

Racialized Dialogue on Online Discussion Boards: Opportunity and Onus in Addressing Racism and Oppression

Kathryn McIntosh, PhD

Erin Block, PhD Candidate

Oregon State University

Abstract

This qualitative study explored race dialogue in an online asynchronous social justice course in which students of color and white undergraduates engaged at various levels in course discussion boards. Theoretical frameworks that guided the research were Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and classroom talk about race (Ferreira, 2022; Quinney, 2019; Sue, 2013). The research considered the following questions: What do online discussion board posts and reflective writings from students of color and white students reveal about their dialogue on emotionally charged topics such as racism and oppression? How do online discussion boards present opportunities or challenges in conversations about racism and social justice for students of color and white undergraduate students? Data from consenting students (n=27) included course assignments such as weekly reflections on class topics and discussion board posts to classmates. Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) supported study of micro-level student moves within conversations, and thematic coding framed by CRT focused analyses on racialized and varied contributions by white students and students of color. Findings indicated that students of color found affinity over shared experiences of oppression and discrimination, engaged holistically involving emotions in addition to intellect, felt the onus of unequal contributions of white students, and positioned themselves within the content of the course. White students often distanced themselves through unidimensional engagement of intellect only, offered platitudes or niceties, and did not explore their own positionality of privilege or dominance. Yet some white students engaged holistically by expressing emotion, finding affinity with others in the struggle to transform themselves and the world, and situating their experiences with privilege and seeing a way forward to work for justice.

Introduction

Research studies on social justice dialogue in university courses focused on racism and oppression suggest that dialogue about race often produces emotional discomfort for both white students and students of color (Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Johnson & Mason, 2017; Quinney, 2019; Sue, 2013). Students of color often experience microaggressions during class dialogue and can feel the unfair onus of teaching white students about their experiences. For example, students of color may feel the need to convince white students that racism still exists, to demonstrate their colorblind actions, or to nudge them to listen to lived accounts of racism from peers (Quinney, 2019). However, white students who deeply engage in sustained dialogue about race can grow their awareness of white privilege (Gurin et al., 2014; Maxwell & Chesler, 2019; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Race dialogue has the potential to both inadvertently reinforce and to challenge racism (Marshall & Futris, 2024; Quinney, 2019). Thus, we were highly interested in studying the complex dynamics resulting from student dialogic practices when sharing and responding to others in discussion boards in an online social justice course.

This study was built on theories of race dialogue and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) and opted to take a granular approach to look at the minute details of student uses of discursive practices in discussion boards in an online social justice course. These specific, often subtle attributes of students' discourse contribute to the shaping of their interpersonal engagement and indicate generalized, patterned interactions that have the potential to both reinforce and resist racism. As such, we employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses on power relations carried out by "actors," specifically students engaged in online dialogue in a social justice course. In particular, we adapted CDA methods from Fairclough (2013) that provide a structure and starting point within a social justice framework for analyzing dialogue,

relational practices, and actors that contribute to a complex understanding of interactions involving power dynamics, including racism and other forms of oppression and privilege. We accomplished this aim by focusing on students' specific word choices, considering students as agentic contributors to dialogue rather than passive recipients.

Emphasizing the agentic nature of discussion board posts, we considered "student moves," or language choices made to articulate their learning and thinking as well as those made to respond to peers. We also emphasized that race dialogue is not an inherently a "safe space," and that sometimes instructor or student norms that intend to create safe spaces for dialogue can inadvertently protect white students' feelings and promote a colorblind view (Brown & Moussa, 2023). Race dialogue often instigates fear in participants and facilitators:

"...Both whites and people of color face certain dangers that prevent an authentic exchange. Not only do whites fear that they will be exposed as racist; they also fear being found out as racial beings. People of color already know that whites comprise a racial group, therefore white raciality would not represent a shocking discovery for them. However, whites' discovery of their own raciality is precisely what is at stake" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 150).

Studying student moves in dialogue on race and oppression is useful to identify modalities to support instructors and to provide students opportunities to reconsider their own biases and assumptions. With support and scaffolding from instructors, students may gain multiple perspectives through their interactions. This becomes particularly important for race dialogue with students of color and white students, when white students often lack lived experiences dialoguing candidly about race (Maxwell & Chesler, 2019). Furthermore, in addition to the fear mentioned above, race dialogue encompasses

topics that are emotional and provocative in many ways. When coursework includes social and emotional support from instructors and peers, discussions can spark transformative development.

Investigating social justice dialogue has the potential to aid educators' understandings of students' holistic engagement and meaningful dialogue on topics like racism and oppression. Thus, we sought to investigate how discussion boards, which are used in the online asynchronous section of ED 219 Social Justice, Civil Rights and Multiculturalism in Education, are platforms for students' holistic engagement (including emotionality) and meaningful dialogue around social justice. As many of them are first- or second-year students, we considered their social and emotional development at this early-college phase and explored their emotional resources to engage in self-inquiry and respectful interactions with one another.

Theoretical Perspectives

We drew from theoretical and empirical perspectives such as race dialogue, Critical Race Theory, and discourse study of classroom talk. These perspectives guided our work on anti-racism and study of dialogue specifically in educational spaces. Much of the research literature focuses on face-to-face classroom conversations; thus, we have applied these perspectives to online asynchronous course discussions. We begin by defining classroom discourse as a phenomenon for inquiry and a medium for better understanding the experiences of ED 219 online students. Next, we center our approach to analyzing classroom discourse drawing from theories of race, specifically Critical Race Theory and theories of race dialogue. Finally, we situate this study in the realm of social justice because we are interested in how online discussion boards foster an environment that sparks social justice action among students.

