Additional Questions from the Webinar: Having Conversations about Race in the Classroom.

Answers from Stephanie Jirard

How would you recommend responding to students who viewing "ground rules" as oppressive.

Ground rules are not oppressive. Students are not going to graduate and walk into a meeting with a management team their first day on the job and start talking about their personal problems, romantic interests, and their investment strategies. Guidelines for social discourse exist in the professional world, and the college experience is preparing students to be professional.

Is it really ok to say we are willing to hear all voices if some voices are harmful to students of color?

All voices are welcome – there is no way we can move forward in society if people do not feel free to share how they think and feel. Understand higher education may not change people’s beliefs about race that they have cherished for a lifetime, but education can open eyes to how others perceive race-based beliefs. Instructors leading discussions about race must work to remain non-judgmental and non-condemnatory in the face of inflammatory statements; try to guide the conversation into an analysis of WHY what someone said is problematic or hurtful.

Is there a place for intersectionality at all when discussing race...or important to save for another time and why?

People often desire to dilute race-specific conversations because of the possibility of generating feelings of discomfort. Talking about intersectionality is great but try not to conflate race with general issues of diversity. Here’s a resource:

Kimberle Crenshaw on intersectionality
https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/

As a professor I sometimes have difficulty with students who refrain from becoming more diverse in their experiences yet want to work in a field that there is a great interface with people of color - social work. How do I get students into stretching out of their comfort zone?

One word – fieldtrips! You do want to avoid taking students to a minority neighborhood or other type of diverse space for the exposure because students may resent the “gawking” and “trivializing” of a one-off diversity the experience.

You can visit cultural sites/museums/movies – even online! In person (with social distancing), you can organize a “one-day” event at museums in multiple cities;
curators are more than happy to help here. Or you can assign virtual tours of notable museums. Then you can re-convene in class and discuss the representations of life in diverse spaces and connect the art to experiences students will have in the field. Here is the list of usual suspects of notable museums:

[https://www.si.edu/museums/african-american-museum](https://www.si.edu/museums/african-american-museum)

DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago, IL  
[https://www.dusablemuseum.org/](https://www.dusablemuseum.org/)

Mississippi Civil Rights Museum  
[https://mcrm.mdah.ms.gov/](https://mcrm.mdah.ms.gov/)

**Privilege and Fragility Questions**

Can you give ideas for how to set up courses and discussions that meet the needs of students who are unaware that racism exists AND students who have experienced racism or are knowledgeable about structural racism. Conflict exists when students say hurtful things unwittingly and often trying to understand and other students are concerned that the teacher is supporting "white fragility" by gently correcting.

How gently to correct the student who said a hurtful thing unwittingly and how to mediate these two perspectives in the most productive way.

I often struggle between wanting to be gentle and guide white students to confronting their racism, and making the students of color feel like I am pandering and prioritizing white fragility. Any suggestions?

I'd love more advice about how to navigate discussions regarding, for example, white privilege, when I have mostly white students and a few students of color.

How would you recommend correcting a student statement in a group discussion that is racist? I want to point out that the statement is problematic without stifling conversation.

**Suggestions for dealing with issues of privilege and fragility in the classroom**

Here’s an example from my own work space. A wonderful White colleague, Dex, on the telephone is describing a courier who will be dropping off some papers as “a big Black guy with a moustache.” Dex’s Black colleague says, “You can’t talk like that,” and walks away. Dex has no idea **WHY** his description is hurtful. I explain that if the courier were “a big White guy with a moustache,” Dex would probably never had used the word WHITE as a descriptor of the courier; Dex sees my point and agrees. America has made color and race shorthand only for people of
color and has reduced three-dimensional human beings to their COLOR. Your job as an instructor is to provide the WHY, but to get there, you have to plan ahead for your class discussions or content delivery.

My advice is to navigate race talk by immediately trying to separate the student from their ideas or statements that may be harmful. Because talking about race is personal for everyone, discussion often shuts down because people (students, colleagues, staff) are AFRAID of how they will be perceived and any potential backlash if they are inarticulate in what they say.

