



Review: [Untitled]

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Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities: A Transdisciplinary Approach by
Howard Ball; S. D. Berkowitz; Mbulelo Mzamane

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Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities: A Transdisciplinary Approach, edited by Howard Ball, S. D. Berkowitz, and Mbulelo Mzamane. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998. 184 pp. \$45.00 (\$19.95)

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In November of 1968 student leaders of the San Francisco State Third World Liberation Front began one of the longest and most contentious student strikes in American history. This multiracial expression of student and community activism gave birth to the first School of Ethnic Studies in the nation. While it has been over thirty years since the strike, the movement to establish a more diverse, inclusive, and relevant undergraduate curriculum continues to make its way across the country. At the University of Vermont, this movement's curriculum has been reinvented with a New England twist.

Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities is both a thoughtful account of the University of Vermont's efforts to establish an undergraduate course requirement on "race relations and ethnic diversity" and a rich examination of faculty members' pedagogical challenges. In this way, the book adds to the already large body of literature that addresses what is loosely termed "multicultural education." The editors, Howard Ball, S. D. Berkowitz and Mbulelo Mzamane try to deliver much more than a descriptive account of their university's experiences and practices. They ambitiously extend a conceptual framework, a "transdisciplinary approach," for studying and teaching about multiculturalism.

In the introduction and conclusion, the editors rightfully argue that no single academic discipline can fully uncover the complex interplay and interconnection of factors that underlie race and ethnicity. They maintain that each major academic field of study—sociology, anthropology, history, and so on—misses part of the point when considering a problem that is shaped by the dynamics of race and ethnicity. Subsequently, an approach that transcends the division of knowledge as it typically exists across most institutions of higher education, they contend, is necessary to teach about race and ethnicity. For these reasons, they recommend a "transdisciplinary approach" that combines different fields of knowledge to offer a larger and more accurate interpretation of race and ethnicity in American society. The chapters in the book are divided into two sections and are basically organized to describe and support their approach.

The first chapter of section one addresses one of the most difficult challenges of teaching about race and ethnicity—namely, to provide appropriate defini-

tions. The difficulty of defining these two concepts might explain why this chapter occupies the most pages in the book. In this chapter, the authors, S. D. Berkowitz and David Barrington, deconstruct biological notions of race and examine a broad spectrum of modern theories regarding race. In general, they conclude that no existing theory can explain the full complexity of race and ethnicity, but it is also clear that race is socially constructed and is subject to substantial changes over time.

Although the chapter is a rigorous and careful examination of race, the authors fail to address fully the political dimensions of this construct, especially as it relates to racial identity. One popular theory for explaining this phenomenon is Omi and Winant's (1986) theory of racial formation. Exploring such theories with students is particularly important because, among other things, race is not strictly a *top down* oppressive phenomenon, as this chapter illustrates so well. One's racial identification may also serve as a means for social change. For example, individuals linked by racial groupings can mobilize their collective energy and political interests to challenge structures of oppression and to redefine racial ideology. According to Omi and Winant, this kind of *bottom up* race-based action was characteristic of the civil rights movement in the sixties. Thus, although this chapter provides a good theoretical introduction, it should not be considered a comprehensive or exhaustive review.

Chapter 2 addresses the significance of race and ethnicity in determining various crucial outcomes. The author, James Loewan, makes the following claims: prior discrimination continues to affect present circumstances, racial discrimination still exists, other societal processes discriminate indirectly, and racism is a vicious cycle of unequal opportunity. His claims are convincing because he effectively employs relevant empirical evidence. This chapter can be useful for raising students' awareness about the dehumanizing and oppressive consequences of racism. Both this and the preceding chapter grew out of a faculty seminar at the University of Vermont that was convened to develop a common understanding about race and ethnicity among faculty members. As a result, original insights, particularly about pedagogy, are not introduced until Chapter 3.