Classroom discourse

Ferreira (2021) studied line-by-line dialogue of classroom conversation, emphasizing that student talk can surface and engage the politics of difference. Ferreira emphasized positioning theory as a way of understanding how students position themselves within class conversations, referred to as “student moves.” In diverse classrooms like social justice courses, conversations highlight and could potentially leverage those politics of difference. Our study investigated these micropolitics of classroom talk in social justice dialogue in an online course.

Critical Race Theory

To set a foundation for exploring classroom discourse, we needed to gain a nuanced understanding of how students of color were engaging with their own social positioning and lived experiences to center the students of color prior to analyzing general interactional discourse across the course discussion boards. We drew from notions of CRT as outlined by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), including the ubiquitousness of racism for people of color and the structural embeddedness of white supremacy (both material and psychic) within the fabric of society. These understandings of racialized experiences with oppression and power are important in the context of the present study as students of color and white students position themselves through dialogue in relationships with broader structural inequities, including institutionalized racism and white supremacy. Moreover, additional tenets of CRT point to the reality that race and races are socially constructed, and that race is one single identity dimension within the multiplicity of social identities that exist for each individual and group.

Originating within the legal sphere, intersectionality is another significant concept within CRT. Intersectionality as originated and explained by Crenshaw (2013) emphasizes that racial identity is interwoven and amplified with other overlapping social identities and forms of oppression, as evidenced by the complex

experiences of women of color. For the present study, intersectionality is a critical frame for analyzing experiences with intersectional oppression is described by students of color in course reflections. Finally, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) posit that within CRT there is a need to consistently problematize essentialism, when a group is portrayed overly simplistically and may “not reflect exactly those of certain factions within it” (p. 64), and take on an anti-essentialist approach towards understanding the lived experiences of people of color and people from other marginalized groups. While essentialism is predicated on the myth that people of color have homogenous experiences across contexts, anti-essentialism through a CRT approach emphasizes the heterogeneity and power dynamics across intersectional identities.

Critical Course Approaches: Focus on Social Justice and Anti-Racism

Critical scholars focused on social justice and anti-racism explore educational environments to identify if they include non-dominant knowledge systems that are beyond the traditional focus on the rational cognitive mind (Pitcher & Martinez, 2022; Rendon, 2023). In other words, centering holistic pedagogy focused on wholeness asks educators and learners to integrate emotion (i.e., intuition/sensing) and cognitive thinking (i.e., intellectualism) for deeper learning and engagement in social justice (Rendon, 2023). Renowned critical scholar bell hooks (1994) describes holistic education and engaged pedagogy as teachers and learners bringing together mind, body, and spirit for the purpose of broadening education to include wellbeing and self-inquiry for a more liberating education that embraces all aspects of one’s being. Deep and holistic engagement in social justice content would require more than unidimensional learning based on cognition and intellectual analyses alone.

Critical Course Approaches: Focus on Mindfulness

Presented as a tool for emotional awareness and presence, particularly during emotionally heightened course dialogue around racism and social justice, mindfulness is intentionally integrated into learning activities in the course that is the context for this study. Critical perspectives on mindfulness can be conceptualized as “nonlinear ways of knowing and a deeper consciousness than a rational or analytical approach... [so that] worldviews and relationships can be transformed with new energies and innovation” (McIntosh, 2022, p. 65). Since the specific social justice course in this study takes up critical theoretical perspectives, it is important to analyze and problematize western approaches—those that emphasize more cognitive, rational, and focused on individual outcomes—and the ways in which critical approaches can respond to the needs of diverse learners and ultimately lead to heightened critical consciousness. Critical approaches to mindfulness interrogate dominant knowledge systems in service of amplifying access and relevance of learning to more holistically promote critical, embodied, and anti-oppressive practices that support BIPOC and folks from other marginalized groups (McCusker, 2022). The ED 219 course had weekly modules to facilitate the students’ use of emotions and body awareness in their learning of social justice for richer engagement in race dialogue.

Race Dialogue

Quinney (2019) studied race dialogue along with scholars DiAngelo (2004) and Sue (2013) who specifically investigated conversation around racism and racialized dialogue. Quinney’s (2019) results suggest the following themes regarding white students’ experiences in an ethnic studies course: (1) deafening silence, especially from white students; (2) keeping race dialogue at a distance; (3) whiteness controls the conversation; (4) race isn't about white people and, and (5) white students fail to recognize their whiteness.

Additionally, Quinney identified findings regarding the experiences of students of color: (1) There are opportunities to learn, such as how students of color offer counter stories, vulnerable narratives, sharing about the ways they've experienced racism and oppression that informs others; (2) Students of color also learn the language and tools to understand their own experiences; they may have faced racism and oppression but haven't previously had the opportunity to put this into words using vocabulary, using concepts, and to articulate it in a new way. (3) Students of color feel pressure to share and to teach others. They also have racial fatigue or stress if it's a one-sided conversation and they're the ones doing a lot of this work of sharing stories and being vulnerable, and many white students are not.

A Quinney (2019) study described race dialogue in a face-to-face ethnic studies classroom, arguing that language of race/racism is a discourse unto itself. Students may have different levels of engagement, based on their experiences with oppression or privilege and the level of practice they have had with discussions around race. Race dialogue can be highly emotional, and unless instructors readily acknowledge and address emotionality, students can be resistant and defensive. For race dialogue to lead to healing, connecting, and social change, instructors should use identity formation—i.e., awareness and exploration of membership in oppressed or privileged groups—as an important entry point into course discussions.

