

Teaching Beyond Your Course Content: When Racism and a Global Pandemic Collide

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In January 2020, I was asked to design and ultimately teach an online course for doctoral students centered around issues related to equity, antiracism, and education policy to be offered in Summer 2020. The pedagogical and content possibilities were endless. I was eager to design a course around these aims that aligned with my research program, previous teaching activities, and service endeavors. I even carved out time for course preparation on a weekly basis to avoid completing this task at the last minute. Despite the excitement and advanced preparation, our world literally changed two months into the planning process. March 2020 will remain etched in my memory as COVID-19 entered our society, and we were forced to come to grips with a stark reality. The novel coronavirus caused so much uncertainty, and higher education institutions had to make decisions on the fly in a limited amount of time. Students and faculty were forced to move their existing face to face classroom dynamics into a virtual format. I should probably mention that in addition to being a tenured professor on my campus, I serve as a senior administrator in our teaching and learning center where I played an active role in supporting faculty with this shift. While doing so, it helped me think about my forthcoming summer online course and ways that I could support students.

While grappling with the COVID-19 crisis, there were countless high-profile deaths of unarmed Black people across the country by police officers and increased awareness of the archetype of “the Karen”, White women who are complicit in upholding racism. I found myself sad and angry regarding the violent deaths of transgender and gender non-conforming people that oftentimes go unnoticed or unreported. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breanna Taylor, in particular, garnered national attention and occupied space in my mind while course prepping in Spring 2020. I constantly found myself balancing a range of emotions from the excitement to teach, fear and uncertainty of COVID-19, and internalizing the prevailing racism that plagues our society. My summer online course commenced and less than a week later, George Floyd was murdered by former police officer Derek Chauvin who knelt on his neck for over nine minutes, and Amy Cooper harassed and called the police on Christian Cooper knowing he did nothing wrong. Those incidents occurred on the same day. While grieving over George Floyd’s death, I was annoyed at what happened to Christian Cooper.

These incidents of violence and racism in American society do not occur in a vacuum and have subsequently shaped how students and faculty experience higher education. In my teaching, I always incorporate current events into my classroom, but course preparation felt differently this time around. Due to COVID-19 and the isolation that many of us experienced

being away from our friends and loved ones, I found myself consuming news and social media more frequently. After processing the abovementioned incidents, I had to mentally prepare myself and think about how I would introduce these unfortunate incidents to my class as I knew my students would need the space. I was angry. I was exhausted. I also knew that I needed to show up and create this space for my students. Given this reality, I believe that educators have a responsibility to adequately make connections between course content and contemporary social conditions for students regardless of course content. Years ago, I read an article by Jeannine Love, Tia Gaynor, and Brandi Blessett (2016) on facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom where they stated the state-sanctioned violence inflicted on Black communities that students and instructors witness must be acknowledged, critically examined, and further explored. I have been committed to doing this whenever possible and I prioritized acknowledging, examining, and exploring these issues in my summer course. In this personal narrative essay, I explore a teaching strategy that I used to build rapport with students and foster a co-constructed supportive learning community.

Good teaching has the potential to influence students' lives in ways that extend beyond the formal academic classroom. To this point, I make a concerted effort to adopt strategies that engage students beyond course content while demonstrating care and establishing trust. Even prior to the pandemic whether teaching online or in person, I have always found ways to check in with my students whether it was seeing how they were doing at the start of class or during the short mini breaks in the longer three-hour courses. In recent years, I have adopted a quick teaching strategy where I engage students' attitudes and dispositions via an exercise where they use their thumbs. I call this "The Thumb Check-in." At the beginning of each class session, I pose the question, "how are you?" Students come to class knowing that this question will be posed and appreciate it being ingrained into the fabric of our classroom climate. There are three response items: (1) thumb up meaning things are well, (2) thumb horizontal meaning things are okay, and (3) thumb down meaning things are not well. Over the years, the response options expanded to five response items as their thumb may be in between horizontal and up or between horizontal and down. Regardless, the goal is to get a collective sense of their thumbs to engage the temperature of the classroom. The exercise lasts approximately 30 seconds and could lead to a short discussion depending on the direction of the thumbs. In the past, depending on the direction of the thumbs, I may see that most students have their thumbs up and would move into the next point on my lesson plan. Other weeks, I may ask students to elaborate on their thumb direction choice. There was not any rhyme or reason to my decision to probe in the past. It was random and based on the overall classroom vibe. Typical responses included professional or personal life updates (e.g., job promotions, life accomplishments) or challenging situations (e.g., coping with racism, overwhelmed with life tasks, family related challenges). Over the years, I have found this strategy extremely useful as I am able to capture how my students are feeling during the class session while demonstrating that I care about them beyond the formal course content.

In my Summer 2020 course, the Thumb Check-in took on a deeper meaning as it helped students make sense of how they were handling the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and high-profile Black deaths that were prevalent in this period. Most of my students had their thumbs at a

horizontal direction, trending down, or outright down. This prompted me to ask students to elaborate if they were comfortable sharing with the larger group. One student would begin, and others would follow. There were some notable examples of how the current racial climate of our country has led to meaningful class-wide dialogues during the Thumb Check-in. Topics included: raising Black children where racism and violence are daily occurrences, navigating the archetype of the Karen in the workplace, making sense of and internalizing Black death, holding one another accountable for personal and professional goals, unearthing challenges related to drafting and enacting policy related to COVID-19, and navigating new roles associated with virtual in-home schooling. Our classroom became a space for support, community building and in many cases healing. Although these quick discussions dovetailed nicely into some of our course content and students appreciated having space to unpack, it was at times difficult to hear some of these stories. Reliving bad moments can be difficult yet therapeutic. Some students even noted how impactful the thumbs were in course evaluation feedback. The thumb exercise instead of a general “how are you doing” is helpful to those who do not want to speak as they can raise their thumb but not feel compelled to elaborate. Moving forward, I will continue to adopt the thumbs up exercise and allow space for follow up responses more often.

My teaching philosophy is reflective of my commitment to social justice and change that can transpire through education and co-constructed learning environments. The Thumb Check-in not only aligns with my teaching philosophy, but it does not consume a significant amount of class time. My mindset around this exercise has shifted from one that is a quick check in to one that can lead to rich community conversations. I encourage faculty to create co-constructed learning spaces where students feel seen, heard, validated, and valued. I found this exercise as a good way to establish rapport with my students. The topics discussed during the Thumb Check-in aligned nicely with topics in my online doctoral course on equity, antiracism, and education policy. Although this has always been a personal teaching technique, I found it was supportive of students who were making sense of racism and the coronavirus pandemic.

References

Love, J., Gaynor, T., & Blessett, B. (2016). Facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom: A pedagogical imperative. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 38(4), 227–233.