaries by classification (e.g. North American native peoples in U.S. and Canada: Eskimo, Sioux, Indios, ...) or mobility (Chicano, Caribbean). How much “over the border” material should be considered as reflecting “American Cultures.”

Identity Pluralism and Tolerance Has been found to have some courses on the biology of humans. Should origins of genetic differences be included as a determinant of the construction of cultures? The basis for intolerance? If so, how? Conditions where it may be acceptable?

“Archeology of pots” as a cultural determinant seems to be a reach for many reviewers. What would make archeology multicultural under our definitions?

The conjunction “and” is being interpreted as “or” in the first sentence of the definition (“...construction”...emergence...*and* effects...) Should be made explicitly “or.”

International Cultures has boundary issues, too: how far from the U.S. should the ideas be?

International Studies has raised this issue: Should we give credit for immersion experience in foreign cultures? How foreign? Canada? Mexico? England, Scotland? Australia? Continental Europe?

We have seen some classes follow an idea or method of expression across cultural boundaries. Should there be a broader category of “trans-nationalism,” “trans-culturalism” (poor neo-syllogism), or “globalization” (probably even worse—but we are stuck with it!)? We will get more “globalization” courses in the future—what to do?

More...?

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Teaching the multicultural requirement

by Julia Lesage

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I teach at the University of Oregon, where all undergraduates must take at least three credit hours in a course that focuses on race, gender, or non-European cultures. Here it's called the race/gender requirement; on other campuses it's called the multicultural requirement. Women's studies and ethnic studies faculty fought for this institutional change. Yet their victory has ironically given that faculty a large added task since this is the group of people who most conscientiously implement the new university-wide requirement.

As someone who has taught feminist film criticism for over twenty years, I had come to enjoy teaching classes that functioned like women's consciousness raising groups as well as being sites for imparting information and teaching analytic skills. It was a shock to walk into my first feminist film criticism class after the race/gender requirement had been enacted and find that I now had to teach a divided student population — those committed to the area of study and accepting some of its basic propositions (e.g., women are an oppressed group) and those who were taking the course just to fulfill the graduation requirement. In other words, in schools that have enacted similar multicultural/gender "basic education" course requirements, the women's studies and ethnic studies courses have a good number of students, often white men, who come in with a begrudging attitude.

In many ways, I also have a begrudging attitude in dealing with this changed student clientele for feminist criticism classes that were formerly a joy to teach. The courses had been intellectually stimulating because, often with mainly women students in the class, we could work at an advanced level of conceptualization relatively quickly. Student writing and research was often publishable or the embryo of a thesis or dissertation. Now the classes seem to begin and stay at the most rudimentary level of intellectual discourse. I understand that my pleasure had also derived from the teacher's and students' shared oppositional stance to hegemonic social structures, in this case, to patriarchal ones. Now the feminist film criticism class still has an oppositional curriculum and some students who share that stance emotionally and intellectually, but it also has in it other students who defend the status quo.

As a teacher, I have a faith that the students who take a class in feminist criticism want to study gender formation, but because some of the students take such a class now primarily to satisfy a general education graduation requirement, it is often hard to move classroom discussion beyond the stage where everyone has to deal with the defensive attitudes of the few. Furthermore, the anger that I feel at women's oppression, theorized and detailed by the curriculum in an explicitly feminist course, sometimes becomes focused on those students whom I perceive as "recalcitrant." Over and over in women's studies classes, one male student can get a large group of women to attend to him for a prolonged period of time, just by his refusing to "get the point" As the feminist film criticism class has become one of the courses that meets the university's race/gender requirement, the class itself now contains and perhaps by its very subject matter heightens gender tensions common in society at large.

To continue the story about our local curricular changes, which may apply to others' experiences as well, my department, a telecommunications and film department, dutifully added a "race" course to the curriculum when asked to do so. At first, "Race and Representation" was taught as a national cinema course on African cinema or Latin American cinema, sometimes by a token instructor of color hired specifically to teach that course.