Most research on social justice learning for undergraduates has been focused on in-person rather than online learning (Brewster et al., 2021; Jessup-Anger et al., 2020; Waite & Brooks, 2014; Reynante, 2022). Researchers offer critiques of online learning, asserting that the impersonal nature of online courses presents barriers to dialogue built on trust and embodiment (Warr & Sampson, 2020). Few studies have examined digital learning tools in general (Gilpin, 2020), not to mention digital learning tools that promote safe

and inclusive dialogue on social justice topics including race and racism. Given the growth of online education in recent years, there is a small but growing literature on online courses in social justice and a need for more work in this area. This study contributes to this growing literature by exploring the online learning environment of race dialogue and the patterns of interaction across students of color and white students.

As society continues to reckon with issues of racial justice and polarity of social thought, it is essential that undergraduate coursework include experiences for students to interact with individuals from lived experiences different from their own. Understanding specific dialogic interactions in online coursework, which perpetuates racism or leads to more authentic connection, allows instructors to monitor and intervene to support students in navigating race dialogue. This work includes supporting students' agency in asserting their own identities in dialogue as well as to challenge white students to make themselves vulnerable and name their own privilege.

We considered the following questions:

1. What do online discussion board posts and reflective writings from students of color and white students reveal about their dialogue on emotionally charged topics such as racism and oppression?
2. How do online discussion boards present opportunities or challenges in conversations about racism and social justice for students of color and white undergraduate students?

Methods

In the larger project called *Social Justice and Mindfulness and Multicultural Education (SAMME)*, we have been studying data from ED 219 for five years to contribute to the field of multicultural education (see McIntosh, 2022; McIntosh and

Blazquez, 2024; Viveros, 2023). ED 219 is a 200-level social justice course that has 4-5 sections per year held as online asynchronous courses. The focus of this course is on social justice, civil rights, and multiculturalism in education. In this course, there are 10 modules that cover topics such as socialization, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, sexism, racism, ableism, classism, religious oppression and more.

In this study, we present a small subset of students' data, focusing on the academic year 2022-2023 with online sections of ED 219. Students in the course had the option to consent to their data being used in a research study once final grades were posted at the end of the term. To recruit student participants, research team members sent a Qualtrics survey asking students for their consent to share written course assignments, including discussion board posts. Students were also invited to participate in a follow-up interview with a team member about their experience in ED 219. Consenting students received an e-gift card in the amount of \$15 for their participation.

There were a total of 27 participating students (out of approximately 100 enrolled). Of students who consented, 22 self-identified as white, and 5 self-identified as students of color (self-identified as biracial, Asian, Asian, or Hispanic/Latinx). Pre-service teachers enrolled in the course because it served as one of their equity foundations requirements. We also had students from various majors who were fulfilling Difference, Power, and Discrimination (DPD) core education requirements. Approximately half the students were DPD students and not education majors. Given the large numbers of students we serve, the context was ideal for addressing our specific questions about teaching ED 219.

Data Sources

For the purposes of this study, only weekly reflections and discussion board posts were analyzed. Data were from consenting students'

(n=27) weekly reflections in which students responded in two ways: to instructor's prompts and to peers' discussion board posts. Students posted an initial response to a required reflection questions each week (see example reflection questions in Table 1 below).

Table 1. Example: Week 3 – Prejudice and Discrimination

TEXTBOOK CONCEPTS: What is necessary to do to minimize the effects of our discriminatory actions based on our prejudiced ideas about social groups?

RELATE TO YOUR LIFE: With the information from the textbook chapter or the other materials, can you use the new vocabulary to explain something that happened in your life? Based on the inequities you described, how could you be an activist to make change in your own life?

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: What self-awareness and concepts did you learn in mindfulness practice this week? How did this help you learn about and connect to multiculturalism?

Each week of the course, students reflected on a different concept. For instance, in week three, they studied prejudice and discrimination, and they connected course concepts to their own lives through storytelling. They are asked to write about an experience in their own lives connected to that concept, as well as reflecting on their use of mindfulness in each week. As part of the course deliverables, each student was responsible for posting a weekly reflection to the online discussion board as well as to respond thoughtfully to at least one discussion board post from a peer.

For our data sets, we did two rounds of data organization. First, all discussion board transcripts were downloaded and cleaned. Next, a separate document was created for each consenting student, which included their weekly discussion board posts, as well as how their classmates

responded to their posts and how they chose to respond to posts from their peers.

Analysis

Our analysis included three phases. In phase one, each dataset centered a student of color (n=5 students) and featured their reflective assignments, including their weekly posts, their responses to peers, and how all peers were responding to them. We did another round of data analysis examining how the white students (n=22) responded to one another in their discussion posts. Different data sets were important because each group is positioned differently regarding course content and therefore needed to be centered for a particular aspect of study. In other words, students of color may have experienced firsthand the phenomena we discussed such as racism, oppression, and discrimination. On the other hand, white students are positioned as the dominant group and experienced privilege and white supremacy. Thus, white students could potentially discuss their own experiences of privilege, power, and supremacy, yet would not have firsthand experience of facing oppression, racism or marginalization.

In the second phase, we analyzed the idea of *race dialogue* (Quinney, 2019) to understand the kinds of interactional dynamics that can be categorized, such as patterns of opportunities or onuses, meaning that students of color had the opportunity to talk about their experiences, but by the same token, had often felt obligation to teach white students. In the next phase, we analyzed around Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) and explored how students of color are connecting to one another's experiences with oppression, both their own as well as that of their family members, partners, other significant people in their lives, and surfacing their counter stories. Counter stories are stories that push back on the white dominant perspective by surfacing the experiences of students of color.

