Teaching About Race and Identity in a Global Classroom

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Abstract

This article explores innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching about race and identity in a global classroom, informed by experiences from the US, France, Rwanda, Ukraine, Armenia and Italy with over 1,000 students from over 70 countries. Embracing an emotionally engaged methodology, the course highlights the importance of personal narratives and emotions in understanding racial and cultural identities. The facilitator's role, focused on process over content, enhances students' engagement and helps them find their own voice. Adopting a global approach, the course helps understand the global nature of race and identity. Taking into account the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, it proposes solutions to do better thanks to experiences of resilient local communities worldwide and the learnings of Transitional Justice.

1. Introduction

"I learn a lot about racism in the US, but how is that related to my country?" a Harvard Kennedy School student from South Korea asked me in September 2022. I was a teaching assistant to Professors Muhammad and Smith, who were asked by HKS in late July to develop an intensive two-week course about race and racism that all incoming MPP students had to attend following the killing of George Floyd. This was a passionate course, focused on the US.

As I was, among the teaching assistants, the only non-US citizen and the only one with previous commitment to antiracism, many foreign students approached me to make sense of what they were studying. "How is the concept of 'settler colonialism' related to Nigeria?" "Police violence in Spain is very different than in the US, what should be my takeaway?" "How do racial identities play a role in the social fabric in Bolivia?" The question kept coming back: "What can I do so we collectively make progress?"

I helped these students in "translating" the concepts at play into their own cultures and felt the desire to develop my own teaching. After Genocide Prevention seminars at Brandeis (US) and Yerevan State University (Armenia), I have thus been teaching for over two years other identity-related topics through my workshops and courses Toward Dismantling Global Racism and Toward Resolving Identity-Based Conflicts at Sciences Po Paris, ESCP Business School (France and Italy), Kyiv Mohyla Academy (Ukraine) and the University of Rwanda, with over 1,000 students from over 70 countries in total.

Here are my main observations, learnings, and recommendations to teach about race and identity in a global classroom.

2. Emotions First

Identities are personal, intimate. This explains the strong emotional load related to identity topics beyond their social, political and geopolitical stakes. How to speak about intimacy in public? This is a challenge in all the cultures I have been in contact with, in all the settings in which I have evolved, for all the individuals whom I have met. Even more so when, as is the case regarding identity, the public debate is confrontational, full of symbolic violence. Who would like to invite violence into his or her intimacy?

My students start the course with little capacity to engage in a conversation about race and identity. They do not know how to manage the intense emotions that they feel during such conversations. Their first instinct is to behave as they think is expected from them. During the first sessions, they overwhelmingly use the wording and narrative inherited from the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, white students usually start by "acknowledging their privileges and leaving space for underrepresented voices" or by shutting down; when colored students take the floor, they are always followed by several supporting statements; everybody rushes to point out that racism is systemic and institutional, present in the very institutions in which we learn together. My understanding is that they expect to get symbolic and self-image benefits from this behavior, to be seen as "good" people within the group and beyond. As a result, they get protected against an intrusion of violence into their intimacy that would make them suffer, but they are not able to have a real discussion, even less to find their own voice or to bring about change.

I do not shy away from addressing the emotional dimension of race and identity. On the contrary, I fully go for it. I keep in mind that "emotions and feelings constitute the driving force for the group life [and that] understanding the emotional life of the group is the

key to working effectively," as Lawrence and Maryann Phillips observe. For example, the first exercise I propose my students is to write the memory of the first time in their life when they realized they have a racial / cultural identity, and how they felt about it. Then, I ask them to share whatever they feel like sharing with another student, before having a collective debriefing. As a result, students not only understand but also experience the intimate dimension and the emotional load relating to identity, and find a way, their way, of speaking about it in public, starting with the smallest public setting.

