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Race in the Classroom #1: How To Build a Diverse Course Syllabus When You Don't Know Enough About Race and Diversity

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I'm teaching about race more and more these days. That wasn't my plan. My training is in ancient Greek philosophy and I used to love teaching Aristotle and Plato. But things changed. Ten years ago, the ancient thinkers were great at helping the first-year students at my small Catholic college in the Northeast reflect on the world, society, and themselves. I can't get it to work anymore. Because my first-years don't read very well, the ancient writers are increasingly inaccessible to them. And they keep requesting more readings by people of color, women, and people who identify as LGBTQ.

This befuddled me for years. I wasn't assigned a single reading by a person of color in my philosophy grad school program, the only women we read were commentators, and all LGBTQ writers we studied were closeted, at least in their writings. None of this bothered me. I was interested in ideas, not people!

Three things changed. First, I realized that marginalized people added different ideas to the conversation. They stressed different issues, and they challenged shared assumptions. Second, my students did better work when I assigned a more diverse set of readings. Third, our students of color began asking us to teach students more about race. They politely didn't add that white faculty members like me should learn some stuff about race too, but it was implied.

All this took on new urgency with the rise and power of the Black Lives Matter movement. I realized that to make sense of the world and their own role in it, our students need to understand race better, and they need to get better at talking about it without getting defensive or shutting down. And of course, I need to get better at it too.

But how do I teach anything connected to race in a responsible manner when I know so little myself? This stumped me for a long time. I had trouble finding readings that felt right to me. And when I came up with something, I remembered that including only one thing by an author of color is tokenism, a sin possibly worse than an all-white syllabus. And then I was paralyzed again.

I eventually decided to live with tokenism and to start small and simple: I just added Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to my first-year gen ed class, combining it with Plato's *Crito* to create a unit on civil disobedience and nonviolence. Once I felt comfortable teaching King, I gradually added other materials: Malcolm X's "Ballot or the Bullet." Selections from his *Autobiography*. Veena Cabrereros-Sud's "Kicking ass." This semester, I added King's arguments for nonviolence. Next semester, I might add a discussion on anger or a chapter by James Cone on nonviolence and Christianity. And I'm hunting around for a good video on the civil rights movement.

I still feel like an imposter teaching this unit, especially when pedagogy requires me to speak as Malcolm X (I sometimes worry that there are secret videos). But I also know that it's usually one of the most effective units in the class. Students who have seemed bored are suddenly interested. My (very few) black students get a chance to show off because unlike most of my white students, they usually know something about Malcolm X. Students bring up connections to the Black Lives Matter movement, and we try to think through what has changed and what remains the same.

I still don't know enough. My course could be diverse in a better way. Right now, all the black authors are talking about race, they are in a single unit, and they are almost all men. It's a work in progress. But most of my white students have never heard of Malcolm X or a sit-in. What I do is much better than nothing and I learn a bit more each time I teach it.

Perfectionism is the enemy here. It usually is. It's OK to start small. Add a single piece. Don't worry about how it fits into the course as a whole – students usually don't see the overall structure anyway. Try and see how it goes. Next time, do a little more, do it a little better, or try something different. Learn. Grow.

***Watch for two additional blogs in this series in December and January.**

Resources

- Cabrereros-Sud, Veena. "Kicking ass." In *To be real*, edited by Rebecca Walker. New York:

Anchor Books, 1995.

- Cone, James. *Martin and Malcolm in America*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.
- Cone, James. *God of the oppressed*. New York, Seabury Press, 1975. (See especially Chapter 9: Liberation and the Christian Ethic.)
- hooks, bell. "Killing rage: Militant resistance." In *Killing rage: Ending racism*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*. New York, HarperCollins, 1986. (In addition to "Letter from Birmingham Jail," see also chapter 15: "Nonviolence," and 18: "Where Do We Go from Here?")
- Mantena, Karuna. "Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics." In *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Srinivasan, Amia. "In Defence of Anger." Four Thought, BBC Radio 4, 2014.
- X, Malcolm. "Ballot or the Bullet." 1964. (Transcript [here](#) and audio [here](#).)

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