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Black Lives Matter at BSU: Reflections on the Spring Teach-In and Town Hall Meeting

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SPECIAL SECTION. BLACK LIVES MATTER AT BRIDGEWATER STATE

Reflections from BSU's Black Lives Matter Teach-In and Town Hall Meeting



**Christy Lyons Graham,
Associate Professor in
Counselor Education
and Teach-In Organizer**

Last winter, I organized
a Black Lives Matter
Teach-In and follow-
up town hall meeting
on the campus of

Bridgewater State University. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an activist movement that began in July 2013, when George Zimmerman was acquitted of charges in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin. BLM campaigns against the violence and systemic racism directed toward African Americans. The overarching goal of the teach-in was to raise awareness and promote constructive dialogue around the issues raised by the BLM movement.

The teach-in was held in conjunction with similar events on three other campuses in Massachusetts. While this was the first event of its kind and new territory for most, more than 70 BSU full-time and part-time professors across many disciplines eagerly volunteered to participate by infusing a BLM-related topic into their courses during that week. I was astonished by the outpouring interest shown during the planning phase of the event. Many participants had had no experience in facilitating dialogue around social justice issues, but chose to take on the challenge.

As the teach-in volunteer organizer, I had the privilege of reading scores of email messages from volunteer faculty participants enthusiastically detailing their lesson plans. I was both honored to be privy to such creative intellectual prowess and proud of my colleagues for taking this on without hesitation. In addition to those from faculty, I also received email indicating interest from librarians and staff. I had not considered how Maxwell Library could be involved, for example, but librarian Pamela Hayes-Bohanan voluntarily put together a MaxGuide that included resources for the teach-in. Additionally, staff from the Center for Multicultural Affairs and the GLBTA Pride Center organized and hosted their own related events during the teach-in week. Several student-led organizations held their own events as well. It was a campus-wide endeavor to raise awareness about Black Americans being systematically deprived of basic human rights and dignity and to engage in dialogue around ways to contribute meaningfully toward the eradication of this social condition.

One week after the teach-in, a follow-up town hall meeting was held. Several faculty, staff, and students volunteered in advance to help facilitate discussion around the Black Lives Matter issues they had discussed in classes and the events they held during the teach-in. The meeting was well-attended, despite the fact that many students and faculty had schedule conflicts. Following the establishment of ground rules, group leaders were assigned and the 100 or so students were divided into nine groups, each with a volunteer facilitator. The groups began their discussions and remained in constructive dialogue for 45 minutes. Some shared their own personal experiences with overt racism and micro-aggressions. Others shared their experiences of witnessing such things. Many talked about the fact that facilitated and constructive conversations needed to happen more often on campus both in and outside of classrooms. The town hall meeting ended with a collective pledge to speak up about racism and injustice. The event was an intense and powerful culminating experience following the Black Lives Matter Teach-In.

For some time following the teach-in week, I continued to receive email from those who wanted to share their experiences. I encouraged faculty to write about them. What follows are excerpts from narratives written by four participating faculty

members. These pieces illustrate the variety of approaches to and experiences of incorporating BLM issues into academic courses across disciplines, and the real value that can be derived from doing so.



**Polina Sabinin,
Assistant Professor,
Mathematics**

In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama said “if we walk away [from complex conversations about race] now, if we simply

retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for *every* American” [emphasis added]. Indeed, the Black Lives Matter Teach-in provided the BSU faculty the opportunity to come together and collectively engage in this conversation, to engage our students in the conversation, and to help create a safe place where we can think deeply about the world around us. The Black Lives Matter Teach-In also reminded us that when we come together we are better at solving problems.

In mathematics education, whether you look at state standards or powerful position papers, equity and equal access are central principles formulated to guide teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators. Yet, the achievement gap between the average mathematics scores of Black and white fourth- and eighth-grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remains at 24 points for nine-year olds and 32 points for 13-year olds (on a 0-500 scale) (www.nationsreportcard.gov). More recently, however, educators have

turned their focus from the achievement gap to the underlying opportunity gap that exists for students of color.

My goal for the Black Lives Matter Teach-In was to engage the students in my Mathematics for Elementary Teachers classes in a discussion about the opportunity and achievement gaps and the effects they have on our society. In preparation for the Teach-In class in late February, I asked each student to “find two statistics about race in education: achievement gap, funding gap, class size, statistics about race of teachers/students, anything you think is important to a conversation about race in education.” The statistics they brought with them on the day of the BLM Teach-in underscored the differences in suspension rates, drop-out and graduation rates, hiring rates, upper-level course availability, NAEP and SAT scores, per student funding, availability of early childhood education, percentage of black teachers, and teacher turnover. I collected their statistics and displayed them on the document camera. We read through each one. It was clear from the students’ reactions that this experience was sobering and sometimes unexpected. I quickly grouped the statistics into six major themes and split the class into six groups. Each group received index cards focusing on one theme (for example, drop-out and graduation rates, quality of available education, or achievement on exams).

