

From Dialogue to Action: Situating Black Lives Matter in a Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the value of teaching a Black Lives Matter course in a liberal arts curriculum. Drawing from original case study experience of teaching the Black Lives Matter course at a predominately white, liberal arts institution, the argument is not only pedagogical, but practical for the times in which education about issues of contemporary significance for all students. Teaching a Black Lives Matter course with a historically-situated, community-grounded and solutions-oriented approach fosters the learning environment of inclusivity to which many campuses aspire. This paper provides a practical blueprint for scholars seeking to creatively integrate teaching on contemporary issue of race that is timely and community-oriented within the liberal arts framework.

Keywords

race, diversity, higher education, liberal arts education, teaching, community engagement

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Introduction

Many college campuses have experienced pressure and are responding to calls for facilitated conversations around diversity, inclusion and identity. Simultaneously, Black Lives Matter activism across the country—in the streets, government buildings, and even election campaign rallies—has demanded full acknowledgment, respect and democratic inclusion of all black bodies. The historical linkages between the campus and the community are essential to the American liberal arts tradition. As seen in previous student activist movements, the American college campus is permeable to demands for racial justice (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012). In light of student protests and activism at campuses like the University of Missouri-Columbia and Yale University, as educators and scholars, we cannot take these moments for reflection for granted (Gay, 2015). With insistence upon dialogue from administrators above and demands for conversational space from students below, a number of educators determined that the timing could not be more ripe to explore and teach about the foundations and implications of the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement¹.

With roots in the United States, Black Lives Matter is an international activist movement that demands state accountability for racial injustices against black people. Although the movement itself has grown to tackle a variety of issues, its primary focus has been unequal policing and brutality perpetrated against black bodies and communities. The movement is not only on the ground with traditional protests, but also gained force to move beyond the boundaries of time, the material world, and physical geography as a Twitter hashtag. As a result, the participants and modes of participation expanded exponentially online and the movement is characterized by a less hierarchical, *leaderful* movement.

Many liberal arts colleges share similar demographics for their undergraduate population: majority white and well-connected to powerful alumni networks². Institutions of this variety are

¹ A number of instructors have adopted some form of a Black Lives Matter syllabus over the past few years. One such reference is Frank Leon Roberts' syllabus whose popularity and accessibility has inspired other educators: Roberts, F. L. (2016). *Black Lives Matter: Race, Resistance, and Populist Protest* [Syllabus], Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York, NY: New York University.

² Relative to their share of the college-age population, 15% and 22% respectively, freshman enrollment of Blacks and Hispanics has widened since 1980. In the top liberal arts colleges, the gap increased from 7% in 1980 to 8% in 2015 for Black students. For Hispanic students, the gap increased from 4% in 1980 to 9% in 2015. For more specifics on minority enrollment in higher education institutions see: Ashkenas, J., Park, H and Pearce, A. (2017, 24 August). Even with Affirmative Action, Blacks and Hispanics are More Underrepresented at Top Colleges than 35 Years Ago. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2w0BE08>

often aware of their positioning within the broader community. Campus members will self-critically refer to themselves as inhabiting a *bubble*. This description illustrates that many students have to actively prick the comfort of their realities to consider worlds that look very little like their own. All the while, with efforts to foster a more inclusive college environment, the number of students from historically underrepresented, marginalized backgrounds and international students continues to increase. Carefully crafted, courses can serve as a space to safely and carefully address these significant changes.

I co-taught a Black Lives Matter course in 2016 as a Political Science elective with open enrollment to all majors. The course's main focus was to develop the students' reading, writing, presentation and critical thinking skills while addressing racial issues of timely import. With this context in mind, what value does a weekly, 2.5-hour course called "Black Lives Matter" have for students from this general background of racial, economic and social advantage? What can a critical, historically-situated and interdisciplinary study of this movement add to a broader campus mission actively seeking to promote inclusion and diversity? How does this course help contribute to a liberal arts education? This essay articulates the following position through lessons and case studies: effectively executed, a #BLM course: 1) opens the door to new perspectives and viewpoints—cornerstones in a liberal arts education—by creating a safe space for open dialogue and critical engagement with identity politics in the classroom, 2) demonstrates the scholarly value of a social movement and new field of research underway, 3) involves the analysis of contemporary issues of inclusion through the investigation of real-world applications, 4) and explores the intersection of practice and theory by engaging the broader community beyond the college campus setting.

