

Reticent on Race:

Promoting Constructive Discussions about Race in a College Classroom

Many students assume that their instructors receive in-depth training in teaching. In reality, however, many professors learn through trial and error since doctoral programs often focus on how to conduct research. While an experiential approach has merit, teaching about race poses special challenges (Fox, 2014, Grineski et al., 2013). Although teaching evaluations can provide valuable feedback, factors such as student fatigue and disillusionment about the impact of comments, can limit what instructors learn about what works and what should be revised. In addition, even with the benefit of constructive criticism, *knowing* a course's weaknesses is only the first step in *addressing* them. As a result, there is a need for more qualitative data that allow students to express what *they* think creates a comfortable classroom setting conducive to reflecting on race.

Challenges of Teaching about Race

One of the more daunting aspects of teaching about race is the relative subtlety of common instances of racism in the 21st century. While institutional racism can be highlighted in various systems such as the criminal justice system (Gabbidon and Greene, 2016), the educational system (Leonardo, 2009), and employment (Watson et al., 2011), it is difficult for most white students to see either racism or white privilege as still relevant. Students are often unaware of racism that exists at an unconscious level, expecting it to be visible and intentional (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2014, Ghoshal et al., 2012, Scott, 2015). Furthermore, many white students from suburban areas live in bubbles where an environment of ample job opportunities, good public schools, escalating property values and low crime normalize white privilege, which to them is invisible (Gallagher, 2008). Manifestations of racism are even harder to discern if students have limited contact with people of color. White people who have a more racially diverse group of friends are more likely to oppose racism and work towards social justice (Spanierman et al., 2009).

Students upset by the elucidation of unearned advantages of whiteness may balk at taking responsibility for how white privilege disadvantages other races. But difficulties

are not just a result of an unawareness (and in some cases, denial) of the advantages of white privilege; instructors are also up against students' steadfast and heartfelt belief that they bear no responsibility for any racial inequality because they do not knowingly participate in racism (Sue, 2015). Although there is a significant literature that delineates specific exercises to teach about race (e.g., Dundes and Harlow, 2005, Harlow, 2009, Khanna and Harris, 2015), white students are especially uncomfortable with and resistant to learning about white privilege because they see it as a "personal attack," as if they are "one of the bad guys," and resent instructors' efforts to make them better people (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012, p. 907).

A list entitled *Denials through Deflection*, or "defensive preemptive strikes" (Sue, 2015, p. 136) provides an excellent summary of the challenges that instructors face. Examples include white students' perception that they are constrained by the need to be politically correct, alleged use of the "race card" by students of color, and claims of reverse discrimination. It is more comfortable for some white students to question the legitimacy of claims of racism, which can interfere with them having an open mind to points of view that seem to accuse them of having an unfair, unearned advantage. They may, for example, dismiss a peer as an angry Black man or woman in order to maintain a positive sense of self as a white person. In some cases, by identifying with an ethnic group, like Italian or Irish, white students can feel morally neutral, instead of seeing themselves as white and thus susceptible to white guilt (Sue, 2015).

In response to such challenges, this case study analyzes the success of an elective course that, for the reasons delineated above, is notoriously difficult to teach: Race and Ethnic Relations. The decision and preparation to assess this course began in early September in the fall semester of 2015, which predated the movement on campuses to introduce some kind of cultural competency course that grew following the resignation of University of Missouri president Tim Wolfe on November 9, 2015. Requiring such courses must be executed with caution, as students taking a course designed to increase racial tolerance clearly does not guarantee accomplishing this goal. John H. McWhorter expressed this very point in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial (November 28-29, 2015):

“[U]ndergraduates of all colors tend to wryly dismiss the ‘diversity’ workshops they had to attend at the start of freshman year as hollow exercises. No one on record has created a program or method on ‘racial sensitivity’ that would do a better job and transform minds in a new way. ‘Racial awareness training’ –the words resonate. But these programs are now eons old. More of these programs would be like thinking a car will run better with more gasoline.” (p. C2).

