

Starting With Self: Identity Work and Anti-Racist Literacy Practices

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If the last few years has made anything abundantly clear, it's this: The time to address issues of social justice and anti-racism in the United States is long past due. As we witness Black Lives Matter protests and racial uprisings around the country, as educators, we must remember that none of this injustice is new; rather, it is deeply embedded in the social, economic, and educational fabric of our nation's history. If we believe that schools can be a transformative force for social justice and that schools can promote the development of empathy, understanding, and responsible citizenship, then we need to expand our understanding of literacy to include racial literacy.

Why Racial Literacy?

Every person in the United States has a racialized identity, one that affects to what extent individuals can navigate systems and structures necessary for participation in a democratic society built on the principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Understanding these racialized identities, and others, is critical to freeing ourselves from socialized patterns of thought and behavior that have led to injustice. As Love (2018) wrote, this "liberatory consciousness enables humans to live 'outside' the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems" (p. 611). Furthermore, because of the pervasiveness of race, learning about how racism functions helps students understand how other oppressive systems work: When students better understand racism as a system, they can apply that understanding to sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of discrimination.

According to Love (2018), the process in developing a liberatory consciousness comprises four stages: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/allyship. However, many students, including White students and even some students of Color, arrive in many classrooms unaware of the extent to which social systems perpetuate injustice. Thus, when teachers attempt to broach

issues of racism and other forms of discrimination, students may be surprised, at best, or they might actively deny that such injustices exist, at worst. This could be especially true of more privileged students who must reconcile the cognitive dissonance they experience when they recognize that they may have benefited from these systems, even if unintentionally.

My own experience as a teacher bears this out. As someone who has spent the last 20 years teaching in a predominantly White and affluent public high school, I have seen students struggle when confronted with the full truth of racial injustice in the United States, historically and present-day. For many students (and adults), race continues to be one of the hardest subjects to talk about critically and honestly. As Sue (2015) pointed out, conversations about race, particularly in classrooms, can be highly emotional, leading to defensiveness, anger, shame, and fear and resulting in attempts to evade, dilute, change, or end the conversation. In addition, Sue noted, talking about race in classrooms can be difficult because such conversations are perceived as violating norms of politeness (the belief that it's not polite to talk about race) and standards of academia (the misconception that critical race theory is not a valid form of scholarship, which it is).

Yet, if we are truly committed to ending racial injustice and other forms of discrimination, then it is critical to disrupt socialized silences around race conversations. Doing so, however, requires intentional and in-depth preparation on the part of teachers. In the English classroom, for example, it is not enough to simply swap out a classic novel by a White author with one by an author of Color. Nor is it enough to assign students to read James Baldwin or Ta-Nehisi Coates. In the social studies classroom, it is not enough to teach about the

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Tulsa race massacre, or Henrietta Lacks in science or Katherine Johnson in math. The inclusion of such figures and events is important, but it is also insufficient.

The Need for Critical Literacy

Instead, what is necessary is a shift that places critical literacy at the center of our instructional practices. All knowledge is socially constructed, and those in power ascribe greater value to certain forms of knowledge and practices of knowledge making, most of which have been rooted in White, Euro-centric traditions. Those in power in educational settings include politicians, school boards, testing companies, textbook publishers, curriculum supervisors, and classroom teachers. For example, “mainstream courses rarely if ever name the positionality of the texts they study (for example, the idea that Columbus discovered America is from the colonizer’s perspective, but certainly not from the perspective of Indigenous peoples)” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 15).

How can teachers help students develop the skills they need to unpack the ways in which they have been socialized, both in and out of school, to participate in and perpetuate oppressive systems? How can teachers help students develop what Muhammad (2020) called criticality, “the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding power, privilege, and oppression” (p. 12)?

Before we can ask students to understand and analyze how systems of oppression work, we must hold space for students to understand and analyze how those systems of oppression work in their own lives. Students must begin with themselves, with who they are and who they want to be—with their identity.

Identity Is Not a Unit of Study

Many teachers begin each school year with a series of “getting to know you” activities that focus on students sharing various elements of their identity with their peers and teacher. Many teachers also dedicate time at the beginning of the year to establish norms and guidelines for classroom community. However, although teachers start the year focused on identity and community, they fail to embed these concepts as foundational to their pedagogical approach throughout the year.

Recently, a student of Color confided in me about a debate regarding political correctness and White Supremacy in another class. According to the student, the debate (note that it was described as a debate versus

a discussion) became contentious, with students holding firm in their initial opinions, with little regard for listening to, much less understanding, what others had to say. Although I did not witness this particular exchange, I know the dynamics of it well because I have facilitated (or failed to facilitate) such discussions in my own classroom. Although this might seem obvious, dominant norms of discourse often frame conversation not as dialogue but as debate. Consider the 24-hour cable news networks, pundits, and talking heads who speak over and at one another: These are the role models for discourse that students see daily. Challenging these norms requires intentional and consistent practice in speaking and listening thoughtfully to one another.

To that end, students must understand and learn to appreciate how their identities inform the way they respond to any text, whether that text is written or a verbal argument with a classmate. The opinions, beliefs, and attitudes that students hold are not rigid and firm, inherent to who they are; rather, they are the result of the complex ways their multiple identities intersect and interact. If students can understand how the complexities of their identities inform their own opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, they can enter conversations knowing the same is true of others.

This identity work benefits all students but especially White students, who are often socialized to not see their Whiteness as a racialized identity but rather as neutral or the norm (“I don’t have a race”). Entering conversations from this stance of humility, rather than confidence (or even arrogance), allows students to be open to hearing perspectives that would otherwise cause the type of cognitive dissonance that leads to defensiveness or fear. From a stance of humility, students can listen for understanding and seek multiple perspectives, especially the counternarratives that challenge the dominant ideologies in mainstream (White) institutions.

