**Teaching Gender and Race Online**

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Long before the COVID situation made teaching and learning online the norm, incorporating, and ensuring constructive discussion around concepts of racial inequality and injustice in the curriculum was a challenge that professors and teachers, especially in the humanities, have often encountered. As the educators, interviewed for this chapter, said, much of their efforts to inculcate questions of race, gender and socio economics constituted a broader effort to make education more social justice oriented and provide students a better understanding of how systems work to oppress and hamper the creation of a more equitable society (Thurber et al., 2019). As the country grapples with crucial questions related to race and social justice, ensuring that students get a thorough understanding of the issues that will enable them to analyze and comprehend the important questions of the day is a must. Besides, 6.3 million students in the United States take courses online (Seaman et al., 2018) and as the pandemic shows little sign of easing, online teaching seems set to stay.

For both students and faculty, taking classes online has certainly produced new challenges. For professors teaching sticky matters of race and gender, teaching online has meant confronting situations whose intricacies are not just all technical, but theoretical as well. Students are less inclined to bring up hard questions and engaging with complicated histories and perceptions can be exacting (Martell & Stevens, 2018). This chapter explores how professors, especially those, in the humanities, re-evaluated their teaching and used new examples and methodologies to ensure that students still got a chance to explore deeply nuanced ideas in lectures, that had to readapt for online delivery.

Through in-depth interviews with 15 professors teaching undergraduates and graduate students in various colleges across the country, this chapter seeks to provide a road map to assist instructors in making the approach to teaching knotty concepts of gender and race and knowledge of intersectionality, in classrooms, clear, as well as identify different models and perspectives, that will help learners discern and delve into the different and inherent contradictions and tensions that arise and shape gender and race related conflicts. The participants interviewed teach a wide variety of courses related to social media and society, history of media, to classes on gender, race theory, misogyny and other journalism and reporting and writing courses that often are cross listed with various other liberal arts departments like history, anthropology, women’s studies and political science.

**Common Challenges**

**The Teacher’s Perspective**

The professors and teachers, interviewed, agreed that teaching classes, especially on race, gender and power relations that inevitably formed important aspects of the various topics they taught, was challenging to explain even in conventional classrooms. “Most students, especially undergraduate students, have a very limited assumption of how thorny issues of race and gender can be related and how they can intersect to create certain encounters,” said, one professor. “For example, while they may be aware of racism, per se, it is hard for them to connect how being black, a woman, and poor can mean very different realities for some.” Learners, as the participants reiterated, have very superficial impressions of why race and gender are important. “We must understand that they may have never engaged with these thoughts in a critical fashion,” explained one assistant professor at a large public university. “Also, they have limited knowledge of history and how colonialism and slavery have operated down the ages.”

The participants interviewed identified three main issues connected with teaching race, gender, and intersectionality. They were: 1) a lack of cogent engagement with how such ideas can intersect 2) little knowledge of historical and sociological context, and 3) an inability to connect with backgrounds that went beyond their own situations.

In conventional classrooms, many of these teachers taught through discussion- based lectures, constituting portions where the professor explained a thought or theory in detail and then let the students grapple with questions through discussions as a class or in groups to test their understanding and get an insight into their thoughts about an issue. “These discussions often throw up key insights into how students think,” said one professor. “They show me areas where students need more context and explanations to help them understand the important and often not so obvious implications.” Online classes may not always have the means to implement this. Also, few of the faculty interviewed had ever taken an online class themselves, so there was no benchmark for them to adhere to or follow (Schimdt et al., 2016).

