Racial Literacy Development: The Efficacy of a Face-to-Face and an Online Course on Race and Racism

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Abstract

Racial literacy is the skill of identifying and addressing racism within society. Developing racial identity and critical consciousness is vital to racial literacy and fundamental for comprehending race and racism. Studies indicate that classes focusing on these subjects significantly improve students' racial literacy (Tatum, 2017). By engaging with racial identity and racism issues, students can foster critical awareness, which benefits marginalized youth in terms of mental health, academic success, and career growth (Diemer et al., 2017). This study evaluated the effectiveness of building racial literacy in an online course on race and racism compared to a face-to-face version. The comparison of students' racial literacy—consisting of racial identity development and critical consciousness—was conducted before and after the course. Data trends showed no significant differences in racial identity, critical consciousness, or colorblindness between modalities; however, unequal sample sizes hindered reliable results. While there was an expectation for students of color to report greater positivity towards their racial identity, only partial evidence supported this. Critical consciousness did not show significant changes from before and after in their ability to analyze or engage in social change practices. Notably, participants did express positive changes in their beliefs regarding the acknowledgment of racism and the influence of White privilege, suggesting an increased recognition of these societal issues after the course. Regardless of modality, learning, discussing, and critically engaging with social injustice builds the knowledge, awareness, and skills to prepare students to live and work with individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

How prepared are students to have productive and well-informed conversations on racism?

As part of the mission and goal of universities to create a culture of collaboration and inclusion, learning how to engage with individuals from diverse cultures and identities in a culturally competent way is of utmost importance. However, with the increasing negativity and hostility towards topics that discuss race, namely Critical Race Theory, students are often unprepared and inarticulate in discussing race and racism with their peers (Cineas, 2021). Fortunately, attending college is often when many students experience a shift in their identity because of the increased exposure to new cultures, educational paths, and content they learn. Students begin exploring parts of their racial identity that they perhaps could not have before because of the lack of information or exclusion of topics regarding race and racism in the classroom. For many students, college courses that focus on race and racism become a pathway for them to learn racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Past Evidence on the Efficacy of Courses on Diversity

Research and literature on undergraduate instruction of psychology of race and racism courses is limited. Past research that examined similar courses, such as multicultural psychology, have shown that courses that teach about culture have positive learning outcomes for students (Sue et al., 2011). Courses like these have been shown to effectively promote multicultural knowledge, increase students' cultural competence, and boost student ethnic identity (Soto et al., 2021). However, past research has included primarily White participants, produced mixed results, and largely ignored how modality (i.e., online or face-to-face (F2F)) modulates the knowledge, skills, and awareness needed to talk thoughtfully about race and racism (Soto et al., 2021).

Racial Literacy

Racial literacy refers to the capacity to identify and confront racism within society. Research indicates that courses focused on race and racism serve as an essential intervention that enhances students' racial literacy (Tatum, 2017). Three significant components of racial literacy are understanding racism, identifying racism, and reading critically.

Understanding racism is conceptualized through the theoretical framework of racial identity development. Racial identity is an individual's identification with a socially defined racial category or phenotype, influenced by racial stratification and the historical oppression of racial groups. Developing a racial identity encompasses answering two specific questions: 1) *What does it mean to be of this racial group?*; and *2) What is the process of realizing this racial identity?* With this development comes the understanding of how racism is not only an *individual* problem but a *systemic* one. In developing a racial identity, students can understand how racism impacts them and society at large.

The second component, identifying racism, is seen through the lens of colorblind racial ideology (CBRI). CBRI is the belief that the best way to achieve racial equality is to treat everyone the same, regardless of race, essentially ignoring racial differences and systemic racism. While noble in thought, research has shown that CBRIs do not reflect the reality of what occurs in American society, where people are judged because of the color of their skin and their racial identity (Neville et al., 2000). CBRI beliefs obstruct or deny individuals' ability to recognize racism, whether in personal interactions or broader societal policies. The third component, reading critically, is seen through the lens of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2015) conceived of critical consciousness while working with adult laborers in Brazil. Freire realized that inequality is sustained when the people most affected by it cannot decode their social conditions. Freire proposed a cycle of critical consciousness development that involved gaining knowledge about the systems and structures that create and sustain inequity (critical analysis), developing a sense of power or capability (sense of agency), and ultimately committing to take action against oppressive conditions (critical action). Critical analysis is key to being able to understand how racism, a form of inequality, impacts individual identity and systemic-level policies.

