

## Creating a New Narrative on Race Through Collective Critical Thinking in the Classroom

Donald Nathanson  
Retired Educator, LAUSD

### **Abstract:**

How can we provide 21<sup>st</sup> century American students with an educational experience that empowers all participants in terms of living in harmony in a racially diverse society? I answer that question in this essay by relying on my nearly three decades, approximately from 1970-2000, of experience teaching U.S. History in a very racially diverse high school. During this period, I realized that students desperately needed to engage in current racial/ethnic issues. I came to understand gradually that a structured, scaffolded approach to race throughout K-12 was important but critical to these efforts was a culminating experience of a one semester conversation focused totally on this subject. The pedagogy involved for this task needed to reflect a coherent process for change that would result in attaining the goals of empowerment.

The essay focuses on the key element of the process -the conversation. This experience would differ greatly in approach, outlook, and purpose from ethnic studies. Using popular racial narratives running the gamut from Colorblind to Institutional Racism as guidelines, participants embark on an exploration that is both extensive and intensive. They deal with numerous facets of interracial/interethnic relationships both on the interpersonal and then on the institutional /systemic level. Questioning the validity of perspectives on each level, gets students to see complexities and, in turn, the ability to challenge and reconcile data from multiple angles. Indoctrination is not a part of the experience, rather emphasis is placed on collective

critical thinking, whether evaluating anecdotal material or academic research. This eventually leads to formulation of new collective narratives which incorporate a range of individual and social responsibilities for each individual. The process of accumulating skills of all sorts, i.e. social, emotional, academic, empowers students to function productively in a diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century society. This essay describes how to do it.

## PREFACE

This article is based on my experiences teaching U.S. history in the period from 1970 to 2000. In that capacity right from the start, I introduced conversations on racial issues, justifiable in my thinking, as a current events theme, ‘What is the state of race relations in the U.S. today?’ For almost all of those years, I taught at two suburban public schools, a middle school in the 70s and a high school in the same Los Angeles neighborhood in the 80s and 90s. The neighborhood was predominantly White, upper middle class. At first, the two schools reflected local demographics. In adherence to civil rights laws and court rulings, the school demographics changed. By the early 80s, my high school had a significant number of Black students, most of whom came from an affluent area. A few years later, Blacks from less affluent areas were in attendance. Interesting to note, affluent Blacks were not happy attending the school for many reasons and returned to schools in their own neighborhood. By the mid-90s, large numbers of Latino students changed the make up of the school in face of declining numbers of Whites. During this period, my school had a striking racial/ethnic diversity. Just to give the reader a general impression from the best of my recollection, the student body consisted of approximately 40% Latino, 30% White and a little under 30% Black. Asian-Americans were a small but significant number. These numbers probably fluctuated somewhat over these years. Students who identified as Native-Americans were but a handful over the decades at these two schools.

This demographic presented me with a most perfect environment for a conversation on race. The development of my curriculum was gradual over there decades, starting with one or two discussions and ending with about 25-30 lessons over the year. It was driven in several ways. I was an avid learner. My students taught me many things which led to my own innovations. Although my doctorate

is in Medieval European history, I made an effort to keep abreast of current trends in pedagogy and race. In the early 70s, 'rap sessions' where students could come in during lunch period and talk about race, were popular. I attended one or two and realized several things. The lack of precise topics led to emotional outbursts without any clear or intense examination of issues. Lack of accountability meant students marched in and out after spewing vituperation. This situation led me to focus on the need for a scaffolded structure and a sense of responsibility. I must admit that I was slow to see the importance of the concept of institutional racism. I did so in the 90s, thanks to my students. While I did address it, much of this aspect of the curriculum I describe here is based on hindsight and what I would do now.

In both my schools, I had no other position than classroom teacher. Of course, in a conversation on race, the facilitator plays a key role and whether we want to admit it or not, that person's race is part of the dynamics (probably more so than in other academic subjects). I identify as White with an asterisk. As a Jewish person, I realize that historically and experientially, sometimes I am considered White, sometimes not. As I have aged, I'm comfortable with that assessment. At the same time, my identity has given me a certain sensitivity to difference. I also think that living through the Civil Rights Movement developed that sensitivity and maturity. By the late 70s, I felt secure enough to write to the committee or department of the Board of Education that dealt with integration matters. I told them briefly about what I was doing, indicating that numbers alone do not make 'integration.' I received a letter thanking and commending me for my effort. Nothing more- there was no further interest. Justifiably or not, I remained silent to colleagues and administration for the most part as to my effort. So you might say this is my coming out moment, but one I hope will benefit and encourage future attempts.

## INTRODUCTION

How can we provide 21<sup>st</sup> century American students a meaningful educational experience that will empower them in terms of dealing with racial diversity?

There are many stumbling blocks for sure but one effective way is the implementation of a refocused K-12 pedagogy. An innovative pedagogy is a decisive factor because the structured, relatively safe environment of the classroom is one of the best places in which a focused, extensive experience can realistically and successfully occur. (1) The question then becomes what new pedagogical approaches can lead to an engagement of the American student body on issues of race and ethnicity. How can we provide an educational venue for change when so many efforts have been made with only incremental advances?

Before we consider what this might entail, we have to consider, even in general terms, some basic perspectives on race/ethnicity that indicate where we stand today. In a period of rapidly changing demographics and an evolving process of integration, there is always a need to reinterpret American values in light of contemporary conditions. For most people, the formation of racial narratives provides an approachable and understandable guideline on how to approach interracial relations as far as perspectives and behavior. Narratives are powerful. That is because they tell a story, a complete picture which makes its component parts easy to understand and justify and yet hard to undermine even if one particular element is challenged. They are, indeed, baselines in dealing with others and currently there are several influential racial narratives. To implement an effective approach to a conversation on race, educators must be conscious of and focus on the present reality in which there are two very prevalent narratives, each with numerous variants. These two stories are quite divergent, but each ultimately support the values which Americans collectively cherish. At the same time, the uncontrolled flow of misinformation and hatred has reformulated old

narratives which lie beyond the pale of our core values. While they pose a challenge to the other two, the focus must remain on an exploration within the context of the values that most Americans at least nominally uphold in various degrees. The process must evolve in a way that will bring people together in order to collectively think critically, to relate and to create a renaissance of new narratives that will align with the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whatever the outcome, the conversation therefore will be set within a context that renews and reinterprets narratives on race that strengthen our national ideals. The key success factor in this case is clearly the right pedagogy.