The “theme groups” had to determine if their statistics described a problem or a strength. (There were no strengths.) They had to discuss what exactly the problem was, why it existed, and for whom it is a problem. Finally, I asked the groups to reflect on what they as students and future teachers could do to help fix the problem. I spent time with each group listening to their thoughts, concerns, and plans for action.

Two observations struck me the most. I noticed that many students made great efforts to respectfully engage in this conversation. They worked hard to choose the best words, stumbled over sensitive topics, and showed genuine discomfort if they realized that something “did not come out right.” The students were clearly not just trying to be politically correct, but were genuinely putting a tremendous amount of effort into

being considerate, respectful, and just. A number of students told me after class that this was the first opportunity that they had had to speak publicly (beyond family and friends) about race in education.

My second observation was that the discussions were centered on social justice, on the unfairness of achievement and opportunity gaps to the low-scoring groups of people, and on how we can do better for Black students. What I realized (standing in the middle of six groups of students and attempting to take in all of their conversations at once) was that conversations about

race and education almost always center on justice, ethics, and fairness. Those are important, powerful, and essential aspects of the conversation! At the same time, we often miss the value of diversity to our classrooms and our society—diversity of experiences, beliefs, world views, strengths, skills, talents, interests, and passions. We need diversity of thought to solve the challenges we face. Cutting groups of people out of any aspect of society is not only morally wrong, but also makes society weaker. Black Lives Matter because together we are stronger! Coming together with all our differences is the only way we will be able to solve our toughest challenges.



**Sarah Thomas,
Assistant Professor,
Secondary Education
and Professional
Programs**

#BLM
#BlackLivesMatter
#AllLivesMatter.

When the call for participation in a Black Lives Matter teach-in came out at the end of the Fall 2015 semester, I read it with curiosity and cautious enthusiasm. As the mother to two children of African-American and Caucasian descent, I find myself hyper-aware of anything that has to do with Black Lives Matter and am cognizant that this is an area where my bias may cloud my judgment. Yet, as a professor of Education, I recognize the importance of providing opportunities for my students to discuss current events and their impact on the world. It is because of this that I took the opportunity to participate in the teach-in with the students in my HSED 414/ MSED 451 (Strategies for Teaching in the High School/Middle School) English course.

The 11 students in the class were taking their final course before venturing into the world of student teaching and one course outcome was to become familiar with varied formats for providing remedial and multicultural instruction in schools. It seemed serendipitous that the outcomes for the course aligned with the teach-in and I was excited to share this opportunity with my students.

Since this course teaches strategies for teaching English, I asked the students to bring in a piece of writing (fiction or non-fiction) from an African-American writer and discuss how and why they would use this piece when teaching their own classes. After discussion about the parameters of the assignment the question arose, "Could we use a writer from Africa?" The answer was a resounding "Yes!" Who am I to suggest that someone like Chinua Achebe did not fit the bill? I sensed excitement and discomfort with my students. As English majors, the students wanted to provide what they considered "authentic" voices to their readings and, for some of them, not being Black may have seemed disingenuous.

However, as their professor and one who has worked in very diverse districts, I saw the teach-in as an opportunity to show them that providing a voice for everyone is something they can and should do. In this class of 11, only one identified as a minority. A 2015 study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that only 17.3% of teachers in urban districts identified as minorities, even though the schools' minority student population made up 44.1%.

While this may mean that teachers can't always identify with their students, it does not prevent them from creating inclusive classrooms where everyone's voice counts.

On the day of the teach-in, an undercurrent of electricity could be felt in the classroom as we sat in a circle—"What would the others think about my choice?" "Could my idea for a lesson plan really work?" It was as if I could see the wheels turning in their brains. We began with an overview of the assignment and I could sense that the students were anxious to share their ideas with their classmates. We were treated to poems by Langston Hughes and introduced to *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine. Students shared their favorite Maya Angelou poems and we felt the continued power of *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker. Students shared their ideas for writing assignments, research projects, and group activities with each other. Discussions about the appropriateness of one poem versus another dominated conversations and soon we began to venture into a discussion about language and the current political climate and what we, as teachers, can do to help students feel safe in their classrooms. One student remarked that he didn't want to be the white teacher discussing the use of the N-word in *Huck Finn* for fear that he may offend some of his students. Another asked her classmates if they were uncomfortable, as white men and women, discussing topics such as police brutality and racial profiling. And one student brought up the unfortunate, but all

too real, scenario of working with colleagues who have a dislike of minorities and what to do and say as a new teacher. The conversations were not easy, but they were necessary in that they opened my students' eyes to the realities that teachers face every day and the importance of providing an opportunity for all voices to be heard, and heard fairly.

