

Teaching With Tension: A National Election, A Pandemic, State-Sanctioned Violence and Strategies for Talking about Race in Our Current Moment

This handout offers guidelines and framing questions to help instructors develop more effective strategies for talking about race and for teaching their students how to talk about race in the classroom. The handout is based on conversations resulting from a virtual workshop organized by Dr. Cassander L. Smith, UA Provost Faculty Fellow and Associate Professor of English, and sponsored by the University of Alabama's Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion on September 25, 2020. The following facilitators led the hour-long workshop:

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Holly Horan, Anthropology
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Mary Meares, Communication and Information Sciences
Sarah Moody, Spanish
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Some Key Issues:

- Social media has created a new style of personal commentary that shows up in student essays and that is sometimes offensive in content and/or tone.
- Vulnerability has been a key strategy for many instructors in their efforts to connect with their students and build classrooms that are safe spaces for all. However, the demand for vulnerability can create exhaustion, fatigue, for faculty and students. This is especially the case for BIPOC faculty and students, who are experiencing an acute collective grief and trauma in our current moment.
- Many faculty feel they do not have the skills to discuss racism and race in their classrooms, and they are unsure about how to gain those skills and what it means to engage in these conversations in productive ways. To what extent do they need to be experts?
- Because talking about race can produce anxiety and fear, students and teacher might clam up, making it difficult to discuss racial issues in the classroom. Alternatively, when students and teacher do engage, they might push back, assuming a stance of self-defense that leads them to say things that are inappropriate, counterproductive, and harmful to minoritized students.
- How to create a classroom that embodies our values, beyond just the curriculum. (Re-thinking assumptions)
- Students and teachers come at the subject of race from many different perspectives, and some might be more comfortable with engaging race than others. Some might be better equipped with the tools to talk about race in ways that are productive. It can be challenging for the teacher to manage the various levels of racial proficiency and students' willingness to engage.

Framing Ideas and/or Questions:

- While many people are uncomfortable with tension, it is not something we should avoid. Tension is a necessary part of engagement; it allows us to consider multiple angles of vision in the classroom, encouraging students and teacher to stretch and challenge their own ways of thinking.
- Tension can be difficult to facilitate, especially in a virtual classroom where it is more difficult to interpret the body language of students and *read* classroom mood. What strategies, then, can help teachers lean into tension, especially in online spaces?
- We spend a good deal of time striving to get our students to see a subject beyond their own inherent biases. We encourage them to take an unbiased approach in their writing and other forms of communication. The focus on objectivity has been a useful strategy for helping students to think more broadly and critically. As an alternative perspective, bias can be a productive teaching tool. Some measure of bias is unavoidable. By virtue of being human, we have feelings, opinions, preferences that we cannot shut off in the classroom. So rather than demand that students rid themselves of bias, we can demand that they interrogate their biases and the biases of others to understand better how they arrived at their feelings or thoughts about a given topic. By interrogating their own ideas more deeply, they learn to appreciate the ideas of others.
- Vulnerability can be a useful strategy for fostering dialogue about race in the classroom. We can consider ways to share our authentic selves with students (and give them permission to be their authentic selves). Allowing students to see our visceral responses to things can be a powerful teaching tool, one that makes students more willing to express vulnerabilities of their own.
- In our efforts to make the classroom a safe space for diverse perspectives, we can rethink what it means to foster diversity. We want to be aware of overtaxing our BIPOC students. The task of providing multiple perspectives on a subject should not fall disproportionately on BIPOC students. We want to be mindful of the fact that BIPOC students do not owe us their voices in the classroom. That is to say, we shouldn't take it for granted that BIPOC students want to share their experiences of race but also create a space in which they can share if and when they choose. How can we privilege the perspectives of BIPOC students without making them object lessons for the edification of other students? Or position them as *experts* on race? Also, we should not assume that white students do not have experiences of race that can and should be examined. In the words of one workshop participant, "Diversity in the classroom simply means making the classroom a space where all students can be students."
- Like vulnerability, trust is necessary for fostering productive conversations around race.

Strategies for Interaction and Discussion:

- Model vulnerability for students, showing them how to think, not telling them what to think. Textually focused activities and contemplative writing exercises can facilitate this.
- Be mindful of communal Black grief and give Black students space as students. Often times Black students can feel pressure to speak as "representatives" of the Black

community/Black experience. Be aware of this pressure and privilege students' individual experiences and contributions to the classroom.

- Be prepared for the emotional responses of students, especially BIPOC students. This means listening. Listening might mean letting go the impulse to defend the status quo or explain away a student's experience as merely perception. Accept their experiences and authority on the subject.
- Set ground rules for discussion early on, and make students part of the process.
 - Set the tone early in the term by explaining to students that the content of the course will produce especially intense conversations. Explain the pedagogical value of that intensity and the course content.
 - Establish the expectations for how students will talk to each other, keeping in mind things like respect, tone, and civility.
 - The class collectively could decide on a code or safe words to use during particularly intense classroom exchanges when they want to express discomfort without calling out other students.
 - Hypothesize with the students collective action to create a safe space, i.e. "What do we do if 'X' happens?" or "How will we address this as a class?"
- Build in moments of silence for reflection; give students space to process difficult course content.
- Strategize beforehand tools for reacting to problematic comments/encounters.
- Allow students to work in smaller groups before discussing as a class. Smaller groups can foster more intimate conversation. Also, it allows students to try out ideas in a smaller setting to see what works and what doesn't.
- Develop trust through consistency, fairness, and equity in interactions with students.
- Create scripts for responding to situations; think beforehand about best responses to potentially difficult classroom moments.

For Further Reading:

- Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*. New York: Seal Press, 2018.
- Philathia Bolton, Cassander Smith, and Lee Bebout, eds. *Teaching With Tension: Race, Resistance, and Reality in the Classroom*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018.
- Lynn Lowrie, "Vulnerability in the Classroom"
(<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/vulnerability-in-the-classroom/>)
- Naeem Inayatullah, "Teaching is Impossible: A Polemic." *Journeys Through Teaching World Politics: Narratives of Pedagogical Development*. Jamie Frueh, ed. Palgrave, 2019.