McWhorter also opines that the purpose of having white students recognize their privilege seems to be to make them feel good about themselves rather than to promote racial equality. White students who believe they recognize their privilege may also fail to truly understand race relations beyond their desire to assure themselves and others that they are not racist. Political correctness may result in institutional displays of efforts designed more to disassociate from racism than to enact changes that promote and achieve meaningful progress towards racial equality.

Subject of Case Study: Dr. Richard Smith’s Race and Ethnic Relations course

Although there are considerable limitations in what an instructor can accomplish in a full-semester course on Race and Ethnic Relations, this case study provides qualitative data that are the basis for suggestions for how to teach a course that students embrace. Each fall, Dr. Richard Smith teaches the course in which about 20 students are enrolled (21 in 2015), most of whom are sociology majors. Smith, an African American male who was a first-generation college student, grew up in Baltimore and is a graduate of McDaniel College where he now teaches. After earning his doctoral degree and teaching at a community college for three years, he joined the faculty as an Assistant Professor of Sociology in 2010. During his first five years at the college, students frequently shared their enthusiasm about the course in conversations with Dr. Smith’s four departmental colleagues. A number of graduating seniors reported that it had been their favorite course, and some suggested that it be required for all students. These male and female students were of different races, although unexpectedly, the majority of students who proposed that it be a required course were white males.

Methods

--Sample

In order to gain a greater understanding of what factors could explain the course's popularity, a white female colleague in her 20th year with the college's Department of Sociology, Dr. Lauren Dundes, conducted IRB-approved interviews of ten students about the Race and Ethnic Relations course in the department of Sociology at McDaniel College. McDaniel College is a small liberal arts college of 1,600 undergraduate students about 40 minutes northwest of Baltimore, Maryland. Many of the students come from high schools with small proportions of minority students. Most (74%) of McDaniel College students are white. In Westminster, where the college is located, 84% of the population is white.

Of the ten students interviewed, eight were current students and two students had taken the course the previous year. Most of the students were juniors and seniors (as it is an upper-level course). Of the current students, three were white females, one was a Latina female, two were white males, and two were African American students (one male, one female). The previous students from fall 2014 included one white male and one Black female. All volunteered to participate after Smith announced the opportunity to participate in a study about teaching race, with confidential interviews to be conducted by a colleague. Smith indicated particular interest in hearing from students who considered themselves to be politically conservative. All of the white students interviewed identified themselves during the interview as politically conservative and came from areas with very few people of color. The students who had taken the course the previous year heard about the project and volunteered to give feedback; the white male from the previous year was politically conservative and the Black female was politically liberal. In fall 2015, 52% of those in the course were students of color, far more than in the college in general (21%).

Interviews

The interviews were conducted individually in a private on-campus location. As part of the informed consent, students were told that results of the study would be shared with Smith only after the end of the semester and that they would be disclosed in a format that would not identify them. There were two interviews: an initial interview, about 3

weeks into the 14-week semester, and a follow-up interview, conducted about two weeks prior to the end of the semester. The length of the initial interview was based how much the student elected to share about the class and ranged varied from one hour to two and a half hours. Follow-up interviews were about 20-30 minutes.

The interview consisted of an open-ended discussion that started with Dundes asking students about where they were from, which set a conversational tone. The initial ice-breaking conversation was followed by Dundes saying that because in general, Race and Ethnic Relations can be a difficult course to teach, she and Smith had decided to collaborate to learn more than what is typically revealed from standard course evaluations about what does and does not work in a race class in particular.

In order to obtain qualitative exploratory data, Dundes asked students to respond to an open-ended probe: Tell me what you think about the course. This technique provided insight into factors that would not be apparent using a quantitative survey with set response categories. Although it is possible to have a confidential and anonymous survey in which students both select a response category *and* write answers to certain questions, it is well-known that the quality of such written data can be poor. In contrast, when there is a free-flowing conversation during which time an interviewer is writing notes, students may be more apt to provide in-depth details. They also receive affirmation from the interviewer that what they are saying is important by the interviewer's conversational tone and note taking which may prompt them to think more deeply about a topic.

