

Student-Centered Discussion in Racial Justice Courses

Abstract:

This article explores whether student-centered discussion is an effective pedagogical method to create a sanctuary type of environment in racial justice courses. Although studies abound about race in university classrooms, none assess the impact of a cross-racial faculty team (Black and White) co-teaching a racial justice course that utilizes a student-centered discussion model. Thus, we build on critical race education scholarship's insights to examine the impact of a student-centered discussion (SCD) model with a cross-racial faculty team co-teaching a racial justice course. Our data come from a two-year interpretive study that included direct observation and content analysis to examine whether student-centered learning is an effective pedagogical method for teaching racial justice courses. While we employed the Interactivity Foundation's SCD model, our findings provide insights about general advantages and disadvantages of student-centered learning in racial justice courses. We conclude the SCD process both detracts from and contributes to the creation of a sanctuary classroom environment. This is complicated because what some White students found to be a sanctuary space was simultaneously a threatening space for Students of Color, particularly due to repeat racial microaggressions. Nevertheless, an SCD process can be beneficial if course structure purposefully decenters a White-centric curricular and pedagogical lens.

Introduction

Professors who teach racial justice courses often strive to create a ‘safe space’ or ‘sanctuary’ classroom environment for their students. These professors know that classroom discussions range from exhilarating to excruciating; this is due to the sensitive nature of the course material and differing faculty and student social locations. Thus, we ask, as Leonardo and Porter (2010) ask in their article about Fanon and fear in the classroom: “‘Safety for Whom?’” (139).

In this article, we explore whether student-centered discussion is an effective pedagogical method to create a sanctuary type of environment in racial justice courses. We build on critical race education scholarship’s insights to examine the impact of a student-centered discussion (SCD) model with a cross-racial faculty team¹ co-teaching a racial justice course. Although we use a particular SCD model, known as the Interactivity Foundation model, we believe our insights regarding challenges and opportunities for creating a sanctuary-type environment apply to many student-centered learning practices in racial justice courses. We hypothesized that the IF (Interactivity Foundation)² process could contribute to the creation of a sanctuary type of classroom environment, but were also curious about the effects of social location on internal group power dynamics. We were guided by our own experiences of teaching racial justice courses, though our racial identities made the task much easier for Rose, a White woman professor. As race politics scholars and teachers at historically and predominantly white institutions, both of us have faced the never-ending project to “prove” the existence of structures of racism and White supremacy that have derailed classroom discussions of the problem on a larger scale. Therefore, we faced the choice to lecture or use other pedagogical means to explore the origins and continued relevance of racial inequality. While we know students must grapple with these issues in consultation with their peers, it is disconcerting to cede control in these inflammatory

situations; we also worry that small group discussions ignore power and social location and thus harm Students of Color.

We use data from our two-year study of a cross-racially taught racial justice course to assess the strength of the SCD model and its ability to create a sanctuary type of environment.³ After offering a conceptual framework to understand the problem at hand, we provide a course overview and rationale for the model. Next, we explain our research design and present our findings. We pay close attention to racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007) and how they affect the classroom environment for all students. We conclude that the use of a SCD process both detracts from and contributes to the creation of a sanctuary type of environment in the classroom. Returning to Leonardo and Porter's question, we find that a 'safe space' for White students to express their views on racial justice issues, both in small and large group settings, proved to be a concurrently threatening space for many Students of Color.

Conceptual Framework

The impetus for this study emerged through years of our experiences with classroom dialogues about race and racism at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Of particular concern was how these dialogues often empowered white students to engage in unintentional and intentional aggressive behavior toward Professors and Students of Color. The purpose of this section is to provide a conceptual framework, or "theoretical and empirical work relevant to the manuscript's purpose, where the purpose is not to further investigate a specific theory" (Rocco & Plakhotnik 2009, 126). With this in mind, we explore three, interrelated concepts that address the issue of racial justice in the classroom: 'safety' in the classroom, racial microaggressions, and finally, the student-centered discussion model developed by the Interactivity Foundation.