To address the emotional dimension of race and identity, there is a challenge to overcome: to ensure that the energy released by the expression of these emotions does not destroy the group or its ability to learn. Therefore, I constantly pay attention to the "heat" within the group, as it is recommended in the Adaptive Leadership theory developed and taught at Harvard by Professor Ronald Heifetz. This is a metaphorical reference to the amount of pressure and stress in the group – too low a level results in complacency, while too high a level overwhelms individuals and provokes strong resistance, both configurations impeding progress. If I feel the "heat" is too high and prevents the groups from moving forward, I pace the work, steer toward less controversial issues, make sure more consensual voices are heard, and I use mine to that end. To evaluate the level of "heat", I observe several verbal and non-verbal indicators. Those corresponding to a high level include the body language of my students that expresses stress, like fixed facial traits, eyes downcast, hands tied and legs crossed; people willing to speak for a long time or interrupting each other, and more generally tense relationships between them; confrontational issues being raised; a low number of people speaking with the others in a tense silence, or on the contrary many people taking the floor in an erratic way; the use of a peremptory tone,… As I am part of the system at work, I also listen to and interpret my own emotions and feelings. Of course, my blind spots, sensitivity and subjectivity play a role and whatever choice I make, I keep in mind the other interpretations that I could have favored. For example, I remember having a sleepless night the day before the third session of my course in the spring of 2023. On my way to the classroom, I realized that what I was feeling was a deep fear – of not being able to make the group learn, of being put aside, of the quality of the exercises I had prepared for this session. Once in the classroom, as students entered and sat down in silence before the start time, I felt this even more strongly. I thus made the assumption that this fear was present in the room, for the students too, regarding their own challenges. So, I focused my attention on their fears when listening to them and modified the exercises I had prepared, which led to a breakthrough in the group dynamic.

In terms of pedagogy, my courses and workshops are screen-free: no smartphone, no computer, no tablet. This makes all of us feel our emotions more intensively, thus more able to work on and with them. I leave space for each student to find his or her own voice, and for the group to learn how to speak about race and identity in a public setting. Concretely, I start each session by not speaking, but by letting my students speak, during a set period of time. I ask them

to abide by only one constraint: to start by something coming from the readings: a question, an idea, a quote,… During these student-led discussions, I pay special attention to not "correct" them when they do not rigorously use concepts that are precisely defined in sociology, political sciences, anthropology, history or ethnic studies – I am not worried because we will study them throughout the course. In fact, I favor their appropriation and the expression of their subjectivity, rather than an intellectual or conceptual approach that would make it more difficult for them to take ownership of their emotions and find their own voice. If a debate arises, I make sure not to pick a side as I want them as a group to build, together, their capacity to have these public conversations. In that sense, I follow the recommendations of Norman Maier regarding group facilitation, while having in mind the "paradox in facilitation" pointed by Terri Griffith, Mark Fuller and Gregory Northcraft: "the influence required to facilitate a group changes the group's outcomes." I address this paradox in exercising, aiming for neutral facilitation while being aware that it is not totally achievable. Lastly, I invite and protect underrepresented voices, which are hardly ever heard in the public debate, if at all.

The result is that, after some sessions, students courageously learn to move from a confrontation of stereotyped statements as is usual on social media to a mature discussion in which all of them take an active part to learn together, not despite their differences of opinions, sensitivities and identities, but thanks to them. Surprising moments happen. For example, Camille, a 1st year BA student from France, shared in a collective debriefing: "I feel I don't have origins, because I come from the same village as my parents." Abdel, who has Algerian background, responded: "Until you said this, I had always dreamt of coming from the same place as my parents, I felt it would be much easier in life not to feel the constant tension that I feel about my identity." Camille: "I have felt strong tension regarding my identity too, for the exact opposite reasons." Students enhance their skills autonomously. I regularly encourage them to acknowledge this achievement, to build on it beyond and after the course, and to continue practicing. Indeed, this capacity is not something that some people have and others do not have, but something that you have more the more you practice.

