



Teaching in a World of White Privilege: A Starting Point for Reflection and Growth

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Almost 80% of US K-12 teachers and 76% of college faculty identify as non-Hispanic white, whereas students are respectively only 47% and 55% non-Hispanic white (Davis & Schaeffer, 2021). Our “color,” that is our race, defines who we are and how we see the world, whether we want it to or not. In a world where race is an ever-present reality, albeit a social construct (Coates, 2021), it matters how white educators interact with students of color and what behaviors they model for white students.

How do educators navigate these waters? How do educators engage in discussion without creating a hostile classroom environment? What are white educators’ roles in seeking to uplift the voices of the marginalized?

Below is one option of a step-by-step guide, along with resources at the very end, to assist white educators on a journey of reflection and growth.

1. Self-reflect and be vulnerable.

Educators cannot engage in any quality teaching without self-reflection. This work—wading through one’s life experiences and working to see it through the lens of race and privilege (note that people can experience both privilege and oppression based on group memberships — is difficult (Crenshaw, 2017)). Am I acknowledging both my visible and invisible group memberships? What are things I have which I did not earn? How has my “whiteness” shaped my development, housing situation, professional success, financial potential? What words or actions creep into my life which are born from discrimination or bias? Verna Myers says to walk into your biases, face them, confront them, deal with them, noting, “we were all outside when the contamination came down” (2014).

DEIJ work, the work of which we speak here, is about social interactions as well as curriculum. Course subject matter, no matter what it is, is not exempt from issues of race and race relations. The excuse of “this does not apply to me” is just that—an excuse.

The stories we choose to tell matter: whose are you telling?

2. Do your homework.

Read and learn. Despite what revisionist history would have us believe, the impact of racism



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in our country is real and present, it is not simply in the past: it literally defines the boundaries of our neighborhoods and freeways (Rothstein, 2018). Its insidious tendrils have woven their way into even the [groceries we buy](#) (Deutsch, 2020) and the language we use (stop and think the next time you hear the phrase [“cake walk”](#) (Gandhi, 2013)). We cannot escape how racism has impacted life in the United States, thus, we must face it.

Start by subscribing to some journals or news magazines which willingly engage in these conversations and topics (I am particularly fond of [Learning for Justice](#)). Perhaps you may begin to follow some social activists on Twitter or Instagram, listen to a podcast, challenge yourself to join a book club or read on your own, attend DEIJ professional development. Branch out of your comfort zone. (See suggested resources at the bottom.)

Create relationships with students. The best source of learning in the classroom has always been from student TO teacher, not the other way around. Survey your students right at the start of the term: who are they, how do they see themselves, what are their stories, what challenges or lights them up? You will be amazed at the difference simply by asking those questions you can make in your course. Read these surveys, see who your students are, do not ignore color or diversity—it is part of who we are and how we see the world (“color-blindness” is both an illusion and counter-productive). Assess their comfort levels with “triggering” topics by using these surveys or anonymous formative assessment. This early work produces beautiful fruit when difficult topics come up either in discussion or when you inevitably mess up (see #4).

