

Episode 27: Addressing Racism in the Classroom

Run Time: 13:51

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Cue music: "Biomythos" by Revolution Void

AH: You're listening to *This Rhetorical Life*, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Hi, everyone. This is Allison Hitt, and today's episode addresses anti-racist pedagogies and how we can talk about racism productively with students in the classroom, particularly when students may feel defensive about these issues. It's important to have these discussions, though, as difficult as they may be, in light of ongoing reports of micro-aggressions and explicit racial violence.

We watched with horror the video of Eric Garner repeating, "I can't breathe" as police officers held his body down until lifeless on a New York City sidewalk. We learned of the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American boy killed in Sanford, Florida while in possession of Skittles and iced tea. And we learned of Michael Brown, the unarmed African American man shot and killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. There have since been more reported cases of unarmed people of color killed by police.

As educators, we ought to discuss issues of racism and structural inequality in our classes. But how do we do this in a way that makes a difference?

According to Jennifer Trainor, author of *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School*, you may be well intentioned in discussing racism in the classroom, but it can backfire and solidify students' perspectives on issues even more than previously. In class conversations about racism, we will likely hear students make racist comments. And as teachers we often tend to see such racist comments in isolated moments and respond, in our minds at least, with judgment. But Dr. Trainor argues that we need to read deeper into the racist comments students make in the classroom to try to understand *why* they're saying what they're saying. Here's what Dr. Trainor has to say about that.

JT: It's easy to see the isolated moments, and it's powerful for us to see them because they're maddening and frustrating and they stand out. But if you look at students' talk over time and in context, they are much more uneven in their ideas than they are in those isolated moments, which then makes it much more complicated to address but also I think makes it sort of less of a problem because you can see that these are young people in process, and they are not coming out of a strict, ideological place where all of their ideas are in

order and all point toward racism. That is not actually usually the case with the students in the study that I did and the students that I have in freshman writing classes who are just a few months older. There's an unevenness and a complexity to what students will say about issues of race depending on the context they're in, depending on what's on their mind, depending on their memories and the things they're working with. But I think that helps us get at what they're actually about when it comes to race. For me, that was really important.

I started the research really struggling to understand how seemingly good people could say such awful things, and that's really what I wanted to understand. I think what I found is that people are not all one thing or another. They aren't as awful as they seem in a particular moment. Our students are struggling I think to make sense of the world.

AH: Next, we asked Dr. Trainor to discuss some of the current approaches to racism in the classroom. Here she starts by explaining the problems with multiculturalism.

JT: There's a lot of things wrong with multiculturalism, especially in K-12 education. It's often presented as this benign melting pot—*we're all the same inside*—leading students to believe that not seeing race is the best strategy and not acknowledging difference is the best strategy. We're all the same inside. In the book, you'll see students saying thing like, “Well we're all the same inside, so Maya Angelou suffered racism. I've suffered, too. I'm a White person, and I've suffered. We're all the same. We all suffer.” Which then obviously negates history and the lived experiences of people of color. So that's one kind of obvious problem with multiculturalism.

I also think that whether this is in the multicultural texts that are being taught or it's in the way they're taught or it's in the students' perceptions of the texts, they tend to dichotomize: *Racism happens because there are evil people in the past or somewhere in the Ku Klux Klan today, somewhere in the South...I don't know, somewhere else that are causing all these problems. It's not something we have to grapple with ourselves in our current place. We're not racist. It's somewhere else.* I think students maybe perceive it—I don't actually know if it's in the text—but there's a perception that there's good and bad, and *I'm good, and that was bad. I don't have to worry about it since I'm not evil, I'm not racist. No problem.*

A third problem, and I think this actually kind of goes in the opposite direction of what I just said, which makes it more complicated is that when you do start to try to push on the idea that we all live in a racist system and we all partake in racist systems—and as White people get benefits from racism—when you take that kind of whiteness studies approach or white privilege approach, you also run into the problem that goes in a slightly different direction, which is the whiteness studies will paint an opposite picture of students as completely in possession of privilege: the knapsack thing I think is the best example of this. Privilege is a knapsack—an invisible knapsack—of benefits that White people carry around and use all the time, but most White people don't feel like they have a backpack. That just isn't how people live their life. You have to work really hard to become conscious of your privilege, and even when you *are* conscious of your privilege and you

know you have a backpack on, there's not much you can do about it. For students, when they're young people, I want to know, *well how am I going to change this?* And I've had students in college say things like, "Well am I supposed to just not be in college because our system of admissions is racist and classist? I should just go home?" Well no, but they want to be able to say, "I'm taking action," and I think the knapsack stuff and the white privilege stuff makes them feel more guilty than is useful, more ashamed than is useful. It gets at emotions that lead more to defensiveness and just a turning away because there's nothing that can be done. You'll hear students say, "There's always been these problems. This is always been the way it is. They're nothing we can do." So that's not what you want, either. I think almost all of those approaches are really not easy to pull off and do well because of these reasons. They risk missing what's really going on.