After the first student-led discussion, Małgosia, a 2nd year BA student from Poland, wrote: "Silence. Not the soothing one but the one which stirs up anxiety, encouraging to intervene and end it. Still, for about two minutes no one does anything, apart from looking at the professor or quite the contrary: avoiding eye contact (that is my strategy). Personally, I thought that the discussion ended, assuming that, like often in the classroom, the teacher will take the matter into his hands and start explaining what the interpretation should have been. But here it does not happen, which leaves us all astonished, and pushes Ludmila to cut the silence.

I usually do not speak in the classroom, fearing that my answer is not insightful enough to satisfy the teacher with years of experience. That is why after joining the discussion with other students, at first, I look at the professor for some sign of approval and validation. When I realize that he takes up the role of the observer,

something changes in my typical approach. I start talking with my classmates as if we were having a conversation during the break. I lose the need to impress anyone, expressing my thoughts and wishing to hear what others think. Time starts to pass much faster as I am no longer in the role of student that I often create for myself to fit the surroundings appropriately.

The next thing that seems to me as a space for self-growth is the fact that not everyone in class shares the same opinion. I try to look out for my reaction and do not assume that my own assumptions are the correct ones. When the professor sums up the discussion without giving any concrete answer, I realize that perhaps in a sense we are all correct since there can be numerous interpretations. Of course, I do not agree with certain assertions but if that is what someone took out from a piece of work, it must have been present there for at least a number of individuals."

3. A Required Pedagogical Position: At the Level of the Students, with Them

In order to give students, the best opportunity to conduct this necessary emotional work, I have adopted the position of a facilitator, as defined by Lawrence and Maryann Phillips: focused primarily on process and structure, rather than content.[.] I am with my students, at their level.

Indeed, we do not speak of theoretical knowledge that someone has and would pass on to students, but of capacity that all of us need to continuously develop. Of course, students need to acquire theoretical knowledge, and I ensure they do so through readings, presentations, exercises and some of my interventions, particularly when I sum up the main points and challenges at the end of sessions. Of course, also, all of us do not have the same ability to address race and identity, but we all belong to the same societies, making similar efforts. There are not on one side people who are totally racist and on the other side people who are not at all. Thinking that way would be an essentialization, a rigid categorization similar to that of racism. We are all exposed to racism, and each of us reacts differently to it depending on our ever-evolving identities, social backgrounds, countries, sensitivities, political orientations, ages,… We all make different choices but we are all involved in the same movement.

In terms of pedagogy, being at the level of the students means that I share with them my personal stories, my challenges. For example, I start the first class by saying "I come from a family of Jews from southern Morocco who had to leave their country because of rising antisemitism. As a teenager, I got involved in civil society to bring about change and protect the most vulnerable ones from violence. Today, I mobilize my intercultural background and international experience to dismantle racism and resolve identity-based conflicts. I feel these are burning issues, for countries, societies and individuals." Instead of coming to the class only with answers, I also come with my unfinished business, my contradictions, my questions, some of which I share with my students. I feel this position embodies the attitude of constant efforts that I encourage them to adopt, lifts the paralyzing bad consciousness of not knowing everything and not having all the "good" answers, and facilitates the transfer between them and me, which I use as precious fuel for pedagogy.

Along with the facilitator position that I adopt, I encourage other institutions' stakeholders – directors, pedagogical managers, administrative support staff,… - to join sessions with the same approach. Their active participation puts them at work, reinforces the message that nobody and no institution is perfect but that we are all on the same boat, and creates bonds that make joint work about race and identity easier throughout the year.

