

## **The Reality of Climate Change: The Global Warming of Classrooms**

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Our era is one when scientists, politicians, and pundits of every stripe debate the reality of global warming or what is less contentiously called climate change. During the course of thirty years of college teaching, I have watched how giving underrepresented groups greater access to higher education has turned up the heat in many classrooms, causing some professors to pay attention to climate changes in ways that at the beginning of their careers they may not have imagined necessary. Those of my generation received instruction on how to write syllabi and assignments, craft examinations, and, if in the humanities, how to teach students to read and interpret texts. There was very little instruction on teaching diverse ethnic populations, and with so few students of color serving as graduate teaching assistants, little need to address any particular problems these instructors might encounter. Most schools were homogenous enough that to speak of climate, ethos, or esprit de corps in the classroom was denigrated as a political act, rather than grounds for developing strategic teaching tools. But there are some of us, who as persons of color, never had the privilege of ignoring classroom climate.<sup>1</sup> We never thought that the global warming of our classrooms was a hoax or paranoia on our part. When we dared mention that the classroom was different for us, senior colleagues often dismissed these observations. Much like those who ignore the overall health of the environment and chant “drill, baby, drill,” these colleagues responded “teach, baby, teach.” Having now taught hundreds of classes where no one looked like me, and where, upon first sight, students challenged my authority, I argue in this essay that the changing demographics of the academy attest to the reality of climate change. Although I have no expertise to weigh in on the presence or absence of environmental global warming, I know enough to understand that the deciding evidence is not what is going on in my back or front yard. Similarly, some teach in fields where the evidence of classroom warming is yet unseen. In such cases, rather than declaring, “I don’t see where students of color are having any impact,”

one would do well to look at neighboring classrooms and universities. Snow on one's own doorstep may not mean that it is not getting warmer elsewhere.

My first major clue that I needed to pay attention to climate change in the classroom came when I began my career teaching several sections of required general education writing courses. Students who filled my classroom at the prestigious private liberal arts college were always surprised that their writing instructor was someone who looked more like their household maid than the teachers from their prep schools. With almost every "C" grade that I gave on a paper, I had to hear in private conference how the student's prep school teacher said the student was a good writer. The encoded message was that if the white prep school teacher said the student could write, who was I, inheritor of black vernacular English, to judge the student's writing as not up to par? The one reservation that I always have held against teaching courses in the general education curriculum has nothing to do with the rank of the students or the level of the material. It has always been that these are more likely to be classes that students choose to fill a requirement than because I am the instructor. When they enter the classroom and find out that their fundamental knowledge has been entrusted to someone whose qualifications they suspect are less than those of someone who fits their image of a real professor, they appear disappointed. The one moment that I have carried with me for thirty years occurred when a wealthy student from an Eastern prep school walked into my introduction to first-year writing course and, upon seeing me, shouted, "Yes, I really hope you are the teacher." This turn of events took me by surprise. Finally, I thought, here is someone who values difference and is eager to learn from her first ever African American instructor. However, our mutual glee was short-lived when the student disclosed that she was thrilled because having a black professor would be good punishment for her parents who had forced her to come to an institution where many of the graduates married their upper-class peers, and where all the shops are spelled "shoppe" and "old" is spelled "olde." The student perceived that her parents would lump me in the same category as they would place her drinking on fraternity row, escapades to the nearest city, and the multiple changing of majors: a waste of parental resources. To this day I remain apprehensive and humbled when a white student tells me how glad she is to see that I am the professor. I do not dare ask why.

Of course, there have been many other events that have signaled to me that I need to pay attention to climate: 1) a student in an all-white American Literature class asked, “How come we have to read *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* when there are no black students in this class?” or 2) the students in a modern literature class who tried to explain why they thought the main characters in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* were black. Not having the heart or gall to tell me that they collapsed my identity with the characters’ identities, they voiced other reasons. Their argument rested on the fact that the Compson family was dysfunctional and that Benjy, the character Faulkner calls a thirty-three year-old idiot, spoke what my students believed to be Ebonics; or 3) the black student in my class, “Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance,” who complained that the white students were trying to read revered black authors as gay. Although one of the goals of climate change is to reduce foul emissions, it is not my desire to use this essay to lament ignorant answers. Rather, I want to celebrate all that these experiences have taught me. I pity teachers who always have taught students who believed in their expertise and respected their authority. Such teachers lose the challenge of teaching those who never will see them as a part of their world. If ever there is a professional development moment, it is when someone incredulously asks, “Are you the teacher?” When we start our careers at a young age, we get that question because we share our students’ youth, but for many of us the aging process silences the question. For those who have permanent markers of difference, however, the question keeps coming. Having heard “Are you the teacher?” so many times, I want to share some things that I have learned about responsibility, civility, and humility—virtues that help me answer that question.

