Multiculturalism in the Liberal Arts Classroom
A Talk by Gretchen Gerzina, June 1, 1995

Gretchen Gerzina received the Ph.D. from Stanford in 1984 and was assistant director of CTL in 1984-85. After leaving Stanford she taught at the State University of New York at Albany and Skidmore College and was a fellow of the Humanities Council at Princeton, where she worked with Toni Morrison on her course American Africanism. Currently she is associate professor of English and Director of Teaching and Faculty Development at Vassar College.

Her biography of Carrington, British painter and Bloomsbury figure, has been re-released in paperback to coincide with the 1995 film Carrington, with Emma Thompson in the title role. Her most recently published work is Black London: Life Before Emancipation. She has completed a study of black characters in 18th-century British novels, Racial Fictions, and is working on a memoir of her parents’ interracial marriage, using family diaries dating back to 1868.

In the first part of her talk, sponsored by CTL, Gretchen described what it is like for a student or faculty member to be a racial or ethnic representative on a predominantly white campus. Excerpts from her presentation follow.

It is a common complaint among students of color that they have been admitted to their particular institutions to give white students a multicultural experience. They sense they are expected to testify about their backgrounds, integrate lunch tables, participate in ethnic activities open to the general campus, and to speak up in the classroom whenever issues involving race or ethnicity come up.

Several years ago I was approached by a large university which had a line earmarked for minority faculty, field open. The idea was to attract and hire people in a variety of disciplines, regardless of specialty. I had a job I liked but thought it was worth investigating. I went and gave a paper on black characters in the novels of William Thackeray, something no one else was working on at the time. The talk was, I thought, articulate and well-researched, and I felt quite comfortable in the question-and-answer session which followed. Dinner too was relaxed and chatty.

I did not get the job, which was given to someone not yet done with her Ph.D. from a less prestigious university, and with no publications or teaching experience. After a time I found someone to tell me why. This is why I was not hired: I was not dark enough. (“She’s no blacker than I am,” one white woman on the search committee said.) I didn’t talk right (no trace of an identifiable accent). I went to Stanford for my doctorate (a private instead of a public university, not downtrodden enough). My field wasn’t ethnic enough. In short, they decided, I wasn’t really black. The woman they hired left after three years. In that time she was expected to advise all students of color, teach only courses in African-American literature even though her field was American Literature as a whole, give papers and publish in African-American literature (as opposed to, say, Emerson or Faulkner), and serve on every committee requiring a minority presence. Her job was to provide a multicultural experience for students and faculty, but in reality her job was to be a monocultural representative.

Now the fact is that every classroom, every faculty member, and every student is participating in multiculturalism, despite the discipline or course material, despite the fact that everyone in the room may be white. Race is now widely recognized as a social construct with no biological definition. A number of social and cultural theorists have begun writing on whiteness too as a social construct, one which depends upon the existence of other so-called races and ethnicities for its very definition. It is not a neutral territory, not a blank slate upon which all else gets inscribed. Neither is it the starting point from which all else diverges. Race therefore does not refer only to people of color but is a relational category. Whites are white only because other people are not white. People of color are colored because other people are not. To drive this home I often refer to my white students as colorless or people of no color.

Models of Multiculturalism

After teaching in a smaller institution, one where everyone knows nearly everyone else, and the process of public testimony by students and others is either redundant or tremendously difficult, I see the importance of encouraging students and faculty to acknowledge the innate multicultural aspects of the teaching and learning enterprises. The problem is that many faculty believe that these are peripheral issues, and that in order to address them in the curriculum something else has to be sacrificed, while some students resist being forced to sit through material

INSIDE Highlights of Faculty/TA Conference on Teaching Assistant Training
Keynote Address by Lee Shulman
Training TAs in Departments

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that doesn’t reflect their own lives. Because of this resistance a number of schools have institutionalized multiculturalism, working under one of three common models.

One, the Stanford model, involves taking the academic course required of all students and building into it the representation that has been lacking. The problem most commonly articulated in relation to such a modified syllabus is, can we possibly fit everything in? What do we have to take out to make room for texts by “others”? What we might call the Hampshire College model does not designate any particular course as the location of multiculturalism but requires students to include a Third World component in one of the three divisions of work they undertake. An unwritten rule at Hampshire is that all courses, including those in biology, chemistry, and math, address in some way the issue of multiculturalism.

The third is really no model at all, despite its ubiquity; it means making multiculturalism available to all through funding, lectures, courses, tenure lines, admissions, and so on, but neither students nor faculty are required to participate. It often fails because heightened administrative commitment is coupled with a reluctance to impose it from the top.

