In the belly of paradox: Teaching equity in an [in]equitable space as a graduate Teaching Assistant (TA)

Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan*
Iowa State University

Abstract: While much has been written on teaching equity and social justice issues in the higher education classroom from a faculty perspective, there exists scant literature on these issues from the perspective of graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs). In this paper, a TA of a research intensive university, using a variety of sources of evidence, analyzes his experiences teaching equity studies in the university context. Using an anti-colonial discursive framework he offers answers to the following questions: What are the paradoxes, contradictions and challenges of teaching equity and social justice issues as a TA in the university context? Some of the issues he raises are the inequitable curricula, engaging with student difference in an inclusive manner, privileging certain bodies in assignments and classroom discussions, and dealing with student diversity without marginalizing equity studies itself. He concludes with a discussion on the implications of the challenges in teaching equity studies in the higher education context.

* Riyad A. Shahjahan is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Social Justice Concentration at the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University. His areas of interest include equity and diversity, spirituality and higher education, indigenous knowledges and anti-colonial thought. His recent publications include articles in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and the *McGill Journal of Education* and a co-authored book entitled *Schooling and Difference in Africa: Democratic Challenges in the Contemporary Context* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006) [with George Dei, Alireza Asgharzadeh & Sharon Bahador].

Introduction

Recently there have been numerous authors discussing the neoliberal restructuring of higher education and how it impacts teaching and learning (see Nast & Pulido, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Despite this restructuring, programs such as Women Studies, Ethnic Studies, Anti-racist Studies, Disability Studies, and others, are slowly starting to gain some recognition as legitimate fields of study within the university (Nast & Pulido, 2000). However the legitimation of these programs is painfully slow, as there are many paradoxes and sites of contestation for those who are involved with such programs (see Agnew, 2003; Ellsworth, 1992; Flores, 1997; Nast & Pulido, 2000; Ng, 1993). The university has historically been a site of elitism and has been used to privilege dominant group members in terms of their gender, class, race, sexuality and religion (Battiste, Bell & Findlay, 2002; Braithwrite, 2003; Churchill, 1995; Farnum, 1997; Schick, 2002). As a pedagogue who has been involved in equity studies, I have experienced first hand the contradictions involved in teaching equity studies in an inequitable environment. In this paper, I refer to equity studies as the compounded study of issues of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, globalization and anti-colonialism within an anti-oppressive framework. In this paper, I relate my personal reflections and analyze my experiences as a graduate Teaching Assistant (TA) who has dealt with a diverse student body in a course focused on equity.

While much has been written on teaching equity and social justice issues in the higher education classroom from a faculty perspective (see Agnew, 2003; Ellsworth, 1992; Eyre, 1993; Fernandes, 2003; Hoodfar, 1992; Laubscher & Powell, 2003; Ng, 1993), there exists scant literature on these issues from the perspective of TAs. As TAs we "help professors meet the pedagogical demands brought on by more students and larger courses, and in the process, learn to teach and earn a living" (DeCesare, 2003, p. 3). In a recent comprehensive review of the published literature on teaching assistants, Park (2004) found six areas of focus. These are: selection and preparation, training, supervision and mentoring, practical issues, personal issues and professional development. The following are some of the most commonly analyzed specific issues: selection criteria (e.g. Pickering 1988; Yule & Hoffman, 1990), TA training programmes (e.g. Burk, 2001; Prieto, 2003), supervisory challenges (e.g. Nyquist & Wulff, 1996), peer mentoring (Bollis-Pecci & Walker, 1999-2000), communication issues (e.g. Feezel & Meyers, 1997), identity (e.g. Anon, 1995; Lal, 2000), and international TAs (Rubin, 1993; Smith & Simpson, 1993). Among these issues the question of training of TAs has received the most attention (Park, 2004). However, a significant gap, which needs more attention, is that most of the literature *on* TAs is by faculty and/or researchers, rather than *by* TAs reflecting on and discussing their own experiences. As DeCesare (2003) eloquently states:

> Today's graduate teaching assistants have rarely reflected in print on the joys and frustrations of playing the TA role. As a result, we know less than we should about the day-to-day course related experiences of TAs, as they themselves live them and describe them. (p. 3)

In addition, there is scant literature that discusses TAs' experiences teaching within an anti-oppressive curriculum (a recent exception includes Lal (2000)). This paper seeks to contribute to this latter body of literature. My foremost objective is to offer answers

to the following questions: What are the paradoxes, contradictions and challenges of teaching equity and social justice issues as TAs in the university context? What are the implications of these challenges and sites of contestation on higher education in general and equity studies? Issues such as inequitable curricula, knowledge production, student diversity, critical thinking, and assessment will also be addressed throughout the paper.

I begin by outlining the framework informing my approach to the issues, followed by locating myself and discussing my methodology for this paper. I then explore the questions and issues related to teaching equity studies in the university context. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of the issues raised in the context of a transformative teaching project in higher education.

Theoretical framework

I use a critical anti-colonial discursive framework (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001) to situate my discussion and my experiences as a TA within the academy. The goal of this framework is to interrogate power inherent in social relations emerging from colonial relations and their aftermath (Dei, 2000). Anti-colonial discourse also challenges "the power configurations embedded in ideas, cultures, and histories of knowledge production, validation, and use" (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 300). Colonial, here, is conceptualized not only as foreign or alien, but as imposing and dominating (Dei, 2000). An anti-colonial framework acknowledges that colonial relations are reproduced in schooling through the denial of difference (Dei, Asgharzadeh, Bahador & Shahjahan, 2006). As we argue with respect to schooling:

> For those who are asked to subsume their difference under the rubric of the 'common', the intellectual stakes are high, particularly as a result of hidden and open emotional and spiritual injuries that are inflicted on victims when the expression of their differences are denied. (Dei et al., 2006, p. 57)

