

Writing about Race

And addressing academic needs at the same time

Hazel Diana Robin

A Note Before We Start

After re-reading my first draft of this article, I realized that in the hope of being brief and clear, I had inadvertently made this all sound easy. Although this particular lesson went quite well, overall, talking about concepts of race and racism in the classroom has had its challenges, and I'm still learning. I'm having to look at all the things I don't know, like how to best facilitate difficult conversations in class and how to make all these lessons relevant to students wanting to get their HSE diplomas. Furthermore, I'm noticing my own places of discomfort and insecurity around talking about race. I am left wondering, when a student does not return to class, "Was it the content or the way the content was facilitated, or did something just come up in their life?" Another question has come up for me: "Have I gotten my students' agreement to go down this road? Do I need to?" There are many other questions and doubts that have come up, and there are no neat or clear answers. So, with all that said, please read on...

Gathering Evidence First

Because talking about race can feel risky, I wanted to prepare my students to talk, think, and write about the writing prompts proposed by *The Change Agent* for the issue on race. I wanted to give my students information that might counter the many misconceptions that many of us have about race.

After meeting with Kathy Budway from our Civics Department, I decided to have my students do some research on a website called "Race: The Power of an Illusion" and watch a few clips from the video by the same name (search for it on YouTube). We did this over a few class periods. The website and the videos tied in well to our theme for the session, which was early U.S. history.



<www.pbs.org/race>

Why Start with Research Rather than Personal Experience?

Usually, when we start studying a new topic, I ask students to share what they know and to speak from personal experience. But for this topic, I decided to do the opposite. I wanted to create a safer space in the classroom by giving students an opportunity to do some research first, *before* talking. In this way, students could talk about the facts and ideas that they found on the website, rather than just talking about their own ideas or ideas that have been passed down by their family.

Academic Skills

Conducting Research

I developed a series of questions (see *Handout #1*) for students to answer, as they viewed the website. This allowed students to practice their research skills and to respond to evidence-based written questions. This particular website provides an interactive way to read; students can follow their

Writing Prompts

Hazel used *The Change Agent* "Call for Articles" in class. Although the deadline for this "Call" has long passed, you can still use it for its authentic writing prompts. The "Call" is reprinted in this packet.

own interests as they navigate the site. The idea was, that after using the website and having some focused classroom discussion, the students would have more ideas and motivation to respond to the prompts posed by *The Change Agent*.

Learning U.S. History

Understanding race and racism are key to understanding U.S. history. Students should especially check out these “quick facts”: <www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatIsRace/001_00-home.htm>.

Science Background

The relationship between race and biology raises important scientific concepts. Use the 2nd page of *Handout #1* to extend students’ knowledge of cells, genes, chromosomes, etc.

Applying and Transferring Knowledge

Students need to be able to transfer what they are learning to other applications. Studying race provides a great opportunity for students to transfer what they are learning about history to better understand and analyze current events. For example, it can be hard to understand the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement or the many initiatives to change current prison and policing practices if they do not fully understand the realities and implication of the Jim Crow era, convict leasing, and chattel slavery.

Relevant Content Improves Outcomes

There is both research and anecdotal evidence that shows that talking about race makes education and history relevant to students of color, thus engaging them and improving outcomes. According to James W. Loewen, in *The Lies my Teacher Told Me*, white students are also motivated by being able to learn the ugly, as well as the beautiful, of U.S. history. Most students do not want history to be whitewashed for them and are inspired to learn a more accurate version of U.S. history.

Writing/Re-Writing

After we established some evidence-based information about race, I shared with students *The*

Change Agent Call for Articles. Although the deadline for the Race issue is now long past, the Call for Articles still provides useful writing prompts. (See *Handout #2*.) Students can write, get feedback, and incorporate feedback in multiple drafts; these are important skills for college and the workplace. (You can find the current Call for Articles at <changeagent.nelrc.org/write-for-us>.)

Teachers and Students Taking Risks

As a white teacher in a classroom of mostly students of color, there are challenging dynamics and questions that I don’t have answers to. I do not get to leave my white privilege at the door; as a teacher, I have that power differential, as well. Being able to talk about race, as a white teacher, is both a privilege and a function of privilege. In speaking with teachers of color, I understand there are many challenging dynamics that they face, as well, and depending on the institution or classroom composition, perhaps even more push-back.

I am lucky to have a handful of student leaders in my class, and they have been invaluable allies.

We recently talked about the student council developing a student-led workshop about skills

that students and teachers need in order to have important and challenging discussions in class. The workshop might include 1) discussion skills, 2) some basics on privilege and oppression, and 3) why these discussions are important. This kind of student leadership reminds us that the teacher can’t/shouldn’t do it all.

