

Teaching Social Justice: Using the Civil Rights Movement in the Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching a course on race is one of the hardest things to do in the American college classroom. The scholarly literature on the educational and pedagogical techniques of teaching race and diversity in the classroom shows several things. For example, one must use teaching techniques such as role-playing activities, icebreakers, and simulation games to educate students about race rather than polarizing them. "Political Discourse: Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement" is a college course designed to help students accomplish the following goals: 1) to introduce them to the major events of the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 through 1965; 2) to improve their ability to evaluate political discourse by learning the components and formal structure of argumentation; 3) to improve their skills in effective public speaking and persuasive presentations; 4) to help them understand how racism has created a superordinate/subordinate hierarchical relationship among groups in the United States; and 5) to break down barriers between students of different races/ethnicities so that they want to engage in discussions about race and racism and develop a commitment to anti-racism and social justice. Through a series of exercises, mini-speeches, and formal presentations, the course attempts to break down students' defensiveness and engage them in open and candid discussions on racism. The course has fostered the development of friendships and coalitions across racial and gender lines. It has become so popular on our campus that the political science department now offers multiple sections of the course in both the fall and spring semesters and during one session of summer school.

Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement provides an excellent framework to help students understand racism and to develop a commitment to anti-racism and social justice. This course is designed to familiarize students with the dimensions of political discourse while linking discussions of the 1950s and 1960s with contemporary racism.

Teaching a course on race is always a difficult thing to do in the American classroom.

While some studies on multicultural teaching have focused on the relationships between

primarily white middle-class instructors and students of color, it is equally instructive to examine the methods of pedagogy that focus on a black instructor and students who are predominantly white (Page, 2002). While Latinos are proportionally represented in this particular course, African-Americans and Asian-American groups are surprisingly underrepresented.

The typical college student today did not experience the modern-day Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s or the system of racial apartheid that existed in the American south during that time period. Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (1954-1965) serves as an ideal basis for the course, given the number of significant speeches, the scope of debate, and the introduction of new kinds of political discourse to America (including nonviolent direct action).

This has opened up even greater teaching and learning possibilities. Students are introduced to a period that few of them know well. Additionally, the course is centered on issues of social justice and racism through which students of different races and from different backgrounds can find common ground.

Literature Review

Examples of the scholarly literature focus on different educational and pedagogical techniques of race and diversity in the classroom. Helen Silverberg (1994) emphasizes the problems and challenges of various techniques of teaching race. The "add and stir" approach polarizes rather than educates students about race issues. For Silverberg (1994, p.719), race groups "are static and unchanging political categories." Furthermore, notes Silverberg (1994, p.719) "Issues of race should be taught through the lens of political and institutional processes and perspectives instead of polarizing and controversial techniques."

Paula McClain (1997) provides recommendations on learning about the Civil Rights Movement by citing the favorite books of her colleagues within the discipline, ranging from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* by Taylor Branch (1988), or Robert Weisbrot's (1990) *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*, or *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* by Robert J. Norrell (1986).

Yvette Alex-Assensoh (2000) discusses innovative ways to teach race through interactive tools that assess the knowledge of students. She begins each of her classes by telling her students that each of them belongs to at least two or more racial, gender, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups. Alex-Assensoh also utilizes tools such as debates, role-playing activities, and other resources, such as autobiographies and videos, to discuss and educate her students on important issues of race.

Evelyn Simien (2003) articulates the importance of teaching black leadership to include both men and women as integral forces in the struggle for equality and civil rights. She emphasizes the importance of African-American female leaders, such as Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Diane Nash, in enhancing the educational curriculum on black leadership and civil rights.

Simien's curriculum of teaching black leadership and the history of the civil rights movement enables her students to use the lessons of the men and women leaders of the movement to conduct a comprehensive social justice project. These projects, according to Simien, should reflect a problem and challenge facing African-Americans and develop a solution to the problem by developing a campaign for social justice. Simien hopes to provide the means to inspire her students to be activists on civil rights and social justice issues.

Ann Lutterman-Aguilar (2003) focuses on the use of icebreakers and simulation games, such as computer-based initiatives, which can be used to educate on various topics involving diversity and global issues. Several of these games, such as the “power and privilege game” and “name that category” game, are important experiential educational and pedagogic tools that are used to create an open and inclusive environment where students are able to experience race issues in a different way than the traditional lecture or reading format. Games of this sort are useful for developing dialogue on diversity, and help students become more aware of cultural differences, issues of social class, power, and privilege, as well as issues of race and ethnicity.