Furthermore, colonial relations are also perpetuated in "the differential treatment of bodies, the hierarchization of particular knowledges, and the peripheralization of certain experiences, cultures and histories" (Dei et al., 2006, pp. 8-9). Knowledge, in this framework, is understood to come from multiple sources, conditions, and sites, such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, culture, religion, language, sexuality and lived experience. An anti-colonial discursive framework acknowledges that there are multiple ways of knowing the world and that traditional academic disciplines are grounded in cultural worldviews that are antagonistic to other knowledge systems (Smith, 2001). As Smith (2001) argues, "In their foundations, Western disciplines are as much implicated in each other as they are in imperialism" (p. 11). Throughout history, hegemonic knowledges have allowed the colonizers to secure their dominance through the discourse of sameness and commonality at the expense of difference and heterogeneity (see Blaut, 1993; Smith, 2001; Stewart-Harawira, 2005). Similar to the construction of nation-state, where the liberal rhetoric of sameness has subjugated minoritized bodies materially and discursively (Loomba, 1998), the university as a colonial site has produced new relations of ruling through the imposition of asymmetrical power relations among groups (Mohanty, 2003). An anti-colonial thinker recognizes the academy as a site where social inequalities along the lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality are reproduced as subordinate voices and

their knowledges are delegitimized (see Dei, Hall & Rosenberg, 2000; Mihesauh & Wilson, 2004; Mohanty, 2003; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). For instance, Marker (2004) states:

> For both aboriginal and non-aboriginal students the university is a journey through a particular kind of knowledge. In the course of their academic progress…they encounter themes that challenge their values and worldviews; they develop cognitive and communication skills that ask them to critique the home and community culture from which they come. (p. 104)

While there are many sites of convergence, an anti-colonial framework shifts from a post-colonial framework in a number of ways. Anti-colonialism, unlike the post-colonial discourse, argues that "colonial constructions affect knowledge production with profound material consequences" (Dei, 2006, p. 13). Furthermore, borrowing from postmodernism, the emphasis of postcolonial theories' on difference takes away from the local and collective resistances in the colonial encounter and may lead to nihility and relativism. Anti-colonialism takes a different turn in terms of agency. Here the value is not placed on autonomous individuals shedding away "oppressive notions of essentialized identity", but on "collectives comprised of bodies who are cognizant of differences and who unite around common struggles against social structures of oppression" (Angod, 2006, p. 165). It stresses that power held locally and in practice can outlast colonial and colonized encounters, and it acknowledges that discursive agency and resistance resides among the colonized and marginalized groups (Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 2002; Memmi, 1991; Thiongo, 1986). Anti-colonial theorizing recognizes the power of local/indigenous knowledges as sources of knowledge that allow for daily resistance and the pursuit of effective political practice to subvert all forms of dominance. Following these considerations, it is important for me to locate myself and discuss my personal, political and academic interest in speaking and writing about my TA experiences within the university context.

Locating Myself and Methodology

I am a South Asian Canadian Muslim heterosexual able bodied male who was a doctoral student and whose area of interest is in equity and diversity issues in the higher education context. I was a TA for an equity studies course located in a research intensive university. This course was a requirement for those students who were in the Equity studies program and an elective course for those who were not. As a TA, I was responsible for facilitating the learning of two groups of tutorial students, each of which had an average of 18 to 25 students and met for one hour every week. I come to this paper, because I experienced first hand many of the contradictions of teaching equity and social justice issues within the university context that privileges certain ways of knowing over others and also gives privileged access to certain bodies over others in the practice of knowledge production. During my TA experience, I felt I was perpetuating many of the systemic discriminations that I was critiquing and teaching in the course, yet this time it was embedded within the higher education context. Since I was a student whose own work was on equity and diversity issues, indigenous knowledges and anti-colonial practice within the university context, I could see in reality many of the issues I was learning and critiquing in my academic work (such as classism, racism, colonialism, sexism and so on) reproducing themselves in the classroom. However, unlike the textual discourse, where I could counteract through

writing back, I saw the challenges of doing equity work in the halls of the ivory tower. I became disempowered by what I was seeing and decided not to renew my TA position until I had resolved these issues in my mind, body and spirit. In addition, my doctoral dissertation was also another factor in my choice not to come back. This, however, also reflected the social privilege I had as a heterosexual able bodied male doctoral student who had managed to get enough external funding to "free" him from teaching duties. This kind of choice is not available to many of my other TA colleagues. When I shared my experiences with other TAs, I found I was not alone in having difficulties and frustrations teaching with an anti-oppressive framework as a TA. I wanted to do something to heal from those experiences and make people aware of our issues. I should also emphasize that throughout my TA experience I had a lot of support from the faculty instructors and other TAs involved in this course. Therefore, the challenges I faced were not due to a lack of support among colleagues, but more importantly they were due to the systemic barriers embedded in the very institutional structure of the academy itself. It is also important to highlight that many TAs who experience these challenges and contradictions, may not be in the position to voice these opinions in public (especially in print) because their jobs or careers may be at stake. Therefore, the act of writing this paper, is not only a counterstory, it is also a sign of my social privilege.

In addition to making use of secondary sources, this paper includes my own teaching experience as a TA. My purpose in this paper, like Sheth and Dei (1997), "is to drag" my own body "into our very own printed articulations" (p. 158). As an anti-colonial pedagogue I have always experimented with unconventional teaching techniques. Since, the tutorials began I kept a record of my own and student's responses to my tutorials in this course. These records inform in various ways the writing of this article, as data, reflections, and analytical remarks (Ng, 1995). While the use of anecdotes is not normally considered scientific status in scholarly writings, "I am advocating their use in explicating the taken-for-granted features of everyday life" (Ng, 1995, p. 134). Furthermore, I use end of the course student evaluations as evidence of the impact of my pedagogy on students. Moreover, I also use course assignments and university grading schemes as pieces of evidence. Rather than rejecting these pieces of information as evidence, these slices of evidence are treated as vital features of a larger social organization (Ng, 1995). Borrowing the words of Ng (1995), "I attempt to preserve the knower/writer as an active subject in the text, grappling with [his] own multiple locations and contradictions." I sincerely believe that "it is in confronting these contradictions and dilemmas that all of us may come to grips with what haunts us and propels us to work towards a better world" (p. 135).

