

Best Practices for Talking about Race in the Classroom

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Challenging but Important

You want me to talk about race and racism in the classroom? Why would I want to do that? As teachers, we have all sorts of reasons not to “go there.” How will I respond when someone says something explicitly racist? I’ve never had any real training in how to deal with this topic. What materials should I use? I’m white; I don’t know what to do. I’m a person of color; this feels risky. My students might not be interested. They have other goals. It’s so depressing!

It is important to address race and racism for many reasons, perhaps the most important being that if you are teaching anywhere in the U.S. at any level, race and racism are *already* in the room, whether you are directly talking about them or not! Race and racism have long been driving forces in U.S. history, and they continue to shape current events and everyday life.

Furthermore, students need support for preventing and responding to race-based discrimination and/or violence. Talking about race and racism breaks down barriers and creates community. Our immigrant students need a chance to learn about the particular ways race is constructed in the U.S. Here are some best practices you can deploy for starting to talk about race in the classroom.

Think Programmatically

- Recruit tutors and teachers that reflect the demographics of the students.
- Offer professional development that integrates cultural awareness, history, and anti-racism.
- Create policies for program response to racial harassment and micro-aggressions.
- White teachers might benefit from workshops

that examine white privilege and include materials like “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh. All teachers could benefit from structures that offer support and the opportunity to share teaching strategies and lesson ideas.

Build Community in the Class

- Get to know the students and their backgrounds.
- Build relationships between students.
- Have the students set ground rules for speaking respectfully about race.
- Don’t respond to everything. Let students respond to each other.
- Invite students to talk about their experiences of race in the U.S. and issues related to race in their home countries.

Weave in Communication and Basic Skills

- Ask: “Where did you learn that?” or “Tell me more about why you think that” or “What evidence do you have for that idea?”
- Depending on class level, ask students to find out more by conducting research.
- Write and practice short dialogues or role play on topics of racism.
- Use data. Ask students to interpret charts and graphs and have them write true statements about the information presented.
- Model saying “I don’t know,” and “Let’s see if we can find out more about that.”

Be Intentional about the Topics You Bring to Class

- Include current events related to race and racism. Make sure not to focus only on bad news.

- Find the stories of action, healing, and transformation.
- Look for generally excluded groups when doing things in class about holiday celebrations. For example, Native Americans and Thanksgiving; Frederick Douglas’s speech on 4th of July; blacks and immigrants in the army on Memorial Day. Add non-traditional holidays, like Juneteenth, Eid, Passover, Kwanzaa, etc.
- Bring in music, poetry, and literature by people of color.

Interact with the Wider Community

- Invite community members and speakers into the classroom, making sure they are able to communicate effectively with language learners.
- Visit or get involved with events/actions led by local communities of color.
- Find ways for your students to share what they know/educate the public about their immigrant communities.

Work with Materials Strategically

- Use pictures, quotes, data, or a chart to bring up issues.
- Use Participatory Education (such as the Language Experience Approach) to create materials based on students’ experiences.
- Analyze your textbook and other materials before using them in class. How are white people and people of color portrayed differently?



“Juneteenth” from the cover of the *Celebrations* issue, where you will find many resources for bringing diverse culture and writing into the classroom. See Issue #41 “Extras” (on our website) for 3 different levels of “Juneteenth.”

What assumptions are made? Whose viewpoints are expressed?

- Decide how you want to handle problematic materials. For example, you can avoid using them in class, invite students to analyze them, alter them, etc.
- Make sure the race of your students is represented in worksheets, videos, etc.
- Use listening activities that have different accents.

Get Support!

- If you are white, get support from other white people for trying to teach about race and racism. Notice where you feel embarrassed or inadequate. By looking at and sharing what hinders you, you will be less likely to bring those obstacles into the classroom. Meanwhile, educate yourself about race and ethnicity in the U.S.: read widely, attend events, listen, and learn.
- If you are a person of color, get support for teaching on this topic. Educate yourself about the various races and ethnicities in the U.S. and the sometimes distinct issues they face.

Resources

- All back issues of *The Change Agent* include articles that are diverse, multi-level, and student-written. Writers explore a wide array of issues, events, and personal stories.
- *Problem-Posing at Work: English for Action* by Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein, available at <www.grassrootsbooks.net>
- <www.tolerance.org/blog/when-educators-understand-race-and-racism>
- <www.racialequitytools.org>
- <www.facinghistory.org>
- Find out more about the Language Experience Approach here: <www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/LEA.html>.

This document has been adapted from the small group notes taken at an MCAE 2015 session, called “Difficult Conversations in the ESOL Classroom: Talking about Race in Today’s U.S.,” led by Lisa Gimbel and Riva Pearson.