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TEACHING

'We Can't Ignore This Issue': How to Talk With Students About Racism

By Beth McMurtrie | JUNE 18, 2020

You're reading the latest issue of Teaching, a weekly newsletter from a team of Chronicle *journalists*. [Sign up here](#) to get it in your inbox on Thursdays.

This week:

- I share advice from experts on how to discuss race and racism in the classroom this fall.
- I point you to some articles and other resources on teaching about racism.

Talking With Students About Racism

As protests over the police killing of George Floyd and other Black people, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and debates about policing put the spotlight on the country's struggles with racism, many professors are wondering how to address those events in their classrooms this fall.

Should they talk about race and racism with their students? And if so, what should they say? What connections could they make to their coursework, or their discipline? And how do professors, whose ranks are disproportionately white, prepare themselves for those difficult conversations and explorations?

After all, you don't know where your students are coming from. Some have participated in protests, or have friends and family members living through these experiences. Others have been watching from afar, not sure what to make of issues like defunding the police or unclear about terms like "systemic racism." And you may never have explored the topic personally, or in your scholarly work or teaching.

I posed those questions to several teaching experts. And while each had a different area of expertise and perspective, they were notably similar in their advice.

First, don't avoid talking about current events. Maybe you don't discuss them in depth until you have established some familiarity with your students. But debates about social and economic inequality, race, and the coronavirus have become such a part of the national conversation that virtually everyone has had to wrestle with them. "We can't ignore this issue," says Mays Imad, who runs the teaching and learning center at Pima Community College. "If we do that, then we may inadvertently send the message that either (a) I don't know what's going on or (b) I don't care. Both of those messages are hurtful."

Second, it's OK to be uncertain. Professors are used to being the expert in the classroom. But in this case, they might be better off listening, particularly if they don't know what it's like to be a person of color living through these events.

"Instructors can share with students, Hey, this is something I don't have a lot of experience with, but it's happening in my world, too. I don't have all the answers, but I'm struggling too," says Kevin M. Gannon, a history professor and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University. That allows students to feel comfortable in knowing that exploring the existence and effects of racism is a process.

Dexter Gordon, director of the Race and Pedagogy Institute at the University of Puget Sound, echoes that approach. "Students have to process this," he says. "Professors are uniquely positioned to help them, but they have to think through this first. Engage the process, and be willing to bring a vulnerability to the class."

Now, the hard part. Talking about racism doesn't begin and end with one classroom conversation, nor is it a checklist for your class to tackle. "We're really talking about transformative practices," says Jamiella Brooks, an associate director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Pennsylvania. "That involves a lot of reflection and a lot of engagement in and out of the classroom."

Brooks has been working with China Jenkins, a faculty developer at Texas Southern University, and Carol Hernandez, a senior instructional designer at Stony Brook University, part of the State University of New York, on an article about how people who work at teaching and learning centers can prepare themselves to develop inclusion and equity

programming at their institution. “Let’s be honest,” says Jenkins. “Most of our centers for teaching and learning are run by predominantly white people, who may not be experienced in antiracist pedagogy or critiquing their own biases.”

The good news is that, whether you’re a professor or a faculty developer, preparing yourself for those conversations fits into what academics do well, namely learn. “The bad news is it’s going to be exhausting,” says Brooks. “It doesn’t matter who you are. You can be Black, Indigenous. With the history of this country, we have to understand what our role within the machine is.”

Faculty members can start by reviewing what they teach. That means learning more about the history of race and racism in this country, as well as the evolution of their disciplines. It means reviewing their syllabi to see who they cite as expert sources. It also involves examining how they engage their students of color, and whether those students can see themselves or their experiences reflected in the curriculum.

Jenkins, executive director of a center that focuses on teaching, enrichment, mentoring, and advising in Texas Southern's College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, says she sometimes gets pushback from professors. “A lot of time, STEM faculty will say, I just teach science, and a formula isn’t racist, or what does it have to do with race?” But she says, “any discipline can be woven into the history of anti-Blackness in this country.” Academics have explored, for example, how the algorithms in search engines can reinforce racism, and why the lack of people of color in economics hinders the field.

Brooks points to one astronomy professor who spends time talking in his class about the contributions of African astronomers, who are often left out of the history books. That’s not something that comes naturally to a lot of instructors. “It’s going to feel weird because, why are we having a history lesson in the middle of an astronomy lesson?” says Brooks. “But that’s the point.”

Instructors should also seek out advice, collaboration, and support. Imad, a professor of genetics, biotechnology, and bioethics and an expert on trauma-informed teaching, says that when discussing eugenics with her class in the past, she brought in faculty experts on

genetics and science education to help her navigate difficult conversations. The same holds true on the topic of racism. “It’s critical to recognize when you’re out of your element,” says Jenkins. “It’s highly emotional work. There’s a lot of fear involved in this.”

Partnerships can take many forms. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Center for Faculty Excellence ran a two-day workshop on equity in teaching last fall in collaboration with the Office for Diversity and Inclusion. The first day focused on the history of the campus, including its legacy of racism, while the second was dedicated to practical work. “That first day was a very important framing of the discussion,” says Viji Sathy, a teaching professor of psychology and neuroscience. “You can’t just sweep it under the rug.”