I wrote this paper first based on a thematic analysis of the paradoxes or sites of contradictions I experienced as a TA in the equity classroom based on the pieces of data mentioned above. After that I went to the secondary literature and identified the issues or contradictions other scholars were writing about anti-oppressive pedagogy. Secondary literature is treated as a source of evidence in supporting my claims and experiences, and theorizing upon my experiences. The four themes that emerged as a result of comparing my data with the secondary literature are: 1) inequitable curricula, 2) dealing with difference and diversity in an inclusive manner, 3) privileged bodies doing well in assignments and classroom discussions, and 4) dealing with difference and diversity without marginalizing equity studies itself[1].

The inequitable curricula: privileging the mind and readings over experiences, emotions and the body

In our tutorials, students engaged with "the concepts and histories of domination and oppression, the skills of structural analysis, and the attitude of critical reflectivity of their social locations in terms of power" (Wong, 2004, p. 2). In addition, I facilitated student learning in critically analyzing "the power, privilege, inequity, discrimination and domination along identities of race, gender, class, sexual orientations, religion, age and dis/ability" at the individual, institutional, systemic and transnational levels (Ibid). These equity issues were usually raised and covered in the course lectures, my job was to clarify the concepts, generate a discussion and cover the topics that could not be dealt with in depth during lecture time. However, if we wish to enact equity and social justice in society then we also have to interrogate *how* one is allowed to theorize about equity and *who* has access to equity studies. I found that while I wanted to base the readings on the concrete experiences of the students' lives, I could not because I was supposed to gear the discussion towards the course readings (I argue why later on in this paper). As one student wrote in his/her evaluation:

> I think it would be useful and more productive in terms of engaging the course material if tutorials were less informal of a structure but also if students were encouraged to relate readings/locate them in their personal life as opposed to primary, exclusive focus on the reading—it excludes a lot of things from the discussion.

The course readings became the entry point of discussion for equity related issues, rather than student's experiences or viewpoints about the issue at hand. This is a constant challenge. For instance, Pinterics (2001) with regards to critiquing second wave feminist literature argues that this literature moves "away from the concrete realities of women" and moves more towards "increasingly complex issues stemming from academic discourse which according to Alfonso, 'are not the socio-political problems ordinary women of different races, classes, sexualities, ethnicities face in their everyday lives'" (p.19). Similarly, I would argue that this idea not only applies to feminist literature but also to many of the equity related readings. Having said that, I can also understand the problem with making the classroom a site of sharing personal experiences, as this may perpetuate power relations (Ellsworth, 1992; Razack, 1998). Commenting on this issue in the context of antiracism, Srivastava (1993) states: "The use of personal experiences of racism to educate others not only makes us vulnerable, it puts us on display" (p. 107). Therefore we need a balance between sharing experiences in the classroom and theoretical readings. Many authors have argued that we need to be able to live authentic lives in the academy (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Shahjahan, 2004). Silencing the personal experiences of students can also be disempowering and can continue their internalized oppression (Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005). Critical pedagogues, anti-colonial scholars and feminists have always argued for legitimizing the personal experiences that students bring with them (see Dei & Kempf, 2006; Freire, 1970, 1997; Giroux, 1986; hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; McLaren, 1998; Shor & Freire, 1987; Weiler, 1988). As McLaren (1998) argues, "[a]ny emancipatory curriculum must emphasize student experience….. Critical educators need to learn how to understand, affirm, and analyze such experience…. [K]nowledge must be made meaningful to students before it can

be made critical" (p. 217). After all, an individual's personal history can play a vital role in his or her own scholarship and learning (Collins, 2000). Theorizing our personal experiences helps us to make sense of the world we live in. As Mohanty (2003) puts it: "it is..[the] understanding of experience and of the personal that makes theory possible" (p. 191).

We cannot, then, continue to privilege the notion that abstract arguments are the only legitimate form of theorizing (Minh-ha, 1989). Many of these critical discourses have perpetuated the fiction of a disembodied learner despite advocating for embodiment in their theory (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Martin, 1992; Orr, 2002; Wong, 2004). The place for the emotions, spirit and body must be part of the learning experience and of our theorization of the world (Shahjahan, 2004; Tisdell, 2003, Wong, 2004). Yet, how can we do this in an inclusive manner in the university classroom?

Dealing with difference and diversity in an inclusive manner:
How do I facilitate decolonizing pedagogical tools?

In the classroom I had students who not only came from diverse social locations because of their race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, but also from different programs of study. In my experience, I noticed that students who came from programs of study, such as social sciences and the humanities, where they had dealt with equity studies, were more likely to understand the course readings compared to those who came from Business and Science programs. In addition, coming from privileged social location played an important role for students who didn't come from the same program of study. These latter students could still be part of the discourse because of the language privilege they had. One of the challenges I faced was a student who was a mother who had recently immigrated to Canada from South Asia. She was always quiet. So one day I made an appointment with her to discuss why she wouldn't speak in the classroom. She related to me her experience of the first day in the classroom for this course. She pointed out that when she entered the classroom, all eyes gazed upon her. She felt very uncomfortable. The gaze, she pointed out, made her feel unwelcome, because most of the students in the classroom were in their early twenties, whereas she was in late thirties and was a mother, who also happens to be a woman of colour. She didn't feel her body belonged in the classroom. She said she wanted to run away from the classroom on the first day. She also said that she wouldn't speak because of her "accent" and how as a result she might be negatively perceived. I was shattered when I heard this story. I asked her why she continued with the course. She pointed out that she was interested in the issues that the readings dealt with because they corresponded to her own personal experiences as a woman, an immigrant woman, a mother, and as a South Asian. She said that she would do the readings and come prepared to the classroom, but she couldn't speak, outside of small groups. Hence in my pedagogical style, I tried to have as many small group discussions to make sure that those students who did not feel comfortable in the larger group could participate in the discourse on equity in a small group setting. Yet, how do we make the classroom inclusive so that no bodies are left behind?