The last chapter of the first section, written by Moustapha Diouf, provides the most persuasive argument in this book for teaching race and ethnic relations. Diouf asserts that if we aspire for equality, respect, and solidarity, "knowledge itself represents a powerful tool for social change" (p. 69), and accordingly, diversity course requirements should be considered an "emancipatory project" (p. 74). He admits that teaching such courses can be difficult because the instructor is typically called upon to challenge students' underlying assumptions about, for example, "the relative openness or closeness of the opportunity structure in U.S. society and whether or not it is based on meritocratic criteria" (p. 68). He points to several topics that instructors can raise in class to clarify some of the misleading assumptions underlying students' views. Although Diouf could not fully address the topics raised, his arguments are well supported. By citing relevant literature, he underscores the fact that these courses are not simple-minded attempts at "political correctness," but like any other area of study, are firmly grounded in rigorous research that is part of a growing body of knowledge.

The second section includes nine short chapters written by professors who have taught such courses in the New England area. The section provides the

reader with a broad sampling of various approaches, available bodies of knowledge, and course strategies that can be applied to teaching about race and ethnicity. Each chapter tends to rely heavily on the respective author's particular disciplinary training, which is either in the social sciences, humanities, or arts. This section makes obvious the unique insights and knowledge that different disciplines bring to understanding the realities of race and ethnicity. As such, the section reaffirms the editor's "transdisciplinary approach." Unfortunately, the section does not offer clear directions for implementing this approach. Because the chapters tend to be disciplinary based, they generally do not provide helpful instructions for integrating the different suggestions. Hence, though the book provides a convincing argument for combining "knowledge about racism derived from the various liberal arts and science disciplines," (p. x), the chapters resemble the fragmentation of knowledge in higher education.

Even though many educators are adept at combining different bodies of knowledge, explicit directions are needed in this case. Shaking up students' prior beliefs about race and ethnicity requires more than a superficial understanding about a given topic. According to Nicholas Danigelis in Chapter 7, "Among all the topics addressed in university classrooms today, there is none that has the same potential as race relations for failed communications" (p. 114). To avoid this, many instructors rely heavily on their own disciplinary strengths when challenging students to think more critically about their assumptions. Given these tendencies, the book may not have the intended transdisciplinary effect on instruction unless the implementation of the approach is made more explicitly.

Fortunately, readers can turn elsewhere to understand more fully the transdisciplinary approach and how it is applied in the classroom. The various established fields that comprise ethnic studies transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and, subsequently, offer a more critical and accurate account of race and ethnicity in America. This transdisciplinary approach had been successfully implemented long before faculty members at the University of Vermont began serious discussions about multiculturalism. Curiously, the faculty there felt compelled to invent another term to describe what is essentially an ethnic studies approach. Perhaps because people who do not understand ethnic studies wrongfully accuse it of being too narrow, the editors chose not to align themselves with it. Failure to draw more heavily from the different fields that are part of ethnic studies, however, resulted in the overemphasis of Black vs. White conflicts and the relative invisibility of Asian Pacific American, Latino/a, Native American and immigrant experiences.

Despite these shortcomings, the rich curricular examination presented in this book has much to offer, especially for those who are just beginning to develop a course about race and ethnicity or for those who are seeking to establish "diversity course" requirements on their campuses. Many of the chapters will also surely spark new curricular insights even for seasoned instructors. The book, however, is not pathbreaking and falls short as an instructional guide. Most of the information presented is addressed more completely in other edited volumes, *Transforming the Curriculum* (Butler & Walter, 1991), *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education* (Altbach & Lomotey, 1991), and *Race Identity and Representation in Education* (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993), to name a few. The lack of fresh information here is oddly reassuring. New England's twist to

multicultural education does not seem to be that different from what students at San Francisco State fought for some three decades ago or what ethnic studies programs have successfully implemented. The only major difference seems to be that they just call it something else in Vermont.

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