Safety in the Classroom

Research on ‘safety’ in the classroom has proliferated in academic journals over the past ten years (Chávez-Reyes 2012; Fox 2007; Lewison & Heffernan 2008; Lightfoot 2010; Nasir & Al-Amin 2006; Pittman 2010; Rodriguez 2011; Stoudt 2007; Weber 2011). Holley and Steiner describe “safe space” in the classroom as “[A] description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (2005, 50). They note that this concept does not refer to physical safety nor to the absence of discomfort (50). Dialogue about race and racism, as well as the racial identity of students engaged in that ‘dialogue’ is one issue of central concern in literature about safety in the classroom. Leonardo and Porters’ question that opened this article—‘safety for whom?’—is most relevant here: “In education, it is common to put the condition of ‘safety’ around public race dialogue. The authors argue that this procedural rule maintains white comfort zones and becomes a symbolic form of violence experienced by people of color” (2010, 139). In the context of group work, power imbalances as a result of racial dynamics can operate openly but also as “more subterranean processes” (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009, 25). Our study examines these issues of safety at play in the general classroom setting as well as in small-group, student-centered discussions.

Racial Microaggressions

White faculty and student use of racial microaggressions is one of the many ways in which the classroom may be inherently unsafe for Students and Faculty of Color. Microaggressions reflect relationships of power and domination, and are therefore always perpetuated by those who hold power in society by virtue of their identity. Social psychologists coined the term “racial microaggressions” to denote “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,

derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (Sue et al. 2007, 271). White people perpetuate racial microaggressions regardless of intent, even though they may do their best to avoid them. We argue that these interpersonal interactions reflect and reinforce institutional and systemic power relationships.

Although microaggressions occur in every classroom, the need to address racial microaggressions by faculty who teach racial justice courses is noteworthy (Sue et al. 2009; Boysen 2012). Microaggressions complicate the idea of a “sanctuary type of environment” which is at the core of the IF process, explained further in the following section. Therefore, our study examines this tension inherent in trying to create a sanctuary classroom environment in racial justice courses when utilizing student-centered learning, such as IF, with the hope that it will contribute to further discussion about this pedagogical approach.

IF Student-Centered Discussion Model

Byrd’s (2008) assessment of the strength of the Interactivity Foundation (IF) discussion model is its ability to provide a “...sanctuary type of environment.” “Sanctuary” is defined as “an environment where all students are free to speak without fear. Every student has a responsibility to help every other student think through the issues. There are no debates and no winners or losers. There is a genuine respect for each other’s role in the discussion” (2008, 9). This is accomplished because the IF discussion process “emphasizes student facilitated discussion and takes classroom discussion a step beyond the Socratic classroom, which still features the instructor on center stage. The IF approach gives students more responsibility for learning” (Lea & Byrd 2009). The primary difference between the IF process and other teaching models is that it is an alternative to teacher-led discussion/lecture: the students (with teacher feedback) lead an IF discussion process to foster democratic dialogue.⁴

The Interactivity Foundation studied the efficacy of SCD models in diversity-related courses (Lea, Horowitz & Byrd 2009). The findings were encouraging as the process “resulted in less classroom conflict and improved student outcomes, in particular to more student interactions and collaboration inside and outside the classroom, an outcome that has implications for improving student retention and the college experience as a whole, particularly for first generation students” (Lea, Horowitz & Byrd 2009, 1). This is the only IF process study about diversity-related topics in the classroom.

Our study departs from IF and related literature in two ways: (1) Lea, Horowitz and Byrd (2009) conducted their study with a White professor, whereas our course assessed the strength of this model using a Black-White cross-racial team-taught course; (2) we examine the impact of racial power dynamics of the IF SCD model itself. Scholarship related to the utility of cross-racial faculty teaching racial justice courses is scarce. Some of this scholarship explores reflections of a professor’s race and/or gender identity in teaching racial justice courses (Cobb-Roberts; Ford, 2011). Most, however, are reflections and not the result of a systematic analysis.⁵ The literature also does not address how racial dynamics impact the IF process and other forms of SCD in the classroom. Related scholarship about race in the classroom is available, but, as noted by Logan et al. (2014), the research has an “overwhelming preoccupation with how to teach race to Whites” (1). Scholarship about Faculty of Color teaching racial course content to Students of Color (Haskie & Shreve 2014; Logan et al. 2014) is rare. Most of the literature examines how White professors teach race to White students. Often this results in catering to “white fragility”, known as a “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). Our use of the IF model in a cross-racial teaching and student setting

aims to investigate how small groups may or may not reinforce these patterns of racial hierarchy in the classroom.