While many authors have argued for and critiqued the idea of voice within the classroom (see Ellsworth, 1992; Mohanty, 2003; Razack, 1998), here I wish to relate an exercise I used in class for the purpose of making students aware of how subtle

forms of domination could be perpetuated in classroom discussions. This exercise was done to make students conscious of how much space each of them did or did not take in the discussions of the classroom. I brought hundreds of coins and a piece of cloth with me to the classroom. I asked the students to rearrange the chairs into a circle. The cloth was put in the center of the circle. Then each student was given four coins. I told the students that as we discussed the issues and topics of the week and as each student took her/his turn to speak, she/he had to throw one of their coins onto the cloth. This way they will all be conscious of how much space they took in the discussion. In addition, if a student finished all their four coins, then they would have to ask one of their fellow students to throw a coin in for them. This way students who finished their coins realized that they were taking space from other students, but also those students who did not speak had the power to decide whether or not they would allow someone to take their space. Although this coin method was not perfect, its purpose was to raise awareness of how certain students dominated in the discussions, and how that was a sign of social privilege. It also raised awareness about how students themselves were responsible for class dynamics and how and what knowledge was generated. Yet this process had a significant impact on students who used to dominate the discussion in the classroom. Many of these students, I realized became more self conscious of how much they spoke. I noticed this through changes in their body language in subsequent classes where they would hesitate to jump in without scanning their peers first. As some students remarked in their evaluations, such methods helped students interrogate their "voice" in the classroom:

> He has made me think about my own privilege and the way I am contributing to equity projects and sometimes ignoring others' stories by asserting my own views so dominantly.

> He really helped me realize the concept of 'voice' and how this relates to power structures and hierarchies.

> He made me interrogate my own role in tutorial in that when I speak I might be discouraging other people's stories

Thus this coin exercise helped students, in the words of Freire (1997), to "speak democratically" in which they practice the "need to silence themselves so that the voice of those who must be listened to is allowed to emerge" (Freire, 1997, p. 306). This was one way of teaching equity issues not just in terms of content, but also through the process of teaching and learning. It is also important to highlight the fact that many students feel pressured into speaking because they have been taught that it is important to speak, and in the classroom context speaking has become privileged over listening (see Wong, 2004). As a decolonizing pedagogue facilitating tutorials, for me both speaking and listening are equally significant. As Wong (2004) eloquently questions: "How can we possibly listen and understand each other if we are all preoccupied with speaking?" (p. 2). Similarly, Freire (1997) notes, "If we don't learn to listen to [other] voices, in truth we don't really learn how to speak. Only those who listen, speak. Those who do not listen, end up merely yelling, barking out the language while imposing their ideas" (p. 306). Further on, however successful my coin method might have been with the student, I remain very much aware of the fact that it still does not remove the power and privilege that has been conferred to me as a TA by the institution (Ellsworth, 1992; Ng, 1995). As Ng (1995) passionately states:

> The university classroom is not, by definition, a democratic class. To pretend it can be is to deny that hierarchy and institutional power exist. It is to delude ourselves that democracy and empowerment can be achieved by good will alone. (p. 140).

So, although I used this coin method to raise the awareness around how much one takes/does not take space, I am still stuck in the academy that I wish to decolonize, and my hands are cuffed by colonial tools. As Marker (2004) argues:

> It is exceedingly difficult to make indigenous knowledge, which is place and experience-based, relevant in the academy that exalts the most abstract and placeless theories about reality….The university…is oriented toward the transportability of both knowledge and credentials; it gazes toward a vast ocean horizon, but misses its own reflection.…Intellectual work often proceeds removed from the natural ecology and without regard for human or environmental consequences. (p. 107)

To this end, in my tutorials my main objective was to rupture the Eurocentric modes of knowledge production and classroom practices that tend to focus on the mind and conceptual ways of knowing. As a result, I used circles, drawings, drama based techniques to raise issues of equity and to generate discussion[2] (see Graveline, 1998; Harris, 2002; Shahjahan, 2004; Tisdell, 2003). I found such tools helped me engage students who normally couldn't engage with the readings because either they were too shy to speak out, or couldn't engage with the readings because of language and class issues. As some students commented:

> He stimulated intellectual thought through his varied and inclusive teaching methods that addressed multiple social locations, interests, and learning styles and abilities…sometimes using dramatic and visual arts to enhance our understanding.

> He encourages diversity forms of expression….challenged taken-for-granted western knowledge or ways of seeing and doing

My main objective in using such methods was to demonstrate to students that there were multiple ways of knowing. Yet while I was doing this, I was struggling with the fact that I didn't want to disadvantage the students in our tutorial from the rest of students in other tutorials with other TAs. This is a very specific dilemma, which is unique to the TA experience. Faculty do not have to worry about this issue, as they don't have to worry about their students taking the same course with other instructors and doing the same exams and assignments. At the end I didn't want to disadvantage the students in my tutorial in terms of their performance on the final and take-home exams, which were primarily based on the course readings and lectures. The course exams evaluated how students engaged with the course lectures and readings, and how they applied critical analysis to the concepts and issues raised in the readings. Although I tried to engage the students with different ways of knowing, this process however hampered our time to discuss the readings in depth as a larger group. We were limited by time. As a TA who facilitates one hour tutorials, I don't have the same luxury of time as faculty normally do who teach in seminar courses or have over 2 hours of class time (for instance Ellsworth, 1992; Ng, 1993; Vacarr, 2001). These

were some of my struggles to decolonize teaching practices in the academy, as I had to conform to standard practices of facilitating discussion in the context of readings, so that I didn't disadvantage the students in terms of marks. After all I didn't want the students in my tutorials to have low marks and jeopardize their academic careers or hopes to go to graduate school.

However, another dilemma I faced was that students themselves sometimes resisted other forms of teaching styles. Some students, especially those who came from science and business preferred having a lecture style class. After all, some of my students had years of indoctrination in the Western Eurocentric models of learning, regardless of their geographic location and had internalized this mode of learning as the norm (Wane, Shahjahan, & Wagner, 2004). So, although students are conditioned and are used to certain ways of knowing and doing, there are many other ways of knowing that are just as valid and they should be seen as important (Erica Neegan, personal communication, February 21, 2005). I believe enabling other forms of knowing allows for different habits of learning.