**The Student’s Perspective**

Online learning can be a unique way to increase access for some, but students often find even common learning systems hard to use. The tutorials designed to help often end up confusing them even further. In conventional classrooms, a student’s learning quirks and requirements are often more easily met. Students are often unclear about what they should do once they enter an online class (Darby & Lang, 2019). For example, as one of my interviewees who teaches in a state university where traditionally students come from low-income backgrounds explained, “For some of my students, my class is the first time where they use a computer for research and writing. Instructions to log onto the learning systems can often be complicated because this is the first time, they are creating email ids, log ins, and passwords and this can often be very overwhelming.” It is this feeling of inadequacy that often-led students to leave online courses. “This is especially true of my students of color,” said one professor teaching in a historically black college. In a recent article, Newfield and Sublett (2018) have pointed out that online education can be an important “engine of racial inequality” and that effective higher education policy must consider these implications when creating policy.

Problems with technology is a factor that Darby and Lang (2019) have comprehensively emphasized as being a singular factor that influences how well a student learns in an online class. Students may not be aware of how to start engaging with the content presented online. Physical classrooms have clear norms that students can cling on to start with. Kauffman (2015) in her seminal work on the characteristics of online students that succeed has emphasized that students who are self-motivated, good organizers and aware of time are the ones who perform the best in online classrooms. But as my participants said, even the best of students can find grappling with perplexing theories of race and gender difficult in a class where he or she may not be able to physically meet with peers to discuss matters and thus lack the support that a physical classroom may provide.

The online classroom emphasizes the need for the physical presence of the instructor. Yet in most online classrooms, images and videos have replaced the familiar comfort of the instructor’s presence and voice. There is no one in real time to ask for help and this can lead to “poor, disengaged” performance (Darby & Lang, 2019).

My interview participants agreed that these were important topics that they have always considered in their classes. Thus, as they realized that teaching complicated subjects related to race and gender might get even more challenging online, they adapted their teaching strategies around three aspects:

1. course design

2. student engagement

3. increasing motivation and learner autonomy.

**Meeting the Challenge: Course Design**

At the outset, my interviewees had made clear three major challenges that they had to deal with related to course design. They comprised a lack of systematic engagement with intersectionality, little awareness of historical context that defines race and gender relations, and an inability to see events and realities beyond their own situations. They reported that while transitioning online, they had been anxious about how well the learning systems and technology would enable them to translate their teaching and styles of pedagogy. The course syllabus and setup received a rethink and redesign from most. Course design had to be extremely intentional. “I shifted my focus to the most important goals we had for our students,” said one participant with five years of teaching in a mid-sized state university. Learning from Darby and Lang’s (2019) fundamental book *Small Teaching Online* encouraged her to “take a backward design approach” and “think carefully about her destination.” This format encourages educators to think along three crucial lines:

1. Where do I want my students to end up?

2. How will we know we have arrived?

3. What will we need to help us get there?

This involves revisiting course objectives and ofttimes a rewording of them as well. These are important points to consider, for as Darby and Lang point out, in a classroom, teachers have many opportunities to remind students about the broader goals of the course, but online instruction may make that hard. Even if the syllabus is extremely detailed, students viewing this through a screen may miss out on important points. When teaching online, teachers must be very clear about explaining the vison and objectives underlining an activity and what the expected takeaways from readings and lectures are. As one participant said, “In my online class, I always explain why they are reading something, who wrote it and what they must look for in the piece. I tell students that they will get extra points if they can bring me insights we did not touch upon in class.” Confusion among students online is often hard to detect and this clarity often worked well to eliminate doubts.

Ensuring clarity is among the first and most important elements that my participants worked towards. In keeping with the suggestions of the Hanover Research report that analyses online teaching practices, my participants worked very hard to ensure to establish a clear communication pattern that worked well to alleviate confusion about course requirements and assignment demands. While introducing the syllabus is usually done on the first days of class, being online meant spending more time on it and taking students through its most important elements line by line. “I introduced the final assignment and made clear that every class and reading assigned could be a part of the final paper,” said one participant. The gender, race, and intersectional element was emphasized. “In the introduction to my social media and society class, I made clear that access to technology and who got access online was greatly dictated by gender, socioeconomic class, and the color of their skin. I point out the portions of the syllabus where we exclusively refer to intersectionality,” said one interviewee. Another participant said she devised an assignment around her syllabus and gave points to students who were able to point how the different areas where intersectionality was required as part of the assignment. “This helped engage them with the idea from the first time they looked at the syllabus,” she said. Most incorporated modules like the Maynard Institute’s Fault Lines approach (Lehrman, 2019)