While making the videotape, IN PLAIN ENGLISH (see ad on p. 19), I became more aware of the educational needs of students of color. All of the students of color whom I interviewed had a profound analysis of institutional racism in higher education. Currently these students are leading a movement to have the university add another course to the current race/gender general education requirement, one that would be about contemporary U.S. race relations, the historical roots of U.S. racial discrimination, or the experiences of peoples of color in this country. Responding to their demands to have more courses that deal with the structural aspects of race in the United States, I decided to try to teach Race and Representation as a course with a broad scope, one that could serve both majors and non-majors, one that might interest both students of color and undergraduates who would be fulfilling their general education requirement through a "film" course.

What follows is a course file. The course draws 50 to 100 students, and it may become larger. It does not have a film rental budget, so I teach it using tapes from our collection, material I have taped off television, or tapes that I rent. The reading is put on reserve.

My basic presupposition is that such a course has to be entertaining, offering what Horace called *utile dulce*, sweet learning (I will explain more about this principle below). The course may evoke anger at racism or sexism but it should not fall into simple denunciatory rhetoric. Rather it should constantly raise issues about viewing pleasure and the variety of spectators' responses. It should have enough curricular material to teach from so that the students of color in the classroom will not have to teach others or represent their race.

Here is how the syllabus addresses the issue of classroom climate:

"While all the class is expected to partake of a general anti-racist attitude, the students — and the readings — will have different approaches to analyzing different film and television texts, so it is important to learn from each other in class discussion. Neither I nor any of you is an authority on all the ethnic minority groups in the United States or on all the possibilities of mixed-race experience. However, just as women and gay people have a more direct understanding and lifelong experience of sexism, so too people of color in the class will have had a more direct experience of and understanding of racism. At any given moment, they may or may not wish to make that experience a part of class discussion; the choice will be up to the individual student. However, the students of color should not feel that they have the burden of 'educating' everyone else. There will be enough visual and written material presented in the class for everyone to learn something about race and representation. Making a congenial atmosphere in which to learn is something that we must collectively establish each time we meet."

In fact, it turned out that the members of the class generally respected each others' opinions. However, I had to firmly direct discussions so that racist opinions, when expressed, were contextualized and explicitly dealt with. As a teacher, the tension I felt teaching a polarized student body never disappeared, but it seemed much diminished at the points when the students had just seen a film and had a lot to talk about. It is from this perspective that I recommend to others who teach such a course

to teach more from film and television texts than from written ones. The entertainment value of features, the quick wit of ads, and the argumentative structure of well-made documentaries provided a momentum and a common, recent viewing experience that this class needed.

In its structure, the course began with a consideration of entertainment television, then feature films, and then documentaries and news. We looked at an episode of the *COSBY SHOW* and watched clips from music television with black performers. We also saw Marlon Riggs' documentary about the history of blacks on prime time U.S. television, *COLOR ADJUSTMENT*. When I teach the course again, I will extend this unit and teach *PURPLE RAIN*, *LA BAMBA* or *CROSSOVER DREAMS* or *THE MAMBO KINGS*, material by Whoopie Goldberg, *TRUTH OR DARE*, and more music video with women of color. Many issues about gender, crossover, family, comedy and buffoonery are raised by television and by music-oriented feature films. One of my goals in teaching television at the beginning of the course was to get students to observe and analyze the complex relation between knowing that what they are seeing is racist or sexist and enjoying it anyway. As it turned out, however, my teaching the complexity of spectatorship was limited. It consisted of a few instances of having students write down and compare their viewing responses.

The most popular section of the course came from showing feature films and teaching simple aesthetic principles which could be applied to film viewing in general. *DO THE RIGHT THING* provides a fruitful discussion of character typeage and color symbolism. *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* and *POWWOW HIGHWAY* both critique heroism and the role of the glamorous male as the central character. The former film is useful as an example of the "reporter film" in which an outsider, a white middleclass investigator, enters into the "Third World" and provides a point of identification for the spectator.

POWWOW HIGHWAY (Jonathan Wacks, 1988) is a low budget comedy which is a loose adaptation of the David Seals novel by the same name. It gives students an exposure to some Native American worldviews through the vehicle of a buddy film, in the road movie genre. Its main character, played by A. Martinez, has rejected many native traditions while living on the reservation and working actively for Indian rights. His comic sidekick, played by Native American actor Gary Farmer, seems childlike but pursues his vision quest to move into full adulthood. The film ingeniously uses natural western locales and intertextual references to the film genre of the western to satirize and reevaluate notions of the warrior and heroism.