Race in the College Classroom: Pedagogy and Politics, edited by Bonnie TuSmith and Maureen Reddy (2002) is an extensive collection of essays by scholars who discuss their experiences of dealing with race issues in their college classroom. The various accounts display the teachers dealing with their own racial and ethnic identities while teaching a multiracial and multicultural, or a predominantly white group of students about issues of race, as well as the various confrontations students from different backgrounds have on polarizing racial issues.

The above authors are white, black, Asian, Latino, women, and men, and each expresses the enormous challenges and obstacles of teaching race in the classroom. Karyn McKinney (2002) openly wonders in her essay “Whiteness on a White Canvas” how to teach issues of race to a predominantly white student body when many of the students have limited exposure to the cultural differences and experiences of other ethnic and racial groups.

Alex-Assensoh (2000), Simien (2003), McClain (1997), and Lutterman-Aguilar (2003) all believe that role playing is an effective non-polarizing technique in discussing issues of race and diversity. I have found in my teaching that role-playing as an in-class exercise is a desirable technique for getting students to talk openly about issues of race. Simien (2003) specifically

identifies the importance of teaching black leadership and the Civil Rights movement to include women as well as men. McClain (1997) identifies textbooks that highlight the leadership provided by these individuals during the Civil Rights Movement. I place additional emphasis in my course on some of the lesser-known men and women who were local heroes in the civil rights struggle. Karyn McKinney's (2002) work on teaching issues of race to a predominantly white student body is particularly instructive. Most of my students, who are white, have had little contact with other racial and ethnic groups outside of their own. In addition, the political protest of the Civil Rights Movement and the pressure that was exerted on the political and institutional structures of America provide an excellent forum to examine issues of race. Silverberg (1994) prefers this approach to studying issues of race because of its less controversial nature.

Learning Objectives

I have identified the following objectives:

1. To introduce students to the major events of the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 through 1965 (Knowledge)
2. To improve the ability of students to evaluate the political discourse of others by learning the components and formal structure of argumentation. (Skills)
3. To improve the skills of students necessary to engage in effective public speaking and to deliver persuasive presentations (Skills).
4. To help students understand how racism has created a superordinate/subordinate hierarchical relationship among groups in the United States (Values)

5. To break down barriers between students of different races/ethnicities so that they want to engage in discussions about race and racism and develop a commitment to anti-racism and social justice. (Values)

Method

Each week students view videos of political discourse drawn from sections of the PBS series on the Civil Rights Movement titled *Eyes on the Prize* (Williams, 1987), which illustrates particular forms of political speech. A faculty member helps students to grasp the mechanics of style, delivery, content, context, targeted audiences, and the like. Each student is required to make a number of oral presentations, including a series of mini-speeches on assigned topics, a debate on a particular issue, and a dramatic interpretation.

Learning Mechanisms

I begin the course with background information on the modern Civil Rights Movement. First, we discuss why there was a need for such a movement. From there, the class moves to a discussion of the origins of race and racism in the world. We discuss how race is a social and political construct and that it has very little, if any, significance in the biological community today. Once we define racism, we begin to discuss how racism as a belief manifests itself in everyday society. We define discrimination and prejudice and discuss examples of each. The first half of the course consists of a series of interpretive exercises focusing on several different themes. While engaged in these exercises students learn about race, racism, discrimination, prejudice, and negative stereotypes. I use many techniques to expose students to the harmful effects of treating others differently. Let us begin with a brief discussion of these exercises.

In-Class Exercises

Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes

This lesson incorporates an educational and pedagogical approach to diversity training (Lester, 1996). It includes a discussion of prejudice, discrimination and racism. To stimulate discussion, I show a short video titled "The Eye of the Storm," a 1970 television documentary from the ABC "Now" program featuring Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher in the all-white community of Riceville, Iowa. Elliott gave her nine-year-old students a two-day lesson on discrimination by means of an experiment that used different eye colors to identify the realities of prejudice and discrimination.

In response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968, Elliott asked her students at Riceville Community Elementary School what they knew about blacks (Peters, 1987). The students expressed as common knowledge the negative ideas they had heard from adults in their lives. She then divided them into two groups: the blue-eyes and the brown-eyes. The students were treated as superior or inferior based on the color of their eyes (*Frontline's* "A Class Divided," 1986).

