

To: Frank Pierson
a) would you please
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to Black
Studies members?

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Suggestions for an Alternative Approach for Black Studies

by Don Mizell

This proposal sketches an alternative conceptual approach to the Black Studies concentration and is in response to

- (1) the inadequacy of the traditional Western approach to instruction
- (2) the conventional value-bias prevalent when studying the Black community and its experience.

Briefly, the Western approach has been to linearize, segmentalize and compartmentalize knowledge and the educational process--making learning easier, but incomplete in the sense that it perpetuates a narrow, specialized, discontinuous view of the information in terms of its relation to all knowledge. But the accelerating rate of change and consequent information explosion engendered by our technological proficiency means that it is no longer possible for any individual to be master of the knowledge available in any basic discipline. And as knowledge expands, the distinctions between disciplines break down, thus extending the breadth of knowledge required to solve problems in any one of them.

The organizational necessity of specialization has become 'routinized' to a tremendous extent. Traditional disciplines do not model contemporary problems as students often see them. These problems--war, poverty, illiteracy, racial myopia--are of a broad social nature, and their solutions are not easily segmented in terms of academic disciplines.

The concerned student, faced with problems which, although complex are quite concrete and which often involve him in a way that brings his whole claim to humanity into question, finds life in college artificial, and the division of knowledge into distinct disciplines strikingly irrelevant. He is aware of the realities of the cybernated era but is forced to live in an industrial, mechanized context.

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Given the information explosion and the rapid rate of change, the ability to manage knowledge seems to be the most indispensable skill. Increasingly, successful functioning on an intellectual level consists not in having a headful of facts, but in problem solving; knowing how to conceptualize problems and how to pursue the information which will provide solutions. The ability to identify and analyze principles, and to re-arrange them around new data to produce more advanced concepts will probably be the central dynamic for a future vital intellectual existence.

Instead of being only dichotomous, instead of atomizing everything into apparently irreducible particles--we must also do the opposite--start putting things back together again, discovering relationships, and going on to find larger and ever larger inter-relationships until we develop global perception. This does not mean we abandon the ideals of scholarship. But the direction will be synthetic as well as analytic. We must learn to count up to One, as all other numbers are fractions.

In addition, the emphasis on 'mental' cultivation at the expense of its equally important (in terms of the individual, the institution and the society) cousins, the physical and the spiritual, precludes an organically inter-related experience and thereby falls short of a total, meaningful intellectual exercise. This emphasis manifests itself more specifically in the following dichotomies:

- a) mind-body
- b) thought-action
- c) prof-student
- d) class-real world

It has been argued that this mechanistic world-view is a direct result of the Industrial Age, which, of course we are no longer living in. The total electronic environment we are immersed in recognizes no such cleavages. The question is are our educational institutions trapped by a past-orientation, a 'rear-view mirror' fixation that will lead them right to destruction? The imminence of

this possibility is something we should be quite wary of.

Meaning ~~the~~ cultivation of the visual sense (reading) at the expense of the remaining sensorium, ~~the~~ ^{the} strong emphasis on intensely linear activity (writing papers) at the expense of developing other modes of communicating and research tends to narrow both the individual and the educational process. As Lloyd Reynolds, distinguished professor at Reed College (and to whom I am deeply indebted) has written:

"Our culture will surely sink into the tar pits unless we learn to develop and use all modes of sensory perception and all kinds of mental activity. We have to stop picking and choosing according to whim. We must stop specializing in either narrow, critical, analytic rationalism at one extreme or an undifferentiated global psychedelic swoon at the other extreme. We must be both rational and spontaneous, both ~~int~~ analytic and imaginative, utilizing both statistics and insight. By so developing all our potentialities, we might even learn to let go, to ride the flux as plants do, responding fully and adequately to the total environment, growing living, organic forms in our social structures.

It might be naive to struggle toward that organic structure as a goal, but we can make it a direction. A direction is more flexible than a fixed goal, it can be followed with less grimness. At least it would make some sense to being alive. Change being what it is, we are going to lose everything anyhow; so what have we to lose? It is idolatry to worship empty structures, empty outward signs, which lack any inward and spiritual grace, which is always to be found."