Four Techniques for Teaching Race in a Way that Students Will Learn

Data are organized into four (somewhat interconnected) strategies in order to pinpoint specific student-identified elements of teaching about race. Smith intentionally employed these techniques to counter potential defensive or deflective responses. The student comments provide insight into the effectiveness of these techniques for those teaching about race.

Technique #1. Take time at the beginning of the semester to address the nature of the topic and how the class will be conducted.

Instructors should alert students to the difficulties of and expectations for taking a course about race and racism. Introducing the class to the nature of the topic must be the first step. Students should be reminded that racism is a hot button, divisive issue that is challenging to discuss. Therefore, Smith emphasizes upfront the potential for collective growth when a class takes on emotionally difficult and sometimes offensive material. Several students identified the importance of orientation to the structure and rules of the class:

Latina female (giving her recollection of how Smith prepared students on the first day of class): *Smith says: "I commend you for being here. We are going to talk about tough issues. But we're a family. We can be open and share. You are free to say what you want, although people might disagree with you and rebut you. But do feel welcome to speak your mind."*

By calling the class a family, Smith implies that students' opinions and input carry equal weight rather than Black student opinions carrying more weight (since Black-white relations are a primary focus of Smith's class). Helping students understand that they are a part of a community that is growing together lessens feelings of being isolated or defensive. As the above comment indicates, students are comforted when they feel that they can express their beliefs in a safe environment. Smith prioritizes making the students feel comfortable before going into uncomfortable discussions. He also reminds them that disagreements are an inevitable yet healthy part of class. However, students are also informed of Smith's strategy so they will be aware of his intentions. The students below express this point:

White female: *Smith says, "I'm going push buttons; I'm going to spark an argument."*

White female: *He tells us: "I want you to understand what's going on in society and to form an informed opinion." His focus was to make sure we understood both sides of all the issues.*

These white female students appreciated that Smith's goal was for them to be more knowledgeable, and contribute to a dialog, not to be convinced of a particular viewpoint. This helped them recognize that their voices were an integral part of the classroom experience. Smith believes that these assurances are necessary to temper students' initial defensive and deflective responses. These white students may have been relieved that Smith's agenda was increased awareness of the multi-faceted nature of racial issues as opposed to a desire to win them over to a politically liberal viewpoint. Although these students may have remained guarded initially, the subsequent techniques served to reinforce the sincerity of his goal for collective growth, and not just the political transformation of conservative white students.

Technique #2. Provide a comfortable atmosphere where students learn from peers.

All of the interviewees confirmed the importance of intragroup contact that is facilitated by having a diverse class (Densen, 2009). Students tend to be more open to issues of race that their peers have experienced compared to news coverage of strangers or what is presented in written course material. Even in classes that are primarily white, Smith endeavors to elicit a variety of perspectives so that other students can challenge each other, minimizing the need for him to step in as the arbiter of racial propriety.

Black male: Smith is the moderator who integrates opinions of students. When students are racist, he relies on the class to check the racism. This makes it unnecessary for Smith to step in. I like this way of handling the discussions because it's more like real life. It's important to have others be socialized to respond to racism. You're not always going to have a professor there to check racism. It's good for students to learn to do it.

Black female: Professors should step in when a student is visibly upset or when a student presents incorrect facts, but not when a student gives an offensive opinion. Dr. Smith understands this. If someone is offensive, he steps in and mediates and says, "You may perceive it this way, but others may see it as offensive."

