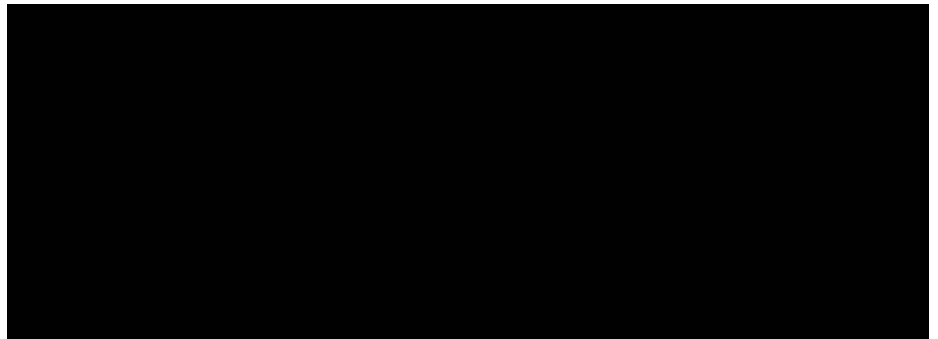# CTE Notebook

I typically encounter little difficulty engendering conversations about race and racism because it has been the central and obvious topic of most courses I teach. Since few of those classes are required courses, each student, through the act of registering for the course, has self-selected herself as a willing participant in a semester long discussion of a sensitive topic—race. Still, within those classes, the difficulty of honest and open conversations increases as the subjects of race and racism encroach upon contemporary and local issues. These difficulties increase yet again as race discussions intersect with gender and sexuality. Here, in my experience, the makeup of the class matters little, as most students will enter the classroom already feeling the pressures and implications of their own identity position on the course. That is to say, the racial demographics of the class may immediately work to silence one group of students and empower the other. For better or worse, my visible black presence may also serve either as an authorizing

each student to believe in my teacherly commitment to these three pillars of classroom discussion: civility, tolerance, and freedom.

Successful establishment of these pillars begins with my ability to persuade students, in word and deed, of my personal commitment to them. I cannot leave to chance the achievement of an ideal balance between freedom, civility and tolerance. This requires, perhaps more than any other pedagogic quality or condition, simple honesty about and willingness to reveal my own views and positions about racial identities and identifications. Here, teaching by example means revealing my own racial defenses and vulnerabilities.

Because nearly every class I teach requires that I tread the waters of race, gender, religion, and sexuality, I typically begin the semester by having each student introduce herself and self-identify according to the most important identity construct of the semester. If I am teaching about the Middle Passage, I have each student self-identify (with neither judgment nor comment from me) his race; In "Religion and American Culture," everyone identifies according to place of origin, race, and religion. I include myself among the respondents. So far, without fail, each one of these exercises pro-

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silences, fall away from unarticulated assumptions, and for fear to relinquish its defensive hold on stereotypes. A civil, free, and tolerant classroom community goes a long way towards providing students with a safe space wherein they are allowed to articulate and advance questions they might otherwise silence for fear.

Although I freely admit my intention to foster antiracist dialogue within the classroom, I find no pedagogical reason to have discussions in which some important segment, however small, of the class feels itself closed out of the conversation. Does this mean, then, that an anything goes atmosphere exists within the classroom? Of course not. The focus on civility, when articulated, adjudicated, and enforced by the teacher, works to encourage care on the part of the inquisitive speaker. The emphasis on tolerance, on the other hand, works to forestall rash and unproductive responses from an offended listener. This does not mean that I seek total agreement, harmony, or conversion. Instead, in a civil, free and tolerant classroom environment I do not shy away from the difficult spaces or from conflict. In my teaching experience, I have had individual

"I thought the discussion was going quite well. I know the issue was a sensitive topic, but the class was engaged in a polite and thoughtful manner. Suddenly, someone made a comment that many found offensive. In the course of a few seconds, the discussion went from cordial to down right hostile as the emotion in the room began to rise."

Many faculty members have found themselves in a similar situation. In the following sections, three of Saint Louis University's faculty offer their suggestions on handling sensitive issues in the classroom.

ADRIAN BLOW, PH.D.
Department of Counseling and Family Therapy

In the field of therapy – which includes counseling individuals, couples, and families – there are many sensitive issues, and students regularly bring these up in the classroom. Many of these issues have to do with the values that students bring into the profession, and their beliefs about change. Unfortunately, there is not always one right way of looking at these issues, and all of viewpoints are tainted by social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religious beliefs, political affiliation, and the like.

A basic assumption that I bring into the classroom is that real differences in belief systems exist, and that it is important for students to be able to talk about these differences in order to grow (or that others can grow by what they have to say). The very process of discussion, in a safe environment, allows for the personal exploration of ideas in a group, as well for alternative views or feedback about these ideas. This, in my mind, is an ideal context for learning and personal growth.

ELLEN M. BURKEMPER, PH.D.
School of Social Service

There are a couple of ways to think about this situation. One is to deal with the situation once it arises. The other is to set in motion, in the first day of the class,

WAYNE HELLMANN, DR. OF THEOLOGY
Department of Theological Studies

In order to lead students to new concepts or ideas that may provide occasion for discomfort, confusion or even strong disagreement, I have found it important first to facilitate a safe environment in the classroom in which students will not become unduly threatened when conflicting ideas become passionate. How is this safe environment facilitated? First of all, students in a classroom should at least know each other's names. From the very first class until the job is accomplished, the instructor with the students should spend some time each class learning names. It can be done in the manner of some imaginative type of game that can be fun and humorous. This makes a world of difference in the classroom environment and it helps foster a community spirit within the class. The time taken for this exercise can reap much benefit.

One benefit is that if students already know each other and feel some degree of comfort within the group, the tension that arises from disagreements is more manageable for both instructor and students. To call upon each other by name already puts the disagreement in the context of an established relationship. Then, when a strong disagreement erupts within the class discussion, it is easier to involve other students to help mediate the dispute.

How is this done? I have often asked other students not so immediately involved in the dispute to re-articulate the diverse positions, each articulating just

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The Technology Corner:
Handling Difficult Issues in Online Discussion
Sandy Gambill, Assistant Director
Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence

It should come to no surprise to anyone who has seen an online discussion board or listserv fall apart because of participant disagreement or off topic discussion that handling difficult issues is as much a part of online courses as face-to-face courses. There is something about the seemingly anonymous online environment that makes students feel free to say things