Through understanding and discussing issues related to racial identity and racism, students begin to develop a critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2016). In combination, an achieved racial identity and critical consciousness have positive benefits for individuals, especially for People of Color, in regard to mental health, academic engagement and achievement, and more successful career development (Diemer et al., 2017). Additionally, a critical consciousness also has *community* benefits in the form of increased social action, increasing school resources, securing spaces for marginalized identities, and instituting policies that address issues of racial inequality (Pillen et al., 2020). Racial identity development and critical consciousness are key factors in racial literacy, and building these skills is essential in having productive knowledge on race and racism.

While the research behind critical consciousness and racial identity development is promising, there is a substantial lack of research that allows for extending these benefits to online courses. Specifically, it is difficult to know *what parts*, *for whom*, and *which aspects of racial literacy* (understanding racism, identifying racism, and reading critically) are being fostered through online courses. Thus, the study examined specific components of racial literacy before and after an online course on race and racism compared to a face-to-face version of the course.

The specific aims were:

Aim 1: Evaluate if an online version of a course on race and racism is equally effective in enhancing understanding of racism (through racial identity), identifying racism (through belief in colorblind racial ideology), and fostering critical reading skills (through critical consciousness) compared to a face-to-face version.

Aim 2: Characterize and compare two components of racial literacy, racial identity development and critical consciousness in students at the beginning (Time 1) and at the end (Time 2) in both modalities of a course on race and racism.

Participants

Students enrolled in online and face-to-face (F2F) sections of a 10-week 400-level Psychology of Race and Racism course were recruited for participation through an announcement posted at the beginning of Time 1 (Weeks 1 and 2) on Canvas. A follow-up message was then posted in Weeks 9 and 10 for Time 2. Participant recruitment began in the Summer of 2023, and the data presented here includes data collected for four quarters from 2023 until the Summer of 2024. Of the students enrolled in these courses (N = 200), 67 consented to participate, and 40 completed the pre- and post-surveys. Participants with incomplete pairs of data were dropped from analyses. Most of our participants racially identified as White (72%), followed by Latino (12%) and Asian (9%). The sample's gender identity consisted primarily of women (60%), followed by men (30%), and genderqueer participants (10%). The ages of our participants ranged from 18 to 25 (22%), 25 to 34 (38%), and 35 to 44 (22%). Most participants were from an online section of the class (n = 9 F2F and n = 31 online). Participants received $10 in gift card compensation for their participation.

Materials
Surveys
The pre-survey collected basic demographic data, including racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity as well as other sociocultural factors (e.g., SES, parent's education, immigration status). During the post-survey, participants were questioned about which course elements enhanced their learning. They were asked which course components such as lectures, reading material, discussions, and instructor interaction were most effective in fostering racial literacy. In the pre and post surveys, understanding racism through racial

identity was measured using two scales depending on the students' self-identified racial identity. White students completed the White Racial Consciousness Development Scale-Revised (WRCDS-R), and students of color completed the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al., 1997). Identifying racism was measured using the Colorblind Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville et al., 2000), and reading critically was measured through the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (ShoCCS; Diemer et al., 2017).

The White Racial Consciousness Development Scale-Revised (WRCDS-R) is a 40-item scale designed to assess four stages of White racial identity development: contact, reintegration, pseudo-independence, and autonomy (Lee et al., 2007). All items on this scale are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores on subscales indicating a higher degree of adherence to that specific schema. Lee and colleagues (2007) reported the internal consistency of WRCDS-R and has been determined to show adequate internal coefficients for each subscale: contact (α = .83), reintegration (α = .83), pseudo-independence (α = .78), and autonomy (α = .84).

The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) consists of three subscales comprised of 27 items. Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Respondents' scores are averaged across the items to generate a composite score for each subscale. The Centrality scale assesses the extent to which race is an important part of an individual's identity. A higher score is indicative of the individual feeling that race is a more central identity. The Private Regard subscale measures the extent to which an individual feels positive towards other Americans of their racial group and being of their particular racial group. The Public Regard subscale measures the extent to which the individual feels that their racial group feels

positively or negatively toward their racial group. Higher scores on the Regard subscales indicate more positive feelings towards people of their own racial group. In this study, each item was tailored to specifically reflect the identity of the specific student of color (i.e., Black would be replaced with either, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, multiracial, and so on).

