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Race in the Classroom #2: How To Create a Reasonably Safe Classroom in Which Our Students Can Talk Honestly About Race

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Talking about race in the classroom makes me nervous. What if a white student says something awful and I don't know how to handle it? What if I don't know the facts? What if something blows up and I end up in big trouble? And isn't it irresponsible of me to teach something I don't know enough about?

Since race is so charged and complex, it's tempting to leave it to experts. But I'm teaching at a small and predominantly white Catholic college in the Northeast (I'm white myself), and I largely teach gen ed to first-year students. We regularly teach outside our areas of expertise. And since very few of us specialize in race, our students won't learn anything about it if non-experts avoid the topic. That seems unacceptable, so I'm teaching race even though I'm uneasy. After all, fear isn't always a good reason to avoid something. I tell my students that all the time.

I also believe that my fears are out of touch with reality. Of course, awful outcomes are *possible*. But they aren't *likely*. I'm a good listener, I'm tenured, and my students are decent human beings who try to be kind, considerate, and non-racist. And I don't have to stay ignorant: I can read, listen, and practice. Since I started engaging the topic of race in my classes, I've improved. I know the subject better, I can sometimes anticipate what students will say and how and if to respond, and I'm better at managing the conversation.

Most importantly, I've figured out how to create a reasonably safe classroom in which to have these conversations:

- We don't start with race. Many of my first-year gen ed students have a hard time speaking in front of the class. They need to practice speaking and they need to trust me and each other before we tackle more controversial topics.
- My syllabus says that I'm still learning and that I expect to learn from my students, and I tell them that repeatedly. They don't believe me, so I demonstrate it. I mess up and thank them when they correct me. I ask them to explain things I don't know, and we build on those explanations whenever possible. When they tell me something cool, I write it down. I show them that I'm still engaged in the messy process of learning and that I'm willing to learn from them.
- We establish guidelines for discussions early on, and we revisit them before we embark on trickier topics, like race.
- I mention my discomfort and let them confess theirs, and then we talk about why it might be important to talk about difficult subjects anyway.
- I give them several ways of providing feedback and to ask questions, and I make some of them anonymous.
- I request feedback, especially if I suspect there's a problem.
- If I don't know how to handle something, I ask them (and others) for ideas. When I screw up, I apologize and try again. I learn and I grow.

Through it all, I keep a nervous eye on my students of color. I might be worrying too much about the impact of these conversations on them. It's uncomfortable for some of them, and of course I want to minimize their suffering. But my fears tell me that they could *break*. And that seems unlikely. They have almost certainly heard much worse.

Still, students of color are badly outnumbered in my classroom, and while some of them are fine talking to a room full of white people about race, others aren't. I email them beforehand and give them options: *Let me know if it gets too uncomfortable. It's OK if you don't want to say anything - and it's OK if you want to talk a lot too.* Some say they're fine, and some don't answer. But some acknowledge that it will be difficult, and then we come up with ways of making it a little easier. Some of them end up talking a lot, others stay quiet in class but write to me, and others yet stay entirely silent. I make space for those who want to speak and then get out of the way as much as possible.

In the spring, one of my quiet black first-years wrote a paper about our classroom discussion of race. She criticized my talking about discomfort, arguing that white people's fears about discussing race express white fragility and that we need to get over it. She made a good case. So I'm trying to get over it and I'm reflecting on how to incorporate her insights into my course. Both the course and the getting over it are works in progress. Baby steps.

****Read the first blog of this series here.***

*****Watch for the third blog in this series in January.***

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/12/race-in-the-classroom-2-how-to-create-a-reasonably-safe-classroom-in-which-our-students-can-talk-honestly-about-race/>