White female: *I watched the Ferguson riots on various media but it was different to see peers react, when it's close to home for them. Their anger caused me to think more deeply about the riots and why they occurred. Although I'm not affected, I now see how other people are affected. It became real when I saw people my age that I know respond, with passion, because of assumptions and stereotypes that are untrue. I can learn it so many times, as related to civil rights, slavery, but I will never really be able to relate because it has nothing to do with my life. I know I can always wear a hoodie without worrying about being followed in stores. But I learn when people express how they feel victimized.*

Instructors need to balance providing an opportunity for students to step into a teaching role by sharing their perspective and insights with the security of knowing that the instructor will intervene as needed. As indicated by the white female above, peers make racism real. Hearing their fellow classmates' fears and concerns facilitates understanding and even sympathizing with groups who are affected by systemic racism. Yet students of color also seem to need assurances that the instructor knows where to draw the line in peers' self-expression. While Black students want to hear what their white peers really think, they also need to know that if they feel that a student's comments become "offensive," that the instructor will speak up for them and convey this to the insensitive student, without requiring students of color to fill the role of defending their group against racist comments.

Technique #3. Rather than tell the students, guide and inform them.

Smith discusses various perspectives on race and provides background information without trying to convince students of a particular perspective. This also avoids oversimplification of complex issues. The end goal should not be that students become passionate or politicized about a particular position but rather that they become well informed. Smith intentionally teaches in a way that is disarming, where student opinions matter and can be discussed. However, it is not a free for all. Students indicate that they are not just learning the opinions of the professor but that they instead are

receiving facts about racial issues in the US that can help to broaden their understanding of the subject matter.

White male: His way of teaching encouraged me to make up my own mind rather than me feeling pushed into thinking a certain way.

White male: Smith encourages students to form their own educated opinions. He's not like other professors who only promote a left wing position.

Students are more open to dealing with a sensitive topic such as race when they feel they are being encouraged to think, explore, and consider not just the information that is being presented but also their own thoughts about race. This sense of ownership of this process emerged most clearly with white males (quoted above) who may feel that they are unfairly blamed without justification and may be more sensitive to seeming attempts to indoctrinate students in ways that vilify their demographic group. White females, however, focus more on making everyone in the class feel valued:

White female: He is so open to hearing about what other students have to say. He is willing to hear all opinions. He also allows the conversation to happen, to unfold. He doesn't totally re-direct it when it gets heated; instead, he comes up with and poses questions based on what students are saying.

White female: He does not contribute his own views, just facts and anecdotes. He does not try to put his own spin on the information. He encourages students to analyze information presented.

White female: No one felt like an outsider or was made to feel guilty. He's a great mediator who doesn't have an endpoint in mind.

Smith also recognizes that students will feel threatened if they hear only a lecture that goes against everything they believe or were told to believe. Instead, he prioritizes

conveying that their opinions are valued but then quickly moves to if and how these views can be substantiated. For example, several students emphasized the openness that Smith displays in his classroom and how that influences their ability to grasp sensitive information.

Black male: I like how it's not lecture based which leaves things open-ended. When a student says something, he won't ever say it's wrong but makes the person who said it think about it. He gets students to think about the basis for their view so that they will question it. He is a peer facilitator; he lets students draw own conclusions after providing facts. They start looking for a pattern, drawing parallels and making the connection themselves. If we have to memorize facts to regurgitate, we won't retain it. We have to learn to think for ourselves. The best way to change white students' thinking about race is to let them make their own connections and conclusions. It's a process that needs time to unfold.

Black female: He does not appease those who are upset by telling them what they want to hear. Students actually want to hear both sides. Other professors agree with the side that's dominant so they don't rock the boat.

As a result, students feel like they form their own opinions based on the information discussed. By providing the students with engaging quantitative and qualitative data about racial inequality, Smith creates a new learning experience, avoiding a diatribe about how white people are the problem in society. The Black female (above) may also fear that instructors who tell students of color what they want to hear simply further alienates white students while black students fail to gain a new perspective. By challenging all students to engage with each other and think critically, instructors are more likely to minimize disillusionment with and fatigue about racial issues.