Colorblindness Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville et al., 2001) evaluates individuals' attitudes and perspectives on racial issues, particularly the extent to which they adopt a "colorblind" viewpoint. The scale contains 20 items and provides insight into how individuals acknowledge or minimize racial differences. Participants were instructed to "rate the extent of your agreement with the following statements by using the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Moderately Disagree*, 3 = *Slightly Disagree* 4 = *Slightly Agree* 5 = *Moderately Agree* 6 = *Strongly Agree*." Participants responded to statements such as, "White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin," or "Talking about racial issues causes unnecessary tension." The scale consists of three subscales focused on Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues, Unawareness of Racial Privilege, and Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination.

Critical consciousness was measured using the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (ShoCCS; Diemer et al., 2017). The measure includes 13 items representing three sub-domains: critical reflection (4 items; e.g., "certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get good jobs"), critical motivation (4 items; e.g., "it is important to correct social and economic inequality"), and critical action (5 items; e.g., "participated in a civics rights group or organization"). Items use Likert scales ranging from 1 to 6 for critical reflection and motivation (*1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree*) and 1–5 for critical action (*1 = never did this to 5 = at least once a week*). Each subscale was independently summed and analyzed.

Procedure

If participants consented to proceed with the study, they received an anonymous survey link to complete the pre-survey baseline measures (i.e., Racial identity, Colorblind Racial Attitudes, and Critical Consciousness). Participants were asked to provide a unique 6-digit code to link Time 1 and Time 2 data. During Week 10 of the course, participants were asked to complete a post-survey including questions asked during the pre-survey (i.e., Racial identity, Colorblind Racial Attitudes, and Critical Consciousness) and a post-survey only ranked question regarding the materials they found contributed most to their learning (e.g., reading materials, lectures, and journals reflecting their personal experiences in the course).

Results
Aim 1
To determine whether an online version of a course on race and racism is as effective as a F2F version in teaching students' racial literacy, we initially proposed an independent samples t-test comparing racial literacy outcomes based on modality. Due to the unequal sample sizes in each group reliable results could not be reported. However, as shown in Table 1, the data trends show no differences in racial identity, critical consciousness, or colorblindness variables ($ps > .05$).

Aim 2
To compare the racial literacy of students before and after a course on race and racism, paired samples t-tests were used to analyze the racial identity, critical consciousness, and colorblindness variables from Time 1 and Time 2. As shown in Table 2, there were no differences for White students from Time 1 to Time 2 when it came to understanding their Whiteness (*Contact*; $t(22) = -.33$, $p = .740$), awareness of racism and White privilege (*Reintegration*; $t(22) = 1.21$, $p = .239$), or internalizing a positive White racial identity (*Autonomy*; $t(22) = .50$ $p = .620$). However, there was an increase in identifying the impacts of White supremacy and privilege (*Pseudo-independence*;

Table 1. Descriptives for Between Group Means for Modality (F2F vs. Online)

	Group	N	Mean	SD
PoC Identity—Centrality	F2F	5	5.45	1.08
	Online	12	5.15	0.84
PoC Identity—Public Regard	F2F	5	4.76	0.73
	Online	12	4.34	1.56
PoC Identity—Private Regard	F2F	5	4.76	0.73
	Online	12	4.34	1.56
White Identity—Contact	F2F	4	1.87	0.93
	Online	19	1.77	0.51
White Identity—Reintegration	F2F	4	1.23	0.11
	Online	19	1.57	0.57
White Identity—Psuedoindependence	F2F	4	4.05	0.39
	Online	19	3.82	0.70
White Identity—Autonomy	F2F	4	4.69	0.14
	Online	19	4.57	0.44
Critical Reflection	F2F	9	6.41	0.45
	Online	31	6.19	1.08
Critical Motivation	F2F	9	6.58	0.63
	Online	31	6.61	0.48
Critical Action	F2F	9	1.71	0.52
	Online	31	1.65	0.66
Unawareness of Racial Privilege	F2F	9	1.60	0.47
	Online	31	1.90	0.86
Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination	F2F	9	1.33	0.50
	Online	31	1.76	0.78
Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues	F2F	9	1.07	0.16
	Online	31	1.33	0.49