Privileged bodies doing well on exams and assignments and classroom discussions

I found it very frustrating to see that students who do well on the course assignments are from dominant groups (in terms of race, class and gender) who have access to the language, resources, time and cultural capital to do well and provide great analyses of courses. This is consistent with what Shor (1996) has pointed out, "grading in school, while being supposedly unbiased, is based on a value system that advantages more privileged students and, therefore, perpetuates inequalities in class, race, and gender" (p. 81). What is more frustrating is that once in you are in a classroom, students are usually there for their marks, you don't want them to jeopardize their grades, because after all their Grade Point Average (GPA) is important for them to continue their academic career or have access to other opportunities (see Nast & Pulido, 2000). As one student commented in his/her evaluation:

> Yes, grades aren't as important, but still very much part of why I come to school…. I want to attend grad school as well!

While I say all this, when it comes to grading students and giving them marks, I go against many of the tenets of the principles I had discussed earlier in this paper. This contradiction arises as a result of the grading scheme. For instance, "A" in our university, should only be given to those who demonstrate: "Strong evidence of *original thinking*; good organization, capacity to *analyze* and *synthesize*; superior grasp of subject matter with sound *critical evaluations*; evidence of *extensive knowledge base*" (University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science Calendar, emphasis added). In contrast, an "F" is given to those who show "Little evidence of even *superficial understanding* of subject matter; *weakness in critical and analytic skills*; with *limited or irrelevant use of literature*" (University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science Calendar, emphasis added). If I critically *analyze* this grading scheme by comparing what is graded an "A" and a "F", I find that it privileges the use of the intellect or mind and the knowledge and use of literature, not what personal experiences one brings, nor does it recognize multiple ways of knowing. So for

instance, if a student came up to me with a critical and anti-colonial project based on his/her experiences, would the university grading scheme allow me to give "A" to this student? Not really. One student came up to me with an assignment along this line, based on his personal experiences, but I could not give him an "A" because he did not follow the question and what was expected of him. The assignment asked him to analyze a document and do the following 1) identify the equity issue(s) addressed; 2) summarize the author's point of view; 3) provide a historical context to the issue(s) and/or the author's arguments; and 4) discuss how the author's comments advance and/or inhibit the achievement of equity. His analysis stemmed from his own personal experience with the equity issue in hand in the document. However, the assignment asked him to analyze the document in terms of the document itself and use the readings to interrogate the document. Here the emphasis is on summarizing, evaluating the author's arguments based on evidence and the use of literature. Similarly, in other exams and assignments, students were asked to summarize or define terms using the literature, or interrogate certain concepts and equity issue based on literature and lectures. This is consistent with the grading scheme outlined above. Harrison (2003) argues that such a process of knowledge production perpetuates colonial relations on minoritized bodies:

> When we ask students to argue a particular case, we expect that they will support it with evidence. We expect that they will draw on the relevant readings and authorities in the field and in doing so they will position their statements in relation to these authorities. But in requiring students to reference their position to an authority we are also perpetuating a historical power relation where Indigenous people have been situated in an unequal power relation to non-Indigenous authority…. We are not only training students in the rules of referencing, we are also constraining and disciplining them through a technology of power which positions them as objects of power and (white) authority at university. (p. 6)

In short, Harrison (2003) notes that, "[c]urrently, the multiplicity of voices are subverted in a hierarchy at university which values analysis and interpretation over description and narration" (p. 9). This is also in line with what Yuk-Lin Wong (2004) argues with respect to the privileging of conceptual knowing:

> In a culture of "discursive rationality", the dominant form of knowledge is one that objectifies, organizes, conceptualizes, normalizes and dictates. To "know" the world, we categorize what we see and experience in the world—things, people—into concepts and ideas. Instead of being open to the rich moment-moment experiences in our encounters with people and things, we "know" and relate to them primarily through our presumed concepts about them. Such orientation produces a sense of cognitive order and control in our relations to the world. (pp. 2-3)

The primary language we use for our readings is English, and we mark students according to how they think critically and write within the colonial protocols of this particular language, where the norm is clarity and conciseness. As Giroux (1996) notes, "clarity becomes a code word for an approach to writing that is profoundly Eurocentric in both context and content" (p. 166). I teach and ask students to paraphrase and cite references as they write. Paraphrasing, in general, is

to restate what the author(s) states in your own words. But how does a student put into his/her own words an author's idea that is not in his/her first language? What does "your own words" mean? Who does it privilege (see Leask, 2006; Leathwood, 2005)[3]? For instance, sometimes I had to grade a mother who is a recent immigrant from South Asia, or an Aboriginal man who has been away from university for many years and has gone through residential schooling, with the same evaluation criteria as other students. To this end, Shor (1996) asks: "[s]hould grading be based on individual social conditions, then? Should it be structured first around the already unequal situations among working-class students of different genders, colors, and family situations, and structured secondly around the economic inequality between worthy students and those from wealthy background?" (p. 84). This is a great challenge I faced as an equity teacher. As Clarke (2005) reflecting on her undergraduate schooling points out:

> Coming from a working-class background and from another country where I did not use "standard" English in the home, exacerbated my inability to write in the academic manner…. It has been difficult for me to adjust to the conventions of academic writing, to its distinctive way of "putting together individual words with established meanings in order to make new meanings. Stringing them together and remembering their arrangement produces syntax" (Brand: 2000)…. My adjustment in the discourse community of the university was challenging. The discourse was already established, with agents (teachers) who were sometimes unwilling to accommodate a new member. (pp. 35-36)

How do we deal with this? I find the language in critical scholarship to be elitist and not accessible for many of our students. It is a lot of jargon. While I discuss issues of class, race, gender, I believe the language that we use to talk about issues of equity is classist. What I am saying is nothing new and has been argued by others. For instance with regards to feminist philosophy, Alfonso and Trigilo state:

> I have serious problems about the difficult, specialized, jargonistic language in which much recent feminist philosophy is being presented…[t]his type of language perpetuates elitist power relations associated with who gets to speak of oppression. (cited in Pinterics, 2001, p. 18)

Similarly, in terms of critical scholarship, McLaren (1997) asks:

> How can criticalists develop a cultural politics that is able to phenomenologize ideology critique and critical analyses at the level of lived experience so as to avoid a leftist elitism? How can a public vernacular develop around critical studies that is inclusive and life-world-sensitive? (p. 118)

Equity related readings have become a 'jargonic exercise' where people have to use such loaded terms in order to say things in a clear and concise way. Sometimes certain terms can be a means to make oneself short and to the point. The criteria for students' learning do not reflect the diversity of experiences of student's lives and ways of thinking and are still rooted in an academic culture that "reflects the dominant discourse of the student as young, white, middle class and male" (Read et al., cited in Leathwood, 2005, p. 315). As Marker (2004) eloquently points out: "the

academic language used to describe reality has a built-in ethno-bias toward individualism and against traditional forms of knowledge" (p. 104).