Students' participation in their own education about racism seems to be more effective than them being simply observers and scribes of information. The following student comments show that teaching about race should be a conversation, not a presentation, and a dialogue *with* the professor, not a monologue *by* the professor. This

perspective echoes the philosophy of Paulo Freire who believes that students should be co-creators of knowledge, and not empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 1970). Indeed, the notion that a purported authority has definitive answers to difficult questions can stymie a productive discussion (Chang and Conrad, 2008).

White female: *Dr. Smith provides open-ended questions where students can go in many different directions. He indicates that there isn't an endpoint where students can find all of the answers, but rather the answers must be arrived at as a society. He helps students get clarity on their views.*

White female: *We are programmed that a teacher talks at you. But with Smith, you want to go to class because he doesn't talk at you, but with you. It's more of an exchange of information.*

Black male: *It's kind of like the student is the professor. Smith lets students discuss the material, and when he does weigh in, his opinion doesn't have more weight than the students. In turn, the students feel it's ok to disagree with him. Students don't want to feel forced to think a certain way about race. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. So while other professors seem more likely to try to "force the horse to drink," Smith will take the students to the water, but then back off and let them decide whether to drink.*

It is evident from the students' responses that Smith does not want them to feel forced in any way. This is possible because of the open-ended questions. Instead of providing solutions, Smith allows students to suggest solutions themselves. Students then feel like they are a part of a conversation rather than just passively listening to a lecture. It is important to trust students to arrive at a conclusion with minimal guidance.

White male: *Smith respects and trusts students to make up their own minds. Students do not like it when a professor is pushing them a certain way. By not pushing them, it avoids a barrier and makes him more approachable.*

White male: *Smith clearly has opinions but he never goes against what a student says. His job is to moderate, and keep things calm. He will take your point and try to show why the point could be racist with facts and history that give students insight. It's different from other professors because he doesn't ever raise his voice. He's very mellow and calm. He doesn't show emotion very much, but still shows passion with how much he knows and with his command of the material. He always has information on the topic.*

These white students see Smith as approachable and capable of hiding his emotions, traits that Smith aspires to convey. Although there could be a cost in terms of how students of color react to his seeming disinterest, at least one student of color understood the rationale for this strategy:

Black female: *Students are comfortable disagreeing with him, more than with other professors. It's because of his personality; he's calm. He sets the tone that determines the comfort level. He never rants. Students have no fear of being attacked in class; it is a very safe atmosphere. If you disagree with him, he won't come back at you with more questions, and won't challenge you. Instead, he tries to see it from your perspective. If a student is racist, he repeats or reiterates back what the student said. This gives the impression that he's not judgmental. He is always very approachable, friendly. It's better that other students respond to racism. He is right to only come in if and when necessary. He should not risk alienating students who need to be taught.*

When the Black female (above) says that Smith “*gives the impression that he's not judgmental,*” she implicitly expresses an understanding of the difficulty of swaying white students and the need to *appear to* validate white students' views in order to broaden their understanding of racism. She acknowledges the risks of “alienating” white students. She understands that the instructor must ensure that white students are comfortable, even though this deference to their comfort level could be seen as another manifestation of

white privilege. Yet the wisdom of these practical realities of teaching about race do not appear to be lost on a number of the Black student interviewees.

Technique #4. In order to keep students open to dialogue, do not make white guilt a focal point.

Although white students must become cognizant of their privilege, it may be counterproductive to elicit feelings of guilt (Nurenberg, 2011). Teaching about racism without making students feel criticized enhances the effectiveness of such efforts (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012). This is so critical because teaching about race can be offensive to others. When students feel guilty, they can become offensive, sad or even apathetic. One student provided an example of how Smith sidesteps white guilt:

Latina female: Dr. Smith as an African American enhances the class because he has more insight into struggles that he experiences firsthand. This allows him to use humor to lighten the mood, without seeming insensitive, especially when things get tense. He doesn't blame white people—he explains without blaming anyone. He stays calm, non-accusatory and never implies that white people are bad.