Note: *PoC = People of Color*

Table 2. Descriptives for Paired Samples T-test (Time 1 vs. Time 2)

	Time	Mean	SD
Unawareness of Racial Privilege (*n* = 40)	1	2.16	0.90
	2	1.83	0.79
Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination (*n* = 40)	1	1.90	0.85
	2	1.66	0.74
Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues* (*n* = 40)	1	1.43	0.49
	2	1.27	0.45
White Identity—Contact (*n* = 23)	1	1.82	0.64
	2	1.79	0.57
White Identity—Reintegration (*n* = 23)	1	1.59	0.52
	2	1.51	0.53
White Identity—Psuedoindependence* (*n* = 23)	1	3.67	0.71
	2	3.86	0.65
White Identity—Autonomy (*n* = 23)	1	4.63	0.36
	2	4.59	0.41
PoC Identity—Centrality (*n* = 14)	1	5.09	0.97
	2	5.24	0.89
PoC Identity—Public Regard* (*n* = 14)	1	4.29	1.14
	2	4.47	1.36
PoC Identity—Private Regard (*n* = 14)	1	5.79	0.93
	2	6.13	0.68
Critical Reflection (*n* = 40)	1	6.08	0.92
	2	6.24	0.97
Critical Motivation (*n* = 40)	1	6.56	0.54
	2	6.60	0.50
Critical Action (*n* = 40)	1	1.64	0.66
	2	1.66	0.63

Note: *PoC = People of Color.* $p < .05$.

$t(22) = -2.32$, $p = .030$) at Time 2. For students of color, there was no change from Time 1 and Time 2 regarding how Central their racial identity is to them (*Centrality*; $t(13) = -.71$, $p = .487$) or how they privately view their racial group (*Private Regard*; $t(13) = -.1.50$, $p = .155$). However, there was an increase in students of color regarding their racial group Publicly (*Public Regard*; $t(13) = -2.40$, $p = .032$) at Time 2. With critical consciousness, there was no statistically significant increase in students' Critical Reflection ($t(39) = -1.67$, $p = .104$), Critical Motivation ($t(39) = -.49$, $p = .628$), or Critical Action ($t(39) = -.36$, $p = .702$). However, there were statistically significant and large effects for increases in understanding Racial Privilege ($t(39) = 3.76$, $p <.001$, Cohen's d = .60), Institutional Discrimination ($t(39) = 2.97$, $p =. 005$, Cohen's d = .47), and Blatant Racial Issues ($t(39) = 2.59$, $p =.013$, Cohen's d = .41) at Time 2.

Course Materials

To identify which specific portions of the course contributed most to learning, participants were asked to rank order the importance of the following from highest to lowest: reading materials (i.e., textbooks), lectures (either written or verbal), journal articles (i.e., peer-reviewed articles), discussions (in-person and through online discussion), journals reflecting personal experiences in the course, instructor feedback (e.g., on assignments and journals), and the major project (a conversation about race and racism with someone outside the course). Table 3 shows the average rankings for each course activity. Note that the closer the mean is to 1, the higher it is ranked. Because the number of F2F participants was too small to separate out, we report the aggregate averages for the F2F and online participants. Also, note that some of these assignments changed in nature based on the modality. For example, the online discussions were conducted using videos, audio, or text responses through VoiceThread (an app dedicated to engaging students in asynchronous interactions). Discussions in the F2F version of the course were held in designated discussion groups and had more immediate feedback from the instructor.

Table 3. Average Course Activity Importance Rankings

Course activities	Average importance ranking
Reading materials	2.31
Lectures	2.33
Discussions	3.91
Major project	5.01
Journal articles	5.20
Journals	5.64
Instructor feedback	6.10

Note: *Averages closer to 1 are higher ranked*

Discussion

A course on race and racism is an effective intervention in making students aware of racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues. However, this study could not answer whether modality impacts these results due to the small number of F2F participants who consented. Nonetheless, the pre-to-post course changes in attitudes are encouraging for the efficacy of diversity-related courses, both online and F2F. More specifically, both the online and F2F versions of this course on race and racism changed students' racial colorblindness beliefs in the span of 10 weeks, making them more aware of social injustice.