DIM SUM (Wayne Wang, 1985), a lyrical film about a Chinese American family, dwells upon the small quiet moments in family life, especially in a mother-daughter relationship. It offers an opportunity to teach generic aspects of domestic melodrama and visual style, especially a compositional aesthetic sensitive to negative space.

What turned out to be most successful in this unit was the inclusion of feature films about/from all the major racial groups in the United States. Ironically, although some students of color privately expressed gratitude at not being put in the role of exemplars, most wanted to see films in class that were exemplars of their ethnic group's experience. I inferred this from classroom discussion and student writing, where the larger cultural themes raised by the film were what the students wanted to talk about most — the mixture of the traditional and the contemporary in Native American communities; police brutality against African Americans; issues in the Latino and Asian American communities of maintaining or losing one's language of origin; and in the Asian American community to claim an American identity as opposed to an Asian one (Kim 1987). Furthermore, the international students in the class were eager to see works by all the U.S. ethnic groups — Chicano, Native American, Asian American, and African American — since they often had experienced racism in the United States but had only seen media from a mainstream cultural perspective.

Teaching exemplary works, the positive images approach, has advantages but also severe limitations. However, the other issue I faced in film selection was that of representativeness, that is, the need to include works about and from each of the major racial categories in the United States. Students whom I interviewed for IN PLAIN ENGLISH specifically wanted curricular material about their racial group to be taught in a wide range of classes and not just in ethnic studies classes. They objected to the way that liberal teachers in the social sciences and humanities would give "one lecture on slavery or one day devoted to racism" — that day covering the experiences of all the ethnic groups except "white," the coverage of which took up 95% of the course.

Finally, cramming too much into ten weeks, I concluded with a section on documentary. I contrasted reportage and the news, in its form and as an institution, to the works and institutional position of independent media makers in the United States. For economic reasons, most media makers of color are independent producers, and for political reasons, many if not most are committed to making oppositional work. I presented and critiqued educational film style, PBS-documentary style, and the news format. Most effective here were contrasts drawn between Alan Parker's depiction of Japanese American WW2 internment in the feature, COME SEE THE PARADISE, Rea Tajiri's experimental documentary, HISTORY AND MEMORY, and Lise Yasui's FAMILY GATHERING. (In the future I would do a larger topic on films about the internment and include MITSUYE AND NELLIE, a film about a Japanese American and a Chinese American poet, made by Allie Light) Finally, I showed my own tape, IN PLAIN ENGLISH, and discussed the genesis and life of a documentary video made within the context of local struggles for institutional change.

Many good readings exist on this topic, and in fact they led to the course's organization. However, it became clear to me that the students only crammed the readings to write an exam, and that most of their learning came from a direct experience of and consequent analysis of media just seen in class. Of the reading that was "digested," only the most directive and denunciatory essays were remembered and written about with either passion or clarity. In this area, the course completely failed to achieve one of the goals set out in the syllabus, which I cite here:

"Writings by film scholars of color will be part of our readings. The criticism read will be analyzed both for its point of view and as a type of criticism that you yourselves may want to read more of or to write. Such criticism varies from reviews in non-film newspapers and magazines to reviews in film journals to analytic articles about the larger issues of race and representation or political reflections on media and society. The writers do not all agree nor write on the same level of complexity. We will be looking at what arguments they present and how they back up their points."

In other words, the course effectively taught students something about film and television but it taught them little about film criticism. I attribute this to the elementary level of the course and its large size as well as to the syllabus' over-ambitious scope.

Because I am increasingly dissatisfied with the kind of learning that comes from doing reading on reserve (since teachers can no longer rely on course packets made available to students at copy stores), I am struggling with a way to test students and to teach them critical writing skills. In particular, they need good material on videotape to study and write about. The easiest topic to assign and the easiest for students to research, of course, is "Racism in (a Hollywood film)", since they can rent such films on videotape. However, that assignment does not achieve what I consider a major goal. I want students to study the work of independent film/ videomakers of color. Students need to have the work available for repeated viewing so they can analyze it in depth.

But with a no budget course in a school system facing 12% cutbacks in state support, the most desirable goal seems hardest to achieve.

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