Rusanganwa, a teenager son of genocide survivors in Rwanda, wrote in August 2023: "I liked the way people were free to share their experiences in the workshops. You showed us the example." Larissa, a daughter of survivors, added: "The good thing was that we were the ones doing the whole thing, because it made us free. We learned a lot unexpectedly and in a short period of time." Alice, a survivor herself and a mother, wrote: "The workshop was a blessing. Now I know how to share stories between generations in a healthy way, which will help me not only in assisting the people I work with as a therapist / counsellor, but also personally in my family, to handle some challenges that I am experiencing regarding our history as genocide survivors." Isabella, a BA student from Colombia, shared at the end of the class in December 2022: "What I think is the main strength of the class is its structure. At the beginning of the year, I was expecting a traditional class, where the teacher gives a lesson, and students take notes and don't participate actively. What I enjoyed the most are the discussions, where students are free to express their views on matters that are at times very collective / political, and closely personal. The experimental form of the class is something very important for me, especially to talk about racism, because I think that it stimulates our curiosity / creativity, our capability to work together and pushes us to really "get into" the cause, rather than just studying it in a detached way."

4. A Global Approach is a Must

There are ongoing unresolved academic debates about the origins of racism. Does it stem from a certain sense of superiority in Ancient Greece? From la "Limpieza de sangre" in Spain in the 17th century? From an instrumentalization of science in the 19th century, represented by Arthur de Gobineau's work? However, what is not debatable is that racism is a global phenomenon, with global roots and global effects.

In 2021, I had long discussions with my friend Denzel, an African-American very active for racial equity: "the US are at the origin of racism. We invented racism in this country! This is scandalous." I strongly disagree with him. Behind the apparently strongly self-critical "We are the worst in the world", I can hear an imperialistic "We are the center of the world, for good or for bad." To dismantle racism in a country or a region, to develop impactful national and local actions and policies, we need to understand its global nature and take into account the evolutions of its expressions around the globe.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples and readings from different

parts of the world. There is a challenge to it, as Western and English-speaking countries are way more covered by research than others. To overcome it, along with redoubled research efforts, I mobilize researchers, academics, activists, political and community leaders in various countries. I know some of them thanks to my 25-year life commitment, and I continuously renew efforts to reach out to new ones, throughout the year. I invite them to share orally their experiences, observations and knowledge. This makes it possible to access the relevant content brought by those who do not write, or not in a language that the students and I speak, or who are not published. I also use the cultural, national, and social diversity present in the class through the students, in encouraging them to share their knowledge while paying attention that they do not behave as institutional ambassadors of countries or cultures. This diversity can also be found in seemingly homogenous classes. For example, when I taught at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, all students were Ukrainians, with similar skin colors and religious beliefs. We explored their territorial, linguistic, political, family and social differences, and used them as opportunities to be sensitive to international examples and sources that related to these characteristics.

In my pedagogy, I also use global sources, in the sense that I assign not only book chapters and scientific articles, but also songs, poems, novels, documentaries, fiction movies, speeches. Indeed, as racism and resistance to it have been present in our societies for centuries, they can both be found in diverse productions. As a result, my students are exposed to a large range of international sources of inspiration. Deconstructing a "classical" approach to such sources epitomizes the efforts that I encourage my students to conduct: to develop innovative approaches to identity-related topics in order to be able to bring about change.

Giuliana, a BA student from Italy, shared in September 2022: "What I like about the whole class is the variety of perspectives and cases we work on. I had no idea of the existence of most of them. I believe this is very important because it helps understand manifestations of racism in their contexts and that the same tools wouldn't work the same way everywhere. Also, as a Western, I believe it's important that I am confronted with conceptions of racism from other world regions, otherwise I would be stuck in a Western conception of the world."

5. The Ecological Catastrophe is the Frame of All Issues

Listening to my students, I realized that the ecological catastrophe is not for them an important topic among others, like antiracism and feminism. Nor is it a topic that intersects with others, or an interpretative framework through which they "see" the world. Rather, it is for them a frame in which everything else takes place. This observation is in line with Bruno Latour's work on the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, which forces us to reconsider all aspects of life[]. This frame is not static, it is constantly tightening as the catastrophe worsens by the day. To my students, this means very practical challenges that previous generations do not have to face: living close to the water or far away? Having children or not? Where does fighting the ecological catastrophe fit into their careers?

