

THRIVING *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Molly Mann (mmann5@sfc.edu) at St. Francis College or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Critical Race Theory (CRT) Bans & Racism

The realities of race and racism in the United States are uncomfortable. But we can teach about these realities in ways that allow that discomfort to happen while also moving past it to real understanding.

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Embarrassing, degrading, humiliating. These are some of the words that Republican legislators from several states have used to describe the feelings that their legislation is meant to protect against in college and K12 classrooms, at least for White students.

Already passed or in process, these new laws focus on banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other “divisive concepts” around racism and United States history.

The legislation varies from state to state, but much is modeled after the now-rescinded Executive Order issued by former President Trump in September 2020. The goal: prevent students from feeling that their country is racist and that individuals, especially those who are White, are inherently oppressive because of their race.

As teachers, however, we do not seek to divide, degrade, or humiliate our students. Our goal is to help our students make sense of the racialized and racist world they have inherited and to do so despite the difficulties that come with teaching about something so emotionally provocative and politicized.

A recent example from an Idaho state university illustrates just how tough this can be. In this case, an instructor was accused of shaming a student when, in fact, she had worked hard to help the student feel included. The false version of the story was used to shut down the course temporarily and to pass a law banning such teaching in the first place.

The realities of race and racism in the U.S., including our history, are uncomfortable. But we can teach about these realities in ways that



Teach Racism as an Idea

An interesting feature of most of the proposed legislation is its focus on the individual. For example, the original Executive Order, which has been replicated in state laws, lays out a series of “divisive concepts” that cannot be taught. One of these is the idea that “an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.”

Racism, however, is not really about individuals. It’s about ideas—powerful and destructive ideas—that we as individuals can either endorse or oppose, just as our larger society reinforces or counters the ideas of White superiority through its laws and policies.

allow that discomfort to happen while also moving past it to real understanding. Feeling uncomfortable is often a normal part of the learning process, but it is not our objective as teachers.

State legislators who intend to stop the teaching of racism may not want to understand this distinction, but I would argue it is key for teaching and learning about racism. As teachers we can use strategies, both in what we teach and in how we teach it, that minimize resistance to difficult facts precisely because, as part of our pedagogy, we consider our students’ feelings. This can

make our work a little easier, even in the face of these misleading challenges.

One important caveat: the race of the instructor really matters when it comes to teaching about racism. Though never easy, this kind of work is much easier for White instructors. Research has consistently shown that people of color experience more challenges when teaching about race. As colleagues and administrators, we need to be mindful of this and provide additional support.

With that in mind, I offer two concrete strategies for teaching about racism now.

RACISM IS NOT REALLY ABOUT INDIVIDUALS. IT’S ABOUT IDEAS—POWERFUL AND DESTRUCTIVE IDEAS.

Teaching about racism as a set of ideas that we can endorse or oppose and resist moves us away from the simplistic notion that racism is only about the individual. And, by teaching it this way, we not only keep

TALES FROM REAL LIFE: THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Having taught primarily White students for many years, I have seen the power of community many times. One of the most common refrains in class and in online comments is “How did I not know how bad racism truly is?” or “How was I never taught this history?”

I often explain that our society is set up in ways that make it hard to truly understand the depths of racism, especially at the institutional level and especially for White people. And while I think this can be helpful, it is usually not until they read or hear similar comments from other students that I see

them relax a little as they see that they are not alone.

The strategies I offer to address race and racism in the classroom help guide discussions so that students can open up and connect with their peers about the realities of our racialized past and present. Once students learn to ap-

proach conversations about race, they are better able to develop a real understanding of these issues. Importantly, they are also able to build community around that understanding and continue to learn and take action even after the semester is over.

BEST PRACTICES: RACE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

How can you move through the discomfort around discussing race and racism to lead students to an understanding of these realities? Here are some best practices to follow in your classroom.

Build In Processing Time

Ask students to read, watch, or listen to the content of the course ahead of time rather than during class. This can greatly improve your discussions and give students more time to process the information.

Allow Student Questions to Guide Discussion

Rather than use class time for lecture, record your lectures or provide other content (articles,

book chapters, podcasts, video clips) and ask students to review them and respond on discussion boards. You can read all of their comments or a sampling, provide some basic grades (plus, check, minus) to incentivize their work, and then use their thoughts to construct a classroom discussion or other activities.

Often student questions are better than the ones we might develop for discussion and this allows us to see how they're feeling and thinking—and identify any common misperceptions.

Create Structure to Foster Trust

When we teach about race,

students need to hear each other's voices and concerns. Creating a class structure in which students feel empowered to explore ideas and perspectives provides them with opportunities to engage with the material and with each other, fostering deeper understanding.

To build structure into classroom discussion, consider the following pedagogical techniques:

- Co-create and mutually agree to rules of engagement for the discussion.
- Use random number cold calling to ensure all students are heard.