For example, he described a Black woman who suffered a hardship that he said some white people found funny. But when he was talking about it, he just said, "Some people found this funny" rather than saying, "Some white people found this funny." It was the same thing when we discussed the Confederate flag. He talked about how some people defend it, not that some white people defend it. He seems to be conscious of making sure that white students don't feel attacked or judged.

It's clear that he respects all perspectives, including theirs. He stresses that he understands how students arrive at their point of view. When white students blamed the Black Lives Matter movement when a Texas sheriff got killed, Dr. Smith let the class discuss it without cutting anyone off. Afterwards he said, "I'm glad this discussion happened. Thank you for sharing."

Then he delved into the background and history of the topic. He talked about students' points without saying if they were right or wrong. He tries in discussions to equally validate both sides. He emphasizes putting information out there and not pushing a particular view.

Because students come into the classroom with strong beliefs often inculcated in them by their parents, many students are particularly sensitive to outright contradiction of these beliefs and respond poorly to such tactics. Instead, after students comfortably voice their views, instructors can then begin to guide students in critically assessing their beliefs based off the new and accurate information presented. They may realize that while their view is important to them, it may not be accurate. This is accomplished, however, when students do not feel attacked but instead are guided on a journey to an answer based on evidence and critical thinking:

White female: Dr. Smith shows that we have a system that is run by white people. But since we are a product of our system, it seems less like he's blaming white people and more about a structure that is larger than individuals' actions. It's hard to change a system which is why it takes so long to make change happen.

Too often, white students perceive discussions of race as personal, specifically about them because they are white. By helping students to understand that they are part of a racialized system that benefits white Americans over others, it lessens the sense of guilt, and helps them to look beyond themselves and delve into the problem. Additionally, it helps white students bond with each other as well as feel connected to Smith as a professor. If students are relaxed and believe that their professor supports and holds nothing against them, they will be more willing to listen, contribute, and learn about race and racism. There is a care factor that helps students open up to hearing information that differs from their viewpoint:

White male: It seems like he cares about students as people. I can tell because he's upbeat. He always seems happy to see students. He also doesn't convey his

own views on a topic. Students feel closer to him because he doesn't make them feel bad for being white. Students feel like they share a similar perspective with him; they feel a connection.

This contrasts with social science classes where it's clear that female professors are feminists. It's harder to feel the connection when you know you don't see the world in the same way. In these classes, it feels like as a male, you are under suspicion of contributing to the problems of sexism.

If a professor manages to not show or minimize any bias, then students feel more comfortable expressing views and less like the professor is trying to influence their thinking. Instead it's a sign of respect for students because he is trusting them, letting them think for themselves.

When professors give opinions, then doing that taints the facts they present. It affects the connection with the professor because when a student's view is at odds with a professor's, they have less common ground and are less able to relate to the professor, and then less open to different ways of thinking. Dr. Smith sticks to facts versus opinion. Yet he's still passionate—but not in a way that makes him seem biased. Even when he talks about racism he has experienced, his tone is matter of fact.

Smith was pleasantly surprised that he is seen as both passionate *and* able to stick to facts over opinions (according to the above-student's comments). The interview data from this study confirm his commitment to ensuring that all students feel respected, never disparaged, reflecting a conscious effort to ensure that he continues to be seen as a credible and persuasive authority, a teaching tenet that is highly recommended (see Hackman, 2005).

What Students Learn

While the techniques described above have a strong focus on creating a comfortable classroom climate, their utility depends on students gaining insight. To assess this goal, Dundes asked interviewees: What did you get out of the class? Student responses revealed that taking the class was eye opening.

White male: *I realize that it's easier to be white--less stigma. I see this from statistics about jobs and how Blacks and whites do not have the same chances because of different privileges.*

White female: *I have increased knowledge, especially about history, even with my background in history. I loved it. I'm sad it's over. I want a class that's Part II. I always felt safe, and never intimidated. I now reject stereotypes because of all the class discussions and wait to judge a racially-charged situation and fully hear both sides before making a judgment. I will not immediately think someone is just pulling the "race card" or overreacting.*

Now I feel like I know people of color and can relate to them, and have a greater understanding of what they experience. I am now more likely to approach someone who's a person of color to become friends. This is especially important for me as a person who is not from a diverse area. This class should be required because it bridges the divide. It forces you to talk about issues and pushes your comfort zone.