Once the data had been coded for the tenets of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007) as well as specific theories of student race dialogue (Quinney, 2019), we focused on linguistic features to help us better understand specific linguistic decisions of students through their interpersonal engagement in online discussion boards. We accomplished this through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which allowed for a more thorough exploration of students' language use around intersectional identity and power dynamics present in students' sharing. To carry out CDA, we read and re-read multiple times through the discussion boards, identifying key words and phrases related to intersectionality, identity, power, privilege, and other structural forces inherent in systemic racism and other forms of oppression. We conducted this investigation in an iterative manner, identifying new words and phrases in each reading of the data.

Finally in our last phase, we analyzed at a more granular level the specific words and language that students used to position themselves within dialogue. We identified patterned interactions and specific language students were using as "student moves." (Ferreira, 2022). In this synthesis stage, we brought together previous stages of analysis to identify moments in the data when students are relating to one another around race and racism in the context of the social justice course. Using the concept of student moves, which we conceptualize in this study as agentic student linguistic decision making, we constructed tables modeled after Ferreira (2022) to examine turn taking within discourse transcripts that were excerpted from discussion board threads. We constructed one discourse transcript table for each of five focal students and coded for themes. We engaged in regular memo writing to reflect on commonalities of themes across the five data tables. Also, we created a table containing self-identifying language for consenting students as provided in a cultural assessment survey through the social justice course and in their descriptions of their own social positioning in dialogue with peers. We identified four key themes (see below), and we

synthesized the data across each of the four themes to describe how the data across excerpts supported each theme.

Findings

For this study, there were four overall themes: (1) Affinity Connections among Students of Color; (2) Distancing and Domineering Strategies of White Students; (3) Varying Levels of Engagement: Holistic and Multidimensional vs. Rational and Unidimensional; and (4) Emerging Richness and Vulnerability of White Students.

Affinity Connections among Students of Color

We started by looking at the experiences of the students of color purposefully because we did not want to center whiteness in the study of racism and anti-racism. We wanted to understand the experiences of students of color first and foremost, thus we centered their interactions happening in the course. The analyses revealed the affinity developed among students of color in the course, as they provided one another with emotional empathy and support over their shared experiences of oppression and intersectional racism.

Empathy—resonating with one another's emotional reactions—was one-way students of color found community and solace in one another. This first exemplar highlights the intersectional racism experienced by a student:

Post: Thank you for sharing your girlfriend's experience through your lens and wanting to be able to change what you can. I can relate to her more than I want to admit. As someone who is multiracial, including both Pacific Islander and Filipina, I can feel her frustration. Mine is slightly different in the sense that I am not even looked at as white, even though my mom is white. The questions that we get from others who don't understand cannot just be frustrating, but hurtful at times because you feel as if a part of you that you are proud of is not

being seen or acknowledged.
[Student#0122-2]

This student was relating and saying, “I can relate to you” and “I can relate to the frustration,” which exemplifies empathy in the experiences of being multiracial. The student is sharing her own story of being biracial and how she's not seen as white, which is imbued with several emotions: frustration, hurt, and pride. This is multidimensional engagement, not only understanding the academic content, but also tapping into the emotions, which could include feelings, physiological sensations, and other body-centered experiences that arise when connecting with experiences of oppression. This embodied emotional engagement adds dimensionality to course engagement, beyond the typical cognitive and intellectual engagement to involve a more holistic response.

A shared experience of prejudice and discrimination often served as a way for students of color to connect. The next exemplar is also about finding affinity in feelings about microaggressions. One student says:

Post: I personally am a woman of color and have experienced prejudice and continue to experience it. Just the other day I was at work when a coworker asked me if I was hispanic and I responded yes, he then proceeded to ask if I liked certain hispanic artists and I said no to a few to which he responded with "oh so are you even Mexican?". This comment carried prejudice in the fact that he acknowledges that I am Mexican but assumes that in order to prove that I should be listening to certain artists or acting a certain way. ... As a Latina I have experienced minor discriminations that have made me feel threatened and reflecting how I felt in that moment and how I can turn it around and use it as empowerment [and activism] makes me

feel better for future interactions. [Student #0223-10]

Response: I really appreciated your response as I've experienced similar things; I'm pleased to see that there are other Hispanics out there.

We included a summary of the response from the peer, who resonated with her experience and could connect in their identity as Hispanic- rather than feeling isolated or alone. This student, who identifies as a woman of color, also started to use some of the concepts from the course and the word prejudice to describe what she has experienced. This is an example of when a student may have experienced the phenomena, but they previously may not have been able to articulate it quite in this way. They are learning the language of social justice and anti-racism that they can use to describe their experience.

Another example was affinity that offered emotional support for the racial trauma that happened in families. This is important support that students of color offer to one another to be able to feel like there's space to share about difficult occurrences.

Post: My mother was scared to teach me and my siblings Spanish for fear that we would speak with accents and therefore be seen as less than...Being raised by immigrants I realize that my parents especially felt a great deal of oppression and struggle to this day to deal with the pain and strife that they had to go through. My mother [had] oppression as she was growing up due to her accent. It affected her to this day so much so that when she had children, she refused to allow us to learn Spanish at a young age, ... [we need] positivity toward people being oppressed by different language barriers and insecurities when dealing with accents... [Student #0122-09]

Response: My family faced oppression due to skin color; due to accents

We included the response from another student whose family also faced oppression due to skin color and accents. With this type of interaction, students know they're not alone. Others have had similar experiences, maybe not identical experiences, but similar experiences. Again, we noticed use of vocabulary words and content from the course to name oppression. Students started to take up specific language to describe what they had experienced. Furthermore, there was expression of emotion as they were being vulnerable in sharing their stories or counter stories and about the fear that runs in families. Students of color also developed affinity regarding the instructor's own stories included in the curriculum (i.e., videos embedded on Canvas). In discussing the instructor's video, the students offer emotional support to one another.

