Let's Talk about Race:
Conversation on Race, Anti-Blackness, and Civic Identity in Post-2020 Times

by ***Matt Griffith***
Ph.D. candidate, Higher Education and Organizational Change, UCLA

1. Premise

Since the fall of 2019, I have been the course instructor for the 195CE Community Engagement and Social Change course at UCLA. Administered through the Center for Community Engagement, the course is designed to provide academic credit to upper-division students with internships while also providing a rigorous educational experience where they read, write, and discuss scholarship to reflect and analyze their professional experience critically. In the community engagement and social change section, most of my students hold internships at nonprofits, government agencies, or companies with a job focus on social impact and community issues.

When taking over the class, I noticed a lack of discussion about power and identity issues. As a race and diversity scholar, I immediately made changes. I began to modify reading lists to include more minoritized voices and challenged students to discuss how power and privilege are at play. Overall, both the Center and I were pleased with the changes brought to the class. This contentment ended during the Spring of 2020.

In Spring 2020, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black bodies captivated the nation. It sparked a global uprising—upending racial discourse and mobilizing individuals worldwide toward engaging in dialogue and action against racism, anti-Blackness, and systemic oppression (Buchanan et al., 2020). Here I was: a Black man, teaching a class on social change in the middle of a generation-defining civil uprising for Black lives, and the course that I was teaching– was not meeting the moment. What is the relationship between social change and racial equity? How is racism embedded and persisted in ongoing social movements? How do we better historize and contextualize issues of racism in examples? More than critique, how are we offering tools on anti-racism and combating anti-Blackness? Can one genuinely talk about civic engagement and participation in democracy without centering race and racism? This experience and these questions serve as the basis for this study.

2. Project Overview

Inspired by the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings, this project will investigate how race, racism, and anti-Blackness are explored in civic engagement and social change curricula within university courses. Using content analysis and interviews, the project's findings will be used to develop educational resources for course instructors and administrators.

- In what ways, if any, are issues of race and racism explored in these curricula?
- How do course participants (i.e., instructors and students) reflect and understand their learning and experience? How did they perceive the discussions on race and racism?

3. Background

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) named civic engagement as one of the essential learning outcomes for students in higher education. They forward that this learning is "anchored in active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges" (CITE). While civic engagement is commonly referred to in higher education, it is also poorly defined (Saltmarsh, 2005). Its relationship with higher education is deeply connected to the ideal of education institutions fulfilling civic responsibilities to their community, society, and democracy (Saltmarsh, 2008; Benson et al., 2007). Moreover, civic engagement courses are often used interchangeably for service or experiential learning courses and their titles vary from community engagement to social change (Jacoby, 2009). Though distinct, these concepts marry together as civic engagement centers on "individuals–as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world–are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world" (Jacoby, 2009, p. 9). Moving forward, as scholars explore diversity, and social justice, and forward a more critical frame to civic engagement, it is imperative to investigate to what extent race is centered in these discussions and its effect on the learning experience (Green & Trent,2005; Mitchell, 2008).

4. Methods

This project is a qualitative study and will hold two sources of data: documents and interviews.

Using a comparative case study, I will examine two higher education institutions with similar institutional profiles (public, research-one institution) that have an interdisciplinary minor in "social justice". The institutions will be referred to as: West Coast University and Midwest University.

For documents, I collected five syllabi from the civic engagement courses, two from Midwest University and three from West Coast University. Once collected, I will conduct a context analysis of the syllabi. I will conduct a thematic analysis on class concepts, discussions on identity and difference, and understand how students are being asked to engage with course materials.

Additionally, I conducted nine interviews— three individuals from Midwest University and six from West Coast University. Scheduled for 30 minutes, these semi-structured interviews will be used for study participants to reflect and make meaning of their experiences in the course.

5. Preliminary Findings

The analysis is still ongoing but here are the initial findings from this project:

5.1 Course Concepts

Here are a few themes discovered in the initial review of the syllabi.

- Beginning of course
  - A personal journey to community-based work and specific reflection on socialization
  - Core concepts: Power, privilege, oppression
- Cultural humility
- Exiting a community responsibly (power differences)
- Inclusion of works from activists and community organizers, significant work from academics

5.2 Administrators/ Instructors

Permission to "go for it"

Instructors discussed how 2020 opened the door to having more honest and direct conversations about race and anti-Blackness. They felt more enabled and supported to assign more critical works and ask deeper questions to students.