Course Overview

The course we co-taught in 2012 and 2013, titled *Law, Politics, and Justice*, was an advanced undergraduate legal studies, political science, capstone course. Students had a strong incentive to choose the course as the major capstone, but it was not required. Even though it was a capstone course, prerequisite coursework was not required. Course racial demographics (self-identified by students) included 10 Students of Color and 18 White students (2012) and 9 Students of Color and 10 White students (2013).⁶ Each class met twice a week for two hours over the course of ten weeks.

We explored the close but often uneasy relationship between law, politics, and justice, with a focus on political and legal attempts at reconciliation and redress for past injustices inflicted upon marginalized groups. With a focus on environmental justice issues, the central question of the course was “what does it mean to be an ally in the context of racial justice?” Course themes spoke to this question: apologies and restitution; racial inequality, with a focus on environmental justice issues; the concept of help; liberation and self-determination; and coalition building and solidarity. Though this question itself reflected the fact that we teach at what Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as identified as an “Historically White College and University”, or HWCU (Singh 2012), our goal was to shift focus and portrayals of People of Color as victims to agents in defining the role of allies in racial justice contexts.⁷ This is the reason the primary decision-making body of the course was the committee, composed entirely of Students of Color. They determined the trajectory of the simulated community meetings at the end of the course (see discussions below).

Students embarked on a quarter-long project rooted in the IF process. They spent substantial time in a structured group process designed to move them toward completion of their final project, a “community meeting” at the end of the quarter. The project goal was to examine how individuals and collectives are implicated in processes of reconciliation and redress. In traditional ways of teaching these courses, we found that students are sometimes overwhelmed or stymied by the information about the scale of systemic racism. They often jump between two extremes: (1) they withdraw at the horror of systemic injustice, or (2) they immediately want to “fix” the “problem” without full comprehension of the way racism implicates their individual selves as well as their collective community identities. We believed that using the IF process, based, in part, on previous experience, might help to mitigate this problem.

The IF project we designed involved a plausible, but fictitious, catastrophic event. We supplied students with the same scenario in both classes in which an underground pipeline exploded at a local public school. Though the scenario itself was imaginary, the pipeline itself does run through parts of neighborhoods in question in Seattle. In 1999, the same pipeline exploded and killed three children approximately 90 miles north of Seattle in Bellingham, Washington (George 2004). The pipeline also runs through what the Seattle Times dubbed “America’s most diverse ZIP code” (*The Seattle Times* 2010). In our invented scenario, a group of family members who lost children in the blast come together to form a response team and create a plan for a community meeting.

Here is an excerpt from the scenario we provided for the students at the beginning of the quarter in January of 2012 (also used in 2013):

A massive explosion of the Olympic pipeline in Seattle occurred on January 3, 2012. The explosion was centred at Rainbow Middle School, a magnet school in Holly Park. Unfortunately, disaster struck at the worst possible time: recess. Ten children died in the blast.

The parents and guardians of the children who died in the explosion have formed a group to respond immediately to the disaster. From this group, they have created a task force of five parents to create a concrete response plan. This task force is in the process of holding community meetings throughout South Seattle neighborhoods (relatively near the pipeline) to gather information and proposals from community members about possible responses.