Those of us who have chugged along with these difficult, stodgy, and often ineffective models for ten years or so are aware that the issue will not go away, that America is a mosaic, a stir-fry, a rainbow—or any other of the artistic, culinary, and atmospheric terms used to describe wholeness in difference.

The current situation, as I see it, is the result of two conditions that are unfortunately in opposition: a proliferation of cultural needs, desires and hungers which are seen as appropriately provided by academic institutions; and a necessity to make cutbacks in programs, courses and social activities necessitated by very real financial constraints which are likely to worsen during the course of our careers. This means that as people wanting formal programs grow, the competition for the resources to fund them will diminish. The likely result is an increasingly monocultural fragmentation at the institutional level.

Opponents of multiculturalism ask whether we can afford such fragmentation at a time when the country so desperately needs a commonality of vision, whether we can afford to learn a meaningless smattering of “other” cultures when our “own” is in such need of clarification and definition. This view, in my opinion, simply perpetuates the notion of an idyllic time when we were all Americans together, despite our differences. What multiculturalism does, at its best, is enable us to recognize those differences and explore through fact and imagination the histories of others so that we can put our own alongside theirs, for better or worse.

Multiculturalism in the Classroom

The question of where to put the site of this knowledge is harder to answer. At the institutional level it needs to be validated as a worthwhile and an affordable entity. It needs to be recognized here so that it can be carried forward into all the other institutions that students will carry themselves to after graduation, to their neighborhoods and into their children’s lives, for the pluralism of America is a fact of life. At the curricular level it also needs to be supported by faculty and administrators and students alike, and it must be available to all, equally. I gave a course on Virginia Woolf in the fall, and only one male student took it. The course carried a woman’s name, and one so closely associated with women’s studies that it seemed to carry a “women only” flag. In fact I viewed it, as did the women in the room, as a course on an important modern writer.

The real level of support, and the real test, of multiculturalism comes in the classroom, long after students have enrolled in courses approved by departments. You are, or will be, the front line. Even in courses where issues of multiculturalism are not on the syllabus or in the curriculum those issues will still exist in the form of that audience in front of you or that group of co-learners (depending upon your pedagogical style) around you. Remember, a recognition of difference is not a cause for anxiety. The rules are few but real. They are: Don’t talk down to anybody. Don’t ask anybody to represent anyone else. Notice if your syllabus or your analogies are only about you. Don’t be afraid to challenge students on their knowledge; you’re the teacher. Don’t make assumptions about class, learning style, preparation or background of your students based on how they look or act. Understand that college students are often still adolescents, in the greatest need of cultural and moral validation of any group of people.

Finally, recognize that what they bring to you, or the college or university, is a sense of cultural dislocation, no matter who they are. Colleges are artificial living environments, and they increasingly find themselves required or morally obligated to make up deficiencies in students’ backgrounds, both academically and socially. For many students this may be the only time this happens in their lives, and the results are going to show up not too far down the line in terms of legislation, demographics, and economics. You are for them the model of the educated individuals who have chosen to make a life out of the life of the mind. The material, whatever its content, will be associated with you, and they need to see that you care—a lot—about it and about them. Your students will be in need of knowledge, but also of challenges and vision. But you are also in need of what they can give you in the form of feedback and perspective about your field and yourself. Multiculturalism allows you and your students to, in E. M. Forster’s often-quoted phrase, “only connect.”

Issues of Speaking of Teaching on related topics:
Winter 95  Results of CTL’s TA Survey
Fall 94  Gender Issues in Teaching
Winter 94  Teaching with Case Studies

See also:
TA Talk, Spring 1990,  TAing in a Multicultural University
In May 1995, CTL sponsored a Faculty/TA Conference on Teaching Assistant Training that brought together faculty members and teaching assistants from virtually every department in the University to share experiences, discuss strategies, and develop resources for improving the way teaching assistants are prepared for the classroom and supported as they develop their pedagogical skills.

A central theme of the conference was that much of the work of TA training is discipline-specific and must be carried out within the departments themselves. To this end, keynote speaker Lee Shulman, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education, stressed the importance of developing a true “culture of teaching” at research-oriented institutions such as Stanford. In addition, faculty members and teaching assistants from a number of departments reported on specific approaches that they had found effective in preparing TAs for their classroom responsibilities.

The Faculty/TA Conference proved to be so successful that CTL plans to conduct a similar event annually. Convening near the end of the school year, faculty and TAs from departments throughout the University will be able to share resources and experiences, assess their accomplishments, and set goals for the coming year. Together with other CTL programs, and with the developing work of departmental faculty and administrators, the “Faculty/TA Conference on Teaching Assistant Training” will soon become an integral part of CTL’s ongoing efforts to keep Stanford in the forefront of teaching assistant training efforts nationwide.

