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## **It Goes Without Being Said: An Adjunct Faculty of Color Navigating the Mores in a Predominantly White University**

**By Kia Mills**

### **Playing the Game**

“You have to learn to play the game if you want to survive.” This was one of the responses I received from a senior faculty of color when I questioned why I was being given a canned syllabus and instruction materials for a course I was hired to teach – as an adjunct faculty member. Being new to the college and not having had a lot of experience teaching in higher education at the time, I asked if every faculty member received a canned syllabus for each course when they got hired and was quickly told that this was not the case as it would be ridiculous to tell faculty what and how to teach. So, why was I being given a prescribed syllabus for my course? I remember thinking even then that academic freedom meant that a faculty member in the discipline had the responsibility to develop course syllabus and materials to teach each course based on professional interpretation and judgement on the most effective way to deliver course learning outcomes and objectives. After all, the Declaration of Academic Freedom as presented by the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) clearly outlines the principles of faculty academic freedom regardless of one’s faculty appointment category. As Finkin and Post (2009) argue, “Lecturers who are neither obligated nor expected to conduct research nevertheless enjoy academic freedom regarding their pedagogical responsibilities” (p. 80).

I knew that even as an adjunct, I have this freedom of teaching, and that being directed to use a prescribed syllabus went against this very freedom, especially since I made it clear that I had developed a syllabus that I would use for the course, and since the canned syllabus was not being offered as an alternative resource. I was directed and expected to use it. When I mentioned this to my colleague, they responded that it was the practice to give adjuncts canned syllabi and course materials. My colleague said, “We are not being hired for our expertise; we are here to solve a temporary problem for the department.” This bothered me, because part of my excitement at being able to teach was based on the freedom to prepare my own syllabi and select the materials that would best address the course objectives and expected student learning outcomes. So, I took the materials, but decided to use my own without telling anyone about it. This was my first act of rebellion against the unspoken ‘mores’ of disrespect for professionals of color and the institutional racism that fuels such practices. I later learned that white faculty were not required to use any canned syllabi but were instead provided with resources they could draw from if they so decided. The meaning behind being told what and how to teach was clear. Faculty of color in contingent appointments are held in even lower regard than white faculty in similar appointments. This signaled to me that the department did not trust my scholarship or ability to carry out my pedagogical responsibilities and wanted to control what I did in the classroom, and how I taught my class.

### **Mores - What Goes Without Being Said: *Positioning***

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines mores as “fixed morally binding customs of a particular group”, and further describes them as “personal conduct or behavior as evaluated by

an accepted standard of appropriateness for a social or professional setting.” As such, mores are based on a people’s culture, and acceptable ways of doing things. Over time, the community (in-group) may become so used to how things are done that no one sees the need to explain why things are done the way they are done, even when people new to the group join the community. The culture in a predominantly white college, for example, could operate from the mores – the culture of the in-group - without regard for anyone who falls outside of their group, such as people of color or members of the LGBTQ+ or any person from a minority population. The result is frustration and confusion when the in-group expectations (assumed to be understood by all) are not met by the minority group, such as faculty of color in higher education. It also goes without being said that the out-group should figure things out and conform to the norms and culture of the in-group, often without reaping the benefits enjoyed by the in-group.

The irony of my next experience was not lost on me either. I was researching ideas and practices around culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, assessment and feedback in K-12 that would benefit our teacher preparation program, and was asked by the Dean if I would present some of the findings or applicable aspects of this research to teacher candidates who were getting ready for field placements. One of the concepts in my research was *positioning* in the classroom and within an educational setting, and how it affects attitudes, information transfer and learning outcomes, and how it can reinforce stereotypes about students who are considered *different*, especially students of color, as being less capable of learning than white students.

Being told what to teach and how to teach by a white colleague with similar qualifications was the way most faculty of color in contingent appointments are treated. At the core of this disrespect is the same mentality that faculty of color ought to be subservient to white faculty, regardless of their expertise. I find this disconcerting and shameful, considering that faculty work in an environment with no supposed hierarchies, since each faculty member is a professional in their own discipline. The example of *positioning* from my research is based on an education system that takes peer learning to mean that a white student would show a student of color what should be done in a classroom setting, bestowing the power of talk to the white student while the student of color is expected to listen and toe the line. This practice *positions* the white students to think and believe that they are superior or smart compared to the student of color, while simultaneously signaling to the student of color that they are inferior or less smart. This type of *positioning* grants the *power to speak* to the white student and makes them *visible*, while it denies the student of color the power of speech and makes them *invisible*. At the same time, the practice makes the student of color *hypervisible* as they become subjected to negative scrutiny because they are *different*. This demoralizing and demeaning practice of assigning white students to explain information to students of color signals to the students of color that they are somehow inferior and less smart, compared to the white student, and subsequently *positions* them as such.