In the end, I think we need to do what we consistently ask our students to do, which is to take risks, be willing to make mistake and know that it is still a work in progress.

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Need Tips and Tricks?

See the “extra” on our website: “Best Practices for Talking about Race in the Classroom.”

Handout #1

Find the Answers to these Questions

Name: _____

Before you start, learn about genes on the next page. Please use the website: <www.pbs.org/race> to respond to the following questions.

1. Why do you think the website is called “Race – The Power of an Illusion?”

2. What does it mean to say that race has no genetic basis?

3. How and why did the concept of race arise? Why would some people find it useful to categorize people in this way?

4. How did race help shape U.S. history?

5. What are three things that are new to you?

6. What do you want to remember?

Genes, Race, and Difference

Some Science Background

What makes humans different from each other?

All plants and animals are made of billions of tiny cells. Inside each human cell, there are normally 23 pairs of chromosomes, and these chromosomes contain deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). The building blocks of DNA are nucleotides. Nucleotides consist of four bases: **adenine** (A), **cytosine** (C), **guanine** (G), and **thymine** (T). All living things pass their DNA on from one generation to the next. Genes are made of DNA. DNA contains all the information about the organism. Genes are small sections of DNA that instruct the organism how to grow and develop.

What is race?

People say that race can be determined from skin color, hair type, the shape of the nose, etc. These features *are* determined by genes, but they represent a tiny fraction of our genetic make-up. According to PBS, “Our DNA is made up of bits and pieces of DNA from millions of ancestors, dating back thousands of generations – all the way to Africa. We all share most of the same ancestry. Humans are 99.9% identical genetically. We are far more alike than we are different. *Genetic differences do exist between individuals and between groups, but those differences don’t follow racial lines.*” The modern concept of race, therefore, is a social and cultural construct with no basis in biology.

Now Try this Activity

Match the term on the left with the definition on the right.

| | |
|-------------|--|
| DNA | The building blocks of DNA; includes adenine (A), guanine (G), cytosine (C), and Thymine (T). The order of these tiny units is the way DNA codes for genes. |
| Race | Each small section of DNA; determines such characteristics as eye color, the shape of blood cells, and whether the right or left side of the brain is dominant |
| Nucleotides | The code for all the traits in the human body; consists of millions, even billions of tiny units linked together in a chain |
| Gene | Structure that contains genetic information |
| Chromosome | A modern concept that claims to sort people according to biological characteristics but is not, in fact, rooted in biology. |

Handout #2



THE CHANGE AGENT

Adult Education for
Social Justice: News,
Issues, and Ideas

The Change Agent CALL FOR ARTICLES Race (Issue #42)

YOU MUST include in *all* articles and emails the contact information for the student and/or the teacher.

THEME: Race. We particularly invite adult learners to share their experiences in writing or with illustrations. Use one or two (not all!) of the following writing prompts to guide your writing:

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What is race? Research this question. Use several sources to back up your claims. Draw from science as well as sociology. Cite your sources.
- Does race have special meaning in the U.S.? If so, what is it? Cite your sources.
- Explore the history of race in the U.S. Where does the idea of "race" come from? Cite your sources.
- If you are not from the U.S., does race have a different meaning in your country of origin? If so, describe it.
- Do you think race has been used to divide people? If so, how? Who benefits from racial divisions?
- Describe when you first became aware of race. Tell the story. Include details.
- Describe a way that you have experienced racism in an interpersonal situation – for example, a racist comment made by a friend or co-worker.
- Describe a way that you have experienced institutional racism – for example, being treated differently by police or the court system because of the color of your skin.
- The issue of black people being killed by police or dying in police custody has been in the news a lot lately. What are your reflections on this issue?
- What is the #blacklivesmatter movement about? What do you think about it?
- Explore what it means to be white in the U.S. If you are white, can you identify any privileges that you got as a result of being white? Can you tell any stories about how being white affected you?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of categorizing people by race?
- What do you celebrate about your race?

All articles must be received by November 6, 2015. Include in *all* articles and emails the contact information for the student and/or the teacher. Final decisions are made by *The Change Agent* editorial board. A \$50 stipend will be paid to each adult education student whose work is accepted for publication.

Please send material (preferably by email) to: Cynthia Peters, World Education, 44 Farnsworth St., Boston, MA 02210 Phone: 617-482-9485 fax: 617-482-0617; email: cpeters@worlded.org.

The mission of *The Change Agent* is to provide news, issues, ideas, and other teaching resources that inspire and enable adult educators and learners to make civic participation and social justice concerns part of their teaching and learning.

<http://changeagent.nelrc.org/>