Post: I think the one thing that stood out to me the most was dealing with fear. I get really overwhelmed or scared at times of uncertainty and I often let my mind run wild with various possibilities. The instructor shared an experience where she dealt with fear and how she sat with it for a while and I think that is a really insightful idea that I will be using in the future."
[Student #0122-5]

Response: I am like you when it comes to dealing with feelings of being overwhelmed. I'm an overthinker too which doesn't help at all. I also found the instructor's story to be helpful in understanding how to overcome my fears or at least reconsider everything that I was thinking. [Student #0122-2]

These two students shared and supported each other emotionally in dealing with fear and the uncertainty, fueled by anxious thought patterns like being an overthinker. Their process is

scaffolded by the course's mindfulness components. They found affinity with each other as they used the instructor's videos as a tool to recognize emotions and anxieties and develop healthy strategies for dealing with them.

Students of color often had embodied experience of the phenomena that were the topics of the course. For them, social justice content was not simply derived from a textbook or other reading; they knew firsthand how it felt to experience oppression, discrimination, racism, or other inequities. The course offered opportunities, such as prompts to discuss the life experiences, mindfulness modules, or instructor videos with storytelling, for the students of color to resonate with one another and find affinity. Through affinity connections, students scaffolded concept development and also emotional reactions that were handled with empathy.

Distancing and Domineering Strategies of White Students

This theme describes how many of the white students' actions in the discussion board differed greatly from the actions of students of color. These white students often offered distancing and one-dimensional responses (i.e., rational only without emotional or embodied expression). The first excerpt below is from a student of color, which was followed by a white student's response that veered towards lengthy academic explanation, ignoring the personal experiences:

Post: A vocabulary word that stuck out to me this week was internalized oppression. This term stuck out to me ... how I have felt plenty of times. For example, I've always found it easier to be around and try to fit in with the white kids growing up where I am from because there weren't a lot of mixed-race kids that had the same background as me. I didn't fit in with the Asian kids, so while I tried ... my best to keep myself as authentic as I can, it is hard when you start

to blend in with others because it's easier that way. [Student #0122-3]

On discussion board, a white student offered very brief acknowledgement to say thank you, followed by a rebuttal. The white student rebutted what the student is saying by offering a lengthy academic explanation of what internalized oppression means from a textbook standpoint. In contrast, the student of color shared a personal lived experience, weaving in some vocabulary, mentioning emotions and being vulnerable. The white student responded by taking it fully in the direction of a rational academic explanation without situating themselves in this and their whiteness and without any emotional response. The student offered a one-dimensional response of academic logic and nothing further. The white student distanced themselves from a depth of response and steered the dialogue in the direction they wanted (towards a textbook orientation).

Distancing strategies also included white students evading discussing their own positionality and accountability in a system of white supremacy. The theme includes white students not locating their own positionality or engaging with power dynamics in their dialogue. The first student, in the excerpt below, is a white student, which is followed by a response from a student of color:

Post: I personally do not have any personal experiences with the idea of white supremacy because I am a white woman and I have that privilege. I came from a mostly white community, where most of my teachers were white. [Student #0122-5]

(Student of color) Response: Hi, wouldn't you say that you do have personal experience with the idea of white supremacy because you are a white woman that has privilege? I say this because the text defines white supremacy as white power and privilege which it sounds like you have. [Student #0122-3]

In this excerpt, the white student distanced themselves from the idea of how white privilege comes from a system of white supremacy. And we demonstrated a counterpoint response from a student of color who used the language of the course concepts in an instructive way, questioning the proposition that the white student does not have experience with white supremacy.

Another finding that surfaced through analyzing white students' dialogue was responding in a way that offered niceties or platitudes. In response to a post by a woman of color about how hard it is to see and to accept that people of color are not treated fairly in the justice system, a white student responds with platitudes:

Post: If everyone focused on the good things that we, ourselves are doing, I think everyone would be a bit more content in their day to day lives. The world can be a horrible place, but we can make the choice to feel good about ourselves at least. [Student #0122-8]

A student of color described how hard it is to see or accept that people like her are not treated fairly in the justice system, which is an example of multi-dimensional sharing, connecting her own experience to other people of color and systems of oppression. In response, a white student offered a post that is one-dimensional, not connecting on an emotional or holistic level. The white student turned to a discussion of doing good and feeling good, without recognition of the complex and difficult emotions in the post of the student of color. There was a difference in the depth of sharing and vulnerability and the way in which the white student was distancing themselves from the sharing of the student of color through an exclusive focus on positivity.

Fuller Engagement including Emotional Reckoning and White Accountability

For some white students, there was more holistic and multidimensional learning, engaging with their

emotions and their lived experiences in a deeply engaged way, rather than only treating this like academic content in an analytical way. We identified interactions of white student dialogue when they held one another accountable for the difficult work of acknowledging white supremacy, privilege, and complex emotions like guilt or appreciation. In the excerpts below, we depict three students who respond to one another in sequence. The first student shared about discomfort with assignments that required opening up about their own self and their whiteness.