It is my contention that while the traditions in the ~~Western~~ ^{Western} intellectual heritage are adequate they fall far short of a total, stimulating creative process, and often produces a learning situation that mitigates the possibility of dealing with the world for optimum good. Who will contend that our institutions

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have found their ultimate form and structure? Are the structures such that no changes need be made in the curriculum or in teaching methods? Would not a more inter-related, comprehensive, inter-disciplinary, total-sensorium involving, problem solving approach to any subject material bring out ideas more meaningfully and forcefully? I answer the latter affirmatively and offer also that such an approach necessitates restructuring our ideas about the most effective method for conveying the information---indeed it is a move away from the rigid syllabus, lecture, mid-term, final, paper syndrome ^{and} ~~this~~ a move toward maximum utilization of the senses, the media and the ecological field in the intellectual experience. The key is integral involvement in the learning process: a more flexible, creative, tribalistic, technologically-oriented (i.e. applied knowledge) dynamics encompassing all participating.

~~The~~ The Black Studies program of the College provides an excellent area for incorporating and evaluating these ideas. However, the present structuring of the institution may prevent the flexibility and unity needed to develop the creative program I envisage. This is not an unavoidable dilemma, however, provided the various departments participating in the concentration exhibit the vision necessary to make such a radical venture succeed. ~~This suggestion is based on the~~ ~~assumption~~. And if the various departments co-operate with the Black Studies coordinator in a progressive manner (avoiding the inherent reactionary tendencies in us all), it is my firm belief that such a venture will supersede the present approach in terms of academic excellence, as it will attempt to expand the definition of academic rigor by demanding a more organic involvement and response from all participating (i.e. student and professor). Although the main emphasis should be on flexibility, I have outlined briefly some of my more specific ideas about the approach to such an experimental program, as possible guidelines:

I. Creation of a different ecological field for academic pursuit

new directions and as a measuring rod for changing perceptions

1) student informs prof/class what is expected in course, prior to information immersion. This is designed to foment creative tension between the interests, energy and insights of students and the professor's sense of what is functional. In such a dialogue situation, the professor's role remains as important as it has always been: he is an essential human catalyst in the educational equation. The difference is that he is freed from his authoritarian role. He is no longer forced to structure conversation. There is something about non-structured but responsible conversation which inevitably tends to force topics of human concern into non-traditional disciplinary patterns. In addition, the topics themselves overlap. The result is that the basis for thinking becomes a system of relationship levels rather than a set of Kantian categories. For the student, dialogue offers unique possibilities for involvement. Perhaps the most compelling feature of education through dialogue is that it offers a vast array of possibilities for community organization. As the group develops through discussion, an understanding of the inter-related complexity of the subject of concern, the need for some specialization soon becomes apparent. But the need springs from a communal concern, and the specialist can rely upon a common experience by which to relate his contribution to the rest of the group.

B. Structure of Intellectual Experience

1) Social Sciences

a. Professor articulates comprehensive, inter-disciplinary, problem-

1. delve into some parts of required or optionalized reading

2. engage in body-oriented information

a) local field work, immediate, to be focused with the reading

around a problem (for other excellent alternatives we might explore joining Haverford's work/study program for community involvement and/or implement the very fine proposition of the CEP report for a Social Science Research Center. See appendixes for more specific elaboration).

3. these findings might be presented in some oral fashion, to be criticized in the class.

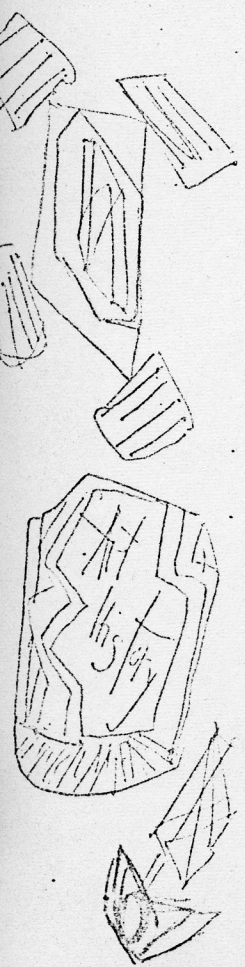
② Humanities

a) Professor articulates comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework through which students subsequently

① delve into reading and/or any related experience that focuses on and extends beyond it, and prepare a presentation that

a) relate the acquired ideas through creative means (e.g. movement, motion, senses, spatial patterns, etc.) after which follows

b) 'rap' sessions about it. These 'experiences' of the group might occur in differing physical locations (e.g. crowded rooms, away from campus, at sunrise, etc.) and at different times depending on the appropriateness of the situation. The idea is to create an intellectually, emotionally and physically rigorous experience, with emphasis on feeling the information. Such a personalized tactile/audible/visual approach might engender unique perspectives into the subject matter, without sacrificing its inherent aesthetic value.