In addition, the culture of critical thinking within anti-oppressive pedagogy, which I believe is a very privileged notion, can hamper many of the students' experiences and ways of knowing. Bowers' (1987) book, *Elements of a Post-liberal Theory of Education*, provided me with some insights into the Eurocentrism lying at the heart of critical pedagogy. As Bower argues with respect to the tenets of Freirean pedagogy, this type of pedagogy "is based on western assumptions about man, freedom, progress and the authority of rational process" (p. 127). Further, Bowers posits that, "[t]he problem with Freire's position is not that he advocates critical reflection but that he makes it the only legitimate source of knowledge and authority" (p. 129) (see also Bowers, 1983; Margonis, 2003; Roberts, 2000, 2003)[4]. I am not trying to negate the importance of critical thinking, but at the same time, I want to interrogate the privilege and epistemic bias involved in *solely* engaging in this kind of way of knowing (see Brookfield, 2003; Norris, 1995; Wong, 2004), to which many people might not have access because of their social location (see Egege & Kutieleh, 2004), or because they have no time nor the privilege to do this kind of thinking[5]. As Ellsworth (1992) argues:

> [S]chools have participated in producing "self-regulating" individuals by developing in students the capacity for engaging in rational argument. Rational argument has operated in ways that set up as its opposite an irrational other, which has been understood historically as the province of women and other exotic others. (pp. 93-94)

Similarly Ng (1995) points out with respect to critical pedagogues: "what we know how to do well, that is, teach students how to construct rational arguments and conduct objective analysis, is also shot through with gender, racial, and class subtexts" (p. 140). I am not arguing that critical thinking is an innate process, that cannot be learned but we need to problematize this kind of thought process and ask who does it privilege within the social context of the academy (see Alston, 1995; Bailin, 1995; Harrison, 2004; Norris, 1995; Wheary & Ennis, 1995). It is important to recognize that our social location interacts with our schooling experiences (Apple, 2004; Dei, 1996; Giroux, 1992). In addition, the Socratic method of critical thinking, which is very much part of equity studies, is also part of the Eurocentric colonial pedagogy. As Peter Hanohano (1999) states:

> Nearly 20 years ago I started law school and became exposed to the Socratic learning method, which is to question everything, doubt everyone, and trust no one. Purpel (1989) described the Socratic method as placing "great emphasis on clarity and on the thorough examination of propositions and statements on skepticism, and on logical analysis" (p. 78), and by, "relentless, persistent and brilliant displays of unsettling questions and probes that often led people to a state of intellectual bewilderment and devastation (and rage)." That is the state I that I found myself in while attending law school, and I clearly felt alone and set adrift from the cultural moorings of my culture and community. (p. 24)

Yet how do we reconceptualize the idea of grading, critical thinking and so on, and not continue to marginalize equity studies as being not academically rigorous (Shor & Freire, 1987), and thus marginalize further our already marginalized

students? Kenway & Modra (1992), with respect to the grading dilemma in the context of Women Studies state:

> Grading is certainly a problem for educators who see part of their mission to be the complete transformation of androcentric education systems, which are hierarchical and based on competition and credentialing. Yet to refuse to award quantitative grades may weaken Women's Studies' legitimacy within these structures…. The issue becomes one of exploring styles and modes of assessment rather than refusing to assess. (p. 154)

Similarly, Ira Shor is critical of the current assessment environment which he argues involves undemocratic approaches. He argues that assessment should not be removed from the classroom, but is a necessary part of higher education. To this end, he promotes forms of assessment to be integrated in the learning activities that are consistent with the democratic processes of the classroom. He states:

> The instruments used to test and measure students should be based in a student-centred, co-operative curriculum. This means emphasizing narrative grading, portfolio assignments, group projects and performances, individual exhibitions, and essay examinations that promote critical thinking instead of standardized or short answer tests. (cited in Keesing-Styles, 2003, p. 13)

Yet, the vision proposed by Shor or Kenway & Modra is still problematic. Shor's argument, still privileges rationalism as the only mode of learning and knowing and ignores the fact that "the critical classroom, too, is located within this [meritocratic] award system. To survive students have to get good grades by competing with one another" (Ng, 1995, p. 147). Kenway & Modra (1992) fail too in that they ignore the crucial difference that access (or lack thereof) to the "culture of power" within the university makes for students especially from marginalized groups (see Delpit, 1988; Ng 1995). As Delpit (1988) argues, a process-oriented approach in teaching and learning works well for those who already know the codes and rules of the subject matter. This is the dilemma I faced with some of my students who came from marginalized groups. I had one aboriginal student who constantly complained that he didn't understand what was expected from him in terms of course assignments. According to him, he felt that he answered the questions, and had difficulty with this "critical thinking stuff", as it privileged the mind, as opposed to the learning he was accustomed to in his community where the world was seen as living relationships rather than just mere concepts. We had an extensive discussion of whether or not he should quit the university. I tried to reason with him and encourage him by saying that it was very important for him to stay and not quit because he could make it, and that he needed to learn these "critical analytic writing" skills to survive, so he could move further in the university context and finish. I argued that we needed him to be within the system for the sake of his aboriginal community, and that by finishing his degree he could later give back to his community. But on the other hand, in my anti-colonial mind, I was thinking, "Why should he stay? Was this curriculum a reflection of his experiences and his ways of knowing?" I have heard many colleagues of mine who get upset when I say this, because the usual response I get from them is "I'm not going to give up on students who come from marginalized groups. They can learn these skills and do well with some hard work." But my response is: Whose skills, languages and ways of knowing are being privileged in the university? Are we not

perpetuating "epistemological racism" this way (see Scheurich & Young, 2002)? Are we not just pushing these students out? Am I not being complicit with the colonization of this student? How many of us are working hard to produce and implement a curriculum that centers indigenous knowledges and recognizes multiple ways of knowing (see Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005)?