Now you're going to ask me, "Well what do we do?" [laughs] And I don't have a straightforward or easy answer for that. In the course of doing the research, since I did the research and started doing the analysis for the book, one of the things that I've become interested in is students that are kind of hyper-defensive about these issues and what motivates that. This didn't come up in the book, but in college I was teaching at Santa Clara for a few years, and you get students who are *really* invested in not facing injustice of any kind in our society. They're really conservative, or they really believe in meritocracy and individualism, and they get very defensive. So in trying to think about why that is—and this goes back to the pedagogies—I think one of the things that happens with those students is they are new to the university usually when I have them. They're freshmen. They're brand new. It's a time of flux, and their identities don't feel very solid to them, and this does not help. Their defensiveness is an effort to kind of solidify their identities, so one of the things I've been doing in the classroom with those students—or when I was at Santa Clara—is to actually try to make them feel *good* about who they are before we start questioning the systems of injustice that we're all mired in, which I think is a little bit counterintuitive.

I've done activities where I'll ask students to identify the value that underlies their opinion about an issue. So if we do something like tracking in school and how tracking ends up being raced and classed in its outcomes almost every time. The research doesn't support it as a pedagogical practice, and students will get really defensive. They really believe in this: *I was in the high classes, and I'm telling you they're better and not everybody can do those classes.* Really believe in it, get very defensive. So what I've tried to get students to do is identify the belief that underlies their opinion that tracking is good. And the belief will be something like, "We should reward hard work," or, "We should reward people who try in school by giving them better classes." This is kind of innocuous to me as a belief. This is not something I feel like I need to worry about. A student who believes that rewarding hard work is not a problem for me. So I try to get them to see that that value is part of their identity, but the opinions that come out of that value are not necessarily on very solid ground. So then we go to *well what does the research say on tracking? Can you hold the value while holding the opinion?* And I think that is identity work for these students. That's about not having to say, "I have to leave college because the system is unfair, and I got here out of unfairness."

Giving them a sense that their identity can stay intact, which I think is the opposite of what whiteness studies wants to do—we want to break down racism, be a race traitor, break down whiteness—and instead say, “Your identity is fine. This is more an ally’s approach, and you can actually start to work for change by being who you are, and you don’t have to get rid of your knapsack. We don’t even have to talk about your knapsack. There’s nothing you can do about that. You’re not going to leave college. You’re not going to sell your car and give the money to the poor. I’m not asking you to do that. I can’t...[laughs] It might be a good thing to do—we can talk about it—but I’m not going to say, ‘Yes, that’s what you should do.’ I mean, where does this go? the logic of it in terms of that knapsack and getting rid of it. Forget the knapsack. What are you going to do tomorrow in terms of who you are and the way you live your life that promotes justice?”

And *that* I think is a much easier thing for students to...especially when promoting justice can be as simple as listening or reading some research or finding out some truths that aren’t always available in our general discourse about race or individualism. I think that I’ve had more success with that, especially with those students who are most defensive and most caught up in defending the status quo. Helping them basically see that they *don’t* have to change who they are—that’s how I’ve worked with White students, along with making space for emotions and making it clear that this is hard work and it’s emotional work and it’s fine to be upset, and I’m here if you want to talk about how upset you are, and really making sure that I’m not attacking or judging them, which is not easy because what they say is sometimes very judge worthy. But I try to make it clear that I’m withholding judgment and that I’m really hear to listen and support them as they encounter ideas that are upsetting to them.

AH: In this next segment, Dr. Trainor discusses the place of anti-racist pedagogies and whiteness studies.

JT: The good thing about them is that they create a space to say that anti-racism is an important goal of our teaching, and that it’s a specific thing, and it has connections to people’s identities. If you’re dealing with an all-white audience, you can address that by saying, “This is whiteness.” I guess what I’m trying to say is that it opened up a space for an anti-racist pedagogical approach, whatever approach that ended up being. At least it led to experimentation and trying to identify how White people responded to these kinds of things, what their actual needs and beliefs and beliefs were. It made us go forward, I think. Otherwise, I don’t know where we were before that...just multiculturalism, I guess, and everyone’s going to get along. So I think it was very useful for that opening up of pedagogical space to say “anti-racism has got to be part of the goal.” And if you’re talking about developing an anti-racist consciousness, you’re talking about White people. I can’t really get into different ways that people of color are positioned around issues of race and anti-racism, but presumably racism is something that people in power practice, right? So if you’re going to say, “We want to have an anti-racist pedagogy,” you’re talking about teaching White people, so you’ve already kind of isolated whiteness as *something* that you need to investigate and understand. You know, I think there’s work to be done.

- BK: Jennifer Trainor opens up a complex conversation around models of teaching white students about racism. How do we approach these topics without making students defensive? How do we teach students to become allies, instead of sinking deeper into engrained structures and ideologies of racism, and instead of acting on guilt?

We would like to thank Jennifer Trainor, author of *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School* and Associate Professor in the department of English Language and Literature at San Francisco State University. We also want to thank Tamara Issak for conducting this interview and helping frame this episode.

Thank you all for listening.

Cue music: “From Stardust to Sentience” by High Places

- AH: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrick and Allison Hitt with additional production from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.