White male: *I now have greater awareness of issues and examples of racism. A diverse class is hugely important. It resonates more to hear from classmates because I know the person who experiences racism as opposed to in a film, you don't know if the supposed victim doesn't like white people or is exaggerating. From peers, it's more credible.*

White male: *Dr. Smith is a great mediator and unifier. The class broadened my acceptance of other people and my understanding of other cultures and their struggles. I can relate more to them and can connect their struggles to my own. Having a diverse class was critical because it helped connect all the ideas together. Dr. Smith melded different students' perspectives despite strife that contributed to me getting a different point of view. I can now recognize white privilege. I had always thought that all it took was hard work and determination*

to get ahead, and now I realize it's not that simple.

White students were pushed out of their comfort zone, enlightened, and experienced a change in their racial belief systems. Students of color reported learning about the connection between historical and contemporary racial issues as well as gained a greater understanding of others' perspectives and a measure of optimism about progress on inter-racial understanding:

Black male: I liked getting the historical background. It gave me hope to see how even students who started off racist began to "get" it. I also can see how if I were a white person with limited exposure to Black people, I might see things the same way they do.

Latina female: I'm happy to say I learned quite a bit about our racial history. What gives me more joy, however, and I'm sure Dr. Smith shares the same sentiment, is that I was able to see numerous white students evolve from a sort of ignorant mindset about race into well-informed individuals.

Although students undoubtedly attempted to put a positive spin on their experience, the data confirm what had been circulating anecdotally about the worth of the class. Furthermore, Smith's ability to reach students of different races and sexes alike suggest that his techniques are worth emulating.

Discussion

Any instructor who teaches race can attest that white students tend to be defensive and/or anxious talking about race and are often too inhibited to express themselves or do so in a manner that is tentative and ambiguous (Sue, 2015). Guidance on how to counter such reticence varies in approach. In one case, when a student was upset that the oppression of women was being overlooked in a class discussion about race, the following response for the moderator was recommended:

[T]he intensity by which you expressed yourself made me feel that my points on racism were being dismissed and that issues of racism were unimportant to you. (Sue, p. 228)

This approach contrasts with that of Smith. A mediator should be an objective third party. A student's contribution should not be assessed on the basis of how the moderator feels about the student's input. Moderators should not take sides or become emotional. Their role is to provide accurate information and to encourage and facilitate discussion, especially with sensitive topics like race. On the other hand, appeasement is also counterproductive. By prioritizing classroom harmony, in-depth analysis of racial conflict may be compromised to maintain positive feelings. Any curricula that seem to be above critique risk creating a doctrinaire and prescriptive classroom environment (Hackman, 2005).

Promoting open dialogue allows students to acknowledge and explore their thoughts about race. Without deconstructing students' feelings, the "emotional roadblocks" (Sue, 2015, p. 145) will continue to obstruct productive race talk. Yet if instructors start off urging white students to acknowledge their white privilege, then they dictate at the outset what students are supposed to believe and impede students' own exploration of issues (McWhorter, 2015). As data in this case study suggest, students should learn to think for themselves; an instructor who deprives them of that right to assess the evidence and make an informed decision undermines the process of students reconsidering their own long-held beliefs.

These data provide not only guidance for how to teach about race, but also suggest that various teaching techniques may resonate differently based on students' race and gender. White men seem especially likely to value making up their own minds and drawing independent conclusions. Because some enter the class feeling vulnerable as white males, the ability to maintain their sense of autonomy and create their own perspective and narrative may be paramount. White women seem to be particularly sensitive to how classmates feel during a discussion and value the avoidance of rancor and the promotion of civility. Black women sought engagement and were less concerned about the tone; heated discussion and hurt feelings may be acceptable if a vibrant discussion ensues. Black men implied that racial conflict can be neither fully explored

nor solved in class because of the scope of the problem. These observations, however, do not tell us what or how much students gain from the course, but rather hint at what aspects they value most.