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Heretofore, I have been primarily concerned with the structure and presentation of information. At this point, I want to discuss the value-bias that has been prevalent in the social sciences ~~which has not been adequately recognized~~ with respect to the study of the Black experience (the Humanities have pretty much ignored it). No change in any of the aforementioned is significant until we recognize the inadequacy and deficiency of our present models for analyzing Black people. The following discourse runs the risk of being perceived as ideology, but I want to make it explicit that this is not my intention. Rather, I seek to ~~outline~~ sketch the meaning of the term Black perspective. Methodologically, our current social science research strategy toward Black people forces one to constantly invoke a medical model to explain deviance. In so doing we 'discover' a whole series of 'variables' which covary with being Black. Since these variables covary, and since they are also different from the white, middle-class norm, we jump to the conclusion that there is a cause and effect relationship existing between them and our predictor variable, whatever it may be--success in school, poverty, etc. Finding such a ~~series~~ set of covariations, we also err in establishing indices to predict deprivation from a series of background variables. It is in this bit of methodological slight of hand that we commit our most serious conceptual error. We have failed to understand that most of our significant independent variables such as family structure, cognitive ability, language, etc. are dependent ones and have at least two reference points--the world of the testmaker and researcher, and the world of the Black man. We seek to force Black people into an alien mold--all we do is say that if the Black community were more like the idealized white norm (i.e. the white community) then it would have little difficulty. What we have to do, our social science implies, is make it less different--make it white. Make the Black man's family like the White man's, and so on for all the variables. Not seeing him from his

belly of the Western world-view and his style, his language, his organic approach to life, etc.---the end result is to place responsibility for poverty and under-achievement upon him and not the institutions which do not understand him. Charles Keil, author of Urban Blues, contends:

"The urban Negro male today may be Everyman tomorrow. He has learned to live with the threat of irrational violence; and we (the world in general, but white people in particular) too must develop a life preserving stance toward the vast, impersonal and constantly growing forces of annihilation that hover over us. He is 'fatherless', and as the pace of our unplanned, unchecked technological progress accelerates, our 'fathers' can no longer provide adequate models of what it means to be a man either---each succeeding generation will find itself in a radically changed environment. Generally, the Negro urban male is useless and expendable in terms of the economic system. Now we can foresee the day when an elite staff of engineers and laboratory technicians will create and nurse the machines that supply all our material needs while the rest of humanity stands idly by, bored and unproductive. Alternatively, we must learn to make use of leisure time. The Negro lives in a state of compressed humanity, the ghetto; as the population continues to expand, if not explode, our living space must become similarly constricted. The Negro has had to come to terms somehow with a hostile majority of a different color that surrounds him; we are rapidly coming face to face with the same situation. The Negro in America is learning to combat and solve these problems. The solutions that he finds will perhaps be those that the American in the world must know for himself in the not too distant future." (p. 193)

One might argue that I have been somewhat unfair to most social sciences when I describe the interpretative schemas and assumptive bases as culturally biased. However, when I talk about this form of cultural bias, I talk not simply about the more obvious forms of bias, but about that which is labelled 'cul-

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tural imperialism.' The most prevalent conceptual bias in this country today is that which asserts that there is a norm against which all behavior can be measured. The norms of this society certainly are not homogeneous; we live in a pluralistic society where norms are still defined variably from culture to culture.

Our immediate goal should be to determine the cultural strengths of the Black community—to see how the white middle-class life-style may be in conflict with these strengths and develop cross-cultural bridges between these two distinct life-styles. At this part in time, focusing on the academic material from the black man's point of reference is essential to negate the strong value-bias. The black perspective, i.e. a view conditioned by analyzing the Black experience through the Black man's eyes, ought to infuse energy and insight that probably otherwise would be neglected.

Structurally, the survey course appears to be the most promising approach to these ideas. By emphasizing the interrelatedness of the information and by attempting to keep a broad overview in the course, the student is allowed the freedom, the flexibility and the point of reference he needs to organize his ideas around. Perhaps three such two-semester courses would be sufficient as unified introduction to the field:

I. Social Science

A. Survey of Afro-American

B. Contemporary Socio-Ec. Problems of Afro-Americans

II. Humanities-Cultural History

A. Black Religion and Philosophy

B. Literature, Music, and Art of Black People

Such a core of courses would form the nucleus of the concentration.

This proposed multiple fusion of the aforementioned dichotomies, this total/field/sensorium alternative is an attempt to shape the educational process in-

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to some semblance of organic unity, thereby making the intellectual experience
a true experience: rigorous, intense, integral and stimulating.