At Grand View, before the pandemic hit, Gannon organized a series of small focus groups with students of color, through the teaching and learning center. Students expressed concern about the curriculum, which is “extremely white, Western, and Eurocentric,” says Gannon, as well as about the lack of diversity in hiring practices. As at many colleges, Grand View’s student body is increasingly diverse while the faculty and staff remain predominantly white.

“Our students are telling us we need to do better,” he says. “And we are trying to do better.”

How you teach is as important as what you teach, these experts say. Inclusive teaching can go a long way toward resolving the concerns of students of color. It can also raise achievement overall and close gaps among students of different racial and ethnic groups, says Sathy, who has written extensively on the topic.

Inclusive teaching focuses on creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment, through such features as structured small-group discussions, regular check-ins with students, and a syllabus crafted with clear expectations.

At this moment, says Sathy, it’s particularly valuable to talk to students about how you can explore issues of race and diversity together. “I feel like every person in academia should be questioning how we know what we know,” she says, “and give students a chance to examine that.”

It’s also important to remember to approach the topic of race with humility and openness, for both you and your students. “Americans in general are just not racially literate,” says Cyndi Kernahan, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls who has

taught a popular course on the psychology of race and racism for about 20 years.

“We have been taught to think about racism as individual acts of meanness. That’s prejudice,” says Kernahan, who published a book last year based on her experience:

Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes From a White Professor.

“Racism is a much bigger system. That’s part of the clash now. Protesters want people to see this larger pattern, which can be almost invisible, especially to white people.”

“That’s a chasm you have to get over with your students,” says Kernahan, founding director of her campus's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. For faculty of color, she says, the topic is particularly fraught, because white students are more likely to challenge their credibility in general.

It also helps to ask students to read class materials in advance and write comments that you can review, to allow for private dialogue when needed. She recalls one student who compared Black Lives Matter to the Ku Klux Klan, an idea he had picked up from the people around him. She was able to discuss that idea with him one on one.

“They may sound clueless to you, and they may say things that are upsetting and shocking, especially white students,” she says. “But you have to meet that with compassion, without backing down from the facts.”

And be mindful of how you treat Black students and other students of color when addressing race and racism. Because she is a white professor teaching a course about racism, Kernahan says, she reaches out early to students of color. I have this scholarly expertise, she tells them, but I don’t have the lived experience that you do, and I want you to know that I see that. Also, you do not have to be a representative for the class.

She doesn’t ask them to respond, Kernahan says. The main point is that she wants them to know they’re recognized.

And if students of color are quiet on the topic in class? Don’t push. Imad, who was in a Baghdad middle school in 1991, when Operation Desert Storm broke out, says she stopped talking about her experiences to classmates in the United States at one point, “not because I don’t care, but it seemed like it was a story I was selling. And people were like, Tell me the next story.”

In short, say teaching experts: Prepare yourself, open a conversation with your students, acknowledge what you don't know, and be willing to listen and learn.

"This is just something you have to join in with," says Jenkins. "Don't be afraid of making mistakes. That's how you build allies. It's in the struggle. Come and struggle."

Have you taught about racism in your course? Have you changed your syllabus or course assignments to discuss problems of historic racism in your discipline? Where did you turn for advice, and what advice do you have for others? Write to me, at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, and your story may appear in a future newsletter.

Resources on Teaching About Race and Racism

Following are books, articles, and guides on teaching about race and racism, or on how to develop inclusive teaching strategies, recommended or written by some of the academics I talked to for this newsletter.

Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes From a White Professor, by Cyndi Kernahan (2019).

"Teaching Race, Racism, and Racial Justice: Pedagogical Principles and Classroom Strategies for Course Instructors," by M. Brielle Harbin, Amie Thurber, and Joe Bandy. *Race and Pedagogy Journal* (2019).

Teaching Race: How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge Racism, by Stephen D. Brookfield (2018).

"Barriers and Strategies by White Faculty Who Incorporate Anti-Racist Pedagogy," by Jennifer Akamine Phillips, Nate Risdon, Matthew Lamsma, Angelica Hambrick, and Alexander Jun. *Race and Pedagogy Journal* (2019).

"Race Matters," by David J. Asai. *Cell* (May 2020). This commentary looks at why students of color leave science at high rates and why it's important to change the culture of science.

Pedagogies of Care: Open Resources for Student-Centered and Adaptive Strategies in the New Higher-Ed Landscape contains material on teaching about race and racism (2020).

"Want to Reach All of Your Students? Here's How to Make Your Teaching More Inclusive," by Viji Sathy and Kelly A. Hogan. *Chronicle Advice Guide* (2019).

"How to Hold a Better Class Discussion," by Jay Howard. *Chronicle Advice Guide* (2019).

Antiracist Pedagogy Reading List, compiled by Andrea Aebbersold, director of faculty instructional development in the Division of Teaching Excellence and Innovation at the University of California at Irvine.

Jamiella Brooks has begun a list to highlight the accomplishments of educational developers who identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

—Beth

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