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Race in the Classroom: It's Still Complicated

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"We were so racially divided back then."

Pronounced by a white student in my Media Ethics class last fall, the reference was not to the 1960s/Civil Rights Era, nor to slavery before 1861, but to the mid-1990s. A discussion of *Time* magazine's infamous darkening of O.J. Simpson's mug shot shortly after his arrest in 1994 prompted her half-defense half-explanation.

The discussion started as an attempt to look at digital manipulation in news photography and whether it is an ethical practice. Numerous examples before the Simpson photo produced an interesting, thoughtful discussion, as had been the case all semester with this particular group of students. But when I pulled that photo out of my folder, the mood of the room changed.

African-American students argued that black is the archetypal symbol for evil, white for angelic; darkening Simpson's skin in the photo thus was an attempt to make him look more evil. This was done, they argued, to appeal to white readers and to reassure them that the darker the skin, the more evil the person. White students concluded that it must have had something to do with the technical quality of the original and they did not fully understand the racist implications. One white student suggested black students were just reading too much into the whole episode.

What really shook the class up was the underlying reassurance that we are no longer divided. The student's follow-up comment was that we've made all kinds of progress since the uninformed era of the 1990s (when we arrived for school on horseback and read by candlelight, apparently), and that this kind of thing would not happen today. I wasn't sure if the black students were more upset at her justification (we didn't know any better then) or her insinuation that all is better now.

Many students seem to want to believe American society is now color blind and we are judged by our characters. But in this instance, the African-American students weren't buying it, arguing that racism is still around, but because it is less acceptable to be blatantly racist, the rest of the world covers it up better. In an effort to convince their white classmates that we are just as racially divided now as we ever were, these students gave several additional examples: black athletes are covered differently from white athletes; no one ever questioned a white president's place of birth; rap music has become far less scary now that white "thugs" are also singing it.

These and other examples were, in their minds, proof that racism is still around. It just plays out differently than it did when beatings or separate water fountains were acceptable.

"What about Tiger Woods?" a white student asked. "Don't you think the media have covered him without prejudice?"

"He's that cute Negro golfer who married a hot white model," a black student replied.

This led to the question of whether we're really in better shape now than we were 15 years ago, or 50 years ago. When the room went silent and all eyes turned to me, I knew my attempt at neutrally moderating had to come to an end. I also knew my students' lack of historical understanding only complicates what is already complicated for most of them. I have been appalled at how poorly my students—regardless of race—know their history. So without answering the question specifically, I started with "you

need some historical context here" and attempted to explain a few things.

It seemed to be going fine until I was interrupted with a question about Brown v. Topeka Board of Education, at which point the hoo-ha began hitting the fan. So I told everyone to stand up. "OK, let's talk about progress," I said. "If you're black, sit down." I then added Latino and Asian. Reminding the class that we are in Texas, the Bible Belt, the Deep South, whatever else we might call it, I said, "So here's where we were in 1951. Sixty years ago isn't that long, but the rest of you were not welcome here then. Women, sit down."

When the three white males in the class of 26 were the last students standing, I said, "Welcome to Midwestern State University at its founding in 1922."

I hated to resort to this level of drama. I thought I was explaining something important in a somewhat objective, though admittedly dramatic, way, but more than that happened. The interpretations:

- I was trying to instill "white guilt";
- I was trying to demonstrate why everyone who isn't white is still angry;
- I effectively showed that we really did make progress as a society;
- I effectively showed that we have made only slight progress, but yes, racism is merely better hidden;
- I effectively showed why I always say we can't study mass media in a vacuum and have to look at the larger society too;
- I had a lot of nerve as a middle-class, highly educated, straight-white-male addressing it at all, regardless of whatever it was I was trying to show.

About three weeks later, when I thought the tension had gone away, the discussion turned to controversial ads. Some students defended running Holocaust denial ads, arguing that everyone has the right to free speech, even if it is misguided. Others defended ads supporting English-only laws for the same reason. For the first time, however, everyone in the room agreed on something: it is not acceptable to run ads that make fun of September 11th.

An African-American student wrote her weekly commentary a few days later, saying she found it "sad and disheartening" that her colleagues could agree on the September 11th ads but not the others. Acknowledging the horror of those events, she then wrote that the same students "don't find the need to be sensitive about racial issues when over 3,400 black Americans have been lynched. They understand that they should not allow an expression in the student newspaper taunting America for being attacked by terrorists, but they would run an ad claiming the deaths of over six million Jews during the Holocaust never occurred."

Part of the inconsistency, she wrote, is that these students lived through September 11th but not the other historical events. "To make true ethical decisions, we all have to place ourselves in someone else's shoes. My father has drunk from a 'coloreds only' water fountain. My mother has been ridiculed for the light color of her skin. I have been brought to tears listening to a survivor of the Holocaust speak. Let my colleagues be descended from parents who were hated by people they had never met or have grandparents they were never able to meet because they were murdered for their culture, and let us see if they don't change their minds on what they view as controversial."

Her essay made clear to me what I already understood and wanted the students to understand: that even if we have made some progress, being "so racially divided" did not end "back then."

I had often removed names and passed out weekly commentaries, usually with a quick "Here are some of your colleagues' comments of late. I thought they were interesting and think you'll find them interesting too." After consulting with her and deleting her name, I passed out her essay to the class, but without saying anything. As the students started reading, the room fell silent. Some students looked around, some made eye contact with me, but then each one looked down again. Finally, a "wow." I didn't say another word about it, instead launching into my usual "Today, we're going to cover ____" statement.

I never brought it up again, because I didn't think I had to.

I'm always nervous about discussing race in any classroom context, as one can never know where the discussion will go, who will say something offensive, or who will be offended. On the other hand, if we don't discuss it, can we make any progress?

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