On February 21, the committee will hold neighborhood meetings. The committee was hesitant to hold a meeting in this neighborhood as the demographics and interests of the neighborhood have often been at odds with those of adjacent neighborhoods. Race and class tensions have run high between these neighborhoods in past community meetings about neighborhood safety. Three months ago, there was a meeting located in Columbia City that drew upon four neighborhoods around it. After one contentious meeting, two young White American residents attacked an elderly Filipino American resident who had voiced his concerns about gentrification and increasing incidents of police brutality in the neighborhood.

A group of residents present at that meeting were shocked and appalled at the behavior of their fellow residents in their neighborhood. They are also worried about the affect the pipeline explosion may have on their own neighborhoods and property values. They have decided to form small resident groups to explore how to respond to this immediate problem of the explosion, and, by extension the problems of White American encroachment on historically African American, Asian and Pacific Islander American and Latina/o neighborhoods, not to mention the fact that the land was taken originally from Indigenous peoples.

In preparation for the community meeting convened by the committee, they have dedicated weekly “discussion meetings” to explore what, if anything, may be an appropriate response or proposal for the committee. The outcome of the meetings will be a meaningful dialogue about allyship. Presentations will be given at this community meeting on February 21, 2012.

In the meantime, the committee itself has also dedicated meeting times to discuss preparations for this meeting that promises to be contentious, especially because nearly half of the committee did not want to go forward with the general meeting on February 21 in the first place. This group will explore, what, if anything, they think may be gained from this meeting and how they think it is appropriate to respond.

Overarching Question: What does it mean to be an ally in the context of racial justice, particularly in the case of environmental justice?

IF Process

After the class was fully enrolled and students completed their consent forms, we assigned them to five small groups. We created one group, the community response committee, entirely of Students of Color; another one to two were entirely White, and the other two to three were balanced in terms of race and gender to the best of our ability given the demographic composition of the class. Students were unaware of how we assigned the groups and, surprisingly, few commented on their composition.

Students *were* aware, however, of the racial roles they were supposed to play in their groups. Students were placed into two different types of groups for this scenario: neighborhood ally groups or the community response committee. We told each neighborhood group they represented White residents of Southeast Seattle. We told the committee the following: “As noted in the project scenario outline, this group was formed as a task force in response to the disaster. It is comprised of family members who lost a child in the explosion. It is a racially diverse committee that is representative of the many groups of People of Color who live in Southeast Seattle.” There were many reasons we did this from a pedagogical perspective, but we highlight two of the most important here. First, we did this so that we could investigate how racial dynamics impact student-centered group work internally, but also between groups of students in the final presentation. Second, we wanted to create a

scenario in which students were essentially in a “caucus” mode (Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training) to see how that affected their ability to grasp and present political science material in the area of critical race theory. In the racially mixed White/Student of Color (W/SOC) groups—which were not racial caucusing groups—we observed the most frequent microaggressions. We discuss this issue further in later sections on our reflections about the course.

We instructed students in ally groups that their goal was to attempt to put themselves, at a group level, in the shoes of their neighborhood group and then ask themselves what, if anything, being an ally meant in this scenario: “Is this explosion connected to other issues in Southeast Seattle? If so, how? What does allyship mean in this context? To be clear, you are not trying to “guess” what you think an actual resident group would do in this situation, but rather, *what you think they should do* in this situation.”⁸ All groups were to participate in a highly structured group process that also included research tasks along the way about environmental justice and the pipeline, racial justice, allyship and anti-racism. They also were instructed to produce a written report at the end of the class based on their group process and research conducted. For the neighborhood committees, this meant writing their “recommendations” about what, if anything they could offer to the community meeting process or the families and communities involved. The committee’s responsibility was to write detailed questions for the neighborhood groups, as well as respond to the proposals put forth by the neighborhood groups. The committee also decided how they wanted to move forward with the process, if at all.

In-class Group Process

In order to illustrate the IF process, we provide an overview of a typical group meeting day in the course. We instructed the students each day to consider a new question, such as: “Think

about real-world implications of conceptual possibilities you developed as a group during the last group meeting.” They rotated roles as facilitator, note-taker and participant (we provided detailed handouts about group roles). We observed groups and provided written feedback through rubrics, particularly about facilitation, each time they met. We also provided group dynamics feedback intermittently with the hope they would become more attuned to reading these dynamics in their different roles. Group notes were distributed at the next group meeting to all of the groups so they could be aware of other groups’ responses to the same questions. We also collected surveys at certain points in the quarter to solicit frank feedback about microaggressions and group dynamics.