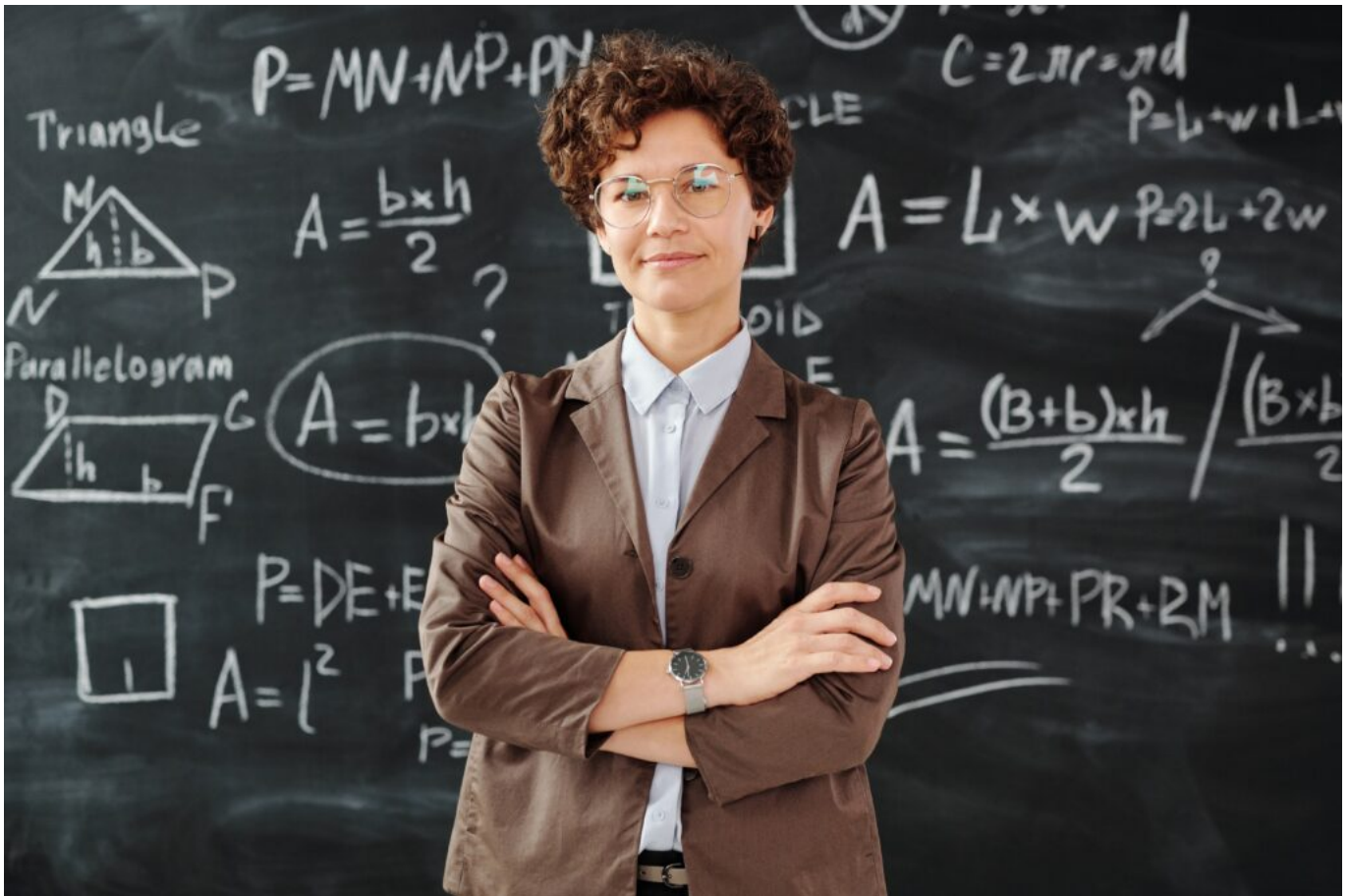


Photo by Max Fischer:

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-woman-standing-in-front-of-blackboard-5212320/>

3. Be honest and expect and accept honesty.

Establish some “ground rules” or course norms. This must be intentional: as teachers, we have a tendency to assume that by saying “this is a safe space” that automatically makes it so. A safe space, literal or figurative, must be intentionally built through discussion guidelines and practice. There are many different frameworks you could adopt, but my favorite is the four agreements of courageous conversations, from Glenn Singleton’s book *Courageous Conversations*: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure (2022). These agreements must be examined both by you and the students and consistently incorporated into course operations.

Be honest about your own experiences and fears, both with yourself and your students. Students know when instructors are not being genuine, and they deeply respect it when we own our mistakes or humanity. Scary and abhorrent as this might be to some of us, it is OK not to be the expert in the room.



Be prepared that if you are expecting honesty, you will most likely get it. Many times, however, students and people of color are not interested in explaining race to yet another white person or discussing events like George Floyd's death again. It can act as a re-traumatization. And while well-meaning white anger is valid and has a place, it is ultimately an academic rather than real or visceral anger. As the whitest person my students ever met, I can never truly empathize, though I might try, with the fear of being black and pulled over by the police. This may place you in the category of ignorant, or a well-meaning white ally, or all the way to having a white savior complex. Intention is different from impact, though: in the words of Calvin Terrell, "in fighting monsters, do not become one" (personal communication, August 21, 2020).

