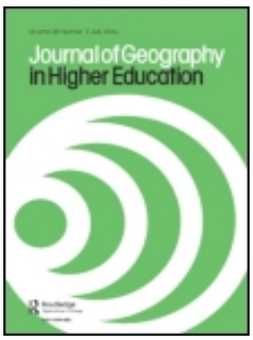

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Arena symposium: equal opportunities

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consensus in higher education cannot simply be assumed. Our efforts to promote equal opportunities in higher education must bear in mind this potentially hostile audience if our arguments are not to fall on closed ears, dismissed as some irrelevant form of 'political correctness'.

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HOW TO TALK PROPERLY AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

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The IBG Equal Opportunities Working Group (EOWG) proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials are a recognition of the way in which language and representations *matter*. Here we want to develop the ideas implied by these criteria.

The meanings, evaluations and effects carried by any system of signs, whether spoken discourse, written text or visual illustration, are contingent upon the concrete situations in which they circulate. We suggest that for the aims that lie behind the EOWG criteria to be realised, lecturers need to consider not only the content of teaching but also its 'context'. That is, we need to consider the concrete situations in which teaching actually takes place, as well as recognising the variety of forms and aims of teaching practices. For heuristic purposes, it might be useful to distinguish between two 'moments' of any form of teaching, the *didactic* and the *reflexive*, which will be related in different proportions in different courses aimed at different audiences. Two examples of courses we teach can be used to illustrate the different emphases implied by these terms. A third-year course on 'Gender, Race and Class' has a format which is largely didactic. The major aims of it are to inform students about social inequalities and theories relating to these three sets of power relations, and to introduce alternative theoretical interpretations of the empirical 'reality' discussed. In contrast, the explicit reflexive theme of a second-year course on 'Cities' is to examine the ways in which different theories and representations of the 'urban', by mobilising particular rhetorical conventions and stereotypes, work to exclude certain perspectives and to construct particular groups as abnormal or deviant, or make them invisible.

We feel that if the aims of the EOWG are to have significant effect then not only should the content of teaching be constructed to avoid unwitting or unacknowledged representation of prejudiced or oppressive images or the universalisation of parochial perspectives, but that this effort should itself be made visible in the practice of teaching. For example, Monk notes (1989, p. 466) that non-sexist language guidelines can be adopted in an unreflective manner which leaves other aspects of research or teaching unaltered. Changing words and

images is not sufficient without a simultaneous effort to change *how* they are read, that is, to alter ways of seeing. Thus, the reflexive process of teaching should form a counterpoint to the didactic process. What will then be communicated to students is not just a stock of knowledge supported by normal academic authority relations, but an invitation to adopt a reasoned and responsible scepticism towards what is offered to them as knowledge worth knowing. This is a condition for the cultivation of a more dialogic pedagogic practice, one which aims at something more than a simple cleansing of teaching materials of whatever unfortunate signs of bias or prejudice they may once have carried.

We can imagine different sorts of resistance to the EOWG initiative and the sorts of teaching it implies. One such response these criteria are likely to elicit is complaints from lecturers that they amount to an oppressive exercise in 'political correctness'—an exercise that would impinge upon the fundamental rights of individual academics to exercise 'freedom of speech'. When objections of this sort are raised over such things as the generic use of 'Man', it is not difficult to anticipate further mobilisation of such cherished rhetoric in response to these guidelines. It is in part to forestall such objections that we feel there is a need to shift the terrain of equal opportunities initiatives such as this in the manner suggested above. A more immediate issue is the potential resistance of students. It is a frequent experience, of ours at least, to have geography students explain that they feel politics, ethics and morality to be essentially matters of individual opinion or bias. They argue that they are subjective issues in contrast with the objective qualities of the material they want to be informed about. In making such an observation, we do not mean to adopt a patronising attitude, but wish to draw into focus the ways in which such attitudes are inherited from previous educational experiences and continue to be tied to the structural relations between teacher and student in the contemporary academy.

The general interests animating resistance to thinking of knowledge as *objectively* partial, that is as socially and historically situated and divided, have of course been subjected to careful and scholarly criticism in recent academic literature; here we are simply pointing to one of the most mundane manifestations, as expressed by students, of such resistance. Following Wartenburg's (1990, Ch. 7) analysis of the power relations which structure teacher–student relations in the academy, we can identify the agency that we as teachers exercise to be founded upon systematic inequality with regard to knowledge. As teachers, we are institutionally constituted as being possessed of certain knowledge and skills, and as determining the manner and rhythm of transmitting and communicating these to students. The problem which arises is that of how we are responsibly and effectively to exercise this authority, and with what objectives in mind. These structural conditions put us as teachers in a position of 'expertise' and our students in positions of 'apprentices'. Our responsibility therefore, is to ask not just what sorts of knowledge are being transmitted (which would be to consider our students as non-agents, and reproduce the divide between objective and subjective perspectives) but rather to understand the transmission of knowledge in pedagogic practice as a process by which students, as agents, are enabled to act in ways previously not available to them (*ibid.*, pp. 108–109).

These considerations raise questions of what new forms of activity we want to encourage amongst ourselves and others by way of our everyday teaching practices. The stated aims of the equal opportunities initiative—to raise awareness of issues of equality and inequality in geography and eliminate discrimination—are imperatives which should be explicitly communicated to students as proper concerns of any intellectual learning process. It is in response to this initiative that we argue that the transmission of 'facts' and of 'knowledge' needs to be framed by the communication of partiality, the interested quality, of any given theory, observation, explanation or interpretation. Such an approach requires that the

specified aims of different courses includes an intention to encourage and foster questions such as: In what assumptions about reality does any account of the social or natural world force one to invest? How do different forms of knowledge address their audiences and construct their constituencies? What sort of objectives does any given body of knowledge carry within itself, what sort of social subjectivities does it valorise or devalorise, and what sorts of interests are served by what is said? These are the sort of reflections that students should be directly encouraged to bring to bear upon the material with which they are presented, in lectures, in seminars, in their own reading.

We do not want to lose sight of the practical and pressing difficulties of teaching in the modern academy which vitiate such intentions—in particular, matters of how to evaluate, assess and grade work produced within courses constructed along such lines. The next step in the effective implementation of the aims of the EOWG in relation to teaching practice is to develop and exchange views on practical methods of achieving the integration of the 'didactic' and the 'reflexive' forms of teaching.

In sum, we are proposing explicit practical and theoretical reflection on the means of fostering a more democratic pedagogic practice. What initiatives such as those of the EOWG represent is an intervention into a certain social field (in this case, the institutions of academic geography) which attempt to redraw the boundaries of what is legitimate practice in order to facilitate increased participation and representation of marginal groups. If such guidelines are not to ossify into simple rules of proper linguistic conduct, thereby diluting their more general transformative potential, then what is required is an effort to put them into practice in a fashion which foregrounds "the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate" (Lefort 1988, p. 39). The university remains, potentially at least, one of the concrete sites where such a vision of democratic practice can be pursued. We need to pay more than mere lip-service to matters of language and representation, not least so that those of us employed to teach can create and reproduce the conditions by which our assumptions as to what is in need of change will be challenged by our students.

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DISARMINGLY SIMPLE? NEGOTIATING THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIC PRACTICE

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Each time I re-read the equal opportunities criteria to which I am being asked to respond, I increasingly come to believe that the power and clarity of its directives are more than somewhat disarming. This is, perhaps, a slightly bizarre way in which to begin, and