After viewing the video, students in my course have exhibited many different reactions. One of the most startling contrasts among student responses is how many of the white students have been dramatically affected by the exercise and have gained a sense of empathy toward the racism that black students experience on a daily basis. On the other hand, many of my black students who feel that white students do not understand discrimination believe that the video uses eye color to make white students understand discrimination based on race.

One interesting observation was that black students and white students in my class were equally surprised by the behavior modification of the children in Elliott's class depending on

whether they were labeled inferior or superior. For example, in the documentary “The Eye of the Storm” when subjected to discrimination on the basis of eye color, both groups became frustrated and felt rejected. Moreover, when the students were asked to do a simple assignment, those in the inferior position had a more difficult time remembering and following directions. Conversely, those in the superior position completed the task easily and enthusiastically and then berated the others, accusing them of inferiority because of eye color (*Frontline’s* “A Class Divided,” 1986). In my classes, Latino students tend to respond in a fashion similar to black students to these issues. I have not detected any noticeable differences between the responses of men and women for these exercises.

This eye-color experiment is an excellent tool for helping students to learn about discrimination and racism, and for whites, in particular, to experience how it feels to be discriminated against. This exercise helps break down students’ defensiveness and allows them to open up and talk candidly about racism.

Dolls Test

This lesson begins with a discussion of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The Supreme Court ruled in this case that separate schools were inherently unequal, thus ending the famous “separate but equal” doctrine handed down by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Thurgood Marshall, the lead attorney who argued for integrated schools, had used as evidence the “Dolls Test” performed by psychologist Kenneth Clark.

In 1950, Clark traveled to South Carolina where he interviewed sixteen black children aged six to nine (Williams, 1987). He carried a suitcase that contained a number of brown dolls and white dolls. Interviewing them individually, Clark asked each student which dolls they liked

better. Most of the students said they liked the white dolls better. Next, Clark asked each student which doll was most like him or her. Clark was disturbed that many of the children would refuse to answer and run out of the room (interpreted as meaning many of the children were upset about having to identify with what they perceived as the inferior doll) (Williams, 1987). The purpose of this exercise in the classroom is to enable students to see the harmful effects that discrimination and segregation have on individuals and groups.

The Name Game

At the beginning of class, I give students name tags that only assign them a race and gender. For that lesson, the student is to respond to class discussion from what they perceive would be the perspective of someone of that race and gender. For instance, Shemeka, a biracial female, was given the name tag of a white male. Throughout that day's discussion, Shemeka responded to all questions from the perspective that she felt a white male would have. Ryan, a white male, was given the name tag of a black female. Therefore, his responses for that day were those he perceived to be from the perspective of a black female.

In this particular class, students were discussing affirmative action. Shemeka, who was speaking as a white male, stated that she was against affirmative action because it was a form of reverse discrimination. However, Ryan, speaking as a black female, felt that affirmative action was very necessary to provide opportunities for women and minorities, both of whom historically had been discriminated against.

This exercise revealed different perceptions that people have about one another as a group that are not always accurate. For example, at the end of class, Ryan informed Shemeka that, as a white male, he was not against affirmative action but actually thought it was a good program. These types of exercises are an effort to help students to understand racism and to

develop a commitment to anti-racism. Numerous students have approached me after class to say that these exercises have helped them to understand racism.

Mini-speeches

To introduce students to the art of public speaking, students are assigned four mini-speeches. Since speaking in front of an audience generally terrifies most students, the four mini-speeches are designed to familiarize students with public speaking and to help them overcome stage fright. My goal is for each student to become more comfortable speaking to the class with each mini-speech.

Leisure Time and Visual Aid

The first mini-speech is the icebreaker. It allows students to introduce themselves to the class in a relaxed and informal environment. This is a one-minute speech in which each student tells the audience about his or her own leisure-time activities. Each student brings to class a few small or portable visual aids to help explain how they spend their spare time. For instance, Jimmy brought in a saddle as an example of his love of horseback riding. Jasmine brought in Toni Morrison's (1997) *Beloved* because her hobby was reading books by black female authors.

Negative Stereotype Advertisement

In talking about racism and sexism, a discussion of the harmful effects of stereotyping a whole race or gender based on the acts of a few individuals from that group is important. Because television is a primary source of stereotyping, it provides the medium for this assignment. The students are asked to view and then tell the class about a television advertisement that they think exemplifies negative stereotyping in popular culture today. Students come to the front of the class, briefly summarize the ad, and tell the class why they think it portrays a negative stereotype, what message it sends to the viewer, and what segment of

the population it stereotypes. Lastly, the students tell why they like or dislike the ad, whether it is harmless or harmful, and what larger message it sends to society.