I make this comparison with how students of color in K-12 are treated because, from the above example, these same white students with negative perceptions of, and deficit mentality concerning students of color often go through life into adulthood with the same complexes and stereotypes reinforced by other institutions and structures, about professionals of color, including

those in higher institutions of learning. Higher education is a setting that makes *positioning* and deeply ingrained racialized barriers to faculty of color continue to be perpetrated against them when they are treated as *less than*, therefore not worthy of appointments that would provide adequate pay and benefits. I was *positioned* as incapable (*invisible*) and *less than* everyone else in the department (including white faculty with similar appointment type and experience) even before I taught my first class – because I am *different*, and it goes without being said (in a predominantly white culture) that I cannot be competent enough to do the job on my own. I was simultaneously *invisible* and *hypervisible* in the way I was treated. Settles et al. (2019) define hypervisibility as “heightened scrutiny and surveillance where failures are magnified and individuals lack control over how they are perceived by others” (p. 63). I have had to let my work and the students’ outcomes speak for my expertise, and vindicate me – not that I need to prove this to anyone when no white faculty in similar appointment bears this burden of proof!

While lack of recognition and respect for the professional achievements of faculty of color is nothing new – as expressed clearly in the blatant and systematic omission and editing out of people of color’s contributions to the professions, inventions, and most of their successful endeavors throughout this nation’s history– it was still shocking to me at first that my education, training, and experience would not be considered or respected beyond the fact that I was supplying cheap labor while the institution waited for the ‘right’ (white) candidate to come along and be hired in a non-contingent appointment to do the work I was doing as an adjunct. After two years in this position, that was exactly what happened. A white faculty was hired in the position that was now a probationary line to teach sections of the same course I was teaching as an adjunct. The same year, a couple of sections of the course were added due to demand, and I was hired again as an adjunct! What went without being said was that I could work as an adjunct, but a more permanent appointment would be given to a white faculty, not me, even though we had similar qualifications, and I had more experience teaching the course, and at this institution. This confirms the notion that faculty of color are often hired into contingent appointments as *place-holders* until the institution can hire someone (usually white) to fill the position on a permanent basis. This was my experience a couple of years later when neither I, nor any of the other faculty of color in adjunct appointments in the department, was hired to teach the same course when a probationary line opened up.

### **Stealing, Usurping or Downplaying Intellectual Contributions**

For some reason, some white faculty members always sound and act surprised at my work. Others are even more surprised when students write positive evaluations and feedback on my courses, and teaching in general. It is as if there is an expectation that I would not bring much to the table, either because of my adjunct appointment or being a faculty of color – or both. I was once asked – based on the positive student evaluations, if I would present part of a research that I conducted on teacher education programs and culturally responsive instruction, assessment and feedback, and implications for learning outcomes for students of color and students with neuro-atypicalities in K-12. I did not realize then what the set up would be when I agreed to work on it collaboratively with a senior, tenured, white colleague, although the research was wholly mine. The understanding was that we were collaborating, but it turned out that my research – which

had not yet been published anywhere – was being used to further perpetrate the false narrative that the senior white colleague produced the material and that I may have only assisted in putting it together! At the time of this collaboration, I was also invited to present at a national conference, which I did together with my white colleague. At this conference, my white colleague took the place of the main presenter (researcher), so it looked like I was their assistant! Some comments by senior faculty in the department indicated that I should have felt honored to present alongside this colleague, which I did because they had years of publication and scholarship in comparison, but I should have been allowed to present my own research, and not have it presented by a white faculty member as though it was their research! I live and learn!

