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Antiracism Basics: Syllabus-Level

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It's a relief to some professors to find that making their course antiracist is not simply about introducing heavy and sometimes politicized topics into class discussion. I find that moving one's course further along the antiracism spectrum can, and should, start with the syllabus!

None of the below suggestions can magically turn a course antiracist - my experience is that antiracism is a lifelong journey, consisting both of moments of inspiration and, perhaps more often, moments of face-palming as you realize the way you've done something for years is problematic, but you literally never noticed it until right now. This is part of why I think many professors shy away from explicitly naming their own journey in antiracist teaching - it requires you to feel embarrassed about the way you used to do things and then using that embarrassment to fuel something better. But the glorious thing is that it *does* produce something better!

The first thing to do with your syllabus is to take stock of the racial representation of your authors. If you use one or a few textbooks, this will likely be easy. If you rely on a variety of resources, it'll take longer, and often require a bit more research. When you tally up who students are primarily hearing from, what voices are most prominent? Do white men win the day? Or is there substantive authorship from people with other racial identities?

In my department, we calculate these totals every semester based on course days. Basically,

what days are students only hearing from white people, and what days are they hearing from people of color? (It could be advantageous to do this in a more granular way too – examining how Black authors compare to Latinx authors, etc., but unless your percentage of authors of color is fairly high, you may not have enough data to draw meaningful conclusions). We submit our percentages every term, and part of our annual assessment is examining if we’ve met our minimums and if we’ve increased racial representation or lost ground overall. The fact that we can work in hard numbers here also tends to encourage something of a gamification of our syllabi – seeing if we can beat our last “high score” is motivation to make our authorship more racially diverse each semester. A single replaced reading feels like a victory in this context – and it is!

Once that work is completed for the term, the next step is to ensure that it’s visible to students and that they understand why it’s significant. I do this in two ways: including relevant expertise and identity markers, including race, along with the link to the course readings, and telling my students directly about what I’m doing with authorship in the course. The first involves setting up Canvas (or whatever LMS) with more than just links to required text. I include the link, and then provide context after it about the writer. For example, “_____ is a Black woman and a seminary-level professor of Theology,” or “_____ is a white male journalist who primarily writes on religious topics.” This is part of an overarching lesson that people’s context is *always* relevant, and that nobody writes without bias. It’s also a practice I royally screwed up the first time I tried it – I only included the racial identities of authors who weren’t white and didn’t mention race for white authors. You know, because white is... normal? White default bias for the fail. Thankfully I caught that one halfway through the semester and worked feverishly to remedy it on the day that awful realization struck me.

Finally, I like being transparent with my students about the “why” of my teaching – it makes them feel trusted and included, and it helps hold me accountable for doing what I say I will. On the first day of class, I show the students our hard numbers for the course and explain that the field is historically and currently white-dominated, but that our program values students learning from a variety of perspectives and voices, so we’ve made a particular effort to use and highlight authors of color. For whatever reason, this is the moment on day one when students will actually take their eyes off their syllabus and look at me directly. I find that there’s power in critiquing your own field, and doing it right away – it helps students feel more able to offer critique and criticism when they feel it necessary.

So, there you have it – if you want to be a more antiracist teacher and aren’t sure where to begin, start with your course authorship and make your choices explicit to your students. It’s far from perfection, but it’s a starting point for the journey.

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