Colorblind and Institutional Racism are two narratives that are actually bookends framing a wide variation of popular views on race that fall within our scope. These are actually so divergent that they are divisive, especially in a highly politicized environment. Any successful effort at a meaningful conversation necessitates an awareness of each and a formulation of strategies which leads from the present destructive status quo towards a new perspective of interracial harmony and social justice. What is the nature of this divergence, becomes the first consideration on this route.

The Colorblind narrative consists of various tenets but paramount in this perspective is the centrality of individual agency. It is most frequently expressed by a widespread segment of White Americans, although not exclusively, whose focus on race relations rests on the interpersonal level. In this scenario, a binary status exists consisting of racists or haters, and non-racists or non-haters. The former, who can be people of any racial/ethnic group, are often defined vaguely as racist, prejudiced, etc. in their approach to others. Then there are the latter who may recognize physical and cultural difference but they see these things as superficial and give scant attention to these distinctions as a basis for any judgmental purposes for any type of relationship. Hence, in their own estimation, they are colorblind, i.e. they don't see color. This is also often verbalized in the

quip, 'we are all the same' or 'everyone is all the same,' in effect negating the importance of any cultural difference and by implication, viewing difference itself in a negative sense. This sentiment is aligned in their minds as well by the way they interpret 'all men are created equal' in the Declaration of Independence. In the binary, there is little consideration of gradation in either category except that the haters are often seen as 'the few bad apples' who need to be held accountable for overt negative behavior. A typical perspective is that the Civil Rights era legislation provided the legal basis to eliminate discrimination. Therefore, imperfect as it may be, a meritocracy now exists for people who want to achieve, and who have the ability to fulfill their ambitions. Our government, and the administration of justice has the tools to monitor equal justice for all, thus trumping the need for social action. As far as education on racial issues, addressing difference, especially in K-12, replaces harmony with tension. It revokes American exceptionalism which is a celebration of individual agency.

This narrative allows the teller many perspectives that may impede openness and ability to change. It may give the person a sense of not being prejudiced or racist. It may lead to the belief that becoming aware of the experiences of others is a waste of time, and instead establishes an ideal story giving the teller a sense of protection from any discrepancies to that ideal.

As with any popular narrative, there are variations and gradations, and in this case, major ones. There are many Americans who recognize to some extent, the reality and value of difference, or believe that they do. Some are not adverse to conversation. The notion of meritocracy, albeit imperfect, is accepted as being an important attribute of our society which is open to reform. Most, however, see the critical role of interpersonal interactions as one of individual accountability.

At the other end of the spectrum, is the narrative of Institutional/ Systemic Racism. The key question for adherents driving this narrative and its variations is why decades after civil rights legislation, has the U.S. not moved in appreciable

ways in the direction of social justice and equity in terms of race. The essential perspective is that our laws, our entire judicial system and comprehensively, our institutions are racist. This is often expressed as ‘the system is rigged.’ But the narrative is also grounded in an academic framework in no small part expressed in Critical Race Theory. Sketched briefly, racism’s origin rests on a foundation of colonialism and exploitation of people of color. A White power structure shaped institutions to sustain this condition which continues in some ways into the present. In this framework, individuals have personal prejudices, biases, etc., but racism is systemic. Racist is carefully defined with gradations in line with actions and attitudes that uphold racist institutions. Working within the system to make our core values reality, is our social responsibility to undo the inequities and unfairness in a society that is not meritocratic in its promotion of White privilege. A few proponents even posit that capitalism itself cannot be reformed and should be eliminated. (2)

This narrative allows the teller some satisfaction by exposing the existence of a high level of racism that he or she may be experiencing. It helps relieve the feeling that I am the cause of what is happening to me. It justifies the work of activist groups seeking social justice. On the other hand, it might provoke a sense that it is a waste of time for me alone to make an effort to improve myself in face of overwhelming opposition. A conversation would be a waste of time.

This perspective also plays out in a variety of ways as it is popularized. Versions of ‘wokism’ place heavy emphasis on White contrition, often necessitating guilt as an act of passage towards allyship in the battle to undo the racist power structure. In reality, many holding this outlook still tend to see the importance of individual interaction, especially in dealing with day to day microaggressions even if there are perplexities of understanding the dynamics involved.

Any serious effort at conversation must take into account where participants



are starting from and what dynamics are in play. The disparities between the narratives gives us insight into that and helps us prepare a curriculum. Keeping this in mind, it is important to expect that a diverse group of students will have discordant perspectives, often along racial/ethnic lines, reflecting different experiences, observations, influences. It is important for educators to facilitate positive connections and mutual understanding while considering comfort levels of all participants. Doing so helps bind participants in a learning environment, encouraging open and honest exchanges. This approach entails a difficult and long term transition that can only happen on a wide scale if there is a new coordinated approach which will unify our present endeavors into a powerful process that can be implemented for effective change.

