

AFRICA AND ATTITUDE CHANGE:

THE TEACHER'S ROLE

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Over the last decade, the dangers of 'playing it safe' when teaching about Africa - stressing current affairs, or the exotic, or 'harmless' or affective elements of African culture - have become clear. Teaching about Africa involves us, centrally, in teaching about other peoples, peoples who are racially and culturally different from the vast majority of Australians. Thus teaching about Africa means confronting the web of ignorance, ethnocentrism and racism embedded within the Australian psyche. So the concept of race, and the nature of prejudice, are essential ingredients in any effective teaching about Africa.

White Australia has been - and for all the current talk of multiculturalism, still largely is - a complacent, introverted, suspicious, Anglo conformist society, so that teaching stressing cultural pluralism for example flounders on assumptions and stereotypes which will not simply go away in the face of more, or more 'correct', information. A teaching strategy which overlooks this fact may well fail to alter students' misconceptions about Africa, and further may actually reinforce prejudice.⁽¹⁾ Teachers must therefore grapple with notions of race and culture, not only while working out our own values stance and role, but also to take into account the views and values of our students, before we can be in a position to define our objectives, or select our strategies.

It is an old addage of teaching that the teacher must start off where the students are. In teaching about Africa, this crucially includes assessing the level and nature of prejudice in the students and their environment. Prejudice involves prejudging on the basis of a stereotype held about a whole group. Stereotyping is 'an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalise) or conduct in relation to that category'⁽²⁾ (and here 'conduct' includes attitudes towards, judgements about...) Stereotypes help reinforce views of differences between groups, and help persuade people that difference means inferiority.

Australian society is heavily ethnocentric and frequently racist. Ethnocentrism is often claimed to be universal - the tendency for us all to believe in the superiority of our own culture, or at least to see our way of doing things as natural or normal. Racism goes further, linking the supposed inferiority of another group with physical characteristics - i.e. a causal association is made between physical characteristics and cultural or personality traits. In many cases, this is no longer crudely biological (although many Australians may still believe that Africans have 'got rythm' or are oversexed), but becomes 'cultural', i.e. colour, or being African, are taken as outward and visible signs of a person's culture, from which predictions about behavioural or personality characteristics are made. This labelling and predicting operates by triggering off in us a whole range of expectations, of definitions of rights and relationships, which reflect

as heavily on our notions of ourselves and our rights as on others.⁽³⁾ And the key point here is that racism is deterministic - it locks people into being something or not being something, regardless of what they are as individuals, and it acts to reinforce their, and their group's, position in the social and global hierarchy.

Race is a rather discredited concept now, but its significance for teachers, and others, lies not in what is true about it, but in what people believe about it. Australians usually have little clear notion of it, so a multidisciplinary approach to it can help teachers, and students, in coming to terms with its ramifications in the African context. Australians, for example, have little idea of institutional racism, partly because we rarely analyse our own history or social structure. We have little idea of the role an ideology of racism can play because we have been encouraged to see ourselves as non ideological. We have little notion of prejudice or awareness of the racist stereotypes so widely held here.

It may, therefore, be useful to pursue some implications of the concept of racism⁽⁴⁾ for the teacher's role and attitude change in teaching about Africa.

Teachers need to be aware of racism as attitudes towards others, and of the dynamics of prejudice. This is necessary to tackle questions like why are some students more prejudiced than others? and to assess the functions that attitudes play for holders, a prerequisite for determining appropriate strategies for attitude change.⁽⁵⁾ It can also remind us that 'There is a psycho pathology of racism, but in racist societies most racists are not 'sick'. They are conforming to social norms without internalizing their prejudices to any depth'. Van den Berghe goes on to state that 'racism is a rewarding ideology and a profitable way of life',⁽⁶⁾ leading us to racism as ideology, an ideology of difference which rationalises political domination and underpins unequal relations. And here we do well to remember that racism, stereotypes, attitudes grew out of real situations, usually as part of the process by which dominant groups secured and legitimised that dominance, and reinforced the patterns of unequal relations.

Our notions of Africa are partly influenced by our cultural and national heritage - people came here as part of the same European adventure which partitioned Africa. We cannot entirely reject colonialism and the White Man's Burden without raising questions about the moral bases of our own society, nor can we approach Africa without assessing our own place within the white, western, rich, developed world. So we may need stereotypes of Africans, if not genetically inferior, at least made so by their culture or current position on the evolutionary ladder of modernization.⁽⁷⁾ We may still need to justify unequal power and wealth by suggesting that the weaker or poorer groups are there because of some inferiority, or incompetence, or unreadiness of their own - the 'blame the victims'⁽⁸⁾ strategy which relieves us of analysing the structures of dependence and exploitation which underlie their inequality from which we, incidentally, benefit. It is tempting, too, to move from an explanation which places responsibility for their disadvantage

on them, to congratulating ourselves for our innocence and competence, to believing that we may have something to teach them, about how to run a state, or define development, or teach university students, or primary maths.

So - what roles are available in crosscultural teaching? which of these appear relevant or appropriate for 'teaching Africa'? Some suggested roles include -

1. be value free
2. reflect dominant, national values
3. reflect local, community values
4. use values clarification, moral reasoning or values analysis approaches to underpin cultural pluralism
5. teach specific values, e.g. antiracism.