Students respond positively to this exercise. For instance, Robert presented a commercial for “Feed the Children” in which viewers are asked to contribute to a relief program for famine-stricken people in Africa. The advertisement shows a partially clothed, hungry-looking African child. Robert perceived that this was a negative stereotype and disliked the advertisement because he felt that it sent the message that all of Africa lives in poverty and needs American aid for survival.

Another student, Rose, discussed an advertisement for a mop that depicted a woman wearing high heels and pearls as she cleaned the kitchen floor. Rose felt that this was negatively stereotyping women as the sole target of cleaning product advertisement campaigns. She also pointed out that the women were portrayed as being sexual objects by appearing to clean house in eveningwear.

Many students stated that they had seen the commercials numerous times but had not realized the harmful effects of the negative stereotyping until required to watch the commercial as part of an assignment. Students gleaned from this assignment that the media, which has a huge influence on popular culture in society, still subtly promotes racism and sexism with its negative stereotyping.

Social Movement Poster

Students are told to imagine that they are attending a southern college or university in the early 1960s. Their task is to organize a demonstration of fellow students in response to some social issue of concern to them. They must create a poster announcing their protest to the students. They must identify their organization, explain the importance of the creation of the

organization, and identify the goals it hopes to achieve. This activity usually involves a lot of creativity on the part of the students, and they are encouraged to dress in attire that pertains to their specific organization. Students are evaluated on their creativity in costume design as well as poster design. Furthermore, they are evaluated on their imagination and creativity with the social movement they select and the enthusiasm and conviction they convey for their cause.

Susan dressed as a piano keyboard. Her message was blacks and whites, just as the ebony and ivory keys on a piano, can live together in harmony. Her presentation represented Students Organized Against Racism (S.O.A.R.). Denise created an organization called Ole Miss Students for Integration (O.M.S.I.). She planned a demonstration in support of admitting James Meredith to the University of Mississippi. Through this exercise, students demonstrated a heightened awareness of social justice issues that were present during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements of the 1960s.

Online Website Political Assignment

Students are asked to select and summarize a current political event of particular interest to them from an online newspaper website. Students are required to describe the theme of their article in a single sentence, followed by a summary of the main points of the article. Each student is supposed to describe these points in such a way that the class can grasp the gist of the article.

Amber chose an online *New York Times* article titled "With Passion and a Dash of Pink, Women Protest War." Amber described how several thousand protesters, most of them women, had rallied near the White House, wearing pink as a symbol of opposition to the war in Iraq. They carried placards, sang, and chanted slogans in a low-key demonstration organized by a group called Code Pink, an obvious play on the national security color-coded alert system. This

exercise allowed students to gain experience in conducting Internet research, to learn about a current political event, and to practice extemporaneous speaking in an informal manner. The four mini-speeches are designed to help students make the transition from informal speaking to the more formal presentations that will be required later in the course.

Formal Presentations

The second half of the course focuses on formal presentations. The first such formal presentation is in the form of a debate. This gives the students the opportunity to develop their skills in research and to learn how to argue their point of view and defend it. The second formal presentation is structured as a dramatic interpretation, which is intended to incorporate the public speaking skills that the students have acquired throughout the semester. These speeches represent the capstone of the class and are to be delivered as dramatic performances.

Debates

Students divide up into teams of two. Each pair of students selects a current controversial issue in American politics of interest to them. One member of each team will argue the affirmative side and the other member of the team will argue the negative side for each issue. After both sides have argued each viewpoint, each side will have an opportunity for rebuttal.

Marilyn and William debated interracial marriage. Marilyn, a white female, chose the affirmative position, which left William with the negative viewpoint. William, a white male, argued that one reason he was against interracial marriage is because the children suffer by not having a clear identity as to their culture or heritage. Marilyn countered by saying that interracial marriages are much more accepted by society today.

Rachel and Sarah, two female college athletes, argued Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act (1972). Rachel, a varsity tennis player, strongly supported equal funding for women's and men's collegiate athletic programs while Sarah, a varsity swimmer, supported Title IX but felt that it was implemented incorrectly.

At the end of each debate, the class took advantage of the opportunity to critique each team of debaters as to their strengths and weaknesses. This often sparked interesting debate among the class as a whole and it gave students the opportunity to learn from one another.

Dramatic Interpretations

Students select a modern-day civil rights speech from a list provided to them that covers a broad cross-section of orators. Where possible, each student must choose a speech that was originally delivered by a person of a different race and sex. Students develop a strong sense of attachment with the speech, capturing the mood of the speaker as well as the tone of the presentation.

