

Embracing Anti-Racist Pedagogy in a “General Audience” Course

Sophie Webb

University of California San Diego

I have witnessed the power of inclusion, active participation, and diverse perspectives in teaching. And yet, in many ways, inclusive teaching does not go far enough. As a fellow of my institution’s Anti-Racist Pedagogy Learning Community (ARPLC), we discussed the challenge of moving from inclusive teaching to anti-racist pedagogy. Where inclusive teaching centers around fostering a sense of belonging and embracing diversity, anti-racist pedagogy actively acknowledges and opposes racism (Blakeney, 2005). Inclusive teaching involves diverse readings on the syllabus, while anti-racist pedagogy delves into the historical context of research publication bias, prompting students to question the prevalence of articles by white men. Ultimately, the goal of anti-racist teaching is to cultivate students’ critical thinking skills in analyzing the systemic racism prevalent in our society today. In doing so, we equip students to navigate a diverse world, challenge inequalities, and contribute to a more just society.

Reflecting on my own learning, I share my experience as a teaching assistant (TA) embracing anti-racist pedagogy in an introductory sociology course. This course, typically led by a single instructor, took an unexpected turn when the assigned instructor withdrew. The sociology department adopted a team-teaching approach with eight instructors, each bringing unique perspectives. While this diversity was a strength, it presented challenges in content delivery coherence. As a TA, I served as a throughline, ensuring continuity for students. This allowed me to integrate anti-racist perspectives without altering the core design. The course, designed to introduce sociology to a diverse audience was limited when it came to addressing issues of race and racism, perhaps due to the team-teaching approach. While inclusive in intent, it lacked a specific anti-racist focus. Rather than advocating for a full course redesign, my goal was to enhance its existing structure. In contrast to my previous experience as a TA for this course

with a single instructor in 2021 when I followed the established syllabus and focused on just delivering the prescribed content, in 2023 I felt I had the opportunity to engage in intentional anti-racist pedagogy.

For example, this course is designed to teach a “general audience.” Within academia, a general audience often carries assumptions of white, middle-class students. In the ARPLC, I was encouraged to collect “first-day information” so I sent out a survey which asked students for their preferred names, pronouns, employment status, and caretaking responsibilities. The dual purpose of this survey was to identify potential barriers my students might face and direct them towards relevant resources, while also emphasizing that their full selves, including their backgrounds, belonged in our classroom. (Killpack & Melón, 2020, p. 1) The results of this survey revealed a richly diverse student body that did not conform to the traditional concept of a general audience.

On the survey, I also asked my students to share their favourite song which I then added to a class playlist that I would play at the beginning and end of each discussion section. This playlist was not just background music; it was a means of making each student feel valued in the classroom and fostering an environment where they could embrace each other's diverse musical preferences. The playlist was available to the students on Spotify, and students continued to add songs, like, follow, and share the playlist throughout the quarter suggesting they enjoyed collaborating with me and each other on our class soundtrack.

In the team-taught environment, TAs were given latitude to tailor our teaching approaches to best meet the needs of our diverse students. As such, I used discussion sections to probe students to think critically about the lectures and assigned readings in the course in line with the anti-racist pedagogy I was learning in the ARLPC. During the week on income inequality, the instructor took a class-only approach to the material — likely due to the fact this instructor was limited in both their time to prepare and only leading the lecture for a week. Recognizing that my students came from varied racial and socioeconomic background, I asked them to read

a short additional article on the racial wealth gap and we discussed how the main lecture would have benefited from an intersectional perspective. My role as a TA allowed me to delve deeper into topics and provide students with additional perspectives. Rather than critiquing that specific lecturer, my aim was to emphasize the unique advantages of discussion sections — smaller settings with more direct student participation — in making specific connections between course content and the diversity of students. Similarly, during the week on crime and the criminal justice system, my students and I went beyond the syllabus to discuss our city’s use of ShotSpotter — an AI tool that listens for the sound of gunfire and then sends alerts to police with specific locations. Students shared their experiences living in heavily policed communities that employ ShotSpotter and we were able to connect the lecture to the students’ lives in a more meaningful way than if we had strictly adhered to the syllabus.

My students similarly noted the benefits of the additional depth of discussion in our sections. In anonymous TA evaluations, I received positive comments that demonstrate the effectiveness of our discussions. One student noted, “She is very good at not only understanding/conveying the material discussed in class, but also understanding how us students are viewing the content.” These evaluations further highlighted that students felt their well-being was a priority, that I empathized with their challenges, and that they believed in my commitment to their success and learning. These sentiments serve as concrete evidence that my anti-racist, in-depth pedagogical approach not only prepared students for the course, but also fostered an environment where they felt genuinely valued.

As I reflect on these outcomes, I am committed to incorporating critical, reflective discussions of both the course content, and also the course itself into my TA practice moving forward, recognizing that doing so contributes to student engagement and understanding as well as to creating an inclusive and anti-racist educational environment.

References

- Blakeney, A. M. (2005). Antiracist Pedagogy: Definition, Theory, and Professional Development. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 2(1), 119–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2005.10411532>
- Killpack, T. L., & Melón, L. C. (2020). First-Day Info Sheets: A Tool to Prompt Semester-Long Inclusive Teaching. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 21(1), 10.1128/jmbe.v21i1.1983. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v21i1.1983>