Chapter 3

Active Learning and the “Teaching” of Migration in Geography:
A Critical Reflection on the Twenty-First Century Multicultural College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores questions of methodology and pedagogy in dealing with diverse student populations in a freshman-level human geography class by highlighting a multi-tiered exercise that encourages students to investigate and to articulate their own feelings and beliefs about migration in a series of low-risk classroom exercises complemented with an out-of-class assignment. The self-reflective portion of this exercise provides the instructor insight into student feelings, attitudes, and knowledge of students’ migration histories and knowledge. Lessons and examples from the author’s classroom experiences are detailed in this chapter to call upon instructors to implement multi-tiered approaches to controversial and international topics, particularly in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, twenty-first century college classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Though not the exclusive domain of the discipline, migration as a topic features prominently in most human geography texts and is considered compulsory material for introductory courses in nearly every college/university in North America. Regardless of political affiliation or personal background, the topic often invokes heated debate among undergraduate students and sometimes results in “discussion as spontaneous combustion” (Brookfield 1995, 12). Academic freedom encourages faculty to ‘teach’ the topic in a myriad of ways, and this chapter presents a critical reflection on the author’s classroom experiences at a suburban college in the South, where students represent a diverse set of linguistic, cultural, class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The chapter explores questions of methodology, pedagogy, and

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Active learning (Fink 2013) as they apply to diverse student populations by highlighting a multi-tiered exercise (Figure 3) that invites students to investigate and to articulate their own feelings and beliefs about migration in a series of low-risk classroom exercises complemented with a more intimate out-of-class assignment. The self-reflective portion of this exercise provides the instructor insight into student feelings, attitudes, and knowledge of their students’ migration histories.

The exercise assesses intercultural competence but does not penalize or reward students with more or less international experience. African American students whose families have never left the South, for example, tend to have less specific knowledge about their families’ migration (his)stories, while recent immigrants or children of immigrants tend to have the most direct knowledge (but not always). Moreover, student narratives suggest that less knowledge of one’s own family’s migration path tends result in more simplistic narratives and understanding of migration in general. Students with more knowledge of their family’s migration tend to describe the complexities of migration in more nuanced terms that might be difficult for other students to fully grasp. Moreover, this case study suggests that affording students multiple platforms of expression results in more profound learning experiences – particularly for those with painful, recent, and/or complicated migration histories.

Oversimplification and generalization remain inherent problems with introductory courses in all disciplines, but they are particularly problematic in geography, where most students will never take an upper level course that would allow for greater scrutiny and more critical thinking. Those students may never have another scholastic opportunity to parse, analyze, and meaningfully synthesize the content on migration presented by their textbooks. As such, it is imperative that students develop a deeper understanding of migration in their introductory course. While many instructors welcome and facilitate debate and/or classroom discussion, such an activity does not always result in thoughtful reflection and/or discourse. Certain students tend to dominate the conversation. Meanwhile, others tune out and/or may not share at all. They may be timid, pensive, or protective of their own thoughts and ideas, leaving the discussion to be dominated by others. The exercise presented in this chapter borrows from both partner sharing techniques and from reflective writing and facilitates learning to occur regardless of pre-existing student knowledge or experience. The author argues that it is incumbent upon instructors to apply pedagogically informed approaches that are mindful of the diversity of student experiences in order to engage the class and facilitate deep learning in introductory general education courses.

TEACHING MIGRATION IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Students are routinely exposed to the core principles and theories of migration in introductory geography classes across North America. The Association of American Geographers annual meeting from 2014 boasted independent papers presented on the topic, compared to just 187 results for ‘region’, 215 for ‘place’, and 217 for ‘map’! The most popular textbooks include large amounts of empirical data including colorful world maps of annual migration flows, historical immigration trends for the U.S., historical overviews of U.S. legislation, brief treatments of migration around the world, and explanations of neoclassical gravity and econometric models. While textbooks vary, most introduce Ravenstein’s ‘Laws of Migration’ (1876) and link generalized economic and demographic patterns between countries and regions in which people move from LDC’s to MDC’s, often in stepwise processes or as a part of chain migration. Some textbooks offer vignettes, case studies, and/or first-person accounts of migration from alternative perspectives (e.g. refugees, forced immigrants, or undocumented immigrants).