Before long, the three-hour class was almost over and the students were given an opportunity to write a short reflection about the experience. Across the board, the students stated they felt much more prepared to discuss difficult topics as student teachers and they were appreciative of the opportunity to learn what their classmates were thinking. One student remarked that the teach-in was by far the best class he had ever had while at BSU and its impact would last a lifetime! And while we didn't come up with any concrete answers to their questions, the teach-in provided the students with an opportunity to be honest about their fears with their classmates and themselves. In doing so, I believe they will be better teachers because they will create classroom communities that value everyone, despite differences, whether in skin color, religion, sexual orientation or learning differences. And as the mother of a six-year old son who is just beginning to question why his skin is darker than his Caucasian father's, the knowledge that these future teachers are prepared to create a welcoming classroom community for everyone gives me comfort beyond belief.



Brian Payne, Associate Professor, History

The events of the past few years confirm a terribly unfortunate truth: racial tension is a persistent fact of American society. As a historian, I can't

challenge that idea; the pages of history show us that racial tension has only changed in its level of severity, or, perhaps more accurately, in the level of attention we've paid to its severity. When teaching race

relations in history classes, whether they be introductory surveys or advanced courses, it is often difficult to put anything other than a negative, condemnatory spin on it. Yet, such an approach is problematic. First, history already suffers from a reputation of being a bit of a downer. Where once it might have been taught in universities as a story of the march of progress, today it is just as often pitched as a story of society's mistakes. Perhaps this is an appropriate backlash to generations of positive and nationalistic presentations of the glorious American past, but it still doesn't do much to temper the

pessimism among so many of our students. Second, when we present racism as a truism it doesn't project much "hope" into the narrative, something most of us are looking for. Often, students walk away from this type of a presentation even more jaded and pessimistic than they were when they first came in (a real feat in itself).

That said, most historians, and certainly all of those here at Bridgewater State University, don't believe in truisms. We normally understand that culture—and racism *is* a culture—is a deeply complex and confusing construction. Racism is a culture constructed within a certain historical context, normally one where economic inequality, political disenfranchisement, and social violence exist. But more often racism is the product of a lack of awareness of the "other," itself generated by exclusion, isolation, and segregation that limits contact between different ethnic groups. Helping students understand this process of cultural construction doesn't do much for charging them up with an unbending idealism for change and a high-octane enthusiasm to make that change, but it might help them understand why so many people still seem so focused on the differences among us.

When the idea of having a campus-wide teach-in on Black Lives Matter emerged during the winter recess, I thought it was a natural fit for me to include this in my History of Immigration and Ethnicity class. I had already committed myself to reconstructing the course to spend more time on the "ethnicity" part and less time on the "immigration" part. In previous renditions of the class, I focused mainly on demographic and policy history of immigration in the United States. This time around I wanted to focus more on the culture of ethnic diversity. Adding a Black Lives Matter component seemed easy enough; however, my assumptions were quickly displaced by panic and fear of having no idea of how it would work.

For a specific focus I decided on the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North between 1900 and 1930. The initial reason for this focus was more practical than intellectual. There are a lot of primary sources on the Great Migration that are easily accessible via a number

of online databases and published readers. These sources are also ideal because of their variety. Northern businesses placed ads for workers in southern newspapers, southern Blacks wrote letters to northern Black newspapers asking for advice, migrants wrote home encouraging others to leave, northern cities passed ordinances segregating the new Black population, and, perhaps most interesting to the students, the new urban Black population produced songs, poetry, plays, art, novels, and stories most often celebrated as the "Harlem Renaissance." With such a diversity of sources, I thought, it would be easy to find something that everyone could enjoy reading.

Once I got into teaching the lesson, however, the students collectively made an observation that I had not fully grasped. The Great Migration was really, really hard. Despite the celebration of a black urban culture that emerged from the Great Migration, the process itself was incredibly taxing and filled with failure, riots, personal violence, family breakdown, and a perpetual fear of the unknown. Such a trip, the students observed, must have been terrifying. Yet, they still went. African Americans in the new urban North settled and worked and lived despite the fears of the unknown and despite the ghettoization imposed upon them.