Changing classroom demographics mandate that all teachers broaden their sense of what it means to be responsible. As someone who teaches American Literature, I must teach it in a way that, regardless of who is present or not present in the classroom, I acknowledge the range of works that have strengthened the canon we call American Literature. Responsibility dictates that whenever the class is discussing an issue that I know has varying points of view, and students themselves fail to present opposing arguments, I take it upon myself to present such arguments, regardless of my personal position, and in a way that shows I am respectful of alternative points of view. Responsibility means that when I teach graduate courses in African American Literature I do so in a way that recognizes its global impact. Students now come from such

places as Japan, Greece, and China to specialize in African American Literature, and my teaching in the American classroom has become a less insular experience than when I first began teaching. When I taught “America through its Literature” to hundreds of South African students before the dismantling of South African apartheid, the black South Africans sat together, the racially

mixed coloureds sat together, and those of Indian descent sat together. After calling the roll the first two or three days, I heard myself stumbling over the names of the blacks because they carried consonant clusters unfamiliar to my diasporic ears: *Ts*; *Mw*; *Nk*; *Dh*, and so forth. Not able to correctly pronounce their names added to the climate polarization. I immediately felt that it was my responsibility to learn the clicks of the Xhosa language and whatever else it took to make the darker students in the class feel welcomed. I did not want to stand before the class with a tongue so assimilated that only the westernized names rolled easily off my lips. Responsibility as a teacher has meant that I do enough work on my own to find out what Latino/a texts I should teach, rather than asking a Latino/a to name one text to capture all of Latino/a experience. Responsibility as a teacher has meant that I blame myself when I have selected a particular text or placed a text in a scheduled reading order that fuels a disregard for the literary contributions of that group. Ending a class with Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, instead of any of her other works, is more likely to make students conclude that African American Literature is about the pathology of the oppressed. Instructors wield power in so many different ways, and it our responsibility to think through the repercussions of our decisions. During these times when so many groups are demanding their rightful seats in our classrooms, to be responsible means that as professors we need to work harder, not simply to meet our students’ needs, but also to maintain our professional integrity.

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Changing demographics also place pressure on age-old values of civility. Although I have never felt comfortable giving students any type of social or etiquette code to govern discussions, I do make it clear what I will and will not do, thus modeling the behavior I want to see in them. For example, on the first day I make it clear that I will never ask an

African American student to speak for all African Americans. Nor will I respond to a white student's naive answer with, "How white of you to have said that." I set a comfortable tone from day one because if the climate is chilly, learning can still take place, but students will resent the circumstances under which they learned. Civility means that I will have to be prepared for the day when inevitably a student of color will explode with impatience at the slow rate of social change. Civility means that I have to appreciate the sheer honesty of a white student who discloses that she is from a very racist background. But here's a caveat: civility should not be a substitute for declaring all comments substantively equal. One of my favorite short stories about civility gone amok is "The Lesson," by African American writer Toni Cade Bambara.<sup>2</sup> Educated Miss Moore is trying to get the neighborhood children to understand the socioeconomic inequities that stem from a white supremacist ideology. To demonstrate the difference that both class and race make in American society, Miss Moore takes Sylvia (the story's narrator), Flyboy, Junebug, Mercedes, Sugar, Big Butt, and their other classmates to F.A.O Schwartz, a New York store known for its expensive toys. Unhappy to take this field trip during their summer vacation, the students have a raucous time hailing a taxi-cab, are surprised to see that white women on Fifth Avenue wear fur coats in the summer time and that patrons of the toy store buy such items as hand-crafted toy fiberglass sailboats, costing over one thousand dollars. The story ends by leaving open what is learned and by whom. My favorite line, though, is Sylvia's attack on what happens when Miss Moore extends too much civility. When Flyboy gives a dumb answer, Sylvia mocks Miss Moore's response: "'Not exactly,' say Miss Moore, *which is what she say when you warm or way off too*" (91, italics mine). Sometimes, when on a mission to save students from their ignorant remarks, I have found myself audibly saying, "not exactly," while privately pondering how to transform the remark from ludicrous to lucid. Our sharp students, like the Sylvia in the short story, see through these attempts and can find them frustrating. To Miss Moore's credit, she merely was trying to teach the children how to think critically and to function subversively, while maintaining civility.

Humility is a third lesson that I have learned from teaching diverse populations. Good teachers know that they have to be learners. Although debatable as a cause for environmental climate change, human activity does cause classroom climate change. The need to be a learner as well as a teacher intensifies when dealing with changing classroom climates. The

complaint that I often hear from students of color is that they feel their white professors and classmates are arrogant— not because they know more but because they assume that marginalized groups ought to be glad they have been given the opportunity to matriculate at University XYZ. I once was teaching a class when a student asked why there weren't more American Indian students in the classroom. This question led to a discussion of what constitutes "indigenous," prompting another student to ask, "How did Indians get here anyway?" Much to my amazement, in all seriousness, another student responded, "The pilgrims brought them here." As hard as it is to imagine that groups existed and lived before white civilizations, we must do so, and humbly accept that there are paradigms, frameworks, situated knowledges, and theoretical schools of thought that challenge many of the older disciplinary tenets and models.

When politicians and scientists speak of global warming, they speak of it as a threat, a cause for alarm. That our classrooms are getting hotter, with the currents of discussion more intense, is not a disruptive event, but an opportunity to redefine teaching for the 21st century.

## References

1. Many critical race theorists argue that historically white professors have not have to pay much attention to how their whiteness affects the students in their classes. See Roxanna Harlow's "'Race Doesn't Matter, But...': The Effect of Race on Professors' Experiences and Emotion Management in the Undergraduate College Classroom," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66 (2003): 348–63.
2. Bambara, Toni Cade. "The Lesson." *Gorilla, My Love*. New York: Random House, 1972. 85–96.