- Set up think-pair-share groups so that students can discuss in pairs before sharing their ideas with the full class.
- Create small discussion or activity groups with specific, clear prompts or even specific roles. For example, one student can be assigned as the "reporter" to share the group's discussion with rest of the class.



within those laws, but also illustrate just how badly these laws misunderstand racism.

For example, consider the racist idea that Black residents make a neighborhood less valuable. As a child, I was taught to believe this. It was reinforced by the adults around me and by the school and housing policies I observed and encountered.

As an adult, I no longer believe this idea. In my work, I try to help students understand how this racist idea developed and how it continues to be reinforced through our laws, policies, and practices. Helping students see how ideas of White superiority are expressed through both individual actions, like those of real estate developers, but also through mortgage lending laws and practices, allows them to see the whole system at work.

And by presenting racism as an idea expressed across different levels (individually, culturally, institutionally) we move away from the simplistic and individualistic caricature of racism presented by these new teaching bans.

Focus on Belonging

If you read the stories about banning Critical Race Theory from classrooms, you quickly see the focus is on preventing students from feeling things. The sponsoring legislators talk about White students being "humiliated" or "embarrassed."

HELP STUDENTS HANDLE THEIR FEELINGS BY CREATING A STRONG SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE CLASSROOM.

What these legislators miss, of course, is that most instructors do not aim to make their students feel bad. While discussions of race and racism may certainly inspire resistance or negative feelings, effective teaching ensures these feelings (if they are present) are simply part of the process and not the point.

The most effective way to help students handle their feelings is to create a strong sense of belonging in our classrooms. To do so, our students need to feel they can trust us as instructors and also trust each other.

One strong tool for helping students to trust us is structure. The inclusive teaching experts Viji Sathy and Kelly Hogan are promoters of structure and I highly recommend their work. In keeping with that work, we can define structure as providing multiple organized and clear opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning.

For example, ask students to post discussion comments or questions that are graded and used as part of course discussion. This practice not only allows for regular, low-stakes assessments, but also communicates a care for students' thinking and contributions.

Whether consciously or not, that student is seeing you can be trusted to use the materials you assign in a clear way and to reward them for their work. As a result, your students will feel more confident that you are someone they can trust.

Structure also helps students trust each other, especially through discussions and opportunities to hear each other. In general, research shows that simply talking to other students is a consistent predictor of belonging, so anything we can do to get them chatting is a good thing. When we are teaching about race, it is especially important for them to hear each other's struggles and common concerns around the material.

To do this, it is key to provide a safe structure for sharing thoughts, based on commonly understood rules of engagement. For example, try random number cold calling, think-pair-shares or smaller groups with specific, clear prompts or roles.

Whatever method, the point is to allow students to hear each other and to do so in a way that is expected and familiar. In this way, your course structure becomes the thing students can count on, even as the ideas you share are challenging.

There are lots of ways to teach about racism, but if we can come back to a few basic principles of focusing less on individuals and more on ideas, along with creating strong structures for trust and belonging, we will have the best chance of moving our students to a place of real understanding.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ahluwalia, Muninder K., et al. "Mitigating the 'Powder Keg': The Experiences of Faculty of Color Teaching Multicultural Competence." *Teaching of Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 187–196, doi:10.1177/0098628319848864.

Gluckman, Nell. "A University Suspended Diversity Courses Because of an Incident That Almost Certainly Didn't Happen." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 24, 2021.

Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (Bold Type Books, 2016).

Kernahan, Cyndi. *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor* (West Virginia University Press, 2019).

Parrott, Heather Macpherson, and Elizabeth Cherry. "Using Structured Reading Groups to Facilitate Deep Learning." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 4, Oct. 2011, pp. 354–370, doi:10.1177/0092055X11418687.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER: WHITE PRIVILEGE AND MORE

The race and diversity of your students will have important implications for how the class feels and the ways in which students respond. Research has shown that students of color and White students may resist learning in different ways and for different reasons.

For example, you may notice that students of color are more likely to withdraw from the conversation when issues of race and racism arise. White students, on the other hand, may be more likely to question your content and openly push back. This reaction is rooted in the privilege held by White students, often subconsciously.

So how do you balance these differing reactions and ensure all students can engage fully and effectively in the discussion? The first step is understanding your students' differing experiences, pressures, and realities. By bearing them in mind, you can greatly improve students' experiences and ability to learn.

For more suggestions about navigating discussions of race and racism within your classroom, see *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor* (West Virginia University Press, 2019).



For more resources on teaching through an anti-racist lens, visit neadjustice.org.

Meet Cyndi Kernahan



Cyndi Kernahan is the author of *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor*, which was given a starred

review in *Library Journal* and noted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as a Selected New Book on Higher Education. Dr. Kernahan is Professor of Psychological Sciences and Founding Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. You can follow Dr. Kernahan on Twitter @CyndiKernahan or visit <https://cyndikernahan.com/>.