The centrality of the ever-worsening ecological catastrophe leads to an ever-increasing tension in the system that we constitute as humans, but also with the other animals and living beings. The resulting pressure on the categories of thought that people from my generation (I am 43) pass on to them entails two opposite reactions. Most students naturally give in to this pressure, get rid of these categories and circulate fluidly between genders, races, sexual orientations,… Others, on the contrary, resist this pressure and look to reinforce the distinctions between genders, races, sexual orientations that they inherit from previous generations. Positions usually labelled as "liberal" or "conservative" are thus opposite reactions to the same phenomenon: the ecological catastrophe. These positions influence the ways in which students address race and identity. As a result, the way they react to the pressure entailed by the ecological catastrophe has a strong impact on how they approach race and identity.

The pressure on the system resulting from the fact that the ecological catastrophe is making the frame ever tighter leads to at least two other consequences.

First, students feel a sense of urgency to address race and identity. I do not have to convince them that these are burning issues. Their interest in the course and participation in class are fueled by this shared sentiment. This tension also means potential danger at a global scale: indeed, a social crisis, like the ecological catastrophe, is one of the three conditions to create scapegoats identified by René Girard[], along with accusations of universal crimes and the identification of a target group, often defined by race. I will have to write in more detail about this, notably regarding the case of antisemitism.

Moreover, the pressure on the system prompts some students to forcefully deconstruct the phenomena that have led us to the bad place we find ourselves today in terms of ecology. These are notably the development model inherited from the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and slavery, along with the imperialisms, colonialisms, and racism that lie at their core. This deconstruction might sometimes take the form of what I would call "a trial of the past", as if deconstructing what has led us where we are now could make us back to "before". As if, in a few words, it would be possible to erase the negative aspects of the past we inherit and create a purer, better present in doing so. I perceive here the potential for a dangerous quest for purity. Dangerous, first of all, because it is not possible to erase the past. It is a fantasy, as is the past as represented by those involved in this trial. Instead of being trapped into these fantasies, the challenge we have to face today is: "taking into account the past that we inherit from, what can we do today to make a better future?" If we stray onto other challenges, we waste precious time and energy in our struggle. The quest for purity is also dangerous because it sometimes directs and concentrates on today's people and organizations the resentment due to centuries of wrongdoings by many actors. That is not just. That may lead some people to justify hatred. That hatred is all

the more harmful as it can target categories of population with a similar racial identity, in the name not of racism, but of their alleged actions, or those of their ancestors, regarding the ecological catastrophe we are in today.

In terms of pedagogy, I need to do better to integrate the ecological catastrophe in my teaching about race and identity, although I feel most of the tools I introduce apply to it. I address it when we explore policy change as a way to make progress on race and identity-based conflicts. This is when we study the attribution of personhood status to the Te Urewera Park in New Zealand. This groundbreaking legal and political innovation has provided protection to the park, to the indigenous Tūhoe people whose homeland it is, and to its other non-human inhabitants. This has inspired similar policy change throughout the world, from India to Latin America, Africa and Europe.

David, a Master's student with Chinese and US background, shared his thoughts following this session in April 2023: "In the context of the broader climate crisis, the demands that are being placed on the Global South, including proposed caps on economic growth and resource development echo some of the many issues we have raised. For one, how do we address questions of accountability for the beneficiaries and inheritors of wealth and privilege built on grave injustices that occurred centuries prior? The "status quo" quality of life and wealth found in the societies and museums of the Global North would not have been possible if not for the exploitation of the Global South. Moreover, the longer we wait to act on climate change, the more expensive and radical the changes needed to reverse the worst of its effects will be. In many ways, the same could be said for addressing the violent legacy of slavery, colonialism and systemic racism; however, I would argue that we have already reached a boiling point many times over in the form of conflict and severe poverty. In both cases, the plight and suffering of those without power remain invisible while the privileged few debates what they may consider sacrificing."