4. Fail. Apologize. And then do it again.

You will likely have some missteps along the way. Come to terms with that now. You may use the wrong terminology (Black vs. African American vs. person of color), tell an anecdote that comes across as oblivious, or judge someone for their language/clothing/social interactions.

Sometimes you will be genuinely at fault; sometimes you will not know where you went wrong; sometimes you will never understand how you offended someone. Intention is again irrelevant: how you impact someone, fair or unfair, is what matters. We can never know what someone else's experience is. Learn how to properly apologize: seek to enhance your own understanding, own it (do not make excuses), actually say the words "I apologize for...," and do not repeat the mistake (Raypole, 2021).

5. Circle back to reflection and continue the cycle.

As you venture into or continue on this journey, remember that you are a product of our society and past. This is not about blame or shame, but instead, we are working to name and re-frame (Terrell, personal communication, August 21, 2020). To paraphrase Goldy Muhammad, the time for good intentions is over (2021). Center voices of color, but do not burden them with the responsibility of teaching you: do your homework! You cannot fix the past, nor fix the whole world as it is. What does it mean to be a good ancestor NOW? How can you change your little corner of the world?

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Suggested Resources (see chart above)

Websites and News Magazines	Web articles	People to read about and follow	Books	Podcasts and videos
<u>Learning for Justice</u>	<u>"Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations," original book by Glenn Singleton</u>	<u>Brene Brown</u> and "Building Brave Spaces for Students"	<i>So You Want to Talk About Race</i> , by Ijeoma Oluo	<u>YouTube: What is Privilege?</u>
<u>The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education</u>	<u>"Anatomy of an Ally," by Carry Gaffney, from Learning for Justice</u>	<u>Verna Myers</u> ; especially her <u>TED talk</u>	<i>Dear White Peacemakers</i> , by Osheta Moore	<u>YouTube film preview: Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible</u>
<u>Harriet Speaks and the founder Jyarland Daniels (local)</u>	<u>"Teaching While White," by Molly Tansey & Melissa Katz, from Learning for Justice</u>	<u>Clint Smith</u> ; see his books, <u>TED talk</u> , and <u>Crash Course Black American History videos</u>	<i>White Fragility</i> , by Robin D'Angelo	<u>YouTube: 'Reverse Racism' Is A Giant Lie - Here's Why</u>
<u>Mercy Education System of the Americas resources on Race and AntiRacism</u>	<u>"Antiracist Action for White Educators," collection from Learning for Justice</u>	<u>Calvin Terrell</u> ; see his recorded talks and his extensive list of resources.	<i>The New Jim Crow</i> , by Michelle Alexander	<u>YouTube: Cracking the Codes: Power Analysis</u>



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<u>Rethinking Schools</u>	<u>"The Evolution of Racism," by Ben Zimmer, from The Atlantic</u>	<u>Tim Wise</u>	<i>The Color of Law</i> , by Richard Rothstein	<u>Podcast: Still Processing, a New York Times culture podcast with Jenna Wortham and Wesley Morrison</u>
<u>Understanding Race and their resources page</u>	<u>"What we mean when we say race is a 'social construct'," by Ta-Nehisi Coates, from The Atlantic</u>	<u>Ibram X. Kendi, the author of How to Be an Antiracist and Director of the Antiracism Center</u>	<i>Courageous Conversations about Race</i> , by Glenn E. Singleton	<u>Podcast: Seeing White, part of Scene on the Radio podcast series</u>
<u>Harvard University Anti-Racism Resources</u>	<u>"Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later," interview from Columbia Law</u>	<u>Gholdy Muhammed</u>	<i>Americanah</i> , a novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	<u>Podcast: Code Switch, from NPR</u>
<u>AJCU Anti-Racism Examen</u>	Pew Research data from 2017-18, <u>K-12</u> and <u>College</u>			