I Teach the Truth

By Marcia Chatelain

"So, what do you do?"

As a history professor, this question has felt like an invitation into a trap lately.

"I'm a teacher."

"Oh, yeah? What do you teach?"

Sometimes I'm purposefully vague. I respond to the cab driver, the airplane seatmate, or the fellow traveler on the crowded train that I teach US history. I pray that it's left there.

"Do you have a specialty?"

"Um, yeah, US cities," I say as I reach for my phone or focus my eyes back on the page in front of me.

I don't want strangers to know that I teach African American history. Don't get me wrong; I'm proud of what I do. I'm proud to be part of a field that has advanced knowledge about race and revived the legacies of freedom fighters. And I'm proud that I have inspired scores of my students to commit to careers in racial justice, from legal advocacy to joining the ranks of scholars and teachers of the subject. Whenever I have opportunities to share African American history with my friends' curious children, older adults gathered at continuing education lectures, and learners in life stages in between, I feel overjoyed that I have chosen this career path. But these days, I can never tell what the stranger I have just met thinks when I say "African American history."

The recent and rapid organizing against content that has been falsely labeled as "critical race theory" has brought my work into a terrible, distorted focus in daily life. Critical race theory—the legal framework developed by the late Harvard University law professor Derrick Bell[1] in the late 1970s—has emerged as the misnomer for content that offers context, critique, or concepts about American history while upholding the values of diversity and expanding the American narrative. Over the past academic year, we have witnessed the evocation of "critical race theory" to justify an array of actions—from suggesting that Black History Month activities should be optional to banning books, restricting instruction in K–12 and higher education, and even shuttering entire courses of study at colleges.[2]

My beloved field is in the crosshairs of this most recent battle of our nation's culture war. Once maybe regarded as a niche or narrow area of history (although it is not), African American history has become one of many targets of legislative and activist efforts to end the teaching of honest, thorough, and accurate his-

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY SONIA PULIDO

tory. African American history is not alone: ethnic studies and women's and gender studies are also targets of groups ranging from parents to politicians seeking to intervene in classrooms.[3] These reactions, practices, and forms of dramatics are not new,[4] but with each cycle of organized attempts to undermine the nuances of classroom subjects, teachers find themselves grappling with a growing culture of fear inside their schools.[5] I'm supposed to enjoy a level of academic freedom because of my position as a college professor. Yet, it is irresponsible to believe that my teaching is disconnected from the preparatory K–12 years. In trying and difficult times, it's important to remember that all of us who teach must be united against cultures of misinformation and disinformation.

Education for the Common Good and on Common Ground

I'm vague about my life's work in history because I'm afraid that the person curious about it will soon turn hostile and cantankerous or be moved to explain what their child should or shouldn't learn. I'm thick-skinned, trust me, but I'm protective too. I believe in what I do, and I'm sure the critics believe in something also. The fundamental problem with movements to narrow learning is that they are not grounded in and cannot remain true to the purpose of an education.

Teachers are grappling with a growing culture of fear inside their schools.

Education—at all levels and in public and private settings—must clearly show how and why our work is invested in the public good, a common good that allows us to use our intellectual curiosity to deepen our understanding and feel more compelled to care for our neighbors. Good teaching provides us a pathway to creating a society based in mutuality. When we fail to introduce our topics grounded in these ideals, we are more vulnerable to the anxieties of the era.

My philosophical musings on what an education is or isn't may seem inadequate to steel you against tip lines designed to unmask the teaching of so-called critical race theory or the chilling effect of watching one too many YouTube videos of explosive school board meetings.[6] Yet, for the same reasons we ensure our students have aced the fundamentals of addition and subtraction before we lead them to multiplication, or the same reasons I introduce students to the 13th Amendment's abolition of slavery before explaining the importance of the 14th Amendment's position on equal protection, our teaching practice has to be rooted in agreement on our common ground.

How exactly do we find that common ground in light of the varied opinions and ideas about what school should or shouldn't be today?

Since 2014, I've spent a lot of time with teachers tackling this and other equally challenging questions. After police officer Darren Wilson killed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the nation watched in real time as a small town became the focal point of world news. The uprising in Ferguson that August inspired me to start a social media campaign, #FergusonSyllabus, to encourage educators to devote some portion of the first day of classes to talking with students about the crisis in the St. Louis exurb.[7] Rather than perpetuate the silences that some children may have encountered around what was unfolding in Ferguson, I believed that teachers could guide students into thoughtful reflection about how the moment could be better understood through the knowledge they were acquiring at school. Whether it was a science teacher explaining the chemical composition and dangers of the tear gas detonated in Ferguson or an English teacher introducing the tradition of protest literature from past moments of American upheaval, #FergusonSyllabus encouraged educators to gather and share ideas online.

As this project grew and shaped other #Syllabus initiatives,[8] I received invitations from educators across the country looking for help with what we call inclusive teaching or diversity in the classroom. The collective emotions of bearing witness to the events in Ferguson—and later in Baltimore after the killing of Freddie Gray and in Charleston after the massacre at the Mother Emanuel AME Church—exposed something unsettling in school communities. Teachers expressed that they didn't know how to talk to students about national tragedies. Principals struggled with setting rules and guidelines for appropriate engagement on these current events. Students shared their frustration that authority figures did not recognize that they had opinions and insights that deserve to be heard. Parents wondered if their children were emotionally and existentially strong enough to monitor the same current events that kept them up at night.