to introducing diversity saying that they found such concrete insights that the component provided, “very useful to explain the concept of intersectionality.” Dori J. Maynard, president of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education in Oakland, CA, based her five Fault Lines of race, class, gender, generation and geography on her father, Robert C. Maynard’s philosophy, because he believed they were the most enduring forces that have shaped social tensions since the founding of this nation.

My participants used a variety of media to emphasize and frame lectures around questions of diversity and internationality. As one participant said, “I wanted to ensure that my student journalists learned more about the context in which present racial tensions have brewed.” She showed various films like To Kill a Mockingbird and Gone with the Wind to talk about the history of how black lives are shaped in the country today. “Historically students have had a woeful lack of historical context about how the US came to be and that was a huge lacuna that had to be fulfilled,” she said. Using the movies as a focal point she spoke not about how slavery came to be but also how racism permeated even in the movie industry. This was also a way to understand that while personal experience was important when it came to comprehend certain struggles; it was important to transcend the personal and extend into the universal as well. It is easy to show a movie in an online class, said my participants, but they also ensured that they remembered key scenes and created points of discussion to lead the class through.

Discussions around these films were also related to how they are being covered in the media lately. Various studies have shown that social media has had a significant influence on racism and can be a useful resource for extending our understanding of race (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). “In a social media class, I encourage students to analyze the tweets around the theme and use that as starting points to discuss racism and allied aspects,” said one participant, a professor at a large private university. This helped them identify words like “n\*\*\*\*\*” and discuss their connotations; words that most students would not bring up on their own.

But as my participants said, it would be a mistake to assume that all students are familiar with Twitter. Sometimes students needed help navigating the platform and professors should be aware of this and prepare accordingly. Professors did not restrict themselves to Twitter alone for as Pew Research Center says, 72% of adults who use the Internet participate in social media video sharing sites such as YouTube or Vimeo (Purcell, 2013) and so exploring race related discourse was extended to these sites as well.

**Meeting the Challenge: Student Engagement**

My participants were clear that their years of teaching race and gender, especially in undergraduate classes, had taught them that the readings assigned, and the lecture might often prove provocative to students’ long held beliefs, backgrounds, and assumptions. “Opinions and beliefs in this area can be very emotional, and I wanted to engage this emotion to create a connect with my students so that we could better tackle arguments centered around race and gender justice,” said one participant. As Thurber et al. (2019) have said, courses about race, gender, and social justice “…may have any number of learning goals, such as: to increase empathy, to challenge misconceptions, to expand theoretical perspectives, to cultivate analytic skills, or to develop tools for productive dialogue.” This, my participants felt, encouraged a synchronous delivery of classes online rather than asynchronous. They used a variety of media including, video, discussion, group work, and readings to facilitate classes but felt that a live presence online was necessary to facilitate and engage constructively with shared thoughts and discuss fraught questions related to gender and race. “Students will often not speak their minds and not ask hard questions if the instructor is not present and the discussion will not bring up new ideas,” said one professor of color who teaches in a large state university.

Discussion boards online were useful to maintain conversations around such topics but most of my interviewees felt that face-to-face synchronous discussions facilitated in the presence of the instructor online provided for spaces where students could share their thoughts more effectively. “When students write, they often tend to overthink questions, especially if they are tricky or uncomfortable ones like that of race,” said one participant, a Native American professor of race and gender online in a large state university. “Students must be allowed to speak freely. They must understand that this is their safe space to share their thoughts.” In a bid to encourage greater and more daring engagement with manifold questions of race and gender, another participant said, he would tell students that it was okay to write what they felt without fear of having to be right. Students were encouraged to talk about their own backgrounds and contexts. “I encourage opinions, especially in the first few classes so that I learn more about what my students think and know about such subjects,” he said. This, as my participants emphasized, was imperative if the basic goals of courses on race and gender were to be met.