#BLM and Institutional Commitment to a Liberal Arts Education

The focus of this article is to show how #BLM can strengthen the institutional goals committed to a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education is defined by its core commitment to broad training in the sciences, mathematics, social sciences and humanities. The goal of a liberal arts education is to guide a student to broaden their intellectual limits, open new horizons and see the world from multiple perspectives. Through their training, students are exposed to a variety of disciplines and viewpoints. Scholars have argued that engaged learning through active collaboration on- and off-campus not only is a core responsibility of the liberal arts college, but also helps to foster

community and trust (Boyer, 1990; Boyer, 1994; Boyer, 1996; Furco, 2002; Harward, 2007). This is especially true when the relationships are mutually beneficial partnerships between the campus and community (Enos & Morton, 2003).

Additionally, as an inherently political act, this exchange is critically important in that some campuses bear historical legacies of exclusion. Many public and private predominately white institutions have historically excluded students based on race. A number of prestigious institutions were also financed by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequently buttressed by the labor of enslaved Africans in the day-to-day functioning of the campuses³. Through the deconstruction and acknowledgment of these segregated pasts by confronting the real-world, current implications of systemic oppressions, teaching becomes at once transgressive, honest and hopeful (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2003; Freire, 2000; Lum & Jacob, 2012). Thematic study of these concerns is only one level of analysis—the next step is *action*. At the intersection of theory and practice, the liberal arts project is complemented by a course of this design.

Yet, studies show that the implementation of these courses is riddled with institutional complexity. The *rhetoric* of diversity may work at odds with the *praxis* of diversity in these settings. Despite seemingly universal calls for diversity, inclusion and the like in recent times, there is also evidence of systemic institutional resistance (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Ringrose 2007). Funding availability for community guest lecturers, perceived and actual weighted value of the course to the curriculum or discipline, broadness of accessibility to all majors through interdepartmental cross-listings, and sufficient instructor training related to managing the course themes are just some of the ways that this course may be institutionally disadvantaged. Even with students that self-select into elective courses on social problems, students are involuntarily steeped in the ideologies of their environment. At more conservative liberal arts campuses, race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, citizenship and national origin have traditionally been considered to be taboo subjects, so it can be a difficult process to integrate these discussions into courses of study. Students may be reluctant to enter a course that have sensitive subject matters placed front and center. However, whether we choose to consciously address the inequities that exist or not, their effects cannot be denied, especially in terms of marginalized student

³ Wilder, C.S. (2013). *Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. New York, NY, Bloomsbury Press.

experiences. This course is a part of moving beyond campus rhetoric of change and diversity to active participation in the world around us.

A helpful starting point and exercise that we used to prepare students for engaging with others is called the **Four Corners Activity**⁴. The in-class, oral and public activity took place a week before their first essay assignment in order to prepare them for clarifying their ideas and taking a position based on textual evidence. Students were asked to take an intellectual and physical stance along a response barometer posted on the wall in the four corners of the room (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree), assemble in small groups based on their response, use the readings to support their ideas, and come up with a collective response for the group to present. Their responses were based on the week's readings Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2012) and *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship* (2014). Some of the phrases the students responded to include: "Criminals are bad people," "The best way to avoid jail or prison is to follow the law," "Incarceration is an effective form of public safety," and "Abolish prisons." Intentionally simplistic and lacking the nuances of the course's overall approach, the phrases themselves were a proxy for a thesis statement and generated debate.

The students found the exercise to be challenging and collaborated with their organically formed groups to refine their ideas. This activity gave students who are quieter in the large groups the chance to discuss their thoughts in an intimate setting with their classmates. The effectiveness of the assignment was noticeable in not only the student's written work as they were pushed to flesh out their ideas, but also in the increased participation of reserved students. The activity was introduced a quarter of the way through the semester so that students unaccustomed to or intimidated by public speaking would have a low-stakes opportunity to share their thoughts early on. The purpose of this activity was to model argumentation, encourage public speaking and develop behaviors for respectful debate, deliberation and collaborative work. These habits are integral to the project to which liberal arts universities aspire⁵.

⁴ I derive this strategy from the "Facing History and Ourselves" website's resource library. For a detailed discussion on how the activity might be used, visit: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/four-corners>

⁵ Additional studies about the value critical race studies and the liberal arts education include: Cole, J.B. (2004), Cole, J.B. (2004), Black Studies in Liberal Arts Education. In Bobo, J., Hudley, C. and Michel, C. (Eds.), *The Black Studies Reader* (pp. 21-34). New York, NY: Routledge. Guerrero, L. (2008). *Teaching Race in the Twenty-First Century: College Teachers Talk about their Fears, Risks, and Rewards*. New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan.

