

# Engaging White Students in Conversations About Race

A high school teacher shares strategies for using literature to guide discussions about race with students who would rather avoid the topic.

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In February, my seniors read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and were considering how a traumatic history can haunt the present. They had finished an article about George Washington's relentless pursuit of runaway slaves, and I asked if this piece of the first president's biography mattered. A few students had mumbled diplomatically: It matters a little, sort of; it doesn't detract from his legacy.

"Whiny people care," Jasper said.

"Does everyone feel that way?" I asked. A minute of silence. I knew that some students disagreed with Jasper but weren't comfortable speaking up, and I'd need to try to draw them out. The bell rang—I'd have to follow up later.

I'm used to White students, especially boys, checking out or offering resistance when race enters a literary discussion, as it does with *Beloved*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *There There*. Some question the well-established historical record or suggest that merely talking about race

sows division. Those who view racist jokes as essential free speech provoke classmates. Some White students complain that they can't relate to books written by people of color, as if any of them have been the prince of Denmark or stalked an ex on Long Island. I have often encountered White students who condemn slurs and wince at news of police killing Black people, but doubt they personally benefit from America's history of racism.

Amid June's protests, my students might have responded differently, but in February, apathetic or exhausted, their eyes glazed over. Despite having never really done so, they were tired of talking about race.

White students are 35 percent of my school population. Most of the rest, Latinx students largely, live in neighborhoods that are segregated from those of their White classmates, who often dominate both student government and class discussions. I started my teaching career in a different city, eager to help my Latinx and Black students find opportunity and power, but now, 10 years later, I believe that cracking through the silence and discomfort of White students may be a more pressing antiracist exercise.

This discourse is far from all I prioritize in my English class. But it's necessary, and through planning, frequent failure, honest reflection, and adjustments, I've settled on some strategies for using English class to improve these conversations.

### **CHALLENGING THE CANON**

*Beloved* may be my favorite novel, and it treats race in a complex way that suits my seniors. But like generations of

students past, my ninth graders read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which places the unjust trial and killing of an innocent Black man within one little White girl's coming-of-age story. Like many teachers, I don't have the freedom to jettison district-mandated core texts.

So my students critique the book as a vehicle for a meaningful conversation about race. Instead of presenting Atticus as a role model, I encourage students to parse his flaws. Do *To Kill a Mockingbird's* lessons about racism really suffice in 2020? Students often come to the conclusion that Atticus's cuddly maxims don't assail the fundamental problem in his world or ours. And if that's the case, why do some teachers (and students) still see the book as perpetually relevant?

But, ideally, students would instead read *Kindred* or *The Nickel Boys* to participate in this conversation. I would love to bury Atticus Finch and instead share the latter's Jack Turner and Elwood Curtis, brave young Black characters resisting Jim Crow.

### **READING THE BOOK IS NOT ENOUGH**

Diversifying the curriculum does not fight racism—it's unhelpful to read *The Nickel Boys* without excavating history, for example, or to shoehorn *Kindred* into an easy lesson about tolerance and forgiveness that never bends toward justice.

Teachers have to let books like these speak their full truths because many students prefer the easy lessons, sometimes indulging in delusional interpretations of texts for comfort. For example, Marina, a White girl, would not accept that *Beloved's* vain abolitionist Mr. Bodwin all but

re-enslaves free Black people through an exploitative economic arrangement. I was glad to upset her.

Sometimes we need to foster discussions that force the issue. Half a class of ninth graders insisted that, for trying (and failing) to exclude White kids from her church congregation, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s Lula is as racist as bigots who vote and serve on juries. The ensuing debate led many to see racism as the product of power as well as prejudice.

### **LAUNCHING AN INQUIRY**

Instead of force-feeding an opinion to students, I sometimes assign an inquiry after we read *Beloved*. For example, I've had student panels research the impact of race on housing development, health care, education, and criminal justice in their own county, and then formally present findings to the rest of class. This way, students own the search, even if they're initially suspicious of the premise.

Teachers can invite school administrators or see if the media studies class can film the presentations. Make the work public, so what students discover and share can educate others.

### **LETTING STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT THEMSELVES (AND PRETEND NOT TO)**

Sometimes, cautious students write most honestly about an uncomfortable topic when they can remain anonymous, or when they can use fictitious characters to reflect authentic experiences.

When we read *There There*, my students discuss how author Tommy Orange uses first-person narrators to capture an urban Indian identity ignored by pop culture and mainstream history. Last year, after finishing the book, each student contributed a single chapter featuring a first-person narrator to a book that served as a polyphonic portrait of their high school environment. I asked them to create characters to reflect authentic though overlooked experiences. Whose voices are underheard? I had them think about whose experiences are discussed less and understood least in the school.

Unsurprisingly, when we turned to the writing exercise, many students—emboldened by anonymity—wrote vignettes detailing experiences with racism. No one knew for sure who was responsible for each chapter of the photocopied publication, which we distributed to students and teachers, but many students learned something about their world, including the extent to which their peers confront prejudice.

### **TAKING STEPS FORWARD**

I've been inspired by my former students taking to the streets in impassioned protest. Their anger is a healthy response to recent events. I did not understand racism's reach and breadth when I attended mostly diverse public schools in Kentucky. I try to give White kids the education I needed—a jump-start for a lifelong process of action, listening, reflection, and evolution.

In June, Paula, class of 2019, wrote to thank me for preparing her for the reckoning she was having with family and friends. Even more comforting was an Instagram story from Nick—a Jasper from another year. He hadn't posted

anything in two years, but when he finally did, it was not a party pic or beach vista, but an earnest missive urging his college classmates to support Black businesses.

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