Teaching the Discipline: The Pedagogy of Substance

Excerpts from the Keynote Address by Lee Shulman

A good teacher isn’t just someone who has mastered a set of teaching tricks, it’s not just process. And it’s not just someone who has a deep knowledge of the subject matter. Neither of those is sufficient. What we see in great teaching is the masterful intersection of the two: someone who really understands the subject deeply and understands how exquisitely complex it is to make your knowledge accessible to the knowing processes of those who do not yet understand.

Learning begins indirectly in courses as undergraduates and graduate students, as students observe good teachers and begin to internalize effective teaching strategies. Often this boils down to what worked with them. We have begun to realize that teacher education goes on in the schools of arts and sciences, more than in schools of education. This is where students are getting their metaphors, their examples, their ways of thinking about what Hamlet represents. Undergraduate arts and sciences education is, in its own way, one of the most successful examples of teacher education ever documented.

Only when they become graduate students and are asked to take charge of discussion and lab sections, to grade papers and examinations, and in some departments to plan and teach the whole course, does the formal training come in. If we don’t approach their training in a systematic way, that is, with attention to the process of how one becomes an effective teacher, we are missing a chance to make them significantly better teachers, for many college and university teachers were assistant teachers in graduate school.

Discipline-specific Training

What is the best way to train teachers? When researchers look at teaching analytically they find a combination of the importance of understanding the subject matter, conceiving of how it is represented in the heads of students, and then being able to generate representations of your own as a teacher that will be a bridge between the subject matter and the students.

Departments are the ideal site for graduate students to learn how to teach the knowledge they have mastered. We have learned this from studying how learning takes place, and realizing that there is little broad transfer and generalizability from one domain to another. Think about what students do to learn something like physics and mathematics as opposed to what they do when studying literature or history. Or take the idea of guided practice, which is the basis of skills-related aspects of learning. Teaching subject matter in math involves dividing the subject matter into discrete units such as problem sets.

But what kind of guided practice do you give when you’re not talking about a field that breaks up into discrete units but instead calls for understanding and appreciating literature? The study of history is another example of a discipline filled with narration, exposition, and extended pieces of text where the notion of guided practice makes much less sense. Such different enterprises demand very different instructional models.

To train teachers, you need to give them a substantial number of subject-specific examples and analyses, and lots of practice. The first way you break down their training is into general and specific knowledge. Then you have to consider how they acquire both content knowledge and pedagogical approaches for each specific discipline.

One way to go about meeting these two kinds of needs are to get teachers together around specific content domains, themes, or processes. They then examine alternative ways of teaching the same ideas. By comparing approaches and strategies on a case basis, you can explore in depth both the substantive ideas and how to get them across.

Case Studies

There are core ideas that are particularly challenging to teach and learn in each discipline, and all teachers, not just beginning ones, must improve their teaching of these
core ideas. That’s why I’m an evangelist when it comes to recommending the use of case studies in preparing teachers. When you use real teaching cases you are always dealing with the particular. The case includes information about the subject matter, the curriculum, the class, even the section. If it doesn’t have that kind of texture, it’s more like a riddle than a case.

Take the case in which one teacher narrates the process of her teaching a particular concept. A good case study will enable users to generate solutions to problems. Why are these concepts so critical? Why are they so hard for many students to grasp? What kinds of representations clarify these ideas and what are their limitations? What analogies enabled students to grasp the concepts? What didn’t work?

Other content-specific examples include: How do you explain the classification of living things as a prelude to taxonomies and phyla? How do you help students grasp the concept of a paradigm in science and how they might discern it? If I’m having difficulty teaching differential equations or irregular verb forms or the subjunctive or getting students to understand advanced philosophical concepts, I don’t want to hear generalizations about what’s behind each of these subjects. I want some good cases that describe how they can be taught.

A well-crafted case has drama and a narrative quality. We’ve learned that narrative quality is often more compelling than an expository presentation of the same ideas. Cases also tend to lend themselves to questions of action. They combine general and theoretical notions with questions about what can be done in this particular situation and why. (See “Teaching with Case Studies,” Speaking of Teaching, Winter 1994.)

Training Seminars

Closely related is the practice of organizing ongoing seminars among teachers in the same discipline, regular meetings in which pedagogy dominates the discussion. This is an excellent way to support teachers in the study of those concepts, ideas, and skills that they are responsible for teaching.

One way to conduct these training seminars is to have a particular teacher take responsibility for presenting a case of teaching and learning. It would be similar to case conferences held in teaching hospitals. Rather than second-guessing previous solutions, seminar leaders would focus on what problem teachers repeatedly had in imparting some skill or concept, and how they did it differently to remedy that difficulty. A teacher might say, “I’m going to talk about a series of things I did to remedy that problem and the evidence I have that more students improved in that area.”

