



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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For the past five decades, I have been exploring White privilege in my personal and professional life. I am White. I married a Black man in Missouri in 1973. We have a son who was born in 1975. My PhD is in Anthropology from the University of Kansas. I have taught high school, undergraduate, graduate, and medical students over the past 30 years. For more information on my background, how I came to an understanding of White privilege before that term was commonly used, and how it impacts my family, you can check out my NISOD webinar.

White Privilege: What It Is and How to Incorporate the Topic Into Your Class Sessions

White privilege is defined as “inherent advantages possessed by a White person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice.”^[i] It is an acknowledgment that having white skin is an advantage from which all White people benefit, whether they realize it or not.

White privilege can be a difficult topic to broach in the classroom. White instructors may worry about misspeaking or offending their students. Some may even reject the idea that they have this privilege at all. Although it may be uncomfortable, it is important to acknowledge White privilege and make a space for conversations about race in the classroom.

This article specifically focuses on White privilege as it relates to Black individuals. However, many other ethnic or socio-cultural racial groups are also impacted by White privilege.

Those individuals who want to learn more about White privilege and how to address it in their classes should review the steps laid out in this article. These steps can help instructors gain a wealth of knowledge, see their world more clearly, and realize that White privilege can and should be addressed in every classroom.

Step 1

Recognize that if you are White or perceived as White, you have White privilege. If you are White and come from a background where you had to struggle for your

education or to provide for yourself and your family, you may not believe that you are privileged. However, White privilege doesn't mean you have not faced hardships. It just means that the color of your skin was not a contributing factor in those hardships.

Step 2

Educate yourself. Explore the issue of socio-cultural race^[ii] in the United States by reading the books and articles and watching the videos that are included in the White Privilege Reference List below.^[iii]

Step 3

Expand your social contacts by using the Twitter list below.^[iv] Follow the advice of these voices, such as Verna Myers in her TED talk.^[v] Move towards your areas of discomfort. When you do this, you will find that those who you approach are probably not that dissimilar from you. Any differences that do exist will improve and enhance your understanding of your own life. Build bridges, not walls.

Once you have taken these steps, you will have the necessary knowledge and tools to begin discussing White privilege in your class sessions.

White Privilege in the Classroom

The following are examples of how to build on discussions of White privilege in various disciplines, including cultural anthropology, American history, politics, economics, sociology, and literature.

When discussing chapters concerning gender, age, or class, instructors can explore examples in the United States of individuals grouped into a particular underclass, or lower social stratum of a community. These include the LGBTQ community, homeless families, and interracial couples. In a discussion about interracial couples, the class may begin talking about anti-miscegenation laws that kept individuals in Southern states who were from different racial groups from marrying. Students might discuss how White privilege functioned in these times, and how the children of interracial marriages might lose the privilege of being White. This topic leads into further discussions of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and lynching.

When discussing chapters concerning politics and

power, instructors can provide students with examples of Black individuals being over-policed, over-arrested, and over-sentenced compared to White individuals. The attached Reference List and the List of Cases[vi] provide specific examples. In addition, instructors can discuss the ways in which voting laws are designed to suppress the votes of Black individuals, thereby depriving them of equal rights. Laws have also been enacted to prevent Black individuals from obtaining the same degree of economic security available to individuals who are White.

When discussing chapters concerning language, instructors can use videos and novels to show how character descriptions generally depict White characters as the norm, but non-White characters as the “other.”

STEM courses can incorporate graphs of privilege and disparity. Music classes can incorporate the song Strange Fruit, which will lead to a discussion about lynching. Human biology courses can discuss how the non-scientific concept of race developed and how it was and is used to privilege White individuals.

Conclusion

I challenge all faculty to invest the time to explore the attached materials. When you have done so, you will find yourself more conscious of White privilege and more confident leading discussions on the topic. These discussions lead to meaningful, perhaps life-changing, interactions with your students. Knowledge that leads to change is education.

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Endnotes:

[i] White privilege (n.d.) In Lexico.com. Retrieved from: https://www.lexico.com/definition/white_privilege

[ii] Race has no biological reality; it is a socio-cultural construct that varies across countries.

[iii] White Privilege Reference List: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/181oY990fdpIlmyL4FFIki9jycPF4iGuekGBfj2tfeJo/edit?usp=sharing>

[iv] Twitter List: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1R_f3Sb7rUIRyFOBQXsoxDy51cKqZKOvaZz4rI70FAy8/edit?usp=sharing

[v] Included in Reference List.

[vi] List of Cases: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kG1W0lpJWBMqv4JYa80IUATSGLGmloCnQ-ZmqOEcmEU/edit?usp=sharing>