**Step #1** is to understand there is a difference in how people talk/dialogue culturally. A good example is the snippet of a democratic presidential debate when Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) challenged Vice President Joseph Biden on the issue of school bussing. Harris made the story personal (I was that girl) and Biden’s response was filled with facts (your local city council).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1OvDB_wavI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1OvDB_wavI)

**Step #2** is to give a “privilege” quiz so students understand the issue. Privilege is often associated with excess and many White students work two or three jobs and their families struggle with tuition bills, so the students do not identify “privilege” with the freedom to move about America without thinking about race. The quiz can help all students see the invisible hand of how some members of society benefit from our racially segregated society.

Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College, created the “White Privilege Checklist.” Giving credit to McIntosh (1987), I have adapted the checklist for college students.

[http://also-chicago.org/also_site/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/white-privilege.pdf](http://also-chicago.org/also_site/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/white-privilege.pdf)

Have students answer true or false to the following questions and discuss – **everyone speaks once before anybody speaks twice**.

1. I can be late for class without everyone thinking bad thoughts about my race ________
2. I can talk about racism without people thinking I am pushing a radical agenda ________
3. I can get a job and feel confident people will not think I got the job because of affirmative action and I must, therefore, be unqualified for the position ______
4. I can rent an apartment in town and not think twice that I might get turned away because of race ______
5. I can turn on the news and remain confident that I can see my race reflected in a positive light ______
6. When I walk into a supermarket, I am sure I can find hair care products I use regularly. ______
7. When I am called on in class, I am aware that I always represent the views of my race. ______
8. If I am stopped by campus police, I never think the stop is because of my race. ______
9. When I shop and use big bills, it never crosses my mind the clerk might question my legitimacy. ______
10. When class discussion turns to our national heritage, I know the discussion includes me. ______
Step #3 make sure you do not impose a “diversity tax” during class conversations where your students of color have to answer for or “educate” White students what it means to be a person of color in America.

BUT if someone says something “hurtful” that needs to be corrected, you have to prepare to explain WHY the statement is hurtful. You can prepare in advance for the most basic statements students typically make. My method, “Seeing it through my diverse eyes”© uses the current news of the day and historical references in a “paint-by-numbers” exercise to help keep the dialogue flowing without spiraling into emotional volatility.

I give a few examples here, but feel free to create your own matrix so that your responses are natural and organic for you and your students, who all have different needs. Again, you want to take the discussion away from individual students to keep students engaged and inoculate the professor from charges of “coddling” students based on feelings. I make no endorsement or criticism of the current political figures by using them in my examples here.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom comment</th>
<th>News of the Day</th>
<th>Historical reference</th>
<th>Shaping Professor response: WHY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>^ I don’t see color</td>
<td>President Donald Trump remarks, July 16, 2020, White House “. . . I will be discussing the AFFH rule — AFFH rule, a disaster — and our plans to protect the suburbs . . . People have worked all their lives to get into a community, and now they’re going to watch it go to hell. . . Your home will go down in value and crime rates will rapidly rise.”</td>
<td>1. Practice of redlining (R. Rothstein, The Color of Law, 2017). 2. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 3. AFFH = Affirmatively Further Fair Housing ^ Implemented by President Barack Obama to foster inclusive communities</td>
<td>How many students live in racially-diverse suburbs? (not just token number). Cities are racially diverse If people do NOT see color, why are laws such as The Fair Housing Act or AFFH necessary? What is the implication about color: “crime rates will rise”?</td>
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<td>^ Racism is a myth</td>
<td>Legal immigration is okay, but illegals take our jobs. (person absorbs media references without critical analysis that certain terms are derogatory)</td>
<td>In World War II, many crimes against humanity were committed by everyday people who thought they were acting morally as a result of relentless government propaganda dehumanizing the “other” as rats “infesting” traditional communities. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: Referring to people as inanimate objects, animals, or by general characteristics, makes it easier for society to distance themselves from certain groups. Dehumanizing people makes it easier to hurt identifiable groups or, at the least, not</td>
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