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Capstone Project
Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)
Minnesota State University, Mankato
Spring 2006

Course: English Composition 101 (two-hour block)

Unit: Race

Unit Objective: to deconstruct myths and to rectify misconceptions of what *race* is, how it has evolved, what its past and current significance is in American society, the language used that defines accurately, falsely and derogatorily its premise, and to expose students to the humanity how race has shaped and influenced a person who is non-white.

Justification: since the advent of racial integration, contemporary America has grown more diverse in schools and the workforce, creating not only an increase in diverse interaction but also the effects of such diversity and interaction. In Southern Minnesota, especially, there still exists a rather homogenous society that is insulated from a reality that already exists, which disserves students from civilly responding to the inevitability of having to work with (or for) persons of another race. It is from my experience and observations that racial tension is prevalent among this particular constituency, many of whom regard racial differences as deficiencies or valid stereotypes of a biological, and thus inherently crippling, identity.

Lesson Objective: to examine, discuss, and evaluate racial language. As a benchmark for this lesson, the opprobrious derogation *nigger* will be interpreted, as it is commonly regarded as the most degrading racial epithet as well as because black subjugation has been the most prevalent social cancer contributing to the success of America. Racial language will be examined as to not only *how* it is used linguistically but, moreover, contextually, as well as by whom it is being spoken.

Methods of Instruction:

Small-group discussion
Large-group discussion
Desire to Learn

Questioning Techniques:

Direct
Open

Materials used:

Kennedy, Randall. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. New York: Vintage, 2003.

Mencia, Carlos. *Not for the Easily Offended*. DVD. Studio Works, 2005.

Monday, April 24th, 2006

1. As a whole class, students are issued a list of *euphemisms* which are to be read out loud and then ranked on the contextual appropriateness of each term.
2. After each set of three terms, the students will, in large group discussion, debate the significance of each term in particular contexts.
3. Students will debate which races are privileged to use particular racial terms, if any at all, and justify in small groups his/her answer. Students will reserve open class discussion until after the following video.
4. A DVD excerpt from comedian Carlos Mencia's standup routine, entitled *Not for the Easily Offended*, will be viewed to the class. This excerpt comprises Mencia's frank views of race in America, both among and within a variety of racial groups.
5. In large group discussion, students will justify their answer concerning if particular races are privileged to use certain racial terms more than other races that may not "identify" with such terms. The instructor will document all ideas on a markerboard for public display.
6. Mencia's routine will be evaluated in large group discussion regarding his candor in using a variety of racial derogations in a variety of contexts, as well as his disregard to how persons will *respond*.
7. *Response* will be examined in how it incites *use* or perpetuates any problems. Students will have to justify their laughter (or dismay) at Mencia's racial perspectives in accordance with their conflicting or complimentary view on who has racial privilege for expressing such perspectives.
8. Individually, students will access D2L and read scanned excerpts from scholar Randall Kennedy's book *Nigger*, which examines, interprets, and evaluates the dynamism of the very same term. Variances of defining this word contextually abound.
9. Students will transcribe notes on an instructor lecture defining solutions to solving racism through either the *eradication* or *regulation* of racial language, considered the perpetrator of overt and covert racism.
10. **Assignment:** students will compose an in-class essay addressing the following points:
 - a. Should racial language be abolished (i.e. eradicating speech) in order to eliminate racism, regardless of the context of this language?

- b. **Should there exist racial privilege in the use of particular racial terms, regardless of context?**
- c. **Justify the essence of comedy as a medium for racial language. Comedy seems often to be immune from strong accusations of being racist or hateful. In terms of using racial language, does comedy serve as comic relief or as expressing a deeper message dependent on the use of such frank language?**

At the end of the hour the students will submit their essay in hard copy.

Personal response to this lesson:

I sincerely respect my frank approach in confronting racial misconceptions and beliefs concerning the *language* used to perpetuate or mitigate racial perspectives. Context and intent of language use are vital components in writing effectively, and these same criteria are essential in defining language representative of humanity.

I was pleased by my students' responses—both verbally and non-verbally—when certain racial terms were used within material sources, by me, and by their peers, regardless of or in respect to context. Many students were adamant in presenting their opinions in open class discussion on the justification of regulating or eradicating racial language; conversely, some were quite hesitant by examining language that is construed as “off-limits” or “taboo”. The eclectic responses as to *who* can use certain words, *how* these words may be used (if at all), and *under what circumstances* (if any) these words may be used, evoked greater constructive discussion from a regular cast of contributing students, and even compelled students who have been quiet throughout the semester to speak out.

Summarily, students didn't become disengaged by the brevity or the format of the lesson. The content alone sparks human curiosity by focusing on what's “off-limits,” but the approach is crucial as to not offend the dynamism of the class or, moreover, to further reinforce racial intolerance or spite. By being both candid and professional, I succeeded in delivering a comprehensive perspective of race as it is defined by a representative language by using a diverse spectrum of perspectives, materials, and instruction techniques to promote active response from any and all students.