#BLM and Historical Legacies of Scholarship and Politics

The Black Lives Matter course is also historically-situated and we presented the #BLM movement as a point on a longer trajectory both in terms of ongoing political activism and an intellectual legacy of racial justice. The founders of Black Lives Matter are also vocal about this history and the intersections of race, gender, queer identities, and ability within this narrative. Notably, Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza indicates the intersection of BLM with various social causes and pays homage to the black liberation tradition of organizing and political thought in her essay, “A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement”⁶. I emphasize this point to say that though the themes of this course are a *trending* topic on social media forums, the substantive discursive elements of the course are not *trendy* and an ephemeral, passing fad. Some could misinterpret a course of this design as an early career professor hashtagging their way through the issues of importance and chasing a spur of the moment, social media trend. I must directly address this concern.

With this concern in mind, I insist that the notions of black freedom, citizenship and unfulfilled promise of American democracy as discussed in present public debates have already happened in various permutations over time. Social media is one way to capture the issues at hand and we certainly honor the space within which this current movement was formed. Yet, by contextualizing the long history of #BLM within the previous iterations including the PostReconstruction Era, Jim Crow South, Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Era we are able to situate #BLM in the past, present and future of the movement. An inclusive panorama of authors including W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Bayard Rustin, Assata Shakur, Kimberlé Crenshaw and others lay the foundation for this dialogue. Future educators on #BLM can feel a sense of freedom to embrace current events from a historical perspective and justify their scholarly significance by doing so. These organizing and intellectual origins are the very foundations upon which the current movement is built and sustained.

With attention to the historical narrative, we also bear in mind that the world in which we live is dynamic and ever changing. The challenge and the promise with the #BLM course is that

⁶ Garza, A. (2014, 7 October). A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. *The Feminist Wire*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

while classroom discussions are supported by scholarly texts and an historical framework that is relatively fixed, we must also be attentive to the social issues that emerge in real time. Similar conversations are happening on social media and the experience of sharing their views is common to the students of a social media generation. As the in-school and out-of-school boundaries are quickly receding, social media presents a unique learning opportunity to extend beyond the conventional boundaries of the classroom. In-class activities that integrate both the digital and traditional forms of study reinforces the students' ability to increase their digital literacy and critical thinking overall. With this context in mind, students bring those online conversations, which might be difficult, hurtful or otherwise unproductive to a classroom setting. Here student views are challenged while remaining attentive to nuance and respect. This stimulates a natural feedback loop to conversations in other classes, residence halls, extracurricular activities, social groups and the campus at large.

Our students have the capacity to change the climate of these debates by heightening the awareness of the on- and offline communities with which they are engaged and in which they are embedded. This approach squarely fits into the liberal arts project and this process of diffusion provides novel ways of seeing even for students who may not have the opportunity to take the course. In class we practiced and pushed the students to hone their skills of debate, discussion and civil engagement so that these campus interactions could be productive.

A direct classroom application to address the issue of time and space through social media was through a week explicitly dedicated to the web and online activism. While students presented on the readings that cited qualitative and quantitative approaches⁷ to study political activity on the internet, these articles by their very nature are crystallized in a specific moment for research.

To accompany this scholarship, our class went to straight away social media for students to research and see what stories and reports were trending in real time regarding Black Lives Matter. As we embrace technology as a learning tool in the classroom, we unearth streams of information while teaching students to become effective stewards and critics of this data.

With this course, we are also able to engage with an emerging space of intellectual inquiry that is under development: social media and online activism. For the social media and online content week in particular, we not only discussed the scholarship and activity of social media as it relates to the #BLM themes, but we had an inter-generational conversation around campus issues and climate to roughly gauge the progress made over a brief span of time. This week was a prime

example of how new spaces for discourse forge uncharted paths for intellectual inquiry. The lessons from this session teaches students (and professors) to grapple with uncertainty in an age where information is instantaneously available and disseminated. It is also a challenge to students to become more critical in their consumption of media. Although we can benefit from a constant stream of data, the sheer availability of information does not render all information useful or reliable. The ability to discern sources with sharp digital literacy is increasingly important for the students of this generation.

