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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Antiracism Basics: Classroom-Level (Part Two)

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Continuing on themes from the last blog in this series, another antiracism pro-tip for classroom teaching comes both from a story an early-career mentor of mine told me, and then directly from the mouths of my own students: for the love of God, always assign groups in class! If you want students to talk to anyone else in class, *tell them* precisely who they're talking to and give them a specific question or two to work on together. Why is this an antiracist practice? In short, students have a strong tendency (sometimes conscious, sometimes not) to self-segregate in classes. Assigning groups disrupts this tendency.

For this wisdom, I was allowed to stand on the shoulders of another teacher rather than waiting until I screwed things up profoundly enough that I actually noticed it. In one of my first years of teaching, a mentor in our new faculty circle talked about her past practice of telling students to just "pair up!" to discuss class material. She saw no issues with this practice, apart from a few quiet students, until one day when she was teaching a course with two Black male students among a much whiter cohort. These students didn't sit near each other, or seem to know each other; but when she instructed everyone to find a partner, neither of them even bothered to look up to their nearest neighbors. Instead, a beat after everyone else had started chattering, the young man in the front row slowly lifted his head and made eye contact with the young man seated in the back. Both had assumed, rightly, that they would not be tapped by their white classmates to be partners; both knew that whether or not they were friends, they

were “other” in this classroom, and that made them de facto partners.

The obvious shame that my mentor felt in articulating this story stuck with me, and so assigning groups has consistently been part of my practice. However, I didn’t realize that I was doing something particularly different until I held an Antiracism Learn-Along event for students at my school where I opened space for them to discuss experiences around race and belonging at our college. Many of them immediately agreed that the school can quickly become “cliquey” and that racial groups tend to stick together unless prompted to do otherwise. Some students of color reported getting “dirty looks” when trying to join into a pre-existing group of white women, but even more said that they simply wouldn’t bother trying – they’d been burned before, often in high school, when attempting to be friendly to white people. They weren’t going to risk the same rejection here if they had the option of staying with people who looked more like themselves.

Despite these experiences, the students said that professors requiring a mix-up of the room really did help over the long term, both in making friendly connections and being able to learn from other perspectives. I have endless ways of sorting students: making them “speed-date” in pairs that only have to converse for one minute, grouping them based on where they sit, grouping them by order on the roster, grouping them by alliterative first names (one of the unique joys of teaching at a women’s college in 2024 is being able to call out “Kiley, Kya, Kayleigh, and Caitlin” followed by “Haley, Hailey, Bailey, and Kayley” in rapid succession. I’m not even making these examples up). Sometimes I craft groups before class, and other times I sort it out when I see who came for the day. Some days I let students stay with their friends, and other days I make them talk to someone who sits across the room. I put my most boisterous people together and my shyest people together to see what happens, then try to balance the talkers and listeners on another day. Because my students are so used to being mixed up, they don’t even notice that some days I ensure that no student of color is alone in a group of white learners, or that some days I put all my Latina students together when discussing something relevant to Latinx culture, so that they don’t have to re-explain their heritage to others. Usually within four to six weeks in the term, students are comfortable enough with this apparent unpredictability that discussion starts flowing easily regardless of what group they’re in.

Students may not notice how this practice can serve an antiracist commitment right away, if ever—it’s not as obvious as visually diverse representation on slides, or including authorial racial identities on an LMS—but assigning groups every time can very quickly disrupt the usual patterns of self-segregation in a classroom, and contribute to a more effective learning environment overall.

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