At the center of this process is a curriculum in our schools directly addressing the role of race/ethnicity in our society. The classroom can provide not only safety and security but also universality, making it a unique milieu for the purpose of having a national conversation and enabling our citizens to move closer to attaining our national values of social justice. Yes there have been some serious efforts in this direction. Much of it, however has unfortunately been limited in scope and in reach. So far, for the most part, it has meant either an ad hoc approach, only as needed in certain circumstances, or only for a target audience of one community, or only, as an effort on the part of only one teacher or class or school. What needs to be done is a structured approach starting in elementary and middle school grades, where some basic elements and concepts can be introduced, in line with developing grade level learning abilities. This foundation must be coordinated with and support a culminating experience such as a one semester required high school course, focused solely on a conversation. This requirement should be offered at an upper level so that students bring a certain maturity and depth of experience and are able to complete before the end of formal education. A semester is enough time for intensity and thoroughness. It also allows for a

sense of community to develop, for a sense of security and responsibility to take hold, allowing free speech to become a reality.

What is critical as well for success is a pedagogy that drives the conversation in a structured, scaffolded manner. This must incorporate practicing many needed skills and learning some new academic content, turning data into knowledge within a process of collective critical thinking. The conversation must not be an indoctrination. The facilitator does not indicate a notion of correctness of any perspective and does not add his or her own perspectives. This approach will enable students to work together to create and consider their own new narratives on race/ethnicity. The scaffolded introduction of topics helps ensure that they are approached when appropriate and when students are ready, lessening greatly the likelihood of so-called hot topics. Finally, what is also critical is that the conversation takes place among a very diverse group of students, including participants that represent a wide range of American communities. This might seem nearly impossible to do but modern technology can make it happen. More about this at the end of the paper. The important question, however, is how can a curriculum accomplish all this while addressing the prevalent narratives and its continuum of variations which must drive that curriculum and the method of instruction.

For the conversation to be the key component of a successful process of change, a pendulum shift must occur in present thinking about race and pedagogy. Bluntly speaking, the importance of examining the interpersonal and individual role must be restored. This does not mean neglecting concepts of institutional racism and social responsibility. Instead for pedagogical purposes, starting with a meaningful exploration of personal attitudes and behaviors is a prerequisite, providing context for the relevance to students of the more complex, abstract concepts associated with institutional racism. Before proceeding to these higher levels of understanding, not only context needs to be constructed. Security, trust,

a sense of community must evolve and that takes time and focus to develop. When a group of diverse people talk about race consistently over an extended period of time, the nature of the experience changes. A new dynamic is created and barriers fall. As respect grows, so does empowerment in the sense of acquisition of skills in communication, racial literacy, ability to form positive interracial relationships. At that point, conversation translates into connection and connections allow for individuality, difference, empathy. This is a critical stage in the process of change, which benefits students' future endeavors. Also, a harmonious small community serves as a model of what is possible for society at large. This would be our desired outcomes.

Conversation is critical, in the form of discussion and dialogue. One objective is to involve all students in a rigorous experience that incorporates social, emotional and academic learning in a unique way. Each participant will have the opportunity to explore his or her own personal perspectives on a very important issue and will be able to transfer that learning on to other aspects of life, i.e. social, economic, and political. Except for factual material and text, there are no correct perspectives, no 'correct' opinions on the part of the facilitator unless greatly solicited for the purpose of sharing experiences and that should not be frequent. Rather, assessments are made by individuals and collectively by groups. In each case, collective critical thinking enables each student to come to terms with concepts such as racist and racism, based on an evaluation of multiple, varied experiences.

#### PRELIMINARIES

Just what would the curriculum look like to be able to achieve that? I will attempt to provide a brief sketch keeping within the bounds of an article. To begin with, there are some standard preliminaries. Ground rules must be established, such as what is allowed, what isn't, no personal attacks, etc. Students

need to learn or be reminded of how to discuss, how to dialogue, how to listen and respect the legitimacy of everyone else's perspectives, how to accept and deal with making mistakes both your own and others. A perimeter should be established within which there is free speech. (3) There also should be some basic vocabulary that is needed for the conversation, i.e. race, ethnicity, prejudice, bias.

There are some preliminaries that are not so conventional that I believe are critical to the success of the conversation. I advise never to force anyone to participate orally. This is very important as many students must overcome fear of making mistakes, of being exposed as racist, of being ridiculed, of being considered as 'less than,' of validating stereotypes. Once these fears subside, participation greatly increases. Whether orally or in writing, anecdotal examples involving individuals not in the classroom should be made anonymously except for public figures. Specifically identifying outsiders easily leads to misunderstandings and is not really helpful in attaining our objectives. I always ask students to do their best to avoid the terms racist and racism for the first half of the conversation. There are many reasons for this. The words are confusing as academic and popular usages don't always conform. The terms arouse strong emotional responses and especially among whites, defensiveness. This is not a basis to establish trust. Nearly all students use the terms in a binary sense- you are or you aren't, it is or it isn't. The worst part is that usage of the terms at the beginning of the conversation gives the impression that the objective is to discover who are the racists, presumably Whites, and that it will be the task of BIPOC to teach everyone the right path. Students must understand from the start that the focus will be on all races/ethnicities, and their interrelationship, not just on the issues of any one identity. The notion of 'witch hunt' will fatally doom any effort. Instead, students must understand what the objectives are, that by engaging in a conversation, they will better understand others and that will enable everyone to better relate to each other. Lastly, I also ask students to consider that

everyone has prejudices. This helps lessen the notion of a witch hunt objective but of course, the real solution is to engage in a conversation that demonstrates these objectives. At this point, we are ready to start.

### EXPLORING AND ANALYZING THE PRESENT ENVIRONMENT

The first unit explores the question of why or why not, a need exists for a conversation on race/ethnicity. In order to answer that, we need to examine where we are at now in terms of interrelationships. School is the place students know best. The easiest way to get an sense of the now, is to ask them to observe. What have you seen at school, in all different facets of campus life, i.e. classrooms, hallways, lunch area, athletics, clubs, etc.? Make sure they look for every type of interactions, including not just White/BIPOC but also interactions among BIPOC as well. Have students read anecdotes written by students from previous years to get ideas of what to do, how to approach the enormous scope of where to look. Over the next few weeks, have students read a collection of their class's observations. Students can then discuss what they have found, focusing on characterizing these relationships. Are certain milieus more conducive to harmony, discord, etc.? Do certain teacher pedagogies result in better outcomes, i.e. sessions where the teacher lectures, discusses, where the teacher let's students choose seats, etc. Students should also work collectively to come up with generalizations about the nature of these relationships; antagonistic, casual, friendly, etc. At this juncture students will want to analyse or rationalize, i.e. the 'why.' It is best to focus them on the objective here, to gain a perspective of what is.

