Teaching and Transcending Basic Skills

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Maybe I thought I would be Michelle Pfeifer, who played the butt-kicking and life-changing white teacher in the movie Dangerous Minds. Maybe I wanted to be like that guy in Stand and Deliver. It was not an accident that brought me to the front steps of “American” High School. I was almost charmed by the graffiti on the concrete walls, the broken metal detectors, and the windowless classrooms. I was twenty-three, white, and from the middle-class suburbs of Virginia. My students were seventeen and eighteen, black and Latino, and most had never left their low-income and high-crime neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay area. But no matter: armed with my newly minted teaching certificate and a pair of rose-colored glasses, I knew that all it would take was the right combination of high expectations and creative lesson plans to motivate my students to achieve academically.

A few weeks later, in the midst of an activity designed to help students learn to critique mainstream media messages, I found myself standing on my desk during my fifth-period English class of fifty-two students, screaming and sweating. They were just not getting it. Though my carefully planned pedagogy was exciting and did seem to be developing students’ critical thinking skills, many students had not mastered the basic reading and writing skills these lessons required. We had rich, high-level discussions and an energetic classroom environment, but when it came to writing a paper or taking a test, students continued to flounder, frustrated with themselves and with me for not helping them develop the tools they needed to express their knowledge in academic form.

I wondered what I was supposed to do. Teach basic grammar to seventeen-year-olds? Even though I knew that my students would need to master these skills in order to enter college or the white-collar workforce, I was terrified that changing the focus of my lessons from higher-order thinking skills toward more basic literacy skills would be akin to lowering my expectations. If I had learned anything from my teacher education program, it was that holding high expectations was the key to ensuring the success of students of color. Research demonstrated that teachers, especially white teachers, are more likely to hold low expectations for students of color and low-income students. But I believed in the academic potential of my students; that was why I was working in an inner-city school.

I felt trapped: both teaching and not teaching basic skills to my students of color felt like potentially racist acts. For one, if I did not teach my students the basic academic skills they had not mastered, I was being professionally irresponsible. It was my job to provide my students with the skills they would need in the business and academic world beyond American High; not doing so would make me complicit in limiting their future options. This problematic situation felt particularly charged for me as a white teacher. I knew that my students lived in a world that automatically privileged people who looked like me, not like them. I was acutely aware that to counter this process of social advantaging and disadvantaging, it was even more vital that my students master basic academic skills.

In other ways, however, teaching such elementary skills to high school seniors of color seemed racist. I knew that many teachers limit the level of instruction they provide to students of color, continually reiterating basic skills rather than moving to the next cognitive level. Although my students had not yet mastered these basic skills, I feared that teaching them might suggest that I harbored deep-seated assumptions about the intellectual inferiority of black and Latino/a students. I was afraid that I would be inadvertently signaling to my students that I thought they were unable to handle the more challenging work that white, suburban, more economically privileged students enjoyed during their senior year.

In the end, I realized I had to do both: I had to embed necessary work on the fundamentals in substantive academic content that would challenge students to grow as analytical and critical thinkers.

Many teachers confuse, like I did, teaching low-level skills to students of color who have not yet mastered them with holding low expectations for student achievement. White, middle-class teachers may be particularly vulnerable to this dilemma. But teaching basic skills if students lack them is quite different from holding low estimations of students’ academic potential. Antiracist teachers must understand this distinction and recognize that teaching basic academic skills, if students still need them and if they are taught in conjunction with higher-order critical thinking skills, does not mean lowering expectations. On the contrary, teachers must do whatever they can to ensure that students of color learn the skills necessary for academic success.

Teachers should recognize the difference between our expectations about students’ current academic performance and our expectations about students’ academic potential. Research on teacher expectations demonstrates that there is a “self-fulfilling prophecy” in education: when teachers believe something
to be true about a student, even if it is not true, the student tends to perform to meet the teacher’s expectation level, whether high or low. What particularly concerns parents and advocates is that many teachers underestimate the academic potential of students of color. Often, though, this issue is not distinguished in the research literature or in teacher training from the task of assessing students’ current academic performance in order to pinpoint and provide the skills students still actually need.

At American High, I worried that I would be lowering my expectations if I admitted that some of my students’ skills were below the level expected of twelfth-graders. But I was simply assessing my students’ previous and current academic achievement. If I had thought that my students had no realistic chance of attending college so I might as well not teach them these basic skills, that would have reflected a low estimation of my students’ potential, both as individuals and as racial group members. Since I held high expectations for my students’ academic potential despite their currently low academic skill levels, I thought, “these students do not currently have the academic writing skills that they need to successfully demonstrate their academic ability. I need to teach those skills right away, so we can work to reach their full potential.” Although teachers of students of color need to be careful never to place limits on their students’ academic potential, they must assess the limitations of their students’ current academic performance in order to know how to help students reach their potential.

White teachers from middle-class backgrounds may have a particularly hard time making this distinction. Many of us focus exclusively on higher-order skills that we feel will convey our high expectations to our students. We might feel that we are enabling students to demonstrate their intellectual ability without highlighting their basic skill deficiencies. However, we must be ready to identify and address our students’ current skill levels, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. The teaching of basic skills becomes a problem when we incorrectly frame students’ limitations as permanent, genetic, or inevitable. Ironically, if teachers fail to teach students the academic skills they need to succeed, their students may actually perceive that their teachers have low expectations for them.

Teachers must be mindful not to abandon higher-order thinking skills when addressing basic skills. Basic skill work should be seen as a necessary but temporary endeavor.

RESOURCES

Deborah Stern. 1994. Teaching English So It Matters: Creating Curriculum for and with High School Students. New York: Corwin. Lesson plan ideas co-constructed with students that address both fundamental skill development and critical thinking skills in the high school English classroom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Principle: How might an educator struggling with the issue of teaching “basic skills” also be struggling with tough issues of racial inequality?
2. Strategy: How do your assignments and assessments allow you to pinpoint and address students’ fundamental skill needs while also cultivating “higher-order thinking skills”?
3. Try tomorrow: How might you organize your curriculum to treat basic skill work as a “necessary but temporary endeavor”?

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