It was at this juncture that the class could turn to hope and emphasize the long, slow history of progress most often celebrated in the history of the Great Migration with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Or, the class could move beyond the idealism of Martin Luther King Jr and dig deeper into the perpetual power of racism and hatred that seems so present to our students today. It was a pedagogical crossroads, and I had no idea what to do. What I didn't want was to become an uncritical cheerleader for idealism and social justice saying that all we need to do is wish it better, and it will become so. I'm obviously not opposed to the campaign for social justice; it's just that such rhetoric sometimes seems shallow in comparison to the incredible complexity found in the history of American racism. Instead, I'd rather embrace that complexity. I wanted to tell the students that understanding racism was, much like the Great Migration, really, really hard with an uphill and unpredictable future. And, so, that's how I ended it: a big "I don't know" that must have seemed anticlimactic and uninspiring to the students, but was, at least, very honest.



**Diana Fox, Professor,
Anthropology**

Between 1908 and 1910, Franz Boas, the father of modern U.S. Anthropology, took to the streets of New York City with 13 of his assistants to measure

the craniums of 17,821 immigrants and their children. This classic study, “Changes in Bodily Form in Descendants of Immigrants” (*American Anthropologist*, 1912), was the first scientific challenge to the cephalic index (the ratio of head breadth to length) which was regarded at the time as the most stable measurement of racial classification, resistant to environmental influences and cultural practices (Bernard, Gravlee and Leonard, *American Anthropologist*, 2003). By comparing the cephalic indices of immigrants and both their immigrant and U.S.-born children, Boas was able to demonstrate cranial plasticity implicated by environment and diet. He rightly rejected accepted notions of racial typologies, decimating the prevailing belief in race as a determinant of culture, and launching a new era of anti-racist activism among North American anthropologists.

This work ultimately led to the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Statement on Race, adopted by its Executive Board on May 17, 1998. The statement asserts that notions of biological race “evolved as a worldview, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into ‘racial’ categories” (www.americananthro.org).

When I read the email call for faculty to participate in the statewide Black Lives Matter Teach-In, I was crafting the syllabus for my senior capstone seminar, Anthropological Theory, and had just put the final touches on the reading for the very week of the teach-in, which, quite coincidentally, included Boas’s anti-racism, his revolutionary study, and its subsequent widespread impact. I immediately jumped on the bandwagon, seeing this as an opportunity for my students to understand the import of conceiving “race” as sociocultural and historical rather than biological, the value of theory and the dangers of anti-scientific belief—in this case, persistent racism. The AAA statement elaborates how racism is the product of the blatantly false yet ubiquitous notion that behavior is attributable to skin color and a cluster of other randomly selected traits coalesced into essentialist categories, actively, vigorously and viciously promulgated from slavery, throughout the colonial world, through the Jim Crow era and beyond.

I conceived an exercise where the 10 senior Anthropology majors in my Theory class would envision themselves in a dual role that many applied anthropologists assume: first, as advocates, mediators and translators for a culture group seeking to survive amidst threats of “development” language and land loss, and other assimilationist and/or genocidal policies; second, as teachers, passing on their insider knowledge to others to promote awareness of cultural diversity and its values. In this case, I asked my students to imagine themselves as applied anthropologists working with the Black Lives Matter movement and teaching 13-year-old students. As neuroscience continues to reveal, this is a time of remarkable brain growth, when the prefrontal cortex matures and neural pathways are shaped and pruned (Nutt and Jensen, *The Teenage Brain*, 2015). At the same time, pre-teens and teens are developing greater awareness of their world and their place in it, experiencing raging hormones and tumultuous emotions. I thought this would be a perfect age to demystify the concept of race to a group of youngsters as background to understanding the current turbulent climate of race relations and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Their challenge was how to do this, bringing what they had learned in class to a hypothetical class of their own. Also, I told them, “there’s no such thing as a generic teenager. Who will your students be, beyond age 13? What will be the intersectional components of their identities and how will they shape how you teach about the meaning of race and the Black Lives Matter movement? After all, you’re anthropologists,” I reminded them, “and you’re empowering them by teaching your students methodology: how to understand human behavior, symbols, the

meaning of human material culture and the values, beliefs and norms that undergird these. You are helping them to figure out how to make sense of the Black Lives Matter movement.”

