



Q&A with Dr. Bill Green on teaching about race and equity

What do you think that educators should keep in mind when they're teaching about the big topic of race and equity? Should their approach vary depending on the demographic makeup of their classrooms?

Social change is an issue because it hasn't really occurred. As much as we hoped that it would, that there's still challenges. And when the challenges rear their ugly heads, people come to the misconceived notion that this is the first time we're dealing with this stuff. All of this is a reflection of a lack of historical context. I think that if an instructor, if an educator wants to use that learning experience as a means of facilitating social action, then part of the discussion has to be about how do we transcend the classroom to the community? And how do we form systems that sustain the effort once we get into the community?

About a year ago people were excited about what they saw happening in the streets as a result of demonstrations of George Floyd. And that was inspiring to see folks of different races and classes and genders come together, but they seem to think this was the first time that it ever happened. And it wasn't. All you have to do is live long enough to have seen stuff in the 1960s. It was the same thing. That tells you two things, that even though there was some movement forward socially. It wasn't sustainable in a fundamental way. And the question is why?

I think that's where the discussion begins to fail really, in putting this information to work and getting the students to think about this being more than just a class experience.

I'm curious about the sustainability of it—obviously, (the George Floyd demonstrations) weren't a one time thing. That kind of energy and action won't end. But I think there's sometimes a sense of fatigue, of people are ready to talk about something else in some ways.

Yes, there is fatigue there. But the fatigue isn't just about being fatigued in talking about social justice. And I think a little bit, that is a factor. But it's also the fatigue of just dealing with life. I mean, in real time, we are seeing, in various states around the country, active efforts to disenfranchise people. This shit should have been dealt with, and was dealt with 100 years ago, and it was dealt with 50 years ago, and we're still dealing with it. And I don't see any kind of major reaction, and why is that?

While I love the press, I really do, it is something that allows us to be distracted from the other issue of social justice, which had been the story. So the fatigue is, you know, I care about social justice, I care about equity, I care about even integration. But I don't know whether my kid's going to be safe in school. I don't know whether my kid, once they get to school, is going to be educated. I don't know whether I'll be able to have a home. I don't know if I can pay for food. That's the nature of fatigue: how do you sustain the focus on social justice during those kinds of challenges?

I think courses that just deal with exposing people to history, which you should be exposed to, and social justice consciousness, which should be exposed to, and critical race theory and all that—that's fine in and of itself, but it doesn't prepare the student to deal with those larger issues, once they leave the bubble. I got a lot of students who leave Augsburg absolutely fired up to want to see change. And then they got to look for a job. Their parents want them to look for a job to help pay for the debt. That's a legitimate issue. Your kid wants to put the degree to work. And he's not sure or she's not sure, well, whether they will be able to do that. In other words, dealing with what some would call real life issues. How do you sustain that passion? And what does an educator do to prepare students to deal with the stuff that will seduce the student away from the consciousness they develop in college?

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Do you have any strategies that you recommend to engage students who might be ignorant of racial issues? Maybe it's not even ignorance, but who are choosing to believe one way or think one way and are locked into those opinions.

The fact that they're taking a class which they don't have to take tells me that they're curious. The fact that they're taking a class from me suggests that they have reason to trust that I'm not going to beat them up, or use them as the image of oppression. I think that students want to grapple with stuff in a safe place. And safe doesn't mean avoiding deep issues. It means being able to discuss deep issues and threatening issues in a way in which they personally are not going to be attacked. So it becomes a strategy on my part to figure out: how can we get certain topics, certain chapters in history, certain fundamental issues that arrive from the conflict that we're examining in a way that allows students to let down their guard? Students are not going to listen if their guard is up. Students are not going to listen if they don't feel like they're going to be heard. So it's creating an environment in which students feel like they can be respected for being vulnerable.

I think an educator has to spend a lot of time looking at his or her own motive, because there are a lot of professors out there teaching this kind of material who are seeing this as an opportunity to create a kind of boot camp, seeking to change our young people. They think that the way to really understand this issue is for them to suffer and be brutalized emotionally. And I think that those kinds of professors are bullies, for the most part. I think that there has to be some assessment of what are we trying to do here? The student has to come first. The student has to be nurtured. You have to assume that the student means that when they say they want to learn something. You have to treat them like you treat yourself or your own kids if you're trying to teach them a new skill. You don't throw them in the deep end. Some people believe in that kind of education, but I don't. I believe in holding people's hands and walking out in the water together, and letting them know I'm going to be there, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you.

It's one thing to know this stuff for the classroom and for the test. It's one thing to know the paper that you're writing. But if this is about social change, this has to be about forming strategies. Once you're out of school, how do you develop organizations? How do you get people to support each other, while they're going through this lonely thing, to talk about the world as it really is, as opposed to some abstract other, and to really consider leadership? To consider that evil isn't wearing a robe and a hood and burning a cross? Or I guess it's now a red cap with a confederate flag. It's not just that, it's sometimes people, just ordinary folks who are afraid because of all these other issues I suggested earlier, who are disinclined to want to shake things up too much.

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For the reality versus the abstract in the classroom. Can you explain the benefits of using those sort of real world stories?

I, as the educator, have to figure out how to focus the discussion in a way that allows the student in the class to transcend just the story itself. The story becomes a springboard for a much more systemic type of issue and discussion, it seems to me, and that's the challenge of any educator. Using each of the stories becomes like a pebble. You know, once you throw it in a pond, the centrifugal circles begin to emanate from that through the discussion. So the

challenge is with any kind of lesson plan, where do I want to go? What do I want to achieve? And how can I use this, to get those kinds of discussions?

Anything else you'd want to add?

I think probably the most important thing I can impart is an educator needing to really check the assumptions. And to allow students to develop their view, especially if it doesn't fit in neatly to social justice type stuff. You have to let the students be where they are initially at least. And you have to develop that trust, they have to know that they're being listened to and respected. And if you disagree with them, that's okay. Tell them you disagree, but in a way that is supportive of the dynamic at least.