Generally, the first two have been traditional approaches to handling controversial issues or culture or values conflicts. Being value free or neutral is not possible, even through ignoring these issues. Teachers themselves are culture carriers, we teach in schools that are culturally shaped, and teach curriculum which reveals our particular definitions of useful social knowledge and desirable values. The huge weight of bias and ethnocentrism in our society, our classroom and our kids, means that a 'neutral' position, by default, gives silent approval to the status quo. Dominant, national values are that status quo, one which, in areas of race, culture and Africa, are unsupportable. And while again there are suggestions in the multicultural debate that teachers reflect local ethnic or aboriginal community values, this provides little guidance on teaching about Africa.

Teachers have long resorted to 'safe' ways of approaching cultural and values conflicts, by using values clarification or values analysis strategies, or adopting a Kohlberg-type emphasis on cognitive development or moral reasoning, where the teacher may appear as neutral facilitator.⁽⁹⁾ However, these ways may not further tolerance, but may encourage the belief that it's all a matter of opinion, or fashion, or culture, or may even legitimise and consolidate expressions of prejudice. The cultural pluralists stress an understanding and acceptance of differences as being 'cultural',⁽¹⁰⁾ but again this interactionist model often fails by underestimating the range of functions attitudes fulfil, and the forms of prejudice and racism which underpin attitudes. Other approaches, related to the above, assert procedural values, seeing the other's point of view, respect for others, etc, which, like cultural pluralism, may be 'neutral' disguises of a commitment to specific, desired values like tolerance and reasonableness.

We do confront considerable momentum in prejudice and misconception about Africa, so that even an attempt to redress the balance or provide more accurate information requires fairly elaborate and thoughtful use of attitude change strategies. But in fact most of us go further than that, and do have specific values or attitude objectives in mind, or

underlying it, when we teach about Africa. Even if we merely attempt a good educational anti prejudice stand, this may involve the positive assertion that it is better to be empathetic than bigotted, better to be reflective about one's own and other's values, and aware of where they might have come from. Is it, therefore, better to be honest about our objectives (at least to ourselves and each other?). It is impossible to be neutral, it is political to be neutral; most of us do believe some values are worth asserting, and some are inadmissible; kids are already facing and will continue to face moral dilemmas and need to develop their own competence in dealing with them. So why be apologetic about it?

Whatever one's own views, teaching about Africa always involves values and often demands a values stance by teachers, who need to develop a rationale for teaching about Africa. We need information about Africa, so we can help correct the wilder myths and derogatory stereotypes held about it. We need information about Africa, too, to help us analyse our own views and values, as well as to assess the accuracy and suitability of curriculum materials in this area. We need to know what we want to teach, and what we want to change. We need to know where our students are, and something of the existing attitudes and stereotypes in Australian society and in any particular classroom. We need to know about the nature of prejudice, the functions attitudes fulfil, and how to change attitudes.

Beyond all this, teaching about Africa is not only an exercise against prejudice in the psychosocial or inter group sense. Africa and attitudes towards it involve relations which reflect global realities, and may challenge students', and teachers', views on how the world works. At which point it may be possible to tackle the question which many would start with, but I will end with - Why are we 'teaching' Africa? what are our motives, our rationalizations, our objectives?

Two obvious answers are because Africa is worth while in itself, and because Africa is our interest (and, hopefully, our job, or part of it). Other suggestions include

furthering international understanding a " la Acfoa" (11)

furthering understanding about the human endeavour, something we know appallingly little about and are all the poorer for it

furthering understanding of culture and social change, development and underdevelopment

furthering understanding of where we fit into the world, from how we as a white, western, colonial country accommodate post war anticolonialism and antiracism, through to contemporary concerns about the Indian Ocean and Zimbabwe.

A final objective, significant in these times when C.A.E.s and other institutions call for 'relevance' in teaching and reject most of the preceding, is to further understanding of ourselves, by using Africa as a device for approaching issues and introducing concepts of importance in Australia. Having taught both Aboriginal Studies and Multicultural Studies to Australian students and student teachers, I

am impressed by the extraordinary difficulties involved in assessing one's own history and society when one hasn't known anything else. Beginning such a study at home, where one's self concept and identity are so closely involved, can be traumatic, even counter productive. There are real advantages in studying an apparently distant place, where students or teachers may feel less threatened and more able to grapple with concepts and ideas of difference or inequality, which can then be brought back into this society.

The specific objectives or appropriate strategies for teaching Africa must depend on the particular circumstances - the individual teacher, the classroom, the subject area or curriculum. However, without a coherent, sustained debate on the nature of prejudice and racism, and the role of the teacher in attitude change, in African studies and in other, related, areas, teaching Africa will remain largely a fragmented, frustrating and often ineffective exercise in Australian schools.

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3. J. Rex 'The Concept of Race in Sociological Theory' in S. Zubaida (ed.) Race and Racism (Tavistock, London, 1970) p. 49.
4. Loosely adapted from M. Banton's three categories in Race Relations (Tavistock, London, 1967) p. 8.
5. A point pursued in Lorna Lippmann's The Aim is Understanding (A.N.Z., Sydney, 1973) Ch. 1.
6. P. van den Berghe Race and Racism (Wiley, New York, 1967) p. 21.
7. A.A. Mazrui 'From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization' World Politics V. 21, 1968, p. 68-83.
8. W. Ryan Blaming The Victim (Orbach and Chambers, London, 1971).
9. See e.g. J. Fraenkel, How to Teach About Values: An Analytic Approach (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1977).
10. Lippmann illustrated this point when she suggests "Unease would give way to acceptance if we were able to think 'If I had been brought up in that culture, and had had his experiences, I too would behave like that'". op.cit. p. 3.
11. See e.g. Australian National Commission for UNESCO Teacher Education for International Understanding (ed. C. Coffey) Curriculum Development Centre, Canberra, 1977, and Development Dilemma (Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1975).