The question of assessment and evaluation is critical here. While faculty may have some freedom to develop evaluation tools for assessing their students (even though this may be limited due to institutional regulations as mentioned earlier), TAs have no such freedom. TAs basically have to follow the guidelines given to them by the course instructor. So while faculty may discuss different ways of evaluating their students, TAs do not have that same power. For instance, I may have control over evaluating my students' tutorial contribution and participation, but I do not have direct control over what kind of evaluation methods are used for exams and assignments. I do have some say over what kinds of questions are posed, because my course instructor was open to it, but not the format. Therefore, as a TA I am faced with much more restrictions than a faculty member to deliver an equitable curriculum[6].

Addressing issues of difference and diversity without marginalizing equity studies itself

In courses involved in equity studies, we want to be able to practice what we preach. Having said this, it is also a struggle to understand that our role as facilitators of learning is to ask students to be agents in their own lives and to take the responsibility for their own learning. This has been a constant struggle where I am dealing with students from diverse backgrounds and each student has unique needs. For me being a good teacher is to look at the student from a holistic perspective. By this I mean, students aren't just bodies filling space in the classroom. Rather, they bring many sides of themselves as a person to the classroom.

At times, however, students may take advantage of my awareness of equity issues, and use it to as an excuse to put off their readings or assignments on equity studies and instead focus on their "traditional mainstream courses." But by doing this in a way they continue to perpetuate the marginalization of equity studies and equity related issues. It is considered not to be as pressing to deal with or understand equity studies compared to other "mainstream" courses in the university. For instance, sometimes students would complain that equity studies exams were at the same time as other final exams, arguing that this was not equitable. Other times, I would observe how students put equity related course assignments as their last priority, or may not wish to do all the work that is needed to finish the assignments, because they had "other more important exams or assignments to deal with." In a way they were marginalizing equity studies within the university context, by un/consciously pushing equity towards the periphery of their learning rather than at the center. This is problematic, as equity studies in the university is already at the periphery, and the fact that students do not see the problem with trying to make this program of study 'special" only pushes this program of study further to the margins of the mainstream university (see Nast and Pulido, 2000).

Sometimes dealing with students can create a false dichotomy between us the teachers (faculty and TAs), and them the students. This is problematic, especially for

us as TAs, because it's difficult to cross the border between being a student and a teacher. We are both students (as graduate students) and teachers in the university context. Faculty, on the other hand, have a clear boundary between themselves and students. This dichotomy is usually created by traditional university structures. Many times, the simple fact that many TAs, like myself, have our own graduate work to do, makes us easily feel frustrated by the challenges we face when interacting with the students. The easy way out for me is to just blame the student. The challenge is to take responsibility, but that takes time, and sometimes we just don't have it, precisely because of the demands of our double duty as both TAs and graduate students. This predicament, however, creates tension for those of us who want the best for the students, and yet still want them to respect our time. So it has been a struggle with this dichotomy. It is easier for me to objectify my students as the "other", and move on, rather than deal with them. For instance, in the first few of my classes, I had one student who would never bring her readings to the classroom. One of the requirements for the tutorial was that she had to bring the readings to the classroom. When I asked her why she didn't bring the readings, she replied that she couldn't afford to buy them. All she could do for the moment, because she had not been paid for the month, was to photocopy the week's readings from another student. This kind of situation exposes the presence of differential access to sources among the students, yet it may be ignored. Such kind of experiences are not usually mentioned in higher education, because students rarely talk about their social locations in the classroom, and also teachers seldom want to find out about who their students are. This can help continue to objectify students and perceive them as equals among their peers. In addition, TAs like faculty who might be well intentioned to find out more about students cannot do so, because of the time constraints inside and outside the classroom, and also because of the challenge of large undergraduate class sizes (Shore & Freire, 1987; Sweet, 1998). But once a teacher takes time to understand who her/his students are, we end up with a different picture of what kind of bodies are prevalent in our classroom, and learn how dangerous it is to assume that all the students in the classroom have the same access to learning opportunities in the university. This kind of issue is not part of our discourse as teachers, rather we are always focused on whether students can understand the content. One needs to ask the question: who has access and time to actually read the content of the readings?

Implications for higher education and future research areas

I believe it is important to challenge the status quo in the education system, i.e., ask ourselves: what does academia mean? We can use our pedagogical style to challenge and redefine what are considered legitimate and valid ways of learning in the formal classroom environment. We have to rethink what constitutes academic standards. As Leathwood (2005) argues: "'Standards', 'quality' and 'assessment' are not neutral and value free, but socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations" (p. 320). What's more, when we look at students from historically marginalized groups, it becomes important for us to go beyond what is considered the 'norm' and make ways of including their voices and silences, which have been marginalized for so long (Dei & Kempf, 2006; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Wane, Shahjahan & Wagner, 2004; Zhou et al., 2005). We need to work in solidarity with these students in order to decolonize the academy and make it inclusive to diverse bodies and knowledge forms.

The overriding question that my experiences and reflections lead me to is: Who is equity studies for within the university context? Is it just a space for critical scholars to disseminate their work? Discussions of answers to these questions should be foremost in the minds of critical pedagogues who are based in the university context. As authors such as Dei (1996), Giroux (1992), hooks (1994), Mckenna, (1991), McLaren (1998), Mohanty (2003), Shahjahan (2004) and Shor and Freire (1987) have argued, equity studies is not some kind of discourse, but it is praxis, and situating this praxis in the university runs the risk of it being transformed into theoretical talk and complacency. As Agnew (2003) observes:

> The Women's Studies program is like a middle-aged woman unconscious of how she has aged and lost her youthful vigour and dynamism. Over the years it has been transformed from a radical oppositional voice to just one more academic field, sometimes invisible, like a middle-aged woman, and often unfathomable to all but the most select among its theoreticians… Becoming an established, respectable part of the university has meant that Women's Studies has had to abide by the rules and regulations that govern curricula, even if they conflict with feminist principles. (p. 177)

We don't want equity studies to be "unfathomable" and a mere "academic field". Neither do we want equity studies to just become a commodity that can be sold by the corporate university to meet the demands of a diverse community (Mohanty, 2003; Nast and Pulido, 2000). Like any other profession that teaches students to have particular skills, equity studies tap into the minds, ethics and morals of students in order to further the project of social justice in the community and their surrounding world. Hence, who has learned equity cannot be determined by marks, but rather can be measured in terms of what kind of actions students take outside in the community. This is the biggest challenge for equity studies.

