

Talking race in the classroom

The faculty learning community (or FLC) I facilitate looks at different kinds of narratives: the books we read, the stories we tell, and the larger cultural “storylines” that inform our understanding of ourselves and others. Race is an important part of those cultural storylines. In fact, race is talked about all the time, institutionally, in our program reviews—across our many campus narratives—but it is usually housed in language like “equity gaps” and “underperforming groups” and “problems with the AVC Scorecard.” In other words, race is talked about by and large as something negative and baffling. And in terms of any meaningful exploration or lasting campus-wide investment, it largely ends up being avoided altogether. Why does talking about race lead to such discomfort? Here is one of our Institutional Learning Outcomes:

Demonstrates an awareness and respect of the values of diversity, complexity, aesthetics and varied cultural expressions.

It would be awesome if someone changed the wording to “awareness of and respect for,” but in the mean time the concepts are still valuable. The world may be a bit hostile at the moment, but all the more reason to live that ILO.

I met with three members of my FLC—Tino Garcia (TG), Vejea Jennings (VJ), and Kathryn Mitchell (KM), all of whom teach and specialize in diversity studies—for a roundtable discussion on talking race in the classroom. I hope this discussion highlights all the opportunities we have to think more deeply, critically, reflectively, and compassionately in our role as educators.

—Mark Hoffer (MH)

Kathryn Mitchell:

To clarify, the term “race” is a misnomer because when society speaks of “race,” it is referring to ethnicity. Ethnicity is a part of culture, and “culturally responsible curriculum” is the term used in current pedagogy and is simply another way of presenting course material. Culture includes many things: ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion, family, and more. The key to culturally responsible curriculum is to offer students the

opportunity to understand course content through their own cultural context. Culture is the basis of learning and it shapes the thinking process. Each aspect of culture shapes the way a student understands course material. To promote student involvement and understanding, faculty need to create a learning environment in which all participants feel respected and connected. This develops a positive attitude towards learning and encourages students to participate in their own education. Learning experiences are then enhanced by critical thought and challenging material that include the student’s own perspective. Ultimately, students feel as if they are learning something valuable.

Vejea Jennings:

So much is about the consciousness of the instructor. It can actually be worse for the student if an instructor brings in material that meets some outside definition of what is “culturally responsible” and is not something the instructor is invested in or cares about. That material, with that kind of energy behind it, can make students feel singled out or tokenized.

Tino Garcia:

Yes, I think it’s important to think of the students’ perspectives and contexts, to think of them as whole people, who respond to things as both a receptive and a participating audience. Instructors may not be engaging as deeply with students in terms of the rest of their lives outside of the classroom, their connection to technology, their status as “new century students,” a phrase used by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Being fluent in multiple cultural contexts can help classroom dynamics. Students can respond very favorably to such efforts. Obviously some things will work better than others, but I would like to see more instructors jump in and try new things.

KM:

Instructors are learners too. They can create a more interesting classroom environment for everyone, including themselves, if they help students look at things from multiple perspectives. For example, a topic about stereotypically Black issues can turn into one about Latinx issues, depending on the individual student. So keep shifting the class conversations, and then talk about that very process of shifting with the students.

MH:

Can we talk for a minute about instructors who don't believe that they have opportunities to bring in, or talk about, or even think about, diversity in their classrooms?

VJ:

Instructors in subjects like math and science can bring in examples and sensibilities that illustrate diversity. I feel there is often this sense that a "vanilla" approach is somehow neutral, objective, normal, the default setting for presenting things in the classroom. If instructors understand their role in different terms, as a facilitator rather than a dispenser of information, that alone can change the dynamics in the classroom.

KM:

Many students see math or other subjects as isolated or disconnected from real world scenarios or sensibilities. The disconnect of ethnicity or diversity just adds to that. But instructors can foreground the real world applicability of the content and have students think about what happens in the classroom as helping them to succeed in their lives, and also in a diverse and complex world.

TG:

Yes, and students are bringing anxieties and stereotypes into their learning process. Those things are already there, whatever the subject. So it's important to talk about those because these perceptions can affect the learning environment. Students can get into this mental loop of conforming to stereotypes because expectations are powerful. If students feel that they have an individual stake in the classroom they might actually connect better with other students, as individuals brought together in a learning community. Relationships are important in all human settings, and the classroom is no exception. With more emphasis on that, and not necessarily on the grade or the end product of the course, more students, I think, have a better chance at succeeding.

MH:

What are your thoughts about using implicit bias testing, as a way for both students and instructors to recognize and confront stereotypes? Vejea, I know you've used Harvard University's Project Implicit test. I'm curious about your experience so far, and what you might want to share here with other faculty members.

VJ:

Utilizing any implicit association / bias testing in the classroom setting seems to necessitate intentionality, rigorous discussion, and debriefing after the experience.

The tests may aggravate and trigger complex reactions from student participants and can be a ripe opportunity for discussion. The tests are imperfect naturally and their usefulness is dependent on a facilitator's ability to allow for examination of the design elements, experience, and results. Without this, the testing experience can be off-putting and result in very little in terms of productivity and a raised awareness and consciousness of bias. The design almost leads all audiences to see bias in themselves or a certain subculture, but this is not an easy conclusion. The conversation must remain multi-faceted because the tests can be wildly reductive. To illuminate the subtle social ills but to also not vex the participants' sense of self or "political correctness" in the process can be more than challenging but most certainly worthwhile. I found it helpful to examine the impetus for the tests and even the scope of the results based on who chooses to participate. A successful experience may be better predicted if bias tests focusing on encountering objects and images not related to "hot topics" is conducted first to establish a general trend in associations and biases. This might prime the participants for a more productive conversation later in the experience.

KM:

Basically, self-aware individuals tend to have a more open mind about these sorts of discussions. It's like with FPD events on this and similar topics: the ones most likely to benefit from them are the ones who never come.

MH:

There are so many competing narratives and stereotypes that pop up. The crusading academic, clad in intellectual armor, hotly charging through a room. The conservative faculty member or student sensing liberal indoctrination in any college setting. The burnt-out employee who just wants to get through the work day with head down, eyes averted, avoiding any hint of conflict (which means any challenging or uncomfortable discussion). The lecture or the lesson or the event or the presentation that skims over or obscures or shuts down deeper questions like whose land, whose labor, whose unimaginable loss? The student who sees more than one text by an African American author on a 101 or 102 syllabus and asks the instructor if this is a specialty course (this has happened in my classes). The student, new to college, who can't believe that an instructor knows her name, cares about her writing, and facilitates a learning environment that is unlike anything she has experienced in high school. Bottom line, with race—and really anything else—nothing unsaid, invisible, neglected, or denigrated is ever healed or resolved. Or made better on a scorecard. *f*