



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Building Bridges Through Technology

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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Shortly after the verdicts in the Ferguson and Staten Island police beating cases led to protests via social media and demonstrations across the country, I found myself involved in two conversations. The first occurred with a car mechanic in Saratoga Springs, the small rural New York community where I work. The mechanic, an African American, described the encounters between the African American males and police officers as well as the citizen protests as signs of unremitting violence. He relayed a racially coded incident with local police in which a man was pulled over, rightfully, for speeding but beaten unnecessarily.

The second conversation took place via telephone with a graduate student in Rochester, who is studying hip-hop and the Black Power Movement. She too is African American, and a mother of two adult children. She works full time and is involved with many community organizations in Rochester. She asked me if she could try writing about the post-Ferguson protests in her final paper. When I suggested that she link these events to her ongoing analyses of community hip-hop and Black Power politics, she told me she felt alone and isolated. "I'm involved with what's going on emotionally because it touches me like that," she said. "But I don't feel like I can talk about what I am feeling."

These two conversations illuminate how the verdicts, resulting unrest, and ongoing incidents of

police officer violence against African Americans have provoked emotions that cannot find an easy articulation in an increasingly racially polarized space. They also speak to the loneliness that people of color face as a result of residing in communities off the beaten path of America's metropolises. These smaller, often more rural communities tend to be predominantly white. While persons of color might live in such communities peacefully, public discourses on race in their immediate localities might discourage them from speaking out. As a person of color who grew up in a similar kind of community as the one in which I now teach, I decided to reach out to a handful of colleagues in hopes of initiating a dialogue on the verdicts and the violence. I hoped that such a dialogue might help students in the college community as well as members of the communities that the college serves build relationships among themselves and create a safe space for learning as well as support.

The result was the Forum on Race and Policing, a plenary featuring a faculty moderator and five panelists, one of whom was the Rochester student. The plenary took place via video-conferencing equipment that the college uses for faculty, professional staff, and administrative meetings. For one of the first times in the college's history, we used the technology to bring students and community members together in a mission of learning through conversation.



To understand the uniqueness of our project, it helps to know a little about our college. Empire State College is a 45-year-old college for adult learners, with no central campus. Students complete degrees through individualized studies, study groups, and weekend residency based programs in centers and units across New York State as well as through online courses. Students and faculty interact via e-mail, online course shells, telephone, and Skype. Often, they never meet face-to-face. The communal billboards, coffee shops, and student centers of a more traditional campus are replaced by e-mail blasts and individualized electronic interactions between students and their instructors and adviser. In a sense, students and faculty are like the people of color in the off-the-beaten paths communities described earlier - isolated in their work and their thoughts.

We wanted our forum to break that isolation. We planned for the plenary to include representation from across the state. I invited regional centers to join the event as viewing sites. Representatives of the participating sites reserved rooms and arranged for coffee, light snacks, or pizza to be served. The moderator spoke from her home center in Buffalo. Through a script that I developed to coordinate communication between the speakers and tech support specialists, the moderator directed the ensuing panelist presentations and questions and answers. She directed tech support specialists at each location to shift video cameras and microphones from one location to another by identifying each speaker by name. Our student panelists spoke from their study sites in Rochester, Manhattan, and Long Island, while a faculty panelist participated from Saratoga Springs. The moderator then gave viewers at each center an opportunity to ask questions and asked panelists to raise their hands if they wished to respond. All participating centers were shown on screens at each locale.

The forum drew about sixty participants and represented an honest effort to integrate technology and teaching into a college-wide dialogue on the issues of racial profiling, police violence, and the ways in which citizens of color – African Americans, particularly – might experience law enforcement differently. While a success, it raised several challenges to teaching race, particularly in the virtual spaces that online courses create.

For instance, we found ourselves asking after the forum what was meant by a safe space. While our technology did bring students and others together, not everyone assembled viewed that technology enabled space as safe. One participant – a former police officer – noted that the panelists all were people of color and that none had worked in law enforcement. Other participants who were invited to ask questions or offer comments via e-mail did respond, not during the forum but afterwards. Some of that feedback indicated that the presence of video cameras made the prospect of asking a question in live-time intimidating.

Another issue that came up was the role of the humanities. Several panelists and audience members suggested a need for more courses on the socio-politics and historic specificities of race in ways that would connect those topics to the immediate events. Despite the appeal, the humanities faculty involved with the event acknowledged later that drawing students to such courses would be difficult, partly because of the college's emphasis on skills-based learning. Much of the student body consists of working adults returning to complete degrees to advance within their existing occupations and/or careers.

The forum offers one model for using technology to build bridges across campuses and communities. Students and others came out of isolated spaces to converse for two hours. Our goal now is to sustain the dialog.

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