Administrators and social justice educators need to challenge not only the curriculum in terms of its diversity, but also the mode in which it is taught and evaluated (see Leathwood, 2005). Classrooms, assignments, and exams "are not mere sites of instruction", but they "are also political and cultural sites that represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 194). The overriding challenge is: Can we imagine different ways of evaluating the students without marginalizing equity studies as being non-academically rigorous? We need to also dismantle the academic regime that regulates what is valid knowledge and how knowledge is produced and disseminated (see Dei et al., 2000; Shahjahan, 2004; Tierney, 1993). Another overriding questions is: How do we center equity studies within the university context and make it more equity responsive? How do we challenge students to respect equity studies as a legitimate field of study, which is relevant to equity and social justice in society? How do we make students more proactive not only in their minds, but in their hearts and souls with respect to equity and social justice issues? Can the latter be done within a university context that privileges rationality over other ways of knowing? Questions such as these are what TAs like myself grapple with in order to imagine a different way of teaching equity studies within the university context. I believe equity studies in the university cannot be effective in promoting equity and social justice within society, until they are at the forefront of equity initiatives within the university, particularly in making higher education more inclusive of diverse bodies and knowledge forms. The question of diversity should not occlude discussions about how questions of difference are linked with neo-liberalism in higher

education, where the relationships between different bodies and knowledge production are being redefined along utilitarian rules and market relations (Arnowitz, 2001; Giroux & Giroux, 2004). Addressing difference means taking head on such issues of capitalist exploitation in the academy, and understanding the intimate relationship between the academy and the new imperial world order (Alexander, 2006), that either homogenizes and silences difference, or appropriates and commodifies diversity for neo-liberal ends (Mohanty, 2003). I believe this discussion is only a stepping stone, and a new dialogue has to emerge between TAs and faculty, students, administrators within higher education, for us to imagine a more equitable space in the university so that we are consistent with our praxis.

Notes

1. One of the limits of this analysis is that it privileges my "voice" over my students and other TAs in this course. Furthermore, this analysis is based specifically on my own experiences at a particular university, at a particular program of study and at a particular historical time. Therefore, it does not represent *all TA's* experiences in anti-oppressive pedagogy. Other salient themes not discussed in the paper are: 1) how questions of my race, sexual orientation and gender affect classroom practices and the impact this had on the students and their response to my classroom practices; 2) social dynamics both between faculty and TAs and among TAs. 3) social dynamics between students in the classroom and how this plays out along the lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all these issues.

2. While drama, circles, art are not necessarily non-Eurocentric methods of teaching and learning. But the idea of moving beyond Eurocentrism in knowledge production is to question the dominant modes of knowledge production that are derived from European culture which is largely based on rationalism and empiricism.

3. It is important to note that this course had writing clinic services just for the sole purpose of this course, which is quite rare for many courses in the university setting. There were also workshops given within the classroom about how to answer the questions, paraphrase and so on. While this is a beginning to remedying the language problem, students whose first language is not English still had challenges of accessing these resources in terms of appointment times and finishing their assignments ahead of time so they can take it to the writing clinic. Furthermore, students cannot access these writing clinics during the exam sessions. While one can argue that marks were given for the points that the students raised, the writing style and language skills still played a role in how we perceived who should get what in terms of marks. As instructors and TAs we are biased towards those who can write very well and in a concise manner (see Clarke, 2005).

4. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a thorough analysis of the Eurocentrism that underpins Freire's ontology and epistemology (for further discussion on this topic please see Bowers, 1983; Glass, 2001; Roberts, 2000; Margonis, 2003). However, it is important to note that non-Western traditions have ontologies and epistemologies that do not privilege the anthropocentric humanistic mind as the dominant way of knowing (see Bowers, 1983; Nakagawa, 2000, Hanohano, 1999; Orr, 2002). Furthermore, according to Roberts (2003), it is also significant to highlight, while Freire draws "heavily on 'rationalist' traditions from Plato onwards", his "ideal of critical consciousness is concerned with *political change*, not merely with a change in thinking." Roberts continues, "Freire's focus on social structures and political action distinguishes him not just from liberal philosophers and educationists but also from many who count themselves as members of the 'critical thinking' movement" (p. 160). Moreover, Freire himself has never advocated for universalizing his pedagogical methods in all contexts, instead he provides us with "certain parameters in dealing with issues of oppression as these issues relate to the pedagogical context" (Freire, 1997, p. 309). Freire also

advocates for love, emotions, intuition, embodied knowledge and passion as legitimate ways of knowing in anti-oppressive pedagogy in his later works (see Freire, 1994, 1998a, b; Shor & Freire, 1987).

5.   Here I am contesting the notion of what constitutes "critical theory." Is it only rational thought and conceptual ways of knowing? I believe personal experiences along with intuition, dreams, embodied knowing and other forms of indigenous knowledge should also constitute critical theory. The epistemic bias of rationality in critical theory is being problematized here, not the practice of using critical theory to inform practice in praxis. I am also arguing against an evaluation method that is informed by an epistemology that assumes that knowledge is constituted only in conceptual ways of knowing and rationality.

6.   As a TA, I don't have the freedom to change the assignments to fit to students needs. I may have some freedom to interpret the grading schema based on my own teaching philosophy. But then the question this raises: is the real problem the course professor's expectations rather than the university grading scheme? I don't think these two components are separate but are intertwined. A grading scheme structures professor's assignments as it is the same scheme faculty can use to argue with students when it comes to appeals for remarking. Furthermore, in a large class it is very difficult to have personalized assignments which may work in smaller seminar graduate courses. Therefore class size, grading scheme, professor's expectations, all play a part in how a TA can mark assignments and what kind of knowledge forms get validated.

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