6. How to do Better? Local Communities and Transitional Justice as Inspirations

Studying race and identity is not enough for students. They also want and need to find solutions. I tell them that, unfortunately, there is no quick fix nor ready-to-be-used toolbox that would have been acquired by previously-trained practitioners to provide short-term results and dismantle racism or identity-based conflicts. Rather, I propose to them an unsatisfactory objective: to do better, "imbere heza" ("for a better future" in Kinyarwanda) as the motto of the Association of Former Students Survivors of Genocide in Rwanda (GAERG) says.

Around the world, various resilient post-conflict local communities have managed to make progress but have often been overlooked because of despise and lack of documentation. Since the 1990s, the actions that allow societies to transition from conflict, dictatorship or genocide to peaceful coexistence or democracy have been studied and conceptualized as Transitional Justice. My teaching builds on the experiences of these communities and on the theories and practices of Transitional Justice. It introduces impactful tools and frameworks, and explores how they can be adapted to develop methodologies rooted in local cultures to help companies, institutions, communities and societies dismantle racism and identity-based conflicts.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples from periods ranging from prehistory to the present day, and of local communities from various countries and regions such as India, Colombia, Timor-Leste, South Africa, Jamaica, South Korea, the Balkans, Nigeria, Argentina, the UK, Guatemala, Rwanda, the US, China, Europe, the Middle East, Tunisia,…

There are conditions under which these local examples can be sources of inspiration. First, none of them has ever brought a totally satisfactory "solution": we have to accept imperfection as part of the journey. Second, what works to make progress in a given place and at a given time does not mean that it will work in another place or at another time: constant adaptation is necessary. Third, racism and identity-based conflicts are global challenges, so it is only through dialogue between the local and global levels, and between the local levels of different countries and regions, that progress can be made. There is room for improvement that goes far beyond the limits of my courses, as this dialogue needs to be more structured, more abundantly nourished, with more research carried out and a higher level of institutionalization than today.

Sasha, a Master's student from Russia, wrote in May 2023 after the end of the course: "I am sure a lot of others would agree that this class even had a therapeutic effect for us. I hope we will be able to spread this effect to the people whom we will meet in our "career" and personal paths. We started our course from reflecting on our own identities. Back then I was really worried about not relating to my ethnic background. I have made some improvements in it during the course, but what is more important, I have learned so many things about the identities of others and they made me understand that identity is so much more than just your ethnic background.

Identities can be created and manipulated. People can be led on because of their identities, but they can also unite and lead others to common goals thanks to it. Identity can be of common trauma, but the common healing can create a new, healthier identity. I feel inspired now knowing all the cases of people fighting for their identity and recovering from identity-based oppression. I am glad to live in times when this "identity-care" can be discussed and institutionalized."

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Foot Notes

[1]Phillips, Lawrence D., and Maryann C. Phillips. "Facilitated Work Groups: Theory and Practice." The Journal of the Operational Research Society 44, no. 6 (June 1993): 533-549.

[2]Heifetz, Ronald A. Leadership Without Easy Answers. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994, and Heifetz, Ronald A., Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow. The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009.

[3]Maier, Norman R. F. "Assets and Liabilities in Group Problem Solving: The Need for an Integrative Function." Group Facilitation, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 45: "For a leader, such functions as rejecting or promoting ideas according to his personal needs are out of bounds. He must be receptive to information contributed, accept contributions without evaluating them (posting contributions on a chalk board to keep them alive), summarize information to facilitate integration, stimulate exploratory behavior, create awareness of problems of one member by others, and detect when the group is ready to resolve differences and agree to a unified solution."

[4]Griffith, Terri L., Mark A. Fuller, and Gregory B. Northcraft. "Facilitator Influence in Group Support Systems: Intended and Unintended Effects." Information Systems Research 9, no. 1 (March 1998): 20-36.

[5]All student names have been changed to ensure privacy.

[6]Phillips, Lawrence D., and Maryann C. Phillips. "Facilitated Work Groups: Theory and Practice." The Journal of the Operational Research Society 44, no. 6 (June 1993): 533-549.

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