The final project capstone focused on a weeklong deliberative process controlled by the committee. Our goal was to simulate an actual meeting in this type of situation. The first time we taught this course, the committee became so immersed in their roles that they constructed biographies of their characters. Neighborhood groups knew in advance they were required to present orally their written reports and that the committee had read a draft prior to the in-class meeting. In their drafts, they made recommendations to the committee and then made changes based on the committee’s feedback. They did not know how the rest of the process would be structured because we ceded that process entirely to the committee. They made the decisions about how to respond. While the final week of this project did not include an IF model, everything leading up to the meeting was a result of the IF group process.

Content Analysis and Findings

This research includes a content analysis of direct observations of class dynamics and whether they created elements of a sanctuary type of environment.⁹ Qualitative content analyses are defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or

patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1278). We used this method as it provides an inductive way to find patterns (or the lack thereof) in observations of student participation, both in terms of outright observation and cross-observational (between the two of us) comparison. In what follows, we describe the procedure for creating the content analysis.

After each class, we wrote answers and reflections to seven pre-determined questions. We committed to complete the notes before the next scheduled class. We did not discuss our answers until we finished our notes. The pre-designed questions were general (“What was your overall impression of class today?”) as well as specific (“Did you notice any microaggressions (between students/students/professors) during class?”). At the end of each week of teaching, we discussed our answers and then noted how we coded our responses according to three categories. The first category of “divergent” indicated a conflicting perception of the same issue or event. For example, we coded an incident as divergent if one of us thought a student’s question to one of us was hostile, while the other did not. The second category, “similar”, indicated the same perception of an issue or event. For example, if we both thought a student’s question was hostile and not a question at all, but rather a statement, this would be coded as similar. The third category, “complementary”, indicated we agreed on what the motive or outcome was of an event, but noted different elements of the same situation. For example, we both thought class went well in the same way, but for different reasons that did not conflict.¹⁰

Results

We coded our individual reflections in a debriefing process for 13 days during the winter quarter of 2012.¹¹ Unexpectedly, we had the same or complementary views of the overall impressions of each class day, as well as individual events that occurred during class periods. Of 130 observations of events during these classes, 51 were similar/same, 77 were

complementary and two were divergent (these were views of student reactions to professors, not the group process, so we do not discuss it further here).

Microaggressions

We also tracked the microaggressions we witnessed in class. As we were focused on racial power differentials, we paid close attention to these types of microaggressions. We did note, where relevant, when other types of microaggressions occurred (e.g. gender and age) and always paid attention to the ways in which these displays of dominance and control were intersectional.¹² We tracked microaggressions during lecture (including student-to-professor and student-to-student) and during the structured group process amongst students. Given our collective twenty-two years of teaching courses related to race and racism in the college classroom, we felt fairly equipped to identify many (though certainly not all) microaggressions in small group and large group settings of the classroom. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that microaggressions are in the eye of the beholder, ultimately, so it is impossible to truly track microaggressions.

As was the case with our general observations, our view of microaggressions was complementary most of the time. The one time we disagreed was about the consistent exclusion of a Student of Color in their group setting. We did not disagree on the general trend that was occurring in this group—just on that particular day.

What our tracking of these events indicate, however, is that *we witnessed at least one microaggression nearly every day*. Our observations most certainly represent an undercount of these dynamics because we could really only observe one or two groups discussions at a time; there were typically five groups meeting at the same time so we missed many of those conversations. In this next section, we provide illustrative examples of the types of microaggressions observed given different official power statuses in the classroom.