### **Tokenizing**

The same year I presented my research, I was touted within the department as a model of diversity and collaboration. I was pointed out at meetings as an example of the kind of innovation that can result when faculty ‘work together’. This introduced a different level of awkwardness and conflict for me. I was asked by the Dean to work with other faculty on a project that was already about to be presented, without the colleagues being given a chance to discuss whether or not there was value in my being co-opted into the project. I was new, naïve and with no understanding of the mores – what went without being said – in this department and how faculty viewed each other’s work. I found out years later that faculty involved in this project resented being treated like they did not know what they were doing and that they needed to listen to me and to allow me to present my work, and show them how it is done etc. These were faculty of color from a different school, and the situation caused a rift between us when there should never have been any, if we had all been given the same information about the project, and a chance to decide if we wanted to work on the project together or not. Perhaps the Dean assumed that all faculty of color think the same and can work together regardless of their disciplines – just because we share the same socially constructed and racialized label that lumps together several people groups with varied backgrounds and cultures, not to mention varied education, specialization, socialization, and life experiences.

I was appalled when I learned that I was being pitted against other faculty with this supposed recognition. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the nation that same year, so the project was never implemented. However, I was viewed as a ‘problem’ by some, unbeknownst to me! This tactic of dividing and pitting faculty of color against each other has worked effectively in ensuring that faculty of color do not come together or work together to confront the real issues that they face, such as lack of support, recognition or acknowledgement of their expertise, in addition to denial or withholding of opportunities for advancement.

Last academic year, I confirmed my suspicion that I have always been re-hired as an adjunct because I provide the *diversity and inclusion* optics for the department without them having to commit to hiring me on a permanent basis or paying me what my work is worth. To the outsiders, I am a faculty member and part of a team that is inclusive and diverse, yet this is not so, since my course assignments are never guaranteed. I also confirmed that higher education institutions tend to perpetrate some of the worst stereotypes about faculty of color. For example, when a course was created to address some developmental gaps – and to provide remediation as

part of student support - I was immediately approached to teach this course since I “had a better grasp of the challenges that students who are underprepared faced, and I had received great student evaluations on how well I supported students in the courses I taught.” I would, of course, be teaching this new course as an adjunct, and was being asked to drop one of the other courses I had been assigned to teach, so I would not go over the total credits assigned to this adjunct position. I was not told why I would be assigned a new course with very little time to prepare relevant material, especially without paid duty days to do so. Interpretation – none of the tenured faculty wanted to teach this new course. Since I was an adjunct, I was expected to take whatever course I was asked to teach.

This is another way adjunct labor is exploited by institutions under the guise of diversity and inclusion. Faculty of color are likely to be pigeon-holed into preset assumptions, and are often asked to teach certain courses within a discipline if there are several students who are struggling with the course, and if majority of the students are students of color, as was my experience. When I said no, and that I was happy to continue teaching the course I had been teaching successfully for years, the new course was assigned to a Graduate Teaching Assistant, and later added as a course for one of the fixed-term appointment lines. This was my second act of rebellion against the mores concerning faculty of color in contingent appointments. There have since been other mores that negatively impact me as a woman adjunct faculty of color, and I am living with the consequences of not ‘playing the game’ because I have not been considered even when there have been openings for probationary or tenure track lines within the department. What I have observed is that white adjunct faculty either continue in their appointments because they have chosen to do so, or they quickly move to probationary or tenure-track appointments without having to play any games. What goes without being said is that white faculty members are often *positioned* to succeed even when they do not meet all the requirements of a vacancy, while faculty of colored are *positioned* often to fail, to do the most work, bear the brunt of whatever can be attributed to them when things go wrong, and are the tokens in the diversity and inclusion chess game.

## Conclusion

The way I see my experiences in higher education as an adjunct faculty of color, institutions have a long way to go in dismantling racialized and racially- based discriminations, stereotypes and marginalization of faculty of color contributions, expertise and professionalism. Despite being hired in a contingent appointment, and treated as *less* qualified (*different = less than*) ‘place holder’, tokenized, subjected to stereotyped and exclusive mores about race, education, work, and life, in addition to having my research stolen and used by others in the name of “collaboration”, I am determined to continue teaching in higher education, providing my students with opportunities to learn and apply their knowledge in meaningful ways in the communities where they live and work. I value the role of higher education in transforming our communities, and would urge administrators and fellow faculty to revisit the *public good* in public colleges and universities, and to work on those strategies that truly address an all-encompassing education that supports the emerging demographics and changing needs of our societies.

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