Many learnt to use the technology to ensure as close a traditional classroom setting as possible. They learnt how to use the different technology at their disposal and created sessions accordingly. “I find the breakout room feature on Zoom very useful,” said one participant. “I divided the class into break out rooms and kept visiting each breakout room to listen to the discussions.” Students were encouraged to post the important points of their discussion online on their learning systems.

The professors interviewed also mentioned the approach of transformative pedagogy that they very consciously used while adapting their courses for online delivery. As Meyers (2008) explains, “Transformative pedagogy encourages students to critically examine their assumptions, grapple with social problems, and engage in social action.” As a paradigm, transformative pedagogy (Taylor & Snyder, 2012) encourages an examination of contexts and situations using various other perspectives while considering social issues. Transformative pedagogy encourages the creation of safe environments, where students are encouraged to think about and question beliefs and biases, and consciously use teaching strategies that encourage better engagement and learning.

Professors asked students to consider alternative perspectives, giving them readings on white supremacy and how this and other social forces impacted the certain groups, keeping them marginalized and dominated. “I make pdfs of the various stories covered by mainstream media pertaining to white supremacy and give them as readings,” said one professor. “These spark discussions about how racism can be disguised as nationalism and what make the two different.” Using mainstream media stories shows students that white supremacy is no rarefied idea but one that society is grappling with now. The immediacy brings the issue closer home and inspires them to explore the issue.

Discussion boards and other text-based conversation apps in learning management systems can be particularly stressful for students because they know they are creating permanent records of anything poorly worded for their instructor and peers to review a limitless number of times (Kelly & Westerman, 2016). Therefore, for sensitive topics such as this, it is best to keep discussion boards anonymous. “I tell my students that we do not need to know who posted a certain thought, but we certainly need to confront and respectfully try and change perspectives,” said one professor. Research has shown that online anonymity, in the context of teaching and learning, helps to create safe environments where collaboration and sharing of views among learners can be encouraged and higher participation encouraged (Chester & Gwynne, 1998). Anonymity, my participants felt, would encourage a franker sharing of thoughts, especially for the more introverted students. One participant had an interesting narrative. In her class, one student had made some provocative remarks about slavery in the country. One black student had not shared her opposition to his comments because she did not want to stir up controversy. But in a thoughtful anonymous post she wrote about how as a black person, the other students views had disrespected her and her ancestry. This was later used in class to show students how nuanced arguments about race and its troubled history should be made.

**Meeting the Challenge: Increasing Motivation and Learner Autonomy**

Thinking along the lines of transformative pedagogy, my participants were very clear that while many online teaching innovations have certainly encouraged the way instruction is delivered to students, they still had to be cognizant that such learning can be very passive in nature. “They may be watching a film but that does not mean they are engaging with the content,” said one participant. Consciousness raising around the existence of oppression (Brookfield, 2012; Cranton, 2016) is no easy task and doing this online comes with a unique set of demands. Research has shown that graduate students learn best when learning online is self-directed (Mello, 2016), but undergraduate students need more support.

To ensure engagement, faculty themselves were extremely active and made sure that they were, as one participant put it, “extremely present” themselves. In a recent study, a survey of 485 online students at Penn State World Campus associated strong instructor engagement with higher scores of student commitment to the course (Bigatel & Edel-Malizia, 2018). Classes delivered synchronously were a mix of lectures, audio, video, and discussion-based sections. Emails and questions were responded to within hours and clear expectations were set for student participation. Besides making it clear that this was their safe space, instructors also had clear rules about what constituted respect and how difficult points of view could be put forth without being aggressive and preventing others from speaking. “I also gave students an option of sending me a private message if they wanted to discuss an idea or point of view that felt might be controversial and if they needed help on articulating it,” said one professor. “Many students would often ask if their wording was respectful. I welcomed such questions and stayed on my toes making sure that every student got a response.”