Student-to-Professor Microaggressions

One of the benefits to teaching a course together is that professors are able to learn and grow as teachers by watching our colleague in action in the classroom. When this occurs across racial lines, the observations can be stunning for the instructor witnessing their colleague teach to the same group of students. While it seems quite obvious and perhaps even trite, it is an exercise that reminds us of how powerfully White supremacy shapes our personae in the classroom. It is also an exercise in pedagogical affirmation of our colleagues. Professors who inhabit social locations that are targeted by systems of oppression, as well as teach about these topics, are very familiar with the phenomenon of the post-class “debrief” with themselves or with colleagues about what just happened in the classroom. This debrief usually involves an “incident” in the classroom, often a microaggression, that they witnessed or were the subject of in the classroom. Though this process of debriefing the class was often exhausting and painful, it was generally affirming to know that what had happened was “real” in the sense that they were justified in feeling attacked.

Not surprisingly, the microaggressions that occurred from student to professor in the context of the lecture setting were almost all aimed at Angelique (Black woman). There were a few microaggressions Rose (White woman) experienced based on her gender identity and once with regards to age (older student asserting their authority over her), though these were relatively rare. We provide a few examples of these microaggressions as illustrations of what we tracked across time for both 2012 and 2013.

White student directly challenged Black woman professor’s expertise. At the end of Angelique’s lecture about the social construction of race and fallacy of race as a biological construct, she asked the class what they had learned about this topic in other educational

environments, such as high school. A White student said that what scholars from the assigned readings and the Black woman professor's lecture stated was scientifically incorrect. Of course, this was not said in such a succinct manner—the student provided the class with a lengthy soliloquy in a way that conveyed their sense of superior knowledge of the subject matter.

White students shuffled papers and packed up during Black woman professor's lecture. On the first lecture day in one of the courses, Angelique lectured about apologies and reparations and weaved historical as well as current examples with everyday personal, micro examples. During the last ten minutes of her lecture, the majority of White students began to pack up their belongings and shuffle papers. The Students of Color did not. It was a very obvious that the White students wanted to leave class as soon as possible.

White student corrected White woman professor's pronunciation. During Rose's lecture about the "Cash for Kids" scandal in Pennsylvania a White student corrected Rose's pronunciation of "Sandusky."

Student-to-Student Microaggressions

As was the case with our general views of the course, our individual and joint collecting of these microaggressions was mostly complementary. Unlike the previous discussion of student-to-professor incidents, these displays of dominance between students could occur at multiple points during the course: during lecture and during the group work phases. In some ways, it turns this notion of professors as all-powerful in the classroom on its head; these students who have marked societal privileges can derail conversations and injure other students as well as professors in the course. Because these moments of injury can occur at

any time is not a reason avoid student-centered discussions; rather, it is a reason to be more vigilant about group dynamics in these situations. Moreover, it is much more difficult for the professor to intervene in these situations as they are student-centered discussions. We only intervened if the group needed redirection to move back on task. We did provide feedback to each group about how the facilitation went for that day, as well as group dynamics, but even that came too late to avoid the initial injuries.

White student requested for Students of Color to share painful experiences of racism. During a class in which a number of Students of Color voluntarily opened up about their experiences, a White student asked for Students of Color to continue sharing their “testimonies” because they were very enlightening to him and helped him to understand racism. This seemed a microaggression as it placed the burden on the students to share and authenticate the existence of racism instead of him getting the information himself from many readily available sources.

White student interrupted and corrected Students of Color. One White student, in one of the racially mixed groups, consistently corrected, interrupted, and talked over Students of Color.

White students physically excluded Students of Color. In one of the racially mixed groups three White students were brainstorming ideas and discussing possible solutions and did not include the other two members of the group, who were Students of Color. The White students did not seem to notice that the Students of Color were not engaged and did nothing to draw them in. Near the end of class, they positioned their bodies in ways that turned away from the two Students of Color and made no pretence of including them.