One thing we’ve learned as researchers going into classrooms and working by the case study approach is that the unit of instruction is not the lesson or lecture, what you do in one class session. That is just a piece of something larger. The better we get as teachers, the more we think about how our lessons hang together. In fact when planning we think in large chunks first, and only then begin to decompose them into individual lessons.

Another reason case studies work is that they offer the teacher some good examples of what worked. When those teaching the same courses get together, they begin to add to this body of what I call “pedagogical content knowledge.” After a group has listened to a particular case report, someone is bound to say, “That reminds me of my class yesterday,” and the discussion takes off from there. Dealing in particular examples invariably results in someone narrating situations that are different in some ways, similar in others. The result is everyone present has new strategies to try out. All it takes is the time to listen to some stories, which effectively become part of an emerging case literature that stays in the memory.
History

History is a department proud of its deep commitment to teaching and to nurturing graduate student teaching. Before 1990 there was little attempt to structure the way students learned how to teach in the discipline, however; it was assumed they would pick it up simply by teaching. History faculty began to revisit these assumptions and their program in a major review of the undergraduate curriculum in 1989-90, which included studies of TA preparation and the outcomes of courses they offered. Finding that undergraduates tended to stay away from courses offered by graduate students, no matter how carefully prepared the syllabus and course material, the history department encouraged graduate students to teach an introductory seminar that majors were required to take.

Graduate students had already acknowledged the need to prepare themselves for assistantships and had organized a one-day workshop for beginning TAs. They were spurred by the knowledge that teaching experience and the ability to articulate that experience and one’s teaching goals were essential if they expected to succeed on the job market. The department built on these graduate student initiatives by instituting a three-year cycle of pedagogy training. Although this is continually being revised, the basic steps are as follows:

1. In spring quarter of their first year, before they begin teaching, most doctoral students take a course on the philosophical and methodological issues of teaching history. The course includes required readings but no written project or practicum.

2. In fall of the second year, as they begin to prepare for teaching, graduate students attend a daylong workshop, coordinated by veteran TAs and dealing primarily with the practical side of teaching. Throughout the year, coordinators of the TA workshop organize brown-bag lunches with faculty, members of CTL, and other TAs to discuss matters of teaching.

3. In winter quarter of the third year (there is some variation because of the pressures of drawing on the benefits pool for tuition), history TAs take a seminar in teaching their own course; this results in a syllabus and a course proposal for one of the introductory seminars.

To reflect the preparation history TAs now receive, the department is planning to offer a certificate in teaching. It will be awarded to students who finish the three-year cycle of training and teach the required number of courses.

—Richard Roberts

Human Biology

“Hum Bio”—or Human Biology—has created a weekend orientation just before the beginning of fall quarter for its eight course assistants or “CAs.” Planned and run by the two head CAs (one from the biology core, or A side, one from the humanities or B side), the orienta-
Center for Teaching and Learning
TEACHING ASSISTANT TRAINING PROGRAM

Fall Quarter 1995

Nov 16  CTL PEDAGOGY WORKSHOP SERIES  12 noon to 1 pm
“Grading and Evaluation Issues”; Durand Bldg, Rm 450

Nov 30  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Doug Osheroff, Physics: “Getting Inside Your Students’ Heads”
Durand Bldg, Rm 450

Winter Quarter 1996

Jan 11  WINTER QUARTER ORIENTATION  12 noon to 1 pm
Mitchell Bldg, Hartley Conference Center

Jan 25  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Sanford Dornbush, Sociology: “Relating To Your Students”
Mitchell Bldg, Rm 373

Feb 1  CTL PEDAGOGY WORKSHOP SERIES  12 noon to 1 pm
“Dealing With Common Classroom Problems” (place tba)

Feb 15  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Jan Krawitz, Communication: “Galvanizing the Student’s Muse:
Creative Work in an Academic Setting” (place tba)

Feb 22  CTL PEDAGOGY WORKSHOP SERIES  12 noon to 1 pm
“Designing Your Own Course” Mitchell Bldg, Hartley Conf. Ctr.

Feb 29  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Ellen Porzig, Human Biology: “Beyond Lectures; Teaching
Opportunities Outside the Classroom” (place tba)

Spring Quarter 1996

Apr  8  SPRING QUARTER ORIENTATION  12 noon to 1 pm (place tba)

Apr 18  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Patricia Jones, Biological Sciences: “Teaching Through Problem
Solving: Perspectives After Eighteen Years in the Trenches” (place tba)

Apr 25  CTL PEDAGOGY WORKSHOP SERIES  12 noon to 1 pm
“Teaching Portfolios As Self-Development” (place tba)

May  2  AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS ON TEACHING  12 noon to 1 pm
Prof. Anne Fernald, Psychology (place tba)