Post: I am getting where I really don't like sharing my own life experiences. I understand why we are asked to do it, and honestly I LOVE reading everyone else's experiences and posts. It just makes me feel narcissistic to be working to apply these huge, impactful, mass struggles, to my own life. Maybe that in itself is showing my privilege, that I feel reluctant to spotlight my life. ...I feel shame to admit that I didn't understand these ideas before but I am also glad that I have the opportunity to learn. I will continue learning and continue contributing to the groups that are working against these systems. Overall, I truly feel pretty shaken up about all of this information, like the whole world is just SO SO disturbed. Is anyone else feeling this?? [Student#0223-09]

This student indicated pleasure and engagement with the back-and-forth posts on discussion board in which they could read about students' lives and how concepts connected to real life. They recognized the enormity of the work of social justice and the task of self-inquiry, including shame about prior ignorance and appreciation for opportunities to learn. The student reached a level of vulnerability in admitting to being shaken and opening their eyes to the magnitude of social problems. The excerpt demonstrates a beginning acceptance (instead of denial), gratitude, and

compassion for oneself to explore within the opportunity of the course. In response, a second student replied:

Response: I totally feel you... Sometimes I will be spiraling after reading these chapters because of how the world can be like this! It is excellent that you are aware and want to ensure you aren't contributing to the negatives. I can totally relate to you and I think one of the best ways to learn is to be uncomfortable and recognize the way you feel. So, shoutout to you for learning and growing!! [Student#0223-07]

There was emotional support and empathy for feeling overwhelmed and spiraling with this newly found knowledge, but also encouragement and affirmation that learning and growth are happening. Terms like “feel you” and “relate to you” indicate empathy and compassion for one another, while terms like “excellent that you are aware” and “shoutout to you” indicate positive reinforcement for doing the work of self-inquiry and for risking to uncover vulnerable thoughts and feelings in order to grow. This series of posts demonstrates multidimensional engagement (and thus deep learning) that involves mind, body, and emotions and strong collaboration and community among white students who do not shy away from the work.

A third student added to this conversation by resonating with emotions and affirmations. She used course vocabulary to name phenomena, discussed activism, and asked challenging questions of herself and society. This student demonstrated not only multidimensional engagement but also various aspects of critical thinking and having an activist mindset. The third student wrote in a post to respond:

Response: I think what you are feeling is really powerful because you are doing something that a lot of white people never will. Many of us will never acknowledge our privilege. I think the feelings that come

with that are intense.... I think it is wonderful that you feel so affected. We can use our privilege to inform our actions -- the way we vote and the way we interact with different cultures.... The places I live and work are the ancestral homelands. How can I make myself useful here when I feel like an invasive? I can be always learning and participating in anti-racist work. I think taking this course will help us empower the diverse student body.
[Student#0223-03]

This student built on the multidimensional and holistic series of reflections with fellow white students, encouraging them to use their privilege in socially active ways that can empower themselves to take action against oppression. They showed empathy and recognition of emotions, suggesting that emotions are “powerful” and “intense,” and applauding that the peer notices affective reactions. The student uses course

vocabulary such as “privilege” and “anti-racist” to describe phenomena. Likewise, the student described that process of utilizing emotions to spark activism such as getting informed, voting with intention, considerably interacting with cultures, and participating in anti-racist work. Furthermore, the student asked critical questions of themselves about how to be useful while feeling like part of the colonizing of indigenous homelands. Not only did this white student offer affirmation, empathy, and accountability to their peers but they also likely helped to educate and develop peers’ thinking because of extending the conversation further to critical, activist, and questioning stances.

Summary of Findings

There were several findings from this study for both students of color and white students. Table 2 below summarizes the findings that were described in the section above.

Table 2. Learning from Opportunities and Onuses

Opportunity for students of color
Connect via affinity, tell their stories vulnerably
Learn concepts and articulate their experiences
Get empathy for the challenges, trauma, and oppression
Tell intersectional and anti-essentializing counter-stories (including instructors)
Onus and racial fatigue
Stress from white students engaging superficially (one-way dialogue)
Pressure to inform the white students
Microaggressions or subversion
Structures for students’ fuller engagement and multi-dimensional dialogue
Include emotions (e.g., shame, discomfort, etc.)
Name their own positioning
Identify the need to engage fully
Get support to build stamina for racial dialogue
Question how to be useful and make a difference
See models from instructors of grappling with whiteness/privilege or healing from oppression as person of color

There were several opportunities for students of color in the findings. Students connected through affinity spaces in the dialogue in discussion boards, in sharing vulnerably about their own lived experiences. They also used language and concepts from the course to articulate their own experiences. They engaged empathically around trauma, oppression, and other challenges, and they offered counter stories that are both anti-essentializing and emphasizing their intersectionality.

Along with opportunities for students of color, there were also onuses on students of color in these conversations around racism and oppression. Conversations were often imbalanced in the level of vulnerability in which white students offered more superficial responses rather than echoing their multidimensional dialogue. Our findings echoed the common experience of racial fatigue in students of color due to the expense of ongoing microaggressions and perceived pressure to provide education for white students around race.

The final few exemplars demonstrate white students moving towards fuller engagement, accountability, and multidimensional dialogue. Engagement occurred holistically as they incorporated their own emotions and feelings, named their social identities, identified the importance of engaging fully, built stamina and endurance to be able to stay in race dialogue rather than giving in to feelings of shame or distancing themselves out of discomfort. A few white students were thinking through how to begin to engage in activism and make a difference in their own and others' lives.

Implications

What do the results of this research mean for our teaching in online social justice courses? Based on this research, we see strong evidence that students need to learn how to do race dialogue,

how to have these dialogues and be able to talk about challenging provocative topics and experiences.