While we expected changes in participants' perceptions of their racial identity, we only saw partial evidence that students of color felt more positive toward their racial group at the end of the course. The course did not impact whether students viewed their racial identity as being more central or salient to them or changed their feelings towards being a part of their group. These stayed consistent for students of color throughout the course. This is not unexpected when considering previous research showing that by the time they enroll in college, most students of color have undergone some form of identity formation

(Tatum, 2017). This course, instead, instilled more positive feelings toward others of their racial group, and this could partly be due to the reading material and lectures that pay specific attention to the history and psychology of individuals belonging to Latine, Asian, and Black racial groups. It could be that in learning more about the history of their respective group, these students felt more positive towards people in their in-group.

We saw similar results for White students, who had increased beliefs about abandoning White superiority. The course has a section on the history and psychology of Whiteness that talks about the impacts of White supremacy not only on other racial groups but on ethnic groups who were racialized into being White (i.e., Italian, Irish). Through the lectures and history, students learned what had to be lost to become White and how White supremacy hurts everyone. Through this course and the apparent results, White students showed an increased intellectual understanding of the unfairness of White privilege and recognized personal responsibility for dismantling racism. We also expected changes in participants' critical consciousness due to the course. However, there was no evidence to support that students were either increasing or decreasing their critical reflection (ability to analyze injustice in society), critical motivation (the drive or commitment to challenge and address these perceived injustices), or critical action (actively engage in practices to challenge oppressive systems and promote social change). We did find evidence for changes in societal beliefs towards colorblind attitudes. After the course, all participants had positive changes regarding denying the pervasiveness of racism and recognizing it. Similar changes occurred with participants decreasing their attitudes that deny the power of White privilege in society and denial of the belief that social policies are needed to eradicate the negative consequences of institutional forms of racism.

Lastly, based on the ranking of the course materials that students felt were more beneficial, the reading material, lectures, and group discussions were most important to them. The ranking shows an interesting mix of independent work, instructor involvement, and interdependent learning. For students in a course on race and racism, the best way to learn and benefit in the class was through a multimodal approach, where students read the material independently, discuss the readings together, and then reinforce the concepts learned through the lectures.

In conclusion, a course on the Psychology of Race and Racism is an effective intervention in making students aware of institutional discrimination, racial privilege, and blatant racial issues. For students of color, a course like this also increases their appreciation for belonging to their particular racial group. While more data must be gathered to determine whether modality differentiates these outcomes, the current trends suggest no differences. More research is needed to confirm that online learners are developing racial literacy on par with their in-person counterparts and that online learners are not missing out relative to their in-person peers.

To become culturally competent, students need to take courses on race and racism. The current hostility toward learning about race and racism or engaging in any critical discussion over historical and systemic inequity underscores the importance of why these courses are essential. Learning, discussing, and critically engaging with social injustice builds the knowledge, awareness, and skills to prepare students to live and work with individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. While orders and policies prohibit the teaching and learning of these topics in some states, the fact remains that our nation is diverse, and not discussing these issues does not mean they disappear or no longer exist. Instead, not allowing the teaching of these subjects only harms society, leaving students unprepared to engage in a rapidly globalizing world. Based on the results of this study, banning courses like these only increases the likelihood that people will be less

able to understand and identify racism. This will have negative consequences for future generations, as they may view colorblind racial ideologies as a societal benefit and struggle to critically identify how ignoring race and denying racism harms individuals.

The current social and political climate also highlights the importance of online courses, which allow students from all areas of the country to access this education, including those residing in states where these subjects are not explicitly taught. Online learning enables interaction with valuable materials and content that is often restricted or unavailable, yet crucial for grasping the social dynamics in the United States. An online class on race and racism equips students with the tools needed for productive discussions and interactions regarding the intersections of race and ethnicity. This course helps them better understand themselves in light of these various identities and fosters ongoing leadership about critical concepts associated with race and racism, building students' cultural competence.

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About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

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Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit responds to and forecasts the needs and challenges of the online education field through conducting original research; fostering strategic collaborations; and creating evidence-based resources and tools that contribute to effective online teaching, learning and program administration.

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