The follow-up is a shift to personal experiences, what has been your experience. Here the assignment is to write up two personal experiences not relegated to the school environment, one you would define as negative and one

characterized as positive. Follow similar procedures. This time, however, the discussion should be on categorizing the types of interaction that are described as positive and those considered negative. What circumstances led to each type, are there any patterns? Again working together, students should aim for generalizations they deem valid.

As a final exercise in the unit, we go back to our original question on the need for a conversation. I ask students about any surprises in what was uncovered. As a generalization, White students were somewhat shocked by the frequency of anti-minority sentiment and behavior. There was a strong belief that the civil rights laws of the 60s had eliminated a lot of discrimination. It's hard to generalize about BIPOC reactions but many of them expressed the view that they found Whites to be more prejudiced than they previously thought. Whatever the surprises, there always seemed to be more acceptance for the conversation after this opening unit. Perhaps there was a good deal less White reticence as a result of hearing another reality in a non-threatening space. Perhaps, non-Whites appreciated participation in a forum where their perspectives were heard respectfully and legitimately. Ultimately this first unit is also a good start by building confidence and by the practice of discussion skills on issues that are generally not controversial.

As students were processing the new data, it was the perfect time to start thinking about individual responsibility and challenge the thinking of 'I play no role in race relations.' Even though we started with the presumption that we all have prejudices, the projection is on others. I'm not involved, I'm not prejudiced, I can't be a racist.' This next unit turns our focus to self-awareness, our attitudes and behavior as to how we deal with difference. As a starter, terms such as racial identity, culture, stereotypes, must be defined. One further step before considering difference, is to think about commonalities so that we can better understand what we may define as different. As a point of contrast, I ask, 'What makes us human?'

In the early 80s, I was starting the discussion on difference when a student got up and walked across the room. He was physically challenged. There was complete silence. All eyes were on him as he explained his awareness of the ways people react to him. I went with what was happening and asked students to write anonymously, considering the present and past situations, how do they react to physically challenged people. I read the responses and we categorized ways that people react. We discussed what might be considered 'positive, harmful, etc.' responses considering that the physically challenged individual is probably well aware of what you are thinking. We also considered the question of severity of the condition affecting our reaction. The experience proved to be so enlightening that I recounted the incident in future years as a segue to the rest of the unit.

There is always a collective sigh of relief after a class of diverse students works together to complete a list of stereotypes of each of the major US racial/ethnic identities (including Whites). It's as if a deep and hidden secret has been exposed. Students submit examples of when they or others they observed were stereotyped. The results are discussed, read and discussed from several angles. Those include categorization i.e. types of stereotype (exaggeration, ridicule), manner/ purpose (aggressiveness, unconscious bias, intimidation, etc.), validity. While I always provided a sheet of factual information, students must be challenged. If Blacks are as intelligent as Whites, why are so few Blacks in honors classes? Just as one example, here are some of the responses. Many Blacks don't want to act White by being in Honors, some counsellors advise Blacks against enrollment in those classes, there are different types of demonstrating intelligence, i.e., street smarts. If we hear about Whites being stereotyped, is it harsher, more disadvantageous for non-Whites to be stereotyped? Even among BIPOC, are some identities more harshly stereotyped? Reading personal reactions to being stereotyped, students discuss a few personal examples as to effects on the person and how might be the best way to handle

such situations. While Whites often recount feeling rejection as individuals, non-Whites victims have many important issues. One example that illustrates this was a Black student who was so often stereotyped that he wished he were White, leading to discussion about self-denigration, about self-blame, etc. Another example is the Latina, fearing rejection and mockery of her ethnicity. Finally, the focus turns to the stereotyper, why do people stereotype, have you ever stereotyped anyone (extra credit for anyone keeping a stereotype diary). After all these exercises, many students are still somewhat perplexed. In this situation, am I stereotyping?

To better answer this question, we must consider of the concepts of racial/ethnic identity and culture. Academic sources and text are a useful starting point, but these concepts only become 'real' in a lengthy exploration within the context of the group experience. Framing this segment, we delineated the major US racial/ethnic identities (reflecting the student population in front of me). Focusing extensively on each group, the fluidity and constructive nature of the categorization is evident and is pointedly observed. For each identity, students were asked to think about membership, distinctions, cultural attributes, etc. There were always varying perspectives. At the same time, recognition was made of a presumably White for the most part, general American culture. As participants focused on each in turn, they referred to historical and sociological material to see the construction and evolution of that category. Interesting questions on this topic always arose, i.e., is difference based on race or class, or somewhere in between.

To make sure that students do not see these racial/ethnic identities and their cultural affinities as monolithic blocs, we considered the important differences and issues within each. This is critical, not only because this approach posits Whites as another identity, but it also illustrates the distinctions and some conflicting interests among BIPOC groups. Specific topics addressed included different national origins within identities, colorism, etc. So much of the examples



of all of the above were clearly illustrated by the experiences and observations of mixed race students relating the benefits and difficulties of their biracial, bicultural experience. To give more depth and meaningfulness to the unit on difference, students were given a green light to write questions about other identities that they were afraid to ask directly. These were compiled and categorized. As a class, the list was discussed and the next step was for students to pick a few questions that they felt qualified to answer. Some were very practical in nature, such as how do you ask about a person's race or origin, or should you even ask about that. Many asked for explanations of traditions, behavior. Written responses were also collected and distributed as a basis for further discussion.

