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The legislation varies from state to state, but much is modeled after the now-rescinded Executive Order issued by former President Trump in September 2020.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 allow that discomfort to happen while also moving past it to real understanding.
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.

**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.

**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 approach 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.
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.”

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
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).