Limitations

The sample was biased because all of the students in the course had chosen to enroll, although all of the white students interviewed identified as conservative. We must also take into account that interviewees were current students and despite confidentiality, perhaps thought that more positive feedback might improve their grade. Interviewees also may have avoided negative assessments out of fear that their grade might suffer. In addition, they might have tailored their feedback because of the possibility of having a future course with the interviewer, Dundes (also a professor in the department of sociology). In fact, all but three students had previously taken a course with Dundes. While this factor could bias the results, it was also helpful in increasing the comfort level that in turn may have led to greater candor.

Faculty members' familiarity with students on a campus of 1,600 undergraduate students may also have resulted in students having greater trust in the stated agenda of understanding more about how to teach a subject that is a sensitive topic. An outsider conducting the interviews might have been suspected of having a different agenda, or assessing the value of the course, rather than as someone interesting in learning about how to teach about race. An additional limitation is that the course enrollment is mostly Sociology majors taking the course to fulfill the major, or due to interest in the topic or because of wanting to take a class with Smith.

Perhaps the most significant limitation is that students might assume that given the small sample size, what they say could possibly be linked to them. While this is a serious limitation, it is important to remember that the initial impetus for the project was to determine reasons why the class was so commonly praised, for five consecutive years. Students had already highly rated the class in both the course evaluations and informal feedback; the goal was to gain a deeper understanding of its acclaim.

The interviews were conducted at a time when all of the students had heard about and discussed the Freddie Gray riots in Baltimore, a 40-minute drive away from campus.

On a more national level, students' comments were likely affected by the Black Lives Matter movement and the resignation of the University of Missouri president after student protests surrounding claims that the administration had condoned racist incidents on campus. Thus, the tumult in the fall of 2015 likely affected student reactions, although it is unclear whether this would make them more sympathetic to claims of inequality or whether some might have believed that the movement to end inequality had gone too far, epitomized in the term "college crybullies," (Kimball, 2015).

Conclusion

Students want to feel like they are being educated, not force-fed. Learning to develop and defend their own opinions will help prepare them for their lives beyond college. Instructors with an agenda stifle organic conversation because they may either consciously or inadvertently control the conversation so that they reach the desired endpoint. Students want to feel as if they can give valuable input, but instructors that have already decided where the class is headed deny students the chance to shape the class, feel engaged, confident, and empowered. Navigating and participating in a conversation about race is an important skill that is also an antidote to the dearth of productive dialogue in this arena.

Similarly, when instructors use PowerPoint slides or handouts that delineate the take-home points (or conclusions), there is less for students to add to the conversation because the endpoint is already outlined, complete with information that bolsters the instructor's viewpoint. Students also may think that these slides include objective information that they will encounter on exams. As a result, students may infer that their input cannot affect the course trajectory and feel disempowered and disconnected. Students appreciate the ability to draw their own conclusions and to hone their critical thinking skills.

Too many white students are uneasy about engaging on the topic, side-stepping their discomfort by considering it a subject matter for people of color to discuss and address. In order for students to care about phenomena such as racism, students need fewer degrees of separation between themselves and events. Peers from a variety of backgrounds help make this possible, an advantage of having a diverse student body.

When students take the lead and navigate a discussion of race with peers who are different, they gain valuable skills.

Engaging in dialogue is only a first step. Even when white students do recognize their privilege, they are faced with the quandary of what to do about it. Because of the gulf between awareness and action, there remains much work to do in promoting activism. Making white people more conscious of racism is a key first step in curbing racist ideologies and practices. Successful courses about race and ethnicity plant the seeds for such change.

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