The power of these discussions and exercises was most evident in the general acceptance of difference as something that was OK to point out, something that could be analyzed as a learning experience. Many relative issues came out of the exploration. Does greater difference mean less acceptance? What about BIPOC relationships that don't directly involve Whites? (Of course, this issue and others have to be explored further when dealing with institutional racism). Also so very important was language usage in the series of questions and responses, reflecting attitudes about difference. One of my students devised a rating system to gage on a scale of 1 to 5 positivity/negativity based on choice of words. Generally students were now better equipped to distinguish a stereotype from a cultural difference.

The logical progression from here is to examine how our attitudes and perspectives can affect our behavior. How do we actually react to difference? In order to do this, we can focus on a few specific types of circumstances in interrelationships. I usually pick situations relating to showing respect/disrespect as well as the very revealing act of telling or listening to racial/ethnic jokes. On the issue of showing respect/disrespect, students write down their own definitions

of both and provide a few examples, whether observational or experiential. As a class, or in small groups reporting back to the class, we can discuss and generalize about important findings. These usually reveal some standard as well as different cultural expectations. In order to tie everything together, it is very meaningful to role play, freezing scenes for class analysis. One example would be introducing a person of one identity to a group of people who are all of another identity. To make things more interesting, the scene can be replayed with other possible combinations of identities. Also, I would add that 'I'm an equal opportunity employer.' Anyone of any identity can play any role. This was an impetus to project stereotypical behavior and student quickly recognized it and loved it. But the important questions to be dialogued were, what to you was respectful behavior, what was disrespectful and why. How can people make others feel comfortable? Or uncomfortable?

The question of whether anyone should ever tell a racial/ethnic joke is not a trivial pursuit. It entails dissecting key elements of interracial relationships. (Again this topic should be further evaluated adding the considerations gained from institutional racism). Students are generally surprised that even on this subject, as facilitator I take no position. Before any conclusions, consideration must be made of types of jokes, the race/ethnicity of the teller and the composition of the audience, context, cultural differences as far as humor. Sensitivity and oversensitivity, harshness and inequality of effect on certain identities; all these need to be part of an intense focus. Students should also consider how to deal with situations where they feel jokes were inappropriate, including casual and workplace settings. Students then have a great deal of range with which to make decisions and generalizations. Quick surveys before and after can be taken of those who believe jokes should be made-never, sometimes with caution, in most situations. In my experience, there is usually a great deal of changing opinions.

As a final activity in this unit, I ask students to pick two racial/ethnic identities; one, their own and one from any other group, describing for each one cultural attribute that they are proud of or admire. The choice must be something which the author sees as a positive example, as a model for everyone. This can be an important ancillary towards contact and acceptance of difference, that is, projecting pride in the positive. There is nothing so powerful in fostering good relationships with others as taking pride in one's own identity as well as recognizing and respecting others. Imagine a class of diverse students where Whites praise all the other identities, where BIPOC, each in turn, does likewise for all the others. As others praise your identity, you better understand your own cultural affinities. Doing this together creates an environment where we all teach each other rather than the unfair and untenable situation whereby BIPOC is there solely to teach White kids about their racism.

By the close of this unit, the two influential narratives may still retain credibility but they will have been challenged at least in parts. Certainly the work on difference calls into question the notion of 'colorblind.' It also points out to those who believe they are open to difference, the validity of their belief. The conversation has invited a change in the way we think and engage with difference. The mutual listening, accepting, admiring of one another likewise presents an alternative to the view that individuals don't play a major role in race relations. Students, engaging with one another, generalizing about those relationships, are in a sense constructing a new narrative together. All this in toto is a key to moving forward.

#### INDIVIDUAL INFLUENCERS

At this point, students can now consider how they came to have certain perspectives on race/ethnicity, in other words, who or what has influenced them

and/or continues to do so. It's a logical step to proceed first with specific individuals, usually in certain capacities. Who has exerted their views, who has modeled behaviors in this regard? Asking students usually leads to mention of parents and other adults, peers, teachers, media stars, etc. An extensive appraisal of each of these sources leads to enlightened awareness of the racial 'climate' that their diverse cohorts have been exposed to. What better preparation for understanding the context of the power of institutional racism.

Parents and other close adults are considered by most students to be the most consequential influence in the formative years and often beyond that period. Following our established routine, after an introductory discussion, they are asked to submit anecdotes illustrating their experiences. Reading these, anonymously presented, as well as others from prior years, allowed us to discuss several aspects. Collectively, we categorized ways in which parents influence children, and we listed specific self-defined positive and negative items. These usually involved stereotyping, hypocrisy as in saying one thing and modeling the opposite, openness to diversity and encouraging interracial friendship. Students recognized cultural differences not only in perspectives but in methods of conveying information and in raising children. Just a brief example- White parents tended to offer the colorblind narrative or a varying degree of acceptance of difference. Often the messages depended on references to a particular BIPOC identity, including outright rejection. Generational factors were often involved. BIPOC parents were hardly monolithic in their influence on children, but a very common factor was advisories on how to deal with Whites and other BIPOC groups, as well specific instructions on how to deal with 'racism.'

An important facet of this topic involved looking at attitudes regarding interracial friendship, dating and marriage. When this aspect of parental influence was initiated, it was like a veil was lifted. It seemed as if this revealed some hidden realities. There were so many interesting variables, especially since the

three ascending levels of a relationship exposed more depth in parental attitudes. We could then turn inward and examine how we would choose friends, dates, future partners/spouses- would their race or views on race matter? How would you raise a child in terms of his/her attitudes on race? How would you deal with an adult who shows views on race you consider offensive? Lastly, how influential or not were parents, other adults on your racial views? Collectively, the class should make some generalizations, noting level of any disagreement. The influence exerted by peers and peer pressure would follow the same format as with parents.