#BLM in the American South and Engagement with Current Issues on Inclusion

As a scholar of comparative politics whose research on domestic work is primarily based in Brazil⁷, I pay special attention to matters of geography, region and culture by making observations of which some scholars who exclusively focus on United States politics might not fully be aware. In teaching this course, it is of critical importance to note that in teaching issues of Black Lives Matter, the knowledge tends to privilege black narratives in an American context. In our course, I sought to include examples of similar themes in global contexts, which I will address momentarily

Yet, teaching on Black Lives Matter in the Southeast, it is a significant place to do so given the hostile racial legacies and specificities of the region. When crafting the course, we were certain to emphasize this point. Since the summer of 2015, there has been a national spotlight on questions of race and inclusion (notably in the Carolinas) for the Charleston South Carolina Massacre and more recently the North Carolina House Bill 2, also called “the Bathroom Bill”. In the same area, the city of Greensboro, North Carolina is the starting place of the student sit-in movement of the

⁷ Some texts we used in the social media week include the following:

Cogburn, D.L. and Espinoza-Vasquez, F.K. (2011). “From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign”, *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10 (1-2), 189-213. Gerbaudo, P. (2012). Introduction. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (pp. 1-17). New York, NY, PlutoPress.

Harrington, J.J. (2010). Political Blog Influence Reconsidered: A Network Analysis of Mainstream and Alternative Ethnic-Racial Political Blogs, *Central European University Journal*, 5 (3), 355-381.

Neely, C. (2015). Making the Invisible Visible: Minorities’ Efforts to Obtain Recognition for Forgotten Victims. *You’re dead? So what? Media, Police, and the Invisibility of Black Women as Victims of Homicide*, (pp. 71-86). East Lansing, MI, Michigan State University Press.

Civil Rights Era while it is also the site of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the Darryl Hunt case⁸. The study of #BLM in this regional context is a distinctive and consequential point.

Many students identify the South as the epicenter of racial injustice. During the course students often questioned how they perceive themselves, their personal ties to the #BLM themes and how they fit into the broader schemas around race which are formed both within and outside of their “bubble” from Southern historical and contemporary social and political forces. When students engage with positionality, often for the first time, it is difficult to grasp that some lives are lived differently than one’s own, even while sharing the same campus. Not all students were ready to receive these direct challenges to their way of life. Despite greater public discourse on confronting privilege of various forms including race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and ability, these conversations are still quite difficult to navigate and embrace for students. We sought to make the most of these complexities by having dialogue with local and national grassroots activists. These activities give the students the space to analyze the issues at a distance for critique and analysis. By the end of the semester, they were given the task of examining their more proximate community, the campus, and themselves.

For weekly lessons that benefit from local resources, activists and engaged scholars, we also had other guest presenters and speakers. For one session, we invited a local clergy member and community activist to speak about his work spanning nearly four decades and his work around the wrongful conviction of Darryl Hunt for the murder of a white woman journalist in the 1980s. Unexpectedly, just days before our guest was to appear, Darryl Hunt sadly took his own life. This tragedy presented a space to connect the ideals of #BLM, policing and racial injustice with individual and community healing. We were able to question the effects of incarceration, recidivism and the role of the faith community in social justice in real time. Again, the responsiveness of the course to current events enabled us to touch upon a variety of themes, while holding firm to a framework of academic inquiry.

⁸ For more information about these cases see:

Boyd, S.B. (2011). *Making Justice Our Business: The Wrongful Conviction of Darryl Hunt and the Work of Faith*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Jovanovic, S. (2012). *Democracy, Dialogue, and Community Action: Truth and Reconciliation in Greensboro*, Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press.

With the South's reputation as ground zero for tense and even hostile interactions around race and various identities, we were able to carve out a space for innovation that may seem counterintuitive at first glance. Yet, this style of discourse is characteristic of this region. Adapting the Civil Rights model of seminars, lectures and organizing among college student groups, community organizers and activists to modern times, we held events on our own campus including a seminar with BLM organizers. With an eye on institutional efforts to do so, we were able to develop unique conversations and experiences for students in a laboratory of ideas in the heart of the South.

#BLM and Engagement with the Broader Community

While designing a course so intimately tied with a broader community effort, I regularly asked myself: who stands to benefit from a course like this and what are the stakes for the community at large? Piercing the "bubble" and moving beyond the idyllic setting was a large part of the course. Thus we had students write reflection papers on experiences in which they chose to participate beyond the classroom including films, lectures and public events. To conclude the course, the students were to design a campaign around a dimension of the #BLM course themes as a final project. The groups were all closely attentive to the ways in which their findings could be distributed and have the widest reach. The groups designed pamphlets, websites, YouTube films and podcasts.

Although each group produced phenomenal campaigns and each made a special effort to capture #BLM issues, one student group was especially intriguing as they made the connection between racial inequity to economic justice, environmental sustainability, urban planning and transportation, and food access—an issue that we did not have the time to extensively cover in the course. One student learned firsthand how food insecurity is also a function of other structural barriers including public transportation. The only local farmer's market that accepts SNAP/EBT and WIC benefits has hours between 9am-12N on Saturdays. For a student without a car, she had tremendous difficulty navigating the local public transportation system online maps which has limited weekend service. In her presentation, she showed how challenging it might be for a person to arrive at the farmer's market to make a purchase.

