

# The Anti-Racist Classroom

## Managing classroom discussions

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# Discussing race in the writing classroom: What could go wrong?

Many instructors who are interested in incorporating discussions of race and linguistic difference into their writing curriculum hesitate to do so out of anxiety over potentially negative outcomes. If this describes you, know that you are not alone!

A recent study of Vanderbilt instructors who teach courses related to race, racism, and racial justice revealed five common instructional challenges (Bandy, Harbin, Thurber, 2018). The first three categories of difficulty are student beliefs, the last two are styles of interaction:

1. Ahistorical and asocial ideologies (racism is the problem of a few "bad" individuals)
2. Notions of race as Otherness (racism is only relevant to people of color)
3. Post-racial beliefs (racism is a thing of the past)
4. Resistance to faculty authority (you can't teach me this)
5. Difficult multi-racial dialogues (i.e. microaggressions)

Thurber, A., Harbin, M.B., & Bandy, J. (2019). Teaching Race: Pedagogy and Practice. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved [Nov. 19, 2019] from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-race/>.

# What could go right?

Discussing race and racism openly and thoughtfully with your class will not only help your students to approach their writing tasks with openness and thoughtfulness, it will prepare them to be good citizens of a world in which these topics are crucially important. It may be scary at first, but it's so worth it, and there's a lot you can do to help the conversation go well!

## Before the discussion:

Preparation is key!

### Prepare yourself





1. Why are you introducing this topic and how can you communicate your intentions to your class?
2. How will you diffuse or delay (but never deflect!) the conversation if it gets too heated?
3. How does this conversation connect with your learning objectives and how can you make that clear?

1. Provide pre-discussion writing assignments so students can gather their thoughts in advance.
2. Introduce discipline-specific expectations for evidence and relevant theoretical frameworks.
3. Establish guidelines for class discussion, including participation, listening, comportment. Introduce these guidelines early and often!

### Prepare your students

# During the discussion

Utilizing basic principles of active learning can help to keep your in-class conversation safe and productive for your students. It's like we've been saying:  
**Anti-racist teaching is just *good* teaching!**

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- **Provide a framework and starting point:** Provide your students with an introduction to the goals of the class period, and ask a specific, answerable question to generate thought.
  - **Think-"pair"-share:** Allowing students to rehearse their thoughts in writing and then in a pair or small group will increase their readiness to participate and their confidence.
  - **Actively manage the discussion:** Model thorough thinking when you speak (emphasizing thought *process* over outcome), and ask students to elaborate where appropriate. Invite them to support their positions.
  - **Address the difficulty:** If conversation stalls or emotions start to run high, back up for a minute and ask, "Why is this difficult to discuss?" Not only are you inviting students to practice meta-cognition, but you are validating their experience of difficulty.
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# After the discussion

Reflection is an important part of any composition classroom, and inviting students to process their experience in writing cements learning and practices critical analysis and self-expression skills. This reflective writing could take the form of a journal entry, a personal narrative, or even an analysis of the discussion! Consider making this reflective writing into a scaffolding assignment for a major writing project. (See our earlier post on scaffolding for more tips!)