The findings indicate that educators should leverage opportunities and intentionally build affinity connections, which the literature demonstrates is important for students of color. We suggest that instructors build safe or brave spaces to tell one's story and important opportunities for students to heal from the oppression and racism they experience. They may explicitly include holistic engagement and offer a definition and imperative for students to approach the course in a "holistic" way (i.e., holistic means: using mind, body, emotions, and spirituality). That's why mindfulness is included in this course to engage more deeply than unidimensional textbook talk. The instructor needs to take an active role to offer tools and a practice space with parameters to limit superficiality, racial fatigue, and microaggressions. Students need to practice having race dialogue that is scaffolded. The results of this study suggest approaches such as: using counter stories, using testimonials, question asking, modeling stories of students' holistic engagement, offering instructors' own stories of vulnerability, and providing possible productive student moves that students could use in dialogue.

Educators need to thoughtfully consider how to support students to dialogue respectfully, how to engage fully and multi-dimensionally, and what are ways to grapple with emotions. In the world, we will all be faced with having dialogue with people who are similar and different than us, who have had similar experiences and different experiences. Learning scaffolds should include social and emotional components to foster respectful, educational, and productive dialogue with others that may provocative and emotional. These implications for educators are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Implications for Instructors

Leverage opportunities and intentionally build:
Affinity connections
Safe-ish spaces to tell one's story (for healing)
Include holistic engagement: emotions, spirituality, mindfulness
Take active role; offer tools and practice space:
Offer instructional tools to prompt deeper engagement (e.g., counter-stories, testimonials, question-asking)
Model stories of students' or instructor's holistic engagement
Provide possible "student moves" that students could use in dialogue
Teach how to dialogue respectfully:
How to engage fully and multidimensionally
Tools to grapple with emotions
Include explicit models for accountability and compassion

Recommendations for Teaching

Below we present thoughts about the challenges of online teaching for social justice and instructional ideas that are generated from this study. We describe limitations in online learning and potential solutions for these issues.

Community Building: Helping students to learn

To some degree, the nature of discussion boards and perhaps learning platforms like Canvas can be individualistic, meaning that the student does work in front of their own computer and makes individual contributions. Students can choose varying levels of engagement, complete coursework as a requirement for a grade, and not participate in the learning community. Thus, educators may be challenged to consider how to build community and carry out constructivist learning—where students create knowledge collaboratively together—particularly in traditional online learning environments. How do we build sense of community in an online course when they're sitting in front of a computer, have varying levels of engagement, and can choose to formulate responses and assignments in isolation or not? Many choose to only minimally and superficially

post a response to others, without deep engagement, thereby not building a strong sense of community.

Johnson et al. (2018) recommend community-engaged activities that take place outside of course and provide students opportunities to share and critically reflect on their activities and community engagement; and they suggest active learning approaches in which students engage in group learning facilitated by instructor's presence and strong guidelines for interaction and in which students have multiple opportunities for critical thinking. Instructors may require students to go out in their community and identify evidence of a form of oppression or discrimination within their daily life (i.e., to align with the topic of the week). Students would go find some place in their world where discrimination or oppression is occurring. Students would post photos, descriptions, map locations, and testimonials, then respond to one another, in which they demonstrate engagement and insight about the world around them. They may bring back images or artifacts from their world that serve as the basis of conversation. As they offer windows into their physical spaces,

demonstrate interaction with the local community, and show critical applications of ideas, they may build a sense of community together. Activist sentiments may develop because students work as a collective to post about the oppression issues and problem areas locally, which may motivate them with desire to take action.

Evolution over time: Developmental trajectories of learning

Given that the term is ten weeks of content learning, in ED 219 we carefully considered how to “stack” modules to layer students’ learning from basic understandings of socialization and self-inquiry to more advanced and nuanced phenomena such as racism and sexism. To work towards critical awareness and action, students need to develop intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic level thinking (Harro, 2013). These cycles develop slowly over the 10-week term. Students learn that their reactions are starting points for self-reflection (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). To support intrapersonal learning, students engaged with mindfulness modules to learn how to tune into their body, breath, and emotions. Through many interpersonal opportunities in discussion boards, videos, and interactions with the instructor, students reached out to connect with others—either with students who are different from them or with affinity groupings. Through course content, at the structural level students learned the histories, policies, and systems that sustain oppression and racism in society. In the course, students were asked to engage at the interpersonal level with peers and in groups in meaningful and holistic ways. A key curricular element was to link multiple levels—i.e., intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels of learning—through narrative storytelling in discussion board (or sharing activity) in the learning activities. Each week in this course, students were required to take concepts from the course (i.e., concepts about systems level thinking) and apply those to their own life and experiences through brief storytelling, engaging their intrapersonal learning. Students shared these

narrative stories with classmates who responded on the discussion board. Our findings suggest that, since some students less readily engaged authentically through writing with others, another idea for interpersonal development is to assign a video about content, then assign an out-of-class interactions, such as a 20-30-minute conversation with a friend, roommate, partner, or family member about how they see oppression in the video. Students would submit a summary of the conversation on Canvas—i.e., hosting a conversation with a trusted loved one—rather than engage in written conversation with a peer in class.

Responding to students’ distancing or minimizing

As instructors, we often wonder what to do if we notice students who are behaving offensively, distancing or minimizing. This project was about trying to develop tools that we can offer instructors. Possible instructor responses may be: naming the behaviors, showing examples of what full and respectful engagement looks like, and asking questions to understand students’ thinking and to prompt their own reflection. This is key because students may not realize what they are doing, as they may be doing what feels comfortable for them and shaped by how they have been socialized to behave in a white supremacist society. And it’s important to use instructor modeling; if they are white then it is important to model how they may be new to race dialogue, uncomfortable, or fumbling as they make efforts that may or may not help despite their good intentions. Willoughby (2012) of *Teaching Tolerance* produced a set of actions for students or instructors to take when they witness racism or bias. These actions include:

(1) Interrupt: to notice and point out biased remarks each time they happen. People can rehearse what they might say so that it is ready in the moment.