How Does Who I Am Inform How I Read and Respond?

Several years ago, I attended a Teaching Tolerance Introduction to Social Justice workshop and adapted their exercise for use with my students. I begin by asking students to write down the following categories related to identity: race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin or immigration status, home language(s), ability, religion or spiritual practice, socioeconomic status, and age or generation. As students write each category down, I explain what it means and model how I identify for it. For example, I explain that gender is a social

construction that consists of cultural expectations, expressions, and roles, and then I identify myself as a cisgender female, taking the opportunity to also define terms such as *cisgender* and *transgender*. Likewise, race is also a social construction, one based on skin color and other physical features, distinguishing race from related terms such as *culture* and *ethnicity*. Students know terms such as *gender* and *race*, but few have really taken time to consider how they might be defined. Talking through each of these terms can also help teachers identify and address students' misconceptions.

Next to each category, students write down how they identify. I explain that I share my own identities as a way of modeling but that, for students, this exercise is private. Students should never be asked to share elements of their identity that they do not feel comfortable sharing. After students are finished, the next step requires students to identify which elements of their identity have the greatest impact on how they navigate the world. This can be done in at least two different ways: (1) by asking students to cross off the element that has the least impact on them, repeating this process until they have one or two elements remaining, or (2) by asking students to place a star next to the element(s) that most impacts them.

In my experience, the first strategy often causes students to struggle a bit more, as they find it difficult to cross things off the list. This, of course, is part of the point of the exercise. I remind students of Tatum's (2000) assertion that "the concept of identity is a complex one" (p. 9) and that much depends not only on how we see ourselves but also on how the world sees us. One strategy I often use to debrief this identity exercise is to poll students (anonymously) about which elements of their identity were hardest to cross or most important to who they are. I share the results of this poll, and together, we unpack how these elements might play a role in our lives. The results are always fascinating to me, as some classes have many students who point out how age is a determining factor, whereas for others, it's gender.

It's in this discussion that students are able to hear the perspectives of their peers and to consider perspectives they might not have otherwise. I invite students to consider the dynamics of power within each element, noting that each element comprises identities that are dominant in society and others that are nondominant. For example, students recognize that in the United States, those with traditionally White, male gender identities typically have more social and economic power. For students with nondominant identities, however, we also discuss the particular nuances of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2016) and how this produces complex and

unique experiences that inform the extent to which someone is able to access and navigate varying social systems and structures. Following our discussion, students write a reflection on how their understanding of identity—their own and others'—has deepened.

We return to this exercise throughout the year whenever students discuss a text or issue. The necessary question for students is this: How does who I am inform my thinking on this text or this issue? Thus, when we have a conversation in which we disagree, as we often do, the purpose is not about proving who is right or wrong but in understanding how one another's perspectives and opinions have been informed by our identities and experiences. This exercise becomes a touchstone experience that we use whenever we need to take a moment to consider where our opinions, values, and beliefs are coming from. If students respond strongly to an issue, what is it about their personal identity and experiences animating that response? Likewise, if students respond apathetically to an issue, what is it about their personal identity and experiences animating that response?

Because I am a teacher of Color (second-generation Asian American), it can be difficult hearing students express racist ideas, even unintentionally. Remembering that students arrive in our classrooms at different stages of racial awareness allows me to hold space for their growth. Every year, for example, I have White students begin to recognize that their lack of racial literacy and their discomfort in talking about race are a result of being racialized as White, where White is the perceived norm. In other words, they do not think about race because they have not had to. Conversely, students of Color begin to more deeply unpack the ways in which their own racial identity has affected them in ways they had not previously considered.

By framing our understanding of ourselves on multiple elements of identity, students of all races can see the ways in which their experiences are complex and nuanced. In my experience, White students (and students of Color) often resist seeing themselves solely through the lens of race, as they should. None of us is one thing. Yet, rather than ignore race, we can situate it in the context of how it is tied to other elements of who we are and how we navigate the world.

Below are other questions we consider throughout the year:

- How might an identity I have give me insight into this issue?
- How might an identity I have limit my ability to understand this issue?

- In what ways have I been socialized to understand this part of my identity? How might this socialization be a benefit or drawback in understanding related issues?
- If I am feeling resistance or defensiveness about an issue, is that resistance or defensiveness rooted in a part of my identity and related experiences? How does this help or limit my understanding?
- If I feel passionately and strongly about an issue, is that passion rooted in a part of my identity and related experiences? How does this help or limit my understanding?
- How might an identity I have inform the choices I make about the media I consume?
- How might an identity I have inform how I respond when I read about the experiences of those different from me?

Identity is more than the question, Who am I? When identity exercises are limited to “getting to know you” activities at the beginning of a school year, we miss a valuable opportunity to help students become critical readers of texts and themselves.

Likewise, it’s critical that teachers do this intensive identity work on themselves. As teachers, we must persistently ask ourselves how our own racialized, gendered, and other socialized identities affect how we choose texts, deliver instruction, and most importantly, engage with students. For example, when I first started teaching, my identity as a daughter of immigrants informed the way I expected students to assimilate into dominant norms of Whiteness. I did not question the power structures behind these norms as I do now. As teachers, we must ask ourselves, How does who I am as a teacher, and all the complexities of who I am, affect how

I interact with students, and all the complexities of who they are?

This awareness and analysis of who we are is critical in the pursuit of a liberatory consciousness, one that recognizes and disrupts socialized patterns of thought and behavior that hold us all back from achieving equity and a just society.

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The department editor welcomes reader comments.



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