The influence of teachers on racial perspectives is obviously an important topics and here there are a few caveats. Students need to be reminded that especially here no names or identifying features is acceptable for both written and oral responses. The aim is not to castigate but to understand what may have shaped our outlook. Also to be noted for the instructor, try to keep the focus on individual teachers as influencers and not on education in an institutional structure. When we do focus on educational institutions, the whole picture will be more meaningful. In the meantime, any perspective should not be rejected.

Following the same format again, students can consider what messages and behavior was imparted to them. We list and categorize the results, considering what would be termed positive, what negative influences. Analysing the results, students can consider what would be their ideal teacher in terms of being a positive influence on race. Students often mentioned attributes such as creating a bias free environment, absence of favoritism, encouragement to communicate, using varied approaches to learning to reach everyone, aligning words and actions. Also to be discussed is the question of whether having a teacher of another racial/ethnic identity plays a role in your attitudes, academic results, etc. Again, there is importance to collective assessment as to the role of individual teachers.

An incident that occurred on this topic in one of my classes was a very important learning experience for me. In the middle of a discussion with another student, one student said, 'Dr. Nate is prejudiced against Blacks.' Let's call this student Adam and the other student, Brian. Both students identify as Black. After Adam's remark, virtually everyone in the class was shouting, 'Dr. Nate is not prejudiced, Dr. Nate is the only teacher who isn't.' Before getting to my reaction, some context is needed about Adam. In conversations, he revealed that he was biracial (Black and White) and that his White side would have nothing to do with him or his Black family. Although Adam was often hostile to other students of all races, we did have a good relationship. In a discussion on Jackson's presidency, I recognized that he was a critical thinker. I did not think his comment about me was antagonistic. I regained control of the class and then contrary to their expectation that I silence Adam and defend myself, I said that I wanted the discussion to continue. They resumed as I listened, my heart palpitating, as two students analysed my racial outlook. Adam 'defended' me as it were, but Adam said, 'Dr. Nate knows some things about Blacks but he doesn't know what it means to be Black.' With the whole class looking intensely at me, I started to make excuses, but I just stopped. Then I said, 'Adam is right.' The importance of this incident is the outcome. Rather than tear apart my relationship with the class, my bonds with them became indestructible for the rest of the school year.

There is no doubt the media has enormous influence on most of us. At this juncture, again try to keep the focus on individual actors, singers, authors, etc. The process here is similar to the other categories of influencers although some lines of inquiry will be different, reflecting the public nature of the context. This last aspect is quite unique in demonstrating the nature of types of influence and influencers that have a broad audience. Also, here perhaps more than other categories, the illustrations will very much reflect the contemporary mood and perspectives. It is also an important final exercise on the interpersonal level

because it clearly begs the question of how the media as an institutional entity exerts power over what is seen, spoken, written.

At the conclusion of the unit, students will have become attuned to the reality that they do not live in a bubble, that there have been and continue to be numerous influences on the racial perspectives, that these influences have exerted themselves in varying degrees of importance. It is now that they are prepared to address the next critical challenge. That is, engaging with the complex notions of institutional racism. This will be a challenge because it will involve a higher level of understanding as well as a readjustment of the attitudes and behavior. It will involve considering the power of our institutions, an enormous challenge in terms of its broad scope.

### INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

There is a discussion prompt that I started to use in the 1990s that I believe offers some benefits, one of which is its potential as a segue to institutional racism. The prompt is, “Nowadays are Whites blamed for everything?” The caveat here is that this approach must never be introduced prematurely. Students must have established trust, open-mindedness, respect and a good deal of racial literacy. This prompt is important because it recognizes a concern of many Whites and offers consideration of an issue that begs emotional responses, in a mature fashion. Inevitably the perspective that the system is rigged is heard and is a great start to a discussion on institutional racism and privilege.

The first step in this direction is to make sure students understand basic vocabulary. The whole conversation now hinges on grasping the idea of an institution and the relevant terms such as institutional racism and systemic racism. Institution must not just be defined but examples of social, economic, professional, government, financial, must be recognized. Other terms as well

should be defined such as oppression, colonialism, exploitation. Now is the time to tackle the terms race and racism. From the work on the interpersonal level, students should be adjusted to no longer think in terms of binary. The same should be considered here. The confusion over the last two terms needs to be addressed by pointing out the multiple usages, including the dictionary definition as opposed to newer and more complex concepts.

The focus must be made clear in distinguishing a different approach from the interpersonal level. Instead of looking at individuals in various capacities, we now will focus on institutions with different and more powerful capacities. This must be clarified and the only way to do it is by a specific example. Take an example that students already have experience with and that is our educational institutions. Unlike analysing the role of individual teachers, we need to examine how education is administered in terms of policy, curriculum, pedagogy, funding, diversity of leadership and staff, etc. Do educational institutions, taking local and state boards of education, provide for equality of opportunity for all races/ethnicities, does it provide for equity in education in terms of offering appropriate learning styles for needs of all races/ethnicities? Use of statistics is important but so is using precise situations from the interpersonal level. For instance, go back to the discussion on a stereotype about Black intelligence and low numbers of Blacks in honors classes. While the responses on the interpersonal level may be valid, now we can examine school policies, historic and contemporary unfairness, teaching methodology, lack of equity etc. to get a better understanding of the complexity.

Another ‘couplet,’ police and policing, offers a second focus that students are familiar with. After consideration of what our law enforcement institutions entail, such as policies, accountability, participants can reconsider their anecdotes relating to experiences with individual officers. This is a great opportunity to reflect on aspects raised on the interpersonal level, including the role of Black



officers and Black civilians. Many such anecdotes by my Black students claimed Black policemen were harsher on them than their White counterparts. Now would be the time for a more complex consideration. The level of discussion can also be enhanced by a coordinated history lesson on the first ten amendments and especially the fourth amendment's probable cause.

