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Race, Civil Rights, Ignorance, and the All-White Classroom

Abstract

While students have heard and know something about Brown superficially, they remain ignorant about civil rights issues in general. My paper will demonstrate how I balance the necessary removal of ignorance with the need to maintain course substance and integrity.

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As a philosophy professor who teaches civil rights issues, I must answer the question "Are We There Yet?" in the negative in large part due to the overwhelming degree of ignorance regarding race and gender among my students. If we fail to acknowledge that ignorance, and feel little if any responsibility to ameliorate it, then we will fail not only the progress of society but also our students' needs to live responsibly in a diverse world.

When I walk into one of my classes, I am confronted with a student population as racially diverse as a Ku Klux Klan meeting. Unfortunately, my students are perhaps more ignorant, in many ways, about civil rights and race than those who attend Klan meetings. Fortunately, they do not come with Klan bigotry. My well-meaning students oppose discrimination on the basis of race and gender, support equal rights in the abstract, and eschew racial epithets. But can one be genuinely "well-meaning" without truly understanding something about the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s? Can one meaningfully discuss *Brown v. Board of Education* or *Bakke v. California* without the knowledge requisite for informed debate? Students can "master" a principle such as "separate but equal," but can they appreciate genuinely the disastrous consequences of *Plessey v. Ferguson* on our constitutional landscape without a sense of race relations in our 350-year history of discrimination? Therefore, in order to instill an appreciation for and an understanding of the Supreme Court cases my courses address, I must simultaneously try to remove some of my students' ignorance before I can get them to engage in productive discussions about course content. How I try to manage the delivery of course content while removing student ignorance is the focus of my presentation.

Humanities teachers recognize the centrality of "context" in any informed debate or discussion. For example, how can students discuss *Korematsu* and Japanese internment during WWII without some limited knowledge about the Fourteenth Amendment? How can students discuss the merits and demerits of *Brown* without a sense of the *de jure* and *de facto* segregation that effectively disenfranchised millions of African American voters in the South? My course objectives include the mastery of philosophical principles as manifested in leading Supreme Court cases on race and civil rights. But divorced from "context," "mastery" is achieved without understanding, much less appreciation and sensitivity. And, as is obvious, I have no black students who can provide any experiences that bring home that reality. Accordingly, I must sacrifice both breadth and depth of content to "information literacy." I can bemoan the lack of my students' high school education, but that does not advance any meaningful purposes I want my courses to serve. I must, therefore, ask two questions. First, should course content be sacrificed to the delivery of background information? Second, if so, how can that be accomplished while maintaining course integrity?

The first question must be answered in the affirmative. The second question, then, presents the challenge. In this paper I explain how I answer that question. The paper contains three parts.

First, I argue that those of us who teach in all-white classrooms have a duty to limit ignorance regarding race, quite independent from course content. Limiting ignorance constitutes a prerequisite for any course that seeks to examine human rights principles. Second, I explain how I try to achieve that ancillary, but necessary, objective. For example, I use pre-tests in two of my courses to assess general student awareness about race in terms of the ideas that particular course will address. (I will provide a copy of one such pre-test.) Third, I present a case study from my "Philosophy, Law, and Society" course on how I tailor (limit) course content to the delivery of information literacy.

By way of conclusion, I maintain that I have a duty to devote considerable class time to limit student ignorance, not simply to deliver slavishly course content. Focusing solely on course content constitutes little more than a meaningless, dry, and stultified academic exercise. Those of us who teach civil rights issues in an all-white environment must balance content with the concomitant mitigation of ignorance. If we fail in our duty to lessen ignorance, we sacrifice genuine awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity regarding civil rights. By limiting course content and enhancing student information enables students to discuss more meaningfully civil rights issues when they confront them. At semester's end, I am content that I have furthered the acquisition of substantive knowledge on the part of my students while eliminating some of their ignorance. That is the best that anyone person can, and should, hope to accomplish.

Presenter

Dr. Michael A. Foley holds a B.A. in German and Philosophy from Eastern Illinois University, an M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Southern Illinois University, and an M.P. A. from New York University. I teach courses focused on issues in philosophy of law and society. Two of those courses -Philosophical Perspectives on Punishment and I Philosophy, Law, and Society -focus attention on issues of race. I teach three sections of each of these courses/academic year. In 2003 my book *-Arbitrary and Capricious: The Constitution, the Supreme Court, and the Death Penalty* -was published by Praeger Press. The book examines the history of Supreme Court decision-making on the death penalty. Major cases that focused on race were examined and analyzed. In addition, in "Philosophy, Law, and Society," more than one-third of the course addresses leading civil rights cases of the 20th century. I also teach an Independent Studies course entitled "Philosophy and Race." I have received "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" awards at both universities at which I have taught. I have received two NEH Summer Seminar grants where I studied "Freedom and the Court" at the University of Virginia and "Courts in American Society" at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I have co-authored two introductory texts in Philosophy, the most recent of which devotes considerable attention to civil disobedience. I am working currently on a book on the philosophy of punishment. More personally, I play tennis, jog, golf feebly, and play bridge enthusiastically.