There was a final piece of the pedagogy I asked students to consider: the relationship between popular culture and social movements—in this case, Beyoncé and Black Lives Matter. A few weeks before our experiment, Beyoncé had released her Formation video, followed the next day by her halftime performance of the song at the Super Bowl, rich with symbolic images of post-Katrina neglect and Black Lives Matter assertions: “Stop Killing Us!,” positive reinforcement of Black women’s beauty, and southern African-American culture all wrapped up in a package of Black Power/Black Panther/Jackson 5-Michael Jackson imagery. Here, we had a confluence of behavior, symbols and material culture, rich fodder for anthropological thought. Social media ignited in storms of protest, bountiful appreciation, and layered, thoughtful reflection and useful critique (she’s joining the long tradition of Black Protest Music; does it protest enough?). Popular culture intersects with and feeds social movements; it can inspire and expand them and is an entry point for teenagers. I wanted my students to think about how they could potentially weave popular culture into their lesson plans.

Their first point of discussion was this: who will our students be? A Haitian student in the class started the discussion asking the rest of the all-white group: “Did you learn Black history at this age when you were in school?” When they all answered no, one decided to choose a mostly upper-middle-class white group with two Black students in the class because they wanted to have a significant impact on this imagined future generation of adults. They also worried about the Black students whom they felt might be called upon to be “representative of the race,” a pernicious notion that stems from assumptions of the connection between race and behavior. This was not going to happen in their class—Boasian ideas of complex cultural diversity and multiplicity would be reinforced.

Another group chose students in class who brought together two neighborhoods, one mostly upper-middle-class white, one a working-class neighborhood of Black and Brown students of varying backgrounds, including immigrants. The rationale: a wide variety of experiences would reinforce the role of environment

in shaping behavior and cultural knowledge. As class ended, they were charged to return to the next class with a clear idea of how to move from teaching their selected groups of imaginary students that race isn’t biological to explaining the Black Lives Matter movement from the “insider’s point of view,” the mission of the anthropologist.

On Day 2, the students immediately got into their groups to cement their applied anthropology lesson plans and to share with each other. Each group started with an inquiry: “What does race mean to you?,” they asked of their 13-year olds. “How have you experienced race in your lives?” This is good anthropological methodology—start by gaining insider knowledge. After this, they each decided that they needed to share some of their own experiences to demonstrate how race is socio-culturally constructed. Following these opening inquiries, the students engaged in active exercises. One group did the “piece of paper in the garbage can” experiment, in which students line up in rows and toss a crumpled piece of paper into a can in the front of the room, highlighting the notion of invisible privilege. Those in the front obviously have an advantage; the ones in the far back the least structural advantage in making a basket. Occasionally individual skill surmounts the disadvantage of the last row, but only occasionally. The second group asked students to create skits that underscore the false notion of race as biological, the value of allies and social movement creation. They gave an example of a skit actualizing the Underground Railroad, in which students would have to enact bravery and fear as exercises in empathy building, and behaviors varied depending on the social positioning of the actors.

Students left the class demonstrating how they would use the tools of our discipline for further inquiry, to teach about BLM as anthropologists would and to ally with the organization. They drew from many of our subfields—biological, cultural, and linguistic anthropology. Language and symbols are so important here. They demonstrated the significance of building rapport with those you wish to work with and of finding points of alliance through difference. And they taught me that they are sensitive, insightful, caring adults who wish to change the world.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH #BlackLivesMatter

**Campus
Wide
Teach-In
@ BSU**

February 22-26
60+ Professors
Multiple Departments
Taking Initiative To Discuss
#BLM



OTHER EVENTS

February 16 / 5:30-9:30

MSA

Showing the Film: Malcolm X
DMF Auditorium

February 17 / 5:00-7:00

IAMSSTEM

*Center for Multicultural Awareness & College of
Science and Mathematics*

BLM: The Ethics of Human Subject Testing
Maxwell Library

February 22 / 4:30-6:00

CMA & African American Society

Prelude to Black History Month:
Celebration, Documentary & Discussion
RCC 202

February 23 / 2:00-4:30

GLBTA

Showing a Film
Pride Center

February 23 / 6:00-7:00

Chi Sigma Iota & Department of Counselor Education
Racial Identity Development and Mental Health
Kelly Gym

February 24 / 5:00-8:00

CMA & African American Society

Black History Month Banquet
RCC Ballroom

March 2 / 6:00-8:00

Sister Scholars

"Free Angela and all Political Prisoners"
Moakley 100

March 2 / 4:30-6:00 #BLM Town Hall Meeting RCC Small Ballroom

Join us to discuss the importance of #BLM and all that we have learned throughout the week!