Discussion and Conclusion

Those instructors who wish to pursue IF or similar types of SCD courses must take seriously that the creation of a “sanctuary” is complicated by students’ varying social locations, particularly their race. What some White students found to be a so-called safe space to voice their views about racial justice and the issues presented in their hypothetical assignment, was simultaneously a threatening space for many Students of Color, as they experienced microaggressions as described in previous sections. This is not only a problem of having a course centered on White students’ social locations at a historically White institution, but also a problem of group discussion processes as well. The tendency to cater to White fragility and the power that White students possess to disrupt, side-track, feign ignorance—or display genuine ignorance—and just generally deny the experiences of People of Color in small group contexts is not only a problem of racial justice courses. It highlights a general problem of small group discussions that we describe in the beginning of this article: power dynamics that go unnamed and are chronically under-addressed in these classroom settings.

These dynamics became even more explosive in the context of the community meeting because microaggressions shifted—though they were still present, of course—from intragroup dynamics to intergroup dynamics from the community groups to the committee, who had the power to control the proceedings. In other words, once Students of Color had collective power to control the proceedings, White students responded (as a collective) to this reorienting of power. The number of microaggressions clearly increased, but Students of Color on the committee were in control of the process. Rather than looking to the professors to intervene—because we had deliberately become spectators in the process—the Students of Color had the opportunity to respond and redirect the process. This was a double-edged sword: centering Student of Color experiences, autonomy and power provoked greater backlash from the White students than traditional lecture format. Nevertheless, we received

written and informal feedback from many of the Students of Color on the committee that it was a transformative experience in both 2012 and 2013. The group process itself—prior to the large-group community meeting—was invaluable to the students on the committee because they were able to build unity amongst themselves. This was not the case in the multi-racial groups we observed.¹³

We learned much about what we might do differently if we taught this course again: more time for debriefing, more time to set up the process, more time for the community meeting itself. Beyond having explicit racial caucusing—which we discuss at the end of this section—all of our ideas are hampered by the structure of institutionalized education: time. We had just ten weeks to not only conduct regular course sessions on environmental justice, but also to have in-class time dedicated to the process. In addition to this, we could assume no prior knowledge about scholarship pertaining to race and racism on behalf of the students due to curricular constraints. These two factors: time and lack of prior shared knowledge meant that no matter how we shuffled the process, we could not adequately address many of the underlying issues we have identified in our SCD process in this course.

Nevertheless, our findings point to three advantages of SCD techniques in racial justice courses, both contingent on group composition and group power. The first advantage is dependent on the racial context of the classroom and the institution: Students of Color having the opportunity to discuss racism and White supremacy amongst other people who have similar or overlapping experiences. This is of particular value in an institution where Students of Color often find they are one among a few in a majority White classroom. We heard this consistently both in written evaluations and verbally from students themselves. This also has the possibility of decentering Whiteness (“The whiteness is thick here” Edwards 2014, 4) in the classroom, to the degree that is even possible. Second, there is a benefit to White students caucusing in all-White groups, just as there is in other racial justice

contexts. Though these groups had a lot to process in terms of their Whiteness—whether or not they were aware of it—they did not have the opportunity to inflict microaggressions on Students of Color in their group. They also were challenged by discussions of race and racism in a deliberately all-White context.

The third advantage is that Students of Color have collective power to self-determine their end goals in the process. This comes primarily at the end of the course when they have the authority and responsibility to structure the deliberative process. This is not unique to IF or a SCD course in general, but it does fit well with the idea that students create a collective product at the end of the course. Though this is a silver lining to our format, it also is problematic, again, in a White institution in which White students are challenged by the idea that Students of Color might be able to retain power in the classroom. It is similar to the dynamic between White students and a Professor of Color where the White students are challenged by the idea of even having a Professor of Color, but it is intensified by the fact that these are students. This means that the White backlash in the classroom can be intense.

We conclude that the use of a SCD process both detracts from and contributes to the creation of a sanctuary type of environment in the classroom. This conclusion is complicated because what some White students found to be a sanctuary space was simultaneously a threatening space for Students of Color, particularly due to repeat microaggressions. Nevertheless, an SCD process can be beneficial when the course is structured in a way to purposefully decenter a White-centric curricular and pedagogical lens. Moreover, the intersectional vectors of power and privilege in the classroom also demand attention when students work independently on their own. Although these challenges are also present in the standard, faculty led lecture format, it can be exacerbated when students, without the experience or expertise, engage in the SCD process.