Charity, who was unable to choose a speech by a person of a different race and gender, delivered Fannie Lou Hamer's (1964) "Is This America" speech. She was so affected by the resolve of one woman's efforts to achieve the right to vote for all citizens of Mississippi that she chose political science as her college major. Penny, who delivered Dr. Martin Luther King's (1968) "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech, which he presented the night before his assassination, performed the dramatic interpretation with such emotion that many in the class were literally moved to tears. Once again, students critique each other on the elements of effective presentation.

Lessons Learned

Since I first began teaching this class five years ago, it has become extremely popular among students on campus. The course now satisfies the general education oral communication requirement for students university-wide, so students from a variety of majors take the course. This is enriching the experience of diversity of students on campus in addition to improving their public speaking skills.

Enrollment for the course has grown to the point where other faculty in the department are now offering this class. I have acted as a teacher-trainer for faculty interested in teaching the class. Five different faculty members have taught or are now teaching the course, and one additional faculty member wants me to assist her in preparing to teach the course next year. At times the course has been team-taught by a black male, a white male, and a white female; a black male and white male; or by individual instructors. The value added by team-teaching is the different perspectives each instructor brings to the subject matter. Each faculty member contributes different sensitivities and experiences to the class.

Attainment of Stated Objectives

My five objectives for the course were divided into three categories: knowledge (one objective), skills (two objectives), and values (two objectives). The knowledge and skills objectives can be more readily assessed due to their objective nature. Therefore, I was able to assess the knowledge and skills categories by using various learning outcomes throughout the semester. The knowledge and skills objectives are listed in the syllabus as an individual learning outcome with a statement as to how each learning outcome will be assessed.

For example, the first skills objective is to improve the ability of students to evaluate the political discourse of others by learning the components and formal structure of argumentation.

The assessment of this objective is as follows: Understanding the basic structure of argument will be assessed through readings on argumentation, followed by in-class discussion and exercises, and ending with written examinations that will test students using the analytical tools they have learned to examine and identify the content of various speeches. Additionally, students were given two mid-term examinations which tested them on their knowledge of key figures and events in the Civil Rights Movement.

In addition to my ability to assess whether students have achieved these objectives, students are given the opportunity on the course evaluations at the end of the semester to provide feedback as to whether I provided students with the tools to meet these objectives and whether I accomplish these objectives. Judging from student responses over the last five years, I would say that I have been extremely successful in accomplishing these objectives.

My final two objectives were both values. The fourth objective is to help students understand how racism has created a superordinate/subordinate hierarchical relationship in the United States. The fifth objective is to break down barriers between students of different races/ethnicities so that they want to engage in discussions about race and racism and develop a commitment to anti-racism and social justice. It is much more difficult to determine whether I have accomplished these objectives due to their subjective nature. Thus, the interpretive exercises are designed to accomplish these objectives. It is my hope that through videos like "The Eye of the Storm" and the four mini-speeches such as the negative stereotyping advertisement that students will develop a deeper understanding of the harm that racism causes in our society.

Students who have completed the course have expressed that they had a very positive experience and have recommended it to other students. One student remarked on a course

evaluation, "The course is an excellent one; I never knew the Civil Rights Movement was so detailed. I think this made me look at the world from a completely different viewpoint as an African-American. I've recommended this class to several other friends." Another student evaluation said, "I feel less ignorant and more open-minded and compassionate toward all people."

In class we often had difficult discussions and exchanges between students where some students articulated racist and/or sexist viewpoints. Sometimes students became angry at one another which resulted in heated dialogue. The course serves as a forum to move the conversation beyond such confrontations. In one course evaluation, a student noted that the instructor was successful at "fielding and creating discussion about often tense debates and topics."

Despite the difficulties and limitations associated with discussing race in the classroom, I feel that the course is successful in achieving constructive dialogue across racial lines. Through the various exercises, I hope that it has also broadened the perspectives of the students and made them more tolerant to different views and lifestyles.

As an African American teaching students who are predominantly white, I have strived to create an inclusive atmosphere that makes students of all racial backgrounds feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Through multiple exercises, videos, speeches, and discussions dealing with the Civil Rights Movement, it has been my goal to help students to understand racism and to develop a commitment to anti-racism and social justice. Additionally, the class has had a spillover effect on campus where cross-race friendships have formed and cross-race coalitions have been created to address racism at the university.

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