

## **Taken with Surprise: Critical Incidents in the Classroom**

Kwok Pui-lan  
Episcopal Divinity School

**Abstract.** This is part of a collection of essays, which tackles thorny questions related to critical incidents in teaching. By using different pedagogical methods and techniques, each author provokes creative thinking about how to address specific concerns common to teaching. The authors demonstrate that the teaching and learning process must make room for—if not celebrate—the surprises that happen not only to the students, but to the teachers as well. The discussion of critical incidents helps to promote reflection on teaching practice and prompt insights into the intricate dynamics shaping the increasingly diverse learning community. Each individual essay is accompanied by reflection questions that can be used to spark conversation among colleagues and/or prompt further personal reflection on teaching and learning.

### **Critical Incident: Beyond Black and White: How to Handle Conflicts?**

Conducting a discussion on race in the classroom is like walking on ice—it is tricky and slippery and you can easily fall flat on your face. This does not mean that you stop talking about it, but it requires specific skills and practice. I was quite unprepared when two students, one white and one black raised the issue of race in my course on Spirituality. The class emphasized the experiential dimension of learning and included meditation, music, and rituals. Students were encouraged to share their spiritual journeys and participate actively in class discussion. Among the twenty-five students, most were white, with a few black, Asian American, and international students.

We were talking about the personal and social dimensions of contemporary spirituality when a black student spoke about her experience encountering racism in her everyday life. When she finished, a white student responded: “I have never just seen you

as black.” The black student was surprised by the response and reiterated the difficulties of living as a black person in America. The white student said: “I want you to know that not everyone sees you simply as black.”

Although I sensed that there was some uneasiness in the exchange, I quickly moved on for I was afraid that it had the potential of escalating into a confrontation or conflict. Besides, I had asked the students to bring an object to class to talk about their spiritual life and felt that I shouldn't let the exchange derail our agenda. The students did the best they could, but there seemed to be something heavy in the air.

That evening, I called the black student to check if she was all right. She appreciated my call and said that she felt that the white student had not listened to what she said and that her remarks were hurtful. For the next couple weeks the black student did not come to class, and her absence was keenly felt, though no one spoke about it. It was not until the black student came back and participated in class that the heaviness we felt was lifted.

The incident troubles me because my school's mission statement stresses the goal of embracing diversity and multiculturalism in our curriculum and pedagogy. As a teacher of spirituality, I have often emphasized that the learning process and the community of learning we create are as important as the content of the subject being studied. I feel that I am responsible to create a safe space such that all students can share and learn in their own ways, but in this case, I clearly did not manage well.

As I reflect on the exchange between the students, I recognize my own difficulty as a foreign-born Asian teacher in negotiating conflicts between black and white students. Although I am discriminated against as a racial minority in American society, I know

from my reading and experience that white people often treat Asians and blacks quite differently. Because of the myth of Asians as the “model minority,” Asians are often sandwiched between the black and the white. Since I was not brought up with race as the dividing line between persons, I often miss the subtle clues, body language, and unspoken subtext that frame interaction across racial lines. For example, the white student’s remark that she did not see the black student as only black can be interpreted as offering support. But the black student clearly understood it differently.

The incident also shows that I was tentative at dealing with conflicts and was concerned to avoid them at all cost, especially in public. I was afraid of losing control of the class and being caught in the middle. East Asian culture attaches great importance to harmony and balance, and conflicts are seen as detrimental to human relationships. I carry with me such cultural orientations, and although I am committed to anti-racism, I need to improve my skills in helping students listen to each other and deal with conflicts in an open and constructive way. I missed a potential *teachable moment* by my avoidance. Instead of allowing time to process the exchange, I chose the safer route of following the lesson plan and the agenda for the day. In so doing, the white and the black student missed the opportunity of checking their assumptions about each other. Their exchange was like two ships passing by each other, without ever meeting. The other students also did not have a chance to respond and interpret what the incident had meant to them.

Being a racial minority teacher does not automatically mean that one is born with the skills necessary to navigate successfully in a racially and culturally diverse classroom. While we often discuss the biased or racist attitudes of white teachers, we seldom

consider the cultural assumptions or prejudice that minority teachers bring into the classroom. What are the assumptions of Asians toward blacks? How does a Native American student respond to his Hispanic teacher? Are the stereotypical images that white students project onto their Asian teacher different from those they project onto her black colleague? Since we are teaching an increasingly diverse student body, checking cultural assumptions and fantasies and promoting cross-racial communicative skills among minorities need to be emphasized. The issue of race has long gone beyond the polarities of black and white, and the cultural politics in the classroom have become much more multilayered and difficult to predict.

I have also found that the emphasis on anti-racism in our teaching may inadvertently put both minority faculty and students under microscopic scrutiny and constant stress. Many white people, even with good intentions, think that racism is not their problem, but a problem faced by the minorities: “See, we are taking care of you and attending to *your* problem.” Racial minorities in a predominantly white classroom become the conspicuous markers of difference, the embodiment of the long history of racial tension, even when the issue of race is not being discussed. People of color are often called upon to provide knowledge about their race and to offer “the minority” perspective, whatever this may mean. Minority students, in particular, need a supportive structure so that they will not feel that they are constantly under the white gaze. They need to form effective alliances and solidarity with their minority faculty, who can serve as role models and provide much needed support.

The metaphor of the classroom as a “safe place” also needs to be rethought. A black colleague of mine has said that black people seldom feel safe anywhere in the

United States. They share their experience in class, often at great risk to themselves. In a culture steeped in psychotherapy, a “safe space” often means that you will be listened to, accepted, and not be challenged. Is this what we want to happen in the classroom?

Doesn't learning always involve taking some risks so that one's worldview can be expanded and one's thinking enlarged? Instead of safe place, can we speak of non-violent space, or hospitable space, or honorable space in which people and their traditions are honored?

After the incident, I did not discuss it with my colleagues or ask for their advice. It is shameful in my culture to admit that there is a problem or a concern in the classroom, for fear that it may give the impression that you are not a good and effective teacher. In a teaching workshop, Parker Palmer said that teaching is such a lonely profession. While doctors, lawyers, and social workers often work as a team and discuss difficult cases, teachers seldom talk about the incidents they encounter (except in team teaching). Because of the peer review system for contract renewal, tenure, and promotion, teachers lack a supportive environment to discuss issues in the classroom and learn from each other to hone their teaching skills. Minority faculty in a predominantly white school find it problematic to discuss their teaching issues because of the need to protect themselves and to project an image that everything is fine. Palmer suggested that we invite a trusted colleague to come to our classroom as observer, but I doubt if this is feasible in many schools.

I have also been thinking about the spirituality of teaching, of how the inner landscape, as Palmer says, affects the identity and integrity of a teacher. What kind of spiritual resources does the teacher need to cultivate in order to muster the courage to

teach? What does it take for a teacher to walk on slippery ice to stimulate students' thinking about difficult issues in life and help them to confront racism with courage and moral imagination? And what does it take to do this not just once but again and again, even when one has slipped or fallen flat?

### **Questions for Further Reflection**

1. In a multiracial classroom, how can teachers and students go beyond a binary construction of race (in terms of black and white) to understand the many cultural and pedagogical assumptions shaping the classroom?
2. How can teachers turn potential racial conflicts in the classroom into “teachable moments”?
3. What kinds of skills must racial and ethnic minority teachers acquire to handle an increasingly diverse student body? What kind of support do these teachers need?