Another professor, in a mid-sized university, used Teaching Tolerance (2019) templates (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>) to guide conversations around whiteness and #BlacklivesMatter. Her purpose, since she was teaching topics that would mean interrogating commonly held beliefs, was to encourage reflection. As Smele et al. (2017) have shown, encouraging a reflection on beliefs and actions is a core element of teaching social justice. The process of examining one’s actions over time is broadly referred to as *reflexivity* (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). “This helps students consider their motives and the influences over their beliefs over time in a very constructive way,” said my participants. As Thurber et al. (2019) say, educators can “model” reflexivity by talking about their own tussles with microaggressions and reactions towards aggressive comments or behaviors. As one professor of color at a large state university said, “I always discuss my own struggles and talk about my students from other classes or previous semesters, making sure to keep their identity anonymous. I try to explain that even as an educated adult I find it hard to understand how all the compound ways racism operates and why it is important to understand it and how it helps us articulate injustices that might happen to us.”

This reflexivity often encouraged students to share encounters that have certainly enhanced the richness of the class. As one of my interviewees said, “Last semester one white student said how a restaurant would not serve her and her Taiwanese friend. She walked out and was aghast that racism was not just about black people but extended to people from other countries as well.” This led to more discussions about how Asians faced discrimination and as the professor said, “I had never seen so much animation and solidarity in my class before. Suddenly we were all part of a one whole, fighting to make a more equitable world.” Many also use Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) study of white students’ rhetorical strategies and encouraged students to discern the tactics employed to understand how dominant classes express their views on race.

Using the theory of transformative pedagogy also means using assignments and other means of assessments to give constructive and prompt feedback on. “I wanted to ensure that students meaningfully engaged with the whole content of the course rather than just piecemeal aspects when they were working on their final assignments,” said one professor. Students in her class wanted to work in groups and find solutions and design programs to educate other people against such systemic bias and the professor ended up changing the final assignment from a paper to group work that led to posters, poetry and plays on battling racism. “I created an online gallery of student work,” she says. “It became a kind of exhibition as well as protest space.” She gave everyone top marks and remembers this as the ideal class outcome for her course on race, gender, and media. Given the pandemic situation, since students could not go out and produce videos, some professors said that they had increased the number of advocacy editorials that students could write based on the different media reports on the #BlackLivesmatter movement and the protests around the death of George Floyd. She also implemented a section on oral history where students could interview people from their own family or other cultures, over the phone or zoom, to create short cultural and lifestyle pieces.

This is the kind of transformative learning that encourages the creation of action-oriented solutions. Their aim, as my respondents said, was to encourage students to develop the skills that would fearlessly and effectively help them participate as citizens (Daloz, 2000) and ensure social change.

While students delved deeper into the subtleties of the questions before them, professors also assigned them more journaling related assignments where students were encouraged to make connections between what they were taught, shown and their class discussions and their lived experiences. My participants often changed the nature of the assignment because an online classroom often demanded a different kind of student assignment. “If we are to encourage greater student engagement then we must meet them where they are and as they develop their thinking and assignments must be changed and adapted to keep up,” said one participant. Not all the reflections posted are graded and students are often given extra points for participation. “At first students participate because of the points and once they do so in a respectful atmosphere where their views are encouraged, they feel better about sharing and this starts a very positive chain of finding and sharing their own voice,” said one professor from a historically black college. This was designed to enhance the students’ control over their learning and ensure that they understood that they were there to learn, not just complete assignments for a grade.