> "As heartbroken as I was, it also lit a fire in me. I felt like I didn't have to hide behind all the niceties and add all the extra justifications. It's like… turn on the TV! It's there! And so as hard as it was, it made me just go for it… it made me be more explicit, to ask the questions that before I felt I needed to justify."

> "I reworked the syllabus so every week they had some on race. Like, you can't avoid it…. If we can talk multiple times about Brene Brown and vulnerability all the time… that is the least we could do."

> "I inherited a syllabus but I had a bunch of ideas around things to contribute…different videos, and different activities and they were like 'sure!' It gave me a freedom to think different pedagogically like there were less rules. Honestly, I wish I could teach all my classes like [this]… I wish I could teach theory classes like this or I wish I could teach a stats class doing some of the stuff I did in those spaces."

5.3 Elevate Conversations

Administrators said that it was a "wake-up call." Though the instructors and students were already having meaningful conversations, some realized how out of touch they had become with the curriculum and the need to do more to raise consciousness outside of the classroom.

> "We started by trying to have some real honest conversations about race. We started an anti-racist book club… We also to syllabi review and tried to incorporate more critical frames… more black people as authors and thinkers in classes."

> "Luckily, we have really great educators [graduate students] and… we have a really great community of people who are ready to roll up their sleeves so we can do better"

> "I think a lot of our students get what it means to be in community… what it means to serve community or you know advocate for one's community. I think we have to draw the line between community work and [civic identity/engagement]. For my students of color, conversations on race is already embedded in what it means for them to be citizens. I can't say the same for white students… and that's on us. White students can't keep getting off talking about sustainability as their focus and not confront how that whole thing is deeply raced. […] But, we all have to be the ones that engage in those conversations."

5.4 Students

No More Patience

Students (particularly students of color) discussed the fatigue of "meeting people where they are." Though they acknowledged the importance/role of empathy, many BIPOC students were angry/hurt and didn't have the emotional bandwidth for compassion.

> "I'll be honest I still don't think that some of the white people [in the class] got it. Like, you are the problem. And like you are the white savior that we were literally reading about in last week's class. But because you've taken this class or because you have [BIPOC] friends like you just you know… Don't get me wrong, I appreciate her at least taking the class. But sometimes I wish she would do it somewhere else."
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> "Either you get it, or you don't… white fragility is real. I liked everyone in my class, but I can only imagine if someone said some [problematic] in my section…I don't know how I would have responded"

5.5 Returning Home

Students who were from the local area discussed the importance of returning to their communities and the feeling of restoration.

> "After everything that happened in 2020, I just wanted to go home. And one of the great things about this class is that I literally get to go home every week. I get to see people who look like me. I get to serve people who look like me … these are literally my people. This is my community. [As a senior] I think a lot about… what's next for me? Should I go back to [my community]? Or should I go somewhere else? I'm still figuring [it] out… but this class has made me just feel grounded and connected to and you know connected to my people. It made me feel like my education has a purpose and that it is like useful."

5.6 Insights for Future Work

> Beyond the analysis, there are several insights for future studies and practice.

Importance of centering Black folks experience in these settings

Participants who were Black discussed racial battle fatigue. As I think about the learnings from this study, I would consider centering on Black educators and students during this time. There was a lot of discussion about their own emotional labor, mental health, and ability to engage in this content. Some participants were physically tired from participating (or in one case leading) in direct actions against the police, but all participants were emotionally drained/tired.

Relationship with campus "diversity" requirements

Many of the courses in the section were available for the university's diversity requirement. Several students claimed that this course should be mandatory or at least take the place of the diversity requirement as many of the courses that fall under the requirement are not as critical. What are the objectives of these kinds of requirements? How well do these courses reach those goals? And what are the different outcomes for someone who takes an experiential learning diversity requirement class vs. a student who attends a traditional lecture? This tension came up multiple times and I believe is an interesting line of inquiry.

6. Next Steps and Future Iterations

As I work to finalize the analysis, this project will do the following–

- July 2022 -December 2022: Workshopping, Conferencing, and Feedback looping
    - For the remainder of the year, I will spend developing and refining this project.
- January 2023: Finalize manuscript
- January 2023- June 2023: Explore toolkit and other forms
    - As I work to publish the manuscript of this project, my intention is to convert it into a toolkit or guide for educators. My hope is that conversations about civic identity and race will extend to many spaces and places through higher education institutions and educators will have the resources to navigate accordingly.