

Can you talk about racism in the college classroom?

Written by Sheila Regan, TC Daily Planet
Thursday, 26 December 2013 16:15

"They walked the talk," Rice said. She attended dozens of intense large and small group diversity training in her years there. "There never failed to be in attendance the early me: some terribly sensitive white woman who was sure we were all the same and if we could just all get along. She would give a tearful monologue about how hard it is to care so much about these things when you're white. It was so painful."

What helped Rice see structural racism more than the diversity training was simply working with people of all walks of life during her time at RESOURCE, both as co-workers and as clients.

At one point, she and several of her co-workers went to a small Midwestern town. Two of the co-workers, who were Black, were very anxious about going into that environment as people of color. "That is such a small example but it was one that really drove something home to me about taking privilege for granted," she said.

Feeling attacked

Sasha Wallach, who went to the University of Minnesota, said she had mixed experiences. In one sociology class called "American Race Relations," Wallach was one of only three white students in the class of about 150. "The professor was white, but that didn't change the fact that the main focus of the class was how awful white people are," she said. She felt attacked, and didn't feel the discussions were productive.

Wallach had a better experience in a different class, called Asian American Art, where again she was one of only a few white students, this time in a class of about 20, with a Korean American woman as the professor. This second class, Wallach says, was more welcoming. While there often was expression of anger by the students in the class, it didn't seem to her to be directed at the white students in the class.

"I think the fact that one [class] was art and one was social science has a lot to do with it," she said.

Defining Racism

In my column this week, I talked about my own experience with anti-racism training, and how I had the most trouble with the definition of racism as privilege plus power. Amina Harper, an artist and contributor to TC Daily Planet, believes that everyone is capable of skin color, regardless of their skin color.

When she attended a private art college in Oregon, Harper said that once she got into an argument in an African American Studies class with another classmate about whether or not people of color could be racist.

"I've always found arguments like this to be pointless and unfounded; EVERYONE is capable of being racist regardless of their skin color," she said. "The act of racism is about power and the perception of power can change at the drop of a hat depending on the situation. According to this classmate, people of color couldn't be racist, they could only be prejudiced. She said this

Can you talk about racism in the college classroom?

Written by Sheila Regan, TC Daily Planet
Thursday, 26 December 2013 16:15

not realizing that prejudice is an act of pre-judging that is executed when one maintains a discriminatory mindset. Racism is just one of the many forms of discrimination."

Harper described watching *Birth of a Nation* and *Mississippi Burning* in the class, which was taught by a white professor and in which she was the only Black student. Harper said if she had been teaching the class, she might have chosen

Roots

or

The Color Purple

— stories about black life told from the perspectives of black characters.

"The teacher tried his best. It made me wonder if you have to be Black in order to teach Black history as you've actually experienced it first hand."

Campus-wide anti-racism training

Debra Leigh, the diversity director for St. Cloud State University, said about 10 years ago, the university was embroiled in a series of controversies involving discrimination, including a million-dollar settlement of a 2002 case charging anti-Semitism. At that time, the university decided that all faculty should take diversity training, and a task force formed to recommend specific training.

"There was a lot of resistance," Leigh said, "even though the union supported it at first." In the end, anyone in a leadership role was required to take the training, and faculty were strongly encouraged, but not mandated, to participate in the workshops.

That's about the time that the position of diversity director was created and Leigh, who was a professor in dance, was hired for the position. Anti-racism training was embedded in classes and presented as hour-long workshops, offered multiple times per semester. Anyone — students, faculty or staff — could sign up for the workshops, which discussed issues of institutional racism and issues of power. The workshops, "help people see racism," Leigh said. They draw on Joseph Barndt, co-founder of Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training, who distinguishes racism from individual prejudices.

Leigh said what works best is rather than having a straight lecture, having a discussion where participants can engage in the topic. Often, professors will send students to the workshop before taking on the topic of institutional racism in class.

Since 2005, Leigh said, all new employees are required to take the training. "We know it's the hardest subject to teach," said Leigh. Though there was some resistance to the workshops in the beginning, Leigh said they seldom have any now.

Diversity aiding discussions

Aleka Kostouros, who grew up in Minneapolis and is currently getting her master's degree in social work in Philadelphia, said a lot of the curriculum in her current program is based in

Can you talk about racism in the college classroom?

Written by Sheila Regan, TC Daily Planet
Thursday, 26 December 2013 16:15

anti-racism training.

"I have not found there to be much resistance from students," she said, "but then social work likely attracts students who have some interest/exposure to these kinds of conversations/ideas."

Kostouros describes her classes as encouraging the students to be respectful and recognize that everyone's perspective and experience is unique and valid. "We have really good readings that help talk about the subject in a useful, non-blaming way. My professor is awesome and has been doing this a while. He keeps things more analytical than personal, which I think helps people step back and examine their own beliefs with less judgment."

Kostouros said it also matters what the make-up of the class is. "My class is actually really diverse, which is helpful," she said.

Kostouros said that the MCTC controversy reminded her about how segregated Minneapolis is, compared to other cities in the United States.

"Moving out to Philly has forced me to confront my own prejudices and stereotypes that I didn't realize were as ingrained as they were (especially having gone to South High School in Minneapolis)," she said. "While Minneapolis fancies itself liberal and educated, there's a lot more prejudice and probably racism there than anyone wants to admit."

A classroom discussion of structural racism led to a reprimand for Professor Shannon Gibney at MCTC. Professors and students at other colleges report that discussions are often tough, with some white students perceiving any discussion of structural racism as a personal attack. We've collected many of their accounts in [Structural racism: Can we talk? Or not?](#) To join in the discussion, post a comment or send an opinion article toeditor@tcdailyplanet.net