Using these most familiar institutions, as a model, students can now begin to get a reasonable idea about the role of other American institutions play as far as race/ethnicity is concerned. But how without making it the pursuit of an entire semester? One way is to divide the class into several groups, each group researching one particular institution, i.e. legal and judicial, medical, financial, economic, professional, etc. Groups would then report their findings to the entire class for further discussion and evaluation. It is important for the groups to obtain and make use of statistical evidence and current reality. In fact, it would be a very beneficial assignment for all students weekly to consult newspapers and other current periodicals (online if necessary) for evidence. That further supports attaining the objective of understanding the concept of institutional racism, and being able to evaluate the extent of its role. Students must be aware of the need to weigh the plausibility of individual agency. If time permits, it might be very beneficial to start with the historical development of some institutions, discussing topics such as slavery, exploitation, colonialism and their influences today especially raising issues such as guilt and anger.

This is a good point to focus particularly on emotional as well as academic learning. In raising the issue of the influence on us today of American slavery, the notions of guilt, anger, hatred can be explored. There are always so many important perspectives here but just briefly, I'll include the comment of one Black student who said that Whites should not feel guilty about slavery, but should be aware of what happened so that it affects their behavior today.

A critical issue that arises from the focus on institutions is privilege. There

may be several privileged social identities based on gender, class, sexual orientation. As with the whole conversation on race, the intersectionality of issues will often seem obvious. That should be recognized. Discussion issues should include who is privileged, who is to lesser degrees. Who would be more privileged for college entry, a white female candidate of modest means or a Latino from a wealthy family? However, for purposes of focus and availability of time, we must think in terms of race and, in this case, we are mostly concerned with the whole subject of White privilege. There is a wealth of textual material that can help students get a grasp of the scope of this issue. There is a vast amount of exercises and games that make all this more meaningful, tying this to critical aspects of our lives and relationships. The New York Times recently had an interactive exercise on how gerrymandering works in disadvantaging certain communities by reducing the importance of their votes. Readers could in turn draw their own maps targeting certain racial/ethnic identities. Students can, in groups, act as government agents planning a new freeway, or granting a location for a chemical plant. They can act as bankers deciding on who gets a loan, or as school officials writing a new history curriculum. These hands on activities can demonstrate possible connections between the power of institutions and privilege.

Ultimately the analysis of a close association depends on a conversation recounting various personal experiences of the participants. Some prompts can help to mine a wealth of anecdotal material to validate responses. How much and precisely how do Whites benefit from institutional racism? Do people of every race/ethnicity have instances where they have unearned privilege? What are ways that privilege based on race/ethnicity and lack of it manifests itself? Are people who get unearned advantage, aware of their benefits? What are their reactions if they already know or whenever they are told? How does lack of privilege based on race/ethnicity affect people? What might be positive ways of dealing with what has been described as White privilege? (Again questions about

guilt, anger, etc. may be critical). This certainly begs the question of where we go from here, and what should be done about any unfair treatment which is contrary to acceptable American values. Any meaningful consideration of this last focus must involve addressing two levels and the two important narratives on race. One actual example from my students comes to mind. A Japanese-American guy had many White friends who often told jokes about Asian-Americans. He joined them in their laughter but that masked the psychological pain. Does this situation involve White privilege? Here students could discuss this on both the interpersonal level as well as the role of institutional racism. An even more complex situation would be the food market incidents between Korean-American owners suspicious of many Black customers. When this turns violent, is it a question of an irate, individual owner who privileges certain races/ethnicities? Is it part of prevalent, projected images and standards that generally privilege certain people? From these examples, discussion should address complexity and raise the point of whether the validity on one level invalidates the validity of the other, or whether both can be valid.

The subject of what to do about privilege needs to be further discussed on several levels. Hopefully in the course of responding to the above prompts, a lot of the psychological difficulties are raised. But there still remains options that can be taken on the part of each individual. These might include specific ways to interrupt and obstruct what one considers racist, and forms and levels of ‘allyship.’ But what about some persistent repercussions that we raised in regard to institutional racism? Does this entail more than an individual effort? Are there social responsibilities for each individual to organize and bring change to our major institutions.? What might be ways to bring about more substantial change?

## FINAL ACTIVITIES

The series of final activities attempts to get students to evaluate; what they've heard, turning that data into knowledge; where they are now in terms of their perspectives; how to evaluate their own and collective conclusions; how to define their present and future role. A final exam would make sure students are thinking critically by responding to essay prompts such as, 'To what extent if any does institutional racism add to our understanding of interracial relationships,' Define racist, racism and privilege based on our discussions and group activities.' Second activity would be to draw up a plans to how I will fulfill my individual and social responsibilities living in a diverse national community. The third is an essay essentially addressing the issue of growth, 'Have I changed as a result of this conversation and to what extent, or if not, why not; what were the most significant reasons and precise instances that brought about change or caused me not to change; Do I have a new narrative on race/ethnicity? The last would be a letter to the facilitator evaluating the whole experience including strengths, and weaknesses. It would certainly be the moment to give relevance on an emotional level.

#### LOGISTICAL CONCERNS

Before concluding, I would like to briefly address two related issues. Could it be that ethnic studies classes in high school are already engaging in a conversation or potentially will be? These courses do have great value in conveying knowledge that is usually not covered in most K-12 education. However, this cannot take the place of extensive, directly focused engagement. While using literature, history, sociology to illustrate human relationships and experiences is imperative, this approach is not structured enough to be a scaffolded ongoing conversation. This would certainly not be enough to avoid making some topics 'hot.' When dealing with interrelationships, all identities

must be in focus. This course might give Whites, for instance, a sense of exclusion and negativity, warranted or not. This doesn't invalidate ethnic studies which I believe should be mandated after the conversation on race/ethnicity. (4)

The other issue concerns how to possibly have the student diversity needed for the conversation when K-12 schools often reflect the separate racial identities of different communities. Technology can help overcome the distance and lack of physically present diversity of both students and staff. A.I. may increasingly serve in an important role. Lessons can be introduced and reinforced online. Personal reflection can be guided by an A.I. program which gives the participant privacy. That is such an important component of change and growth. I visualize the anonymous usage of these reflections by university research groups to create a feedback loop on how to better conduct the conversation and better understand the role of race/ethnicity in our society. I wish to state that I realize at the present time that there is no substitute for 'face to face.' That however is not achievable on a wide scale.

