



Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Teacher

Cyndi Kernahan

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In the beginning pages of *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Teacher*, Cyndi Kernahan states the purpose of her book: “This book is about teaching race and racism in a way that is not blaming or shaming, a way that is compassionate but also relentlessly honest... confront[ing] the realities of racism without being confrontational” (5). Utilizing the latest research from the scholarship of teaching and learning and her field of social psychology, Kernahan delivers a compelling volume useful for both those teaching courses specifically about race and racism and for instructors whose fields will inevitably encounter racial themes.

In the introduction, the author poses the question, “Why Is It So Hard?” to teach about race and racism. She names the emotional and cognitive complexity involved in the subject and how it can challenge a student’s sense of identity. While acknowledging that these forces are at play in the classroom, she is clear in her understanding that her mandate as a teacher is to assist students in developing a more nuanced and complicated understanding of the subject matter, not necessarily to compel behavior change.

The following six chapters are organized in a similar fashion, exploring a specific topic related to teaching about racism, followed by recommendations and suggestions, developed through thorough research as well as her own experiences in the classroom. The topics of these chapters include an examination of how students can move from a personalized understanding of racism to one that incorporates an understanding of systemic forces, student resistance to course content and ideas for moving students beyond resistance, and how to develop a secure teacher identity when teaching about racism. Additionally, she details how to create belonging in the classroom, the process of creating ground rules that encourage a growth mindset, and strategies for teaching difficult course content. Kernahan concludes with a succinct summary of seven overarching ideas and an appendix of sources useful in understanding the historical context of racism.

This volume is thoughtful, impeccably researched, and full of useful examples

drawing on her own years of experience as well as insights from her colleagues in the field. Throughout the book, Kernahan maintains her commitment to honest, evidence-based teaching on the issue of race and compassion towards students as they navigate the disturbing history and contemporary reality of systemic racism. While the author is clear in her focus on how one educates about race, her book covers topics that are useful to university faculty who find themselves teaching about any number of polarizing issues. Especially insightful is her treatment of student resistance and creating belonging in the classroom. The book is not without its limitations, which Kernahan readily admits. From the beginning, she is clear about her limited perspective; she teaches small classes to overwhelmingly white students. She also notes that limited research has been done on the concerns of students of color in courses on race and even less on white instructors teaching in classrooms where the majority of the students are people of color. While more research is urgently needed in these areas, her work is still immensely helpful and insightful, providing best practices that can serve to create a transformative learning environment around a difficult topic.