To ensure more student control over learning, professors also ensured that students were as comfortable as possible with their learning systems. “The first a few office hours for the course were designed to answer questions about how to use the assignment and discussion sections,” said one professor from a mid-sized state university. Her student evals showed that the students had deeply appreciated this. The professors agreed that they did not need technical obstacles to complicate the already manifold questions of race and gender that their courses were designed around. My participants said that before they started teaching online, even in the short period of time that they were given to adapt their courses; they worked hard to ensure that they were as prepared as possible for this. “I made sure that I did not look at online education as a second-best alternative,” said one professor teaching in a large state university. “For me, it was the latest and most effective way to deliver my course.” While some expressed doubts about whether they could be effective online teachers, they were clear that going online did not mean less rigor of learning or assessment.

**Conclusion and discussion**

From the outset, my participants were clear about the challenges they would have to face in their online delivery of classes centered on teaching theories related to misogyny, racism, and gender. They knew from their years of teaching that students often found it hard to thoroughly engage with how topics in the area intersected and impacted experiences and that they had little background knowledge to build on. But this did not stop them from ensuring that students delved into these ideas as analytically as possible. Using different teaching templates from instructions like the Maynard Institute and other resources like the Teaching Tolerance templates, they redesigned syllabi and adapted assignments to give students more control over their learning and in the process increase motivation and engagement. Teaching complicated notions of race and gender is never easy but these professors adapted different aspects of the learning systems they had at their disposal to ensure that students learnt and developed crucial skills to take concrete action. Their used various aspects of transformational pedagogy and combined different teaching techniques like lectures and discussion and media like film and print to help students engage with issues of race facing the nation today. They all agreed that the synchronous method of delivery helped them address the different questions that students brought up and keep engagement levels high. This enabled them to use the discussion feature effectively and produce, as much as possible, a traditional classroom experience for students. But they agreed that this could certainly reduce access since some students may not be able to attend at fixed time but as the professors interviewed said, the complexity of the ideas were such that the physical presence of the instructors to answer questions and facilitate free and open discussions were very necessary.

**Best Practices**

The participants interviewed had a quick checklist for those teaching race and gender related classes online for the first time.

1. Talking about race and gender to students can be emotional for the instructors as well for students. The aim is to ensure that students to bring up and ask hard questions. Engage with lines of thoughts even if they are flawed. Students learn how to use logic and fact to support their points and you might just have shown them new ways to think.
2. Use different online resources that are available. For example, the Teaching Tolerance site has a wide array of classroom topics that can be incorporated online: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>
3. Use mainstream media and new media like social media video and messaging platforms. They are pivotal to larger public conversations that students must be keyed into.
4. As you encourage reflexivity, talk about biases that you may have overcome in your life and work. Encourage students to reflect on situations and larger political happenings in the light of facts. These facts can be historical or immediate and students must be taught the importance of using strong references in their work.
5. Diversify the content. Use authors from different races, genders, and cultures in the syllabus. Introduce students to these authors. This can form key prefaces for students to go beyond their limited worlds and encounter something larger. Try and use this to create larger communities of learning where students can exchange ideas.
6. Be prepared for the unexpected. We can follow every suggestion in the book to make sure that we have the perfect course set up, but students learn in different, unpredictable ways. Be prepared for the unforeseen.
7. Advocate for more organizational structure and institutional support for online programs. See if faculty development programs designed to help faculty teach online can be developed. Share tips and resources among yourself, especially, if they are related to student engagement.
8. Students are confused and scared. There is a pandemic and protests around race rights. So be as supportive as you can. Make feedback kind, perceptive and timely. Talk to students. See if you can give feedback face to face. The attention will make you present as an instructor as well as one who does their best to engage students.
9. Be prepared to change an assignment if you feel it no longer meets or enhances student progress. the issue of race, as we can see, is a clearly evolving one. Encourage students to keep up and honor their growth by making changes wherever necessary.
10. Anonymity on discussion boards can be helpful, especially to draw out shy students or those who feel afraid to share view. But if you feel that this is being misused and the number of racist posts is deliberate, change the settings. Explain to students why this has been done but do it. This is your class, and you are in control.

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