(2) Question: pose a question in response to the biased or disrespectful comment to

figure out the underlying reason or line of thinking, thereby giving clues about how to address the bias. Simple questions like: “Please say more about...” could be helpful.

(3) Educate: do not hesitate to respectfully explain why terminology or behavior is biased and offensive. Sometimes people are not aware that they have said or done something offensive.

(4) Echo: if someone acts bravely to speak up against offensive actions, then echo their words. Individuals can make a difference, but there is power in numbers.

Compassion at the core: We are all socialized in this system

Our data showed several students who felt uncomfortable, avoidant or fatigued with social justice conversation. It’s important to teach this content through compassion rather than put students on the spot in a way that makes them recoil or pushed to the fringes of the conversation. The worldview of this course was that we are all socialized into a racist society; thus, it is not our individual fault that we were socialized that way. It is not our parents’ fault that they were socialized that way, if they didn’t know better. However, what we do have under our control is the ability to learn and grow and do the work of social justice. We can tap into the emotions and, with awareness, not let the fear be the guide. We can pause in the moments when it is easier be reactive when provoked, and we can reject any type of uncompassionate or unproductive reaction. Instead, we can agentively decide to do something different. We believe in teaching this course with compassion because we cannot have the students who are new to race dialogue to feel like this conversation is not for them. They should feel somewhat uncomfortable because that is part of the learning, but not shamed into defensiveness, avoidance or defeat. Teaching ideas may include approaches such as mindfulness to explicitly foster compassion among students and instructor. Also we suggest discussing compassion openly and

explicitly, building community in which we kindly and respectfully discuss our own blind spots, ask thoughtful questions of one another, and tell our own stories of privilege and oppression.

Norms for course conversations

As our data showed, when racial dialogue was unbalanced across students and it became a one-sided conversation, then the environment set the stage for racial fatigue. We can develop explicit course norms so students know what it means to engage in a holistic, deep and respectful manner. Deeper learning occurs when students engage more fully and are scaffolded by norms to guide interactions. One teaching idea is to create course norms together, perhaps in a crowdsourcing document, and revisit them regularly. Then ask students: Does everyone remember the norms we agreed to? Are there any changes that students would like to make? How have we stayed accountable to these norms? Where do we need to hold ourselves more accountable? Are there exemplars of ways that these norms were (or weren’t) put into practice? Please see Appendix A for an exemplar of community norms.

Getting vulnerable and keeping in the healing zone

In the data, we saw students of color who seemed to experience both frustration and healing, and we saw white students both distance themselves or delve in deeply. As educators, there is a balancing act and attending to different groups of students, as we both seek vulnerability and focus on healing. When we create assignments, from one perspective, we think about the white students and how to push the students who distance themselves and use defensive strategies, but we don’t want to solely utilize a white-based pedagogy that focuses on white fragility and developing stamina to dig deeper into racial dialogue. From another perspective, we should attend to healing for students who have experienced racism and racial fatigue. We don’t want to push the students of color into sharing and being vulnerable in ways that feel quite unsafe

and re-traumatizing because their experiences in higher education may have served to reinforce lived oppression and racism. Brooks (2017) describes experiences with a seasoned social justice educator that deployed “toxic ideologies and violent epistemologies” that traumatized Brooks in the classroom (p. 102). A liberating form of social justice education would make space for students to bring their whole selves and rich histories to the learning in the course. One teaching approach is to assign positionality videos where students could tell their stories. Students would make a video of their own sources of knowledge and identity in their homes or communities. In that way, we could attend to student’s family and background from an asset perspective and build on the assets in the course. As educators, when we consider a video assignment, we find ways in which we’re not asking students of color to reveal too much, be too vulnerable or unsafe, and we can ask white students reckon with their positionality and background. The focus is on developing healing space. With compassion, we nudge students who are new to race dialogue to become vulnerable and situate themselves. With any of these activities, we need to be thinking about all the students in the course and not centering whiteness.

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Appendix A. Exemplar of Community Norms for a class

How can we work together to have a respectful, accessible, and intellectually stimulating environment in which everyone can learn? [Course crowd source in a collaborative document.]

- Make space; take space (be mindful of how much space you take up; give space to others)
- Pause and think: Allow time for thinking rather than jump to reaction
- Listen/read with an open mind
- Listen/read carefully before responding
- Ask follow-up questions
- Be respectful and critique content but not the speaker; challenge ideas not people
- Accept that your story is your story, no matter what it is
- Appreciate diversity: your perspective toward someone else's experience is not the same as being the person living that experience
- Maintain confidentiality: Keep outside discussion free of names and details
- Pay attention to one's impact on others, assume good intentions but harm can be done
- Assume responsibility to learn and improve
- Embrace/normalize emerging and changing ideas as "rough drafts" or work in progress
- Aim for an environment where people feel safe-ish to state their needs; take responsibility to state one's own needs
- Have accessibility check ins; building safe spaces
- Provide holistic and multidimensional posts

About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit strives to be leaders in the field of online higher education research through contributing new knowledge to the field, advancing research literacy, building researcher communities and guiding national conversations around actionable research in online teaching and learning.

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.

Contact

Naomi R. Aguiar, Ph.D.
Associate Director of Research
Oregon State Ecampus
541-737-9204
naomi.aguiar@oregonstate.edu

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