This kind of course is especially vital in this context because of points made earlier: in a liberal arts education, sharpening one's critical thinking lens can come from various sources including experiential knowledge and moving beyond the gates of the campus. This student shared her clumsy experience with public transportation which gave her insight into how everyday folks might have to budget time and carefully plan a simple visit to the grocery store, much less a farmer's market or food pantry with even more hourly restrictions. Because race, class and quality food access are so distinctly intertwined in our town, food justice and access is inherently an issue that impacts the quality of black lives in the area.

Another valuable point is that seeing these intersections of issues, students from this institution can broaden their outlook and this open perspective will serve them well as future leaders. In an institution that has a high concentration of students with pre-existing social networks of high capital that will likely be powerful and influential elites in their fields of choice⁹. Students being groomed for these professional positions, this #BLM course might be the only class they have to interrogate the world in this way. Not only will they encounter material and concepts with which they might not otherwise engage, a course such as this may alter their perspective and produce more conscientious, aware and sensitive future citizens and leaders. Though there are no guarantees that any individual course would transform their outlook, students of all backgrounds would certainly benefit from the exposure to these concepts and ideas.

As a comparative scholar of race and politics in Brazil¹⁰, I also made the global and post-colonial implications of the movement for racial justice a distinguished part of the curriculum. The devaluation of black life throughout the African Diaspora and the larger struggle for racial justice is not limited to the United States context. We dedicated time to talking about global policing and reform, immigration, criminality, terrorism and post-colonial relations in the contexts of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, Brazil and France. These international critiques also satisfy an increasing interest in liberal arts campuses to embrace globally-conscious curricula.

⁹ For further research that investigates the reproductive cycles of elite students in powerful jobs and positions see: Rivera, L.A. (2015). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Harrington, J.J. (2016). Guess Who's Coming to Research? Reflections on Race, Class, Gender and Power in Brazil. In G.L. Mitchell-Walthour. & E. Hordge-Freeman, (Eds.), *Race and the Politics of Knowledge Production: Diaspora and Black Transnational Scholarship in the United States and Brazil* (pp.91-97). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Conclusions

This article is framed around the idea that a liberal arts education can benefit from a #BLM course. The implementation of this course raises substantive issues beyond the tasks of lesson plans, readings, course assignments and grades. The bigger picture is far more intriguing. Fundamentally, as educators, we must step back and ask what kind of students are we sending out to the world to become leaders in their respective fields. Ultimately, the students are not only cognizant of facts, but they are the recipients of primary professional training for entering a world of diverse people.

As shown in this essay, a Black Lives Matter course carefully taught can undergird broader institutional efforts around a true liberal arts education by not only creating a physical space for dialogue, but it also influences intellectual venues for students to grow and share with others. The course itself is responsive to current events and broader trends and public discourse which lends itself to creativity and scholastic plasticity and thought: for professors and students alike. Although the course was offered in Political Science elective, it was open to a variety of majors with interdisciplinary perspectives. The #BLM course was also co-taught by professors with differing positions and thoughts. The course holds as much curricular value for a physics student as a sociology student. Through their engagement with the community and campus their work volleyed back and forth from the theoretical to the practical and enhanced their learning.

A course like Black Lives Matter is only the beginning and institutions must continue to push further. Courses of this nature call for trained faculty to comfortably facilitate these dialogues, especially on liberal arts campuses. The instructor has to be responsive to current events and developments in the real world. Also, courses of this design promote and spark pedagogical innovation that most campuses are seeking. I would caution, however, that this training should be shared by faculty of all races and identities representing a variety of disciplines and should not be shouldered only by the most vulnerable members of faculty: contingent, adjunct, temporary, postdoctoral scholars, early career and faculty of color. It is a community responsibility that could and should be shared by all. Additional research on courses that respond to current events and social movements within the liberal arts education is critical.

Due to the rising popularity of courses on complex social issues and problems, many institutions encourage community-engaged courses to fund campus lecturers. On some campuses, such courses have the added benefit of financial resources to host guest lecturers and fund

independent student research. Clearly, not every institution has the resources to make these invitations. Yet, if diversity is a broad institutional priority, the resources to support courses that center issues of difference ought to follow suit. At the present moment where the tensions of a polarized American society are often reflected on our campuses and in our classroom settings, we have a responsibility and opportunity. We must confront the critical issues of our time with an eye toward building community. This approach to education is a fundamental pursuit of equity and justice that is firmly embedded in the liberal arts tradition.

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