Our reflections on this course point to the powerful possibilities of intentional and explicit racial caucusing, mentioned earlier in this article, in racial justice courses. These possibilities are beneficial in all contexts, but hold particular promise at predominately white institutions. This format allows Students of Color to share experiences and engage in analysis in an intentional manner and supportive environment that typically are not available in the classroom setting. It also challenges white students to explore their privilege, which they typically can avoid, in an academic context. Caucusing is helpful in particular when there will be a shared group process at the end of the course term that provides an opportunity for students of all races to affirm their mutual commitment to dismantling racism and building anti-racist partnerships. This is critical as caucusing could devolve into a process in which students feel frustrated and silenced, internally to the group and externally in the larger classroom. Thus strong internal student facilitation and skilled external faculty direction is essential for engaging in this process. The caucusing approach, like the SCD approach, highlights the promise and the peril of student power: *who* engages, *who* dominates the conversation, *whose* perspectives are prioritized when the instructors cede at least partial control of conversations and classroom dynamics.

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Notes

1. Professor Angelique Davis self-identifies as Black and Professor Rose Ernst self-identifies as White.
2. We received an Interactivity Foundation grant to study their student-centered discussion method. We adapted IF to our needs, but the basic principles remained the same.
3. This article focuses on the racial dynamics in the classroom. We acknowledge the importance of intersectional analysis in these contexts as well, but to maintain the privacy of our student subjects identifying them by race and gender would easily reveal their identity. We believe that our research raises a number of issues regarding the intersections of race, gender and class. While this analysis is outside the scope of our article we hope our research will contribute to further study of these dynamics within the classroom setting.
4. We are not concerned with the type of instructor lecture in the classroom. Instead, we focus on the differences between student-centered dialogue and discussion as opposed to having instructor-centered learning where the professor is the focal point of classroom activity.
5. Examples in this genre are the following. Buglione and Safford-Farquharson (2010) describe reflections of a Black and White professor teaching courses and Guerrero's work (2008) contains a collection of "personal pedagogical memoirs" (11).
6. It is rare for our classes to have near parity between Students of Color and White students. We believe this happened due to our recruitment efforts. We also want to note that although we use the homogenizing term "Students of Color" throughout the article, we do so to avoid violating human subjects protocols that may risk identifying individual students.
7. We added this clarification because we did not want them to engage in a way that reflected potential racist attitudes of neighborhood groups. Instead, we wanted them to interrogate ideas of allyship and solidarity.
8. We added this clarification because we did not want them to engage in a way that reflected potential racist attitudes of neighborhood groups. Instead, we wanted them to interrogate ideas of allyship and solidarity.
9. As noted previously, the existence of a sanctuary in a hostile environment does not mean that this sanctuary is actually "safe" in the fullest sense of that word. Instead, we are looking to see if there are elements of sanctuary created in this classroom.
10. We also collected direct observational data and feedback of the student-centered discussion project. This provided us an opportunity to observe, systematically, student interactions in small-group discussions (the same group) over the course of a quarter. We took notes on each group interaction, compared our notes, and then provided written feedback to the group as a whole, as well as the assigned, but rotating task of note-taker and facilitator.
11. This section includes coding results for 2012. We looked at the general trends for 2013 as well and there were no major deviations from 2012. We do include our 2013 course for the remainder of the analysis.
12. We did not have permission from our Institutional Review Board to ask questions about economic status. Nevertheless, these dynamics were present clearly throughout this process both in terms of the effect class cultures had on intragroup dynamics, as well as perspectives on the substantive political issues discussed.
13. We also noted a number of microaggressions that occurred before and after class as well as during breaks between students and students to professor. We did not include these in our analysis because they occurred outside of class. It is worth highlighting, however, because they were some of the most egregious microaggressions we witnessed. It is also noteworthy because as professors, we often forget how the conversations we encourage in the classroom continue outside the classroom, for better or for worse.