



Anti-Racist Teaching: Opportunities for Reflection and Action for Change

There are many excellent lists and resources that you can find that will promote the creation of an inclusive college classroom, or ways that faculty can develop inclusive pedagogy. This is not that list. This resource will provide starting points for faculty at SUNY Cortland who are looking

to embrace the call to become anti-racist, because, as bell hooks (2014) argues, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12).

Reflect on your beliefs about Teaching, Learning, & Society

A common saying holds that trying to explain white privilege to white people is like trying to “explain water to a fish.” The ways in which faculty teach and students learn are shaped by deeply held and enacted beliefs about our society. Once we accept this fact, we can begin to see the water that has shaped our approach to teaching and learning at SUNY Cortland. To become an anti-racist teacher, we require personal work on understanding those beliefs and challenging the ways that racism shapes our understanding of teaching and learning. For example, consider what your ideals of “good students” and a “bad students” are and how those ideals are shaped by attitudes toward race and privilege. Recently, SUNY Cortland publicized a [list of webinars and self-paced learning opportunities](#) that can help to prompt the kind of personal work that can have a significant impact in unpacking and unlearning our racist attitudes. Another good example of the process of reflection and action that will be impactful for our students can be found at [Wheaton College](#).

Reflect on your Pedagogy & the ways it reflects Privilege and/or Bias

Just as your beliefs about learning and teaching are shaped by the systemic racism and white privilege endemic in our society, the practice of teaching (pedagogy) is also impacted by these negative forces. For many college faculty, we teach in the ways that we were taught, and we believe that these methods are the right ones because they have worked for us. For other instructors who have attended workshops and spent time reflecting on and changing pedagogy toward being more inclusive, the shift to anti-racist teaching might seem unnecessary. Yet year after year, in open meetings, surveys, and complaints to administration, SUNY Cortland students are describing teaching and learning environments that are racist. How can we explain that disconnect? How can we challenge each other as teaching faculty to engage in a cycle of reflection on our practice, change toward anti-racism, and evaluation of the impact of those changes that will be felt by our students?

Be explicit about expectations and commitments. SUNY Cortland class climates should foster belonging and must acknowledge the ways that the class climate can be impacted by racism. A few important considerations are the class ground rules and your expectations of the class. One example of the kind of ground rule that fosters community is “Understand that we are all bound to make mistakes in this space,” which can be followed up with description of what students should do if they have an issue or question about something that was said or assigned. To [learn more about ways to create class ground rules and expectations geared toward belonging](#), not compliance, see this resource from University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching.

Consider the ways that you have structured participation. What are the structures for participation in your class and how do they privilege approaches to learning that are reflective of white culture (i.e. competitive and individualistic instead of collaborative and communal)? For instance, are there opportunities for students to engage in collaboration? How are those opportunities scaffolded so that students learn what is expected of them? If your collaborative groups include students from different racial backgrounds, what pre-teaching or feedback structures are required of you to ensure that students do not experience discriminatory or biased treatment? Going further, instructors should reflect on the ways that discussions are conducted and how space is made for questions, because research has shown that verbal call and response questioning privileges certain groups of students. Brown University offers a quality resource for more questions and points to consider about [equitable classroom participation](#).

Address challenging circumstances head on. The number one request from SUNY Cortland faculty members around culturally responsive teaching and inclusive education is for increased training to help with difficult classroom conversations. Perhaps a student makes a racist remark, or perhaps students respond with silence or disinterest in discussions about race or privilege. Once you have engaged in the personal work of uncovering and addressing your bias and racism, you will see these conversations as your responsibility. Harvard University offers [more specific support in the conversations](#) including suggestions for how to handle “racially charged conversations” or “hot moments.”

Include Opportunities for Students to Provide Feedback on your Pedagogy

Beyond that, avoid making assumptions about students or stereotypes about groups of students. Explore the concept of Stereotype Threat and how even well-meaning comments can undermine students in this [research-based intervention guide](#). We need to be especially conscious now that Black students and students of color will be returning to campus after many negative racial and racist experiences. Becoming conscious of our students’ experiences can help to ensure that we don’t re-traumatize students when they return to campus.

Include opportunities for students to provide feedback on your pedagogy. Much of the reflection at the personal level includes learning about ways that forces such as unconscious bias, and systemic racism can negatively impact pedagogy. Another key opportunity to learn is by asking students about their experiences on a regular basis.

Ask students to provide feedback about course content, assignments and pedagogy at regular intervals. Think about using different modalities for this feedback, such as asking students to

complete short reflections on the Discussion Board or through email, soliciting feedback on assignments as part of the assignment process, and valuing student feedback and critical perspectives on biased materials or class structures. Value the perspectives that students bring to the learning process by allowing feedback to become a regular part of your teaching.

Consider providing opportunities for anonymous feedback. Anonymous feedback will not work for every instructor as [research into racial microaggressions](#) on anonymous course evaluations has demonstrated. Using tools such as Microsoft Forms through MyRedDragon, ask students about their experiences in small groups, on discussion boards, or with different material/assignments. Signal your willingness to listen to student concerns and adjust your pedagogy based on the perspectives that students offer, [as this article from Science describes](#). Explore the ways that you might open yourself to critique and improvement through these feedback structures. Asking for vulnerable feedback requires faculty who are willing to follow up by adjusting expectations, guidelines and pedagogy. While feedback can be a key component of developing trust with students, a lack of response can undermine a learning community.

Bibliography

- hooks, b. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.