If we consider the classroom as one of the best milieus for the conversation, we have to think about implementation. Where and how do we start? Should we aim for a single pilot program, a district wide program, state wide? Deciding these questions is important but admittedly, I don't have much expertise.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, K-12 education is central to the process of change and the conversation on race/ethnicity is a prime example of how we need to provide students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. In a way that voids indoctrination, students become engaged in the most intense manner with racial/ethnic diversity. Whatever attitudes, perspectives they come away with, they attain racial literacy and the ability to communicate and to function in a mutually beneficial way with

others. Whatever they come away with, they have considered the challenges to prevalent racial/ethnic narratives. They are better able to see nuance, non-binary distinctions, complexities. They will have practiced critical thinking and be able to apply that skill to other facets of their lives.

In that fashion, they have the capability to write a new narrative, one not created by or for one particular racial identity. Rather it will be one that integrates perspectives and in that way provides a pathway for solutions. Hence, we might call this the Integrated Narrative. It would provide the teller a greater fluidity of perspective, reflecting a diversity of experience. More substantially, it would provide a framework enabling the teller to adapt to the complexities of a rapidly changing society. At the very least, the teller would have an awareness of where they stand and how they play a role in the broader picture. Everyone has available the possibilities of new connections and in that sense, empowerment. This can only help play a critical role as they function as change agents in important roles in our institutions, helping at the same time to strengthen our core values. Most important of all, the very act of participating in the conversation, whether voluntarily or not, transforms that action into one of social responsibility that collectively undermines a support of institutional racism by means of doable acts individual agency.

My own facilitating experience covered a good deal of what I have written with the exception of an admitted important weakness on institutional racism and, given time constraints, a complete coverage of certain issues. But from the perspective of what I wrote, from observation and feedback, what I did do, had important results. I know it, I've seen it. My experiences and the changes I've seen and heard from students contradict the notion that silence furthers inclusion. Any attempt to deny or silence instruction on the role of race in American history and society past and present, will ultimately be an exercise in futility.

The critical factor, however, is the importance of whether the general public

understands what is involved in the suppression of facts and innovation. In an age of increasing efficiency of crafting false or misleading narratives, whether computer generated or politically motivated, the reality of contact among diverse races and ethnicities, becomes a critical antidote to misinformation. Ironically, greater emphasis on creating effective programs on racial awareness and ensuring a trained and capable staff, will be a key to greater social justice and fulfillment of constitutional rights.

#### NOTES

1. Other milieus offer opportunities but have limitations. In Robin DiAngelo's 2018 book, "White Fragility," while illustrating her theme, she numerates the overwhelming impediments posed by teaching diversity in a corporate environment. Church and community groups have various approaches but do not, by far, have the reach of American school systems. Furthermore, an important program which involves extensive time and scope, must be made a requirement.
2. A good deal of my description is found in Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 book, "How to be an Antiracist."
3. The Aspen Institute has a program called, "The Better Arguments Project," that attempts to improve interracial understanding by focusing on the methods of conversing. Information about the program is found on their website, [aspeninstitute.org](http://aspeninstitute.org). They reach out to business and community groups. Essentially the program stresses listening skills, having an open mind, and incorporating awareness of where other identities' perspectives

are coming from. These are all important preliminaries to a conversation but I find the program very limiting for several reasons. While the program begs for incorporating knowledge of context, and understanding the roles of emotional factors and power dynamics, it does not provide the structure to develop these aspects into a meaningful conversation. As I see it, it doesn't deal with change processes except for preliminaries. I must admit I do not like starting a conversation on race with a notion of arguing. Although calling for open-mindedness, it frames the experience in terms of avoiding confrontation. I see this approach as having only short term benefits and any extensive usage would have difficulties with hot topics.

4. There is some discussion about having a conversation on race by incorporating elements of it into various academic subject classes, especially history. There are certainly pros and cons. As a history teacher, I saw the problems of focus and structure in doing this. US history does not necessarily lend itself to the scaffolded approach I believe is necessary. On the other hand, there are topics that can be easily coordinated... Another benefit is that the facilitator becomes a known quantity, but again whether that's a positive factor depends on the individual teacher.

## APPENDIX- OUTLINE OF THE CONVERSATION

### I Preliminaries

1. Prepare students for successful outcomes by introducing format, rules, skills, objectives, vocabulary.
2. Avoid pitfalls from the start.



## II Exploring and Analyzing the Present Racial Environment

1. Demonstrate the rationale for having a conversation on race.
2. Have students observe the school environment.
3. Have students recount personal experiences both outside and inside school.
4. Establish a baseline as a basis for future exercises.

## III Self-Awareness

1. Challenge the notions of current narratives by examining individual interpersonal roles.
2. Examine thoroughly stereotypical and racial/ethnic identities and cultural affinities.
3. Certify that students understand the above distinctions using a variety of exercises that develop awareness of behavior and attitudes.

## IV Influence of Certain Individuals

1. Examine the origins of our racial perspectives
2. Have students enumerate the most important influencers in their lives.
3. Examine the role of parents and other adults, peers, teachers, individuals in the media.
4. Use the results as a precursor to understanding a wider range of influences on our racial perspectives.

## V Institutional Influences

1. Focus on understanding complex vocabulary and ideas to ensure alignment on definitions.
2. Examine specific institutions and how they play a role in racial interactions.
3. Assess and integrate the interpersonal and institutional levels of influence
4. Discuss the role of privilege.

#### VI Final Activities

1. Collectively write new narratives on race relations.
2. Dialogue on lessons learned.
3. Address the issue of growth and future responsibility.