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The Conversation We Must Get Tired Of

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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In some ways it's really simple. If we had genuinely multi-racial classrooms in the U.S. the challenge of race in those same rooms would be much less of one.

We so quickly find ourselves embroiled in an oh-so-familiar conversation when the pedagogical question becomes how to best teach race, privilege, U.S. religious history, ethics, and justice in the religion and theology classroom. How do we keep white students from shutting down? How do we get them to understand? How do we enable them to recognize their stake in such learning when so few of them have had to think about such matters before? How do we do all of this while providing a modicum of safety, let alone real sanctuary and a rich learning environment, for a handful (or less) of students of color contending with the demographic and cultural tyranny of their white peers?

I think of this as the "How do we Reach White Students?" conversation.

I don't mean to imply the conversation isn't critically important. It is.

Questions about how to enable transformative, anti-racist agency in white students are urgent and the paths to get from where we stand now to that elusive place are anything but self-evident. Those of us committed to birthing a different future, by way of our work as pedagogues, have much to learn from each other. We have much to discover together about

effective strategies for making inroads into the grip whiteness has on young people who have marinated in it uncritically for two decades.

But I want to critique the conversation too. We need to become much more critical about what this pedagogical discussion accepts and what, as a result, it tends to ignore as a central responsibility of our work as teachers and faculty members.

With a few refreshing exceptions, most of the time I contextualize my own contributions to conversations about race and pedagogy, the way so many of my colleagues do; with a disclaimer that goes something like this: “Of course, my classrooms are overwhelmingly white.”

Such contextualization is deeply ironic when articulated by those of us seeking to deepen our abilities and commitments to challenging white privilege. The irony is at least two-fold.

First, “reaching white students” is infinitely (and needlessly) more difficult in a predominantly white classroom. This truth means that those of us truly committed to anti-racist, transformative pedagogy in our classrooms must come to recognize structural, institutional transformation as one of our non-negotiable *pedagogical* responsibilities. This is a shift for many of us. But it’s an urgent one.

Second, when we make the challenge of reaching white students central in our teaching—which we must if we are to meet the students we have in the contexts we inhabit—we need to get honest about the fact we are thus in the business of investing yet more resources, energy, time and commitment into the lives of *white* students. The same context that makes teaching race so very difficult—the predominantly white institution/classroom—could not be more nefarious evidence of the long-term, structural effects of white privilege. And, if we choose to not take on institutional transformation as a pedagogical responsibility, our classroom investment in white lives can scarcely hope to do much more than perpetuate white privilege, albeit privilege that is a bit more self-conscious and self-aware.

We need to do more than *teach into* the “reaching white students” challenge. We need to decide to subvert and challenge the institutional structures that racially constitute our classrooms the way that they do.

It’s time for we faculty members in predominantly white institutions to get tired, to the point of resisting, the “white students” conversation.

It’s time we got so serious about effective, anti-racist pedagogy that we work to change our institutions with as much intention and care as we invest in constructing our syllabi and lesson plans.

It’s worth repeating that the challenge I’m laying out is merely an extension of our pedagogical identities. If we know the most transformative possibilities for anti-racist learning happens

when students are engaged across lines of all sorts of complex and diverse differences—and not at the level of tokenism—then addressing our own institution’s failures to make college education accessible to students of color, to recruit and retain such students more effectively, or to address whatever the structural impediments are in a particular institution, is simply what we must do if we are truly pedagogues.

What would happen if for every hour I spent strategizing within the classroom, I spent two hours investing myself outside the classroom? What would happen if I worked to identify and organize similarly concerned faculty at my institution to institute specific strategies, policies, and programs that would actually impact the demographic constitution of my classroom?

There are successful models out there in higher education right now that are cultivating academic excellence and enabling real thriving among students of color at predominantly white institutions. Not only are these programs important for the students most directly impacted by them—students left to navigate hostile racial climates at predominantly white institutions, even after having overcome many other structural challenges to enrolling in the first place. These programs also have the potential to secure the longer term result of cultivating more robustly diverse racial environments among the student body as well.

I work at an institution where we are trying some of this and recognizing that it takes resources to make it work. It’s early. But, so far the results have been greater than we would have hoped for.

I believe that if we faculty invested ourselves as *pedagogues of our institutions* with as much commitment, savvy and attention as we invest in our classrooms, we could change the racial climate in more and more institutions.

Besides potentially transforming them in ways that are, quite frankly, morally right and oh-so-urgent for this society, there’s another bonus here. Our workload would become much lighter too, or at least beautifully different. The more we create structures that cultivate environments where robust and meaningful diversity is realized, the less heavy lifting we have to do in our work to “reach white students.” A whole different range of teaching opportunities, challenges, moments and *joys* open up.

I, for one, would welcome this kind of shift. I suspect many of us would.

To get there we have to realize we’re tired of the “white” conversation and think beyond the classroom space about what a commitment to effective pedagogy means in our lives as faculty.

So, let’s equip ourselves with evidence and examples, let’s embolden ourselves institutionally, and let’s decide to meet the challenge of race in the classroom with all of the tools required to successfully respond to that challenge in ways that will matter for this society in the long run.

<https://wabash.center/2015/02/the-conversation-we-must-get-tired-of/>

