

Joe McDermott

76-272: Talking Across Difference

Final Learning Assessment

When I signed up for this course (and was subsequently waitlisted for it), I must admit that I had my reservations about it. I'd never taken any kind of English course at CMU and I had of course heard rumors not about the course specifically but about the much-touted diversity here. I was a bit worried, mainly because here was, a white, middle-class male in the Engineering department trying to, as I saw it, defend my whiteness while being sensitive to everyone else's 'other'-ness *for a grade*.

It feels very, very good to know I was so horribly wrong. Without a doubt, this class has been the one I've grown and changed the most in; in fact, it's the only one at all that's done a thing for me as a person. I've learned a lot, not so much about this author's view on this subject or the 'proper procedure' for calculating something horridly irrelevant, but instead useful skills that will doubtlessly help me in my future.

The main thing I'd like to say I've taken away from TAD is a newfound, keen appreciation not of other cultures or religions or anything in specific, but of difference itself. Believe me, after reading over that statement I know it sounds loaded and a bit fake, but it's honestly true.

I have always prided myself on the ability to be sensitive to difference without overcompensating for it. I realize now that I was a lot more "Black People Love Us" than I was sincere. Now, however, after steeping myself (something I didn't expect to do with this class) so deeply in the causes, examples and consequences of difference, I actually appreciate it on the whole.

Identity. A subject I've always been interested in. I was thrilled to get the syllabus the first day and discover discussion of identity was to be the focus of the second half of the class. I've wanted to learn more about identity building and this year only fed that desire. Everything- Bellah to Dee to Belenky – has been a pleasure (yes, even Anzaldua) because it ties in so well to this central topic. I think this might be the first time I've felt that all aspects of a class have done this.

I think the finest example I have of the growth I've made as a person this year might be my plans for the future. I have (and here I hope not to get struck by lightning) always disliked community service-type activities. Growing up, I spend a large amount of time filling up my days with things that were important to me, but weren't necessarily important to others. The 'community' type activities were shuffled into the background for a time.

Now I see that perhaps these two priorities might be one in the same. I'm suddenly very interested in not just 'reaching out' to others, but letting them reach out to me. I am surprised and pleased by this feeling- one I'm not sure how to handle. This class, I believe has facilitated such a response in me as I've finally taken the time to look at others, see difference, *appreciate* it, and recognize there are things I cannot do or learn on my own.

This has so far been a high-handed and heavy paper, but at this point I feel I must level: I've had a blast learning what I have this year. The texts read from a bit arduous to completely compelling, but no matter what the subject of discussion, I was always excited to get to class and start debating.

Finally, the project. I realize that my project was sort of small-scale and may not have addressed the most pressing issue (cliques), but the freedom that was allowed gave Jill and I room for trial and error; finding out what works in terms of narratives, networks, and websites was half the battle (and fun). The knowledge that these reports can be made available to help others is rewarding and awesome.

In summary, I've learned a lot in this class. Critical reading/writing, problem analysis, ways of 'knowing', critical incidents: these are wonderful tools that I'm sure I'll use again, but the class as a whole is much greater than the sum of these parts. What really matters, what has made a (excuse the term) 'difference', are the things that weren't just stops along the way. I learned that difference isn't a topic to stir politically correct debate or even feel-good rhetoric. It's a serious study, one that ties directly into our cultural and social identities. I learned that there is quite a world out there that isn't separate from me. Making a difference isn't something to joke about; it's real. Maybe, depending on my schedule, I can get involved with the mentoring program that was mentioned in class. Even if not, though, I know I finally have a foundation to build a better person on for the future. It's an exciting and assuring thing to know.