As an outsider to these school environments, I realized that out of a mix of shame, sadness, anger, and unpreparedness, administrators and educators were skipping steps in a difficult process. A number of well-intentioned and well-meaning diversity and inclusion initiatives were conceived of too rapidly, without attention to the fundamentals of delivering an education. As an outsider, I believed my role was often to refrain from telling educators what to teach ("read this book, not that one") or what to say ("use these words, not those ones"). I know my audiences often wanted these answers, but I resisted. My job was to find out what exactly everyone was searching for in the name of inclusion. What does good teaching feel like? What events of your developmental years were shrouded in silence? Do you trust your colleagues to help you through this process? Can you explain why you are doing what you are doing? Six years later, when our school year was remade by the COVID-19 crisis and our national consciousness was shaken by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, educators again were reaching out to me to ask: What comes next? How would the moment described as "the racial reckoning" inform the start of fall classes? How was COVID-19 complicating the increasing calls for, as well as commitments to, anti-racism?

Again, I dispensed the advice that I had developed six years earlier. Yet, I did not anticipate that the anti–critical race theory movement was being mounted to efficiently and aggressively dismantle this response.[9] Over the course of one academic year, schools that once sought my expertise in inclusion so they could actively implement programming and classes to expand their students' learning shifted to asking me how to defend themselves against anti–critical race theory attacks. In the fall, teachers who were chastened and awakened by reports of their students' experiences of racism and bias at school had been moved to action. They had internalized the anecdotes their students shared on social media, in school newspapers, and in student-written open letters.[10] Some parents demanded that schools address climates of discrimination, and others joined schools on their anti-racism journeys as volunteers and co-collaborators. By the spring, however, multicultural education committees had disbanded. Teachers were more anxious about books being banned than introducing inclusive content. Principals no longer issued statements about anti-racism, lest they find themselves on the local or national news. This pressure and stress on school communities is heartbreaking and discouraging.

Cultivating a Culture of Trust

It is not clear if these efforts to constrict what is taught in schools will continue to grow next year. As teachers, we need to find ways to turn off the noise of the discord and prepare to care for and nurture our students. Educators can foster a spirit of transparency that acknowledges the dynamics that inform our work, models how to grapple with uncertainty, and shows that our classrooms are places in which students' intellectual growth serves them as individuals and members of society.

How do we do that? As you enter summer break and prepare new lesson plans, attend professional development workshops, and talk to your colleagues about the highs and lows of the past year, consider these reflections before determining what comes next for you.

1. Can you explain why you teach, in addition to what you teach? On the surface, this sounds simple, but in my experience, few educators spend time explaining to students the why of their classrooms because the what is all-consuming. Although students may ask "Why are we learning this?" to express their confusion or frustration, we can use the *why* to strengthen the work of teaching. Why are we gathered in a school to explore the past? Why are we conscientious of the ways that people in other parts of the world live? Why are we recognizing this achievement or contribution? These questions can also create space to explain to students how your intellectual curiosity has shaped you. Explaining why you teach social studies, your initial engagement with the topic, and your specific interests can help students identify their own passions.
2. Where are you meeting your students? The relationship between student and teacher is akin to two people going on a walk. The classroom is the path, and at various points each person can decide how fast or how slow they will move or if they will turn around or diverge from the path. Teachers are used to being the guiding force, but in all matters of inclusion, it's helpful to recognize that sometimes students can lead. Why? Like us, students bring to the classroom their cultural contexts, their influences, and their views on the world. When teachers fail to consider what students bring, we often overlook what students can offer in the learning process. Students who are invited to contribute information about what shapes their worldview see their teachers as people willing to accompany them on their learning journeys. When educators enter a classroom, we are asking students to care about a topic or a set of ideas that is important to us. At the very least, we have to give students an opportunity to share what is equally important to them.
3. What kind of world do you bring to your students? In the terrifying climate of banned content and censored words, educators who are invested in a social justice framework for teaching may feel that their jobs are on the line with every thoughtful conversation. There is no denying that some of us feel more threatened and vulnerable than others. There is no easy solution to this, but I encourage teachers to think of engagement in difficult history and contemporary social issues as a matter of preparation. In my years consulting with schools, I found that teachers who felt

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moved by a particular moment—whether it was the anxieties borne out of the 2016 election or the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida—wanted to radically upend their teaching. Teachers who had never broached the topics of racism or xenophobia or gun violence believed that the moment was too urgent to ignore it. I applaud the determination of teachers who are moved to action. But I caution against radical shifts in tone or topic in any classroom because reactive teaching rarely turns into sustainable practice. If a teacher says, "This issue is too pressing not to talk about it!," I often respond with questions about their classroom environment: Do you regularly ask students to debate topics? Do you use writing exercises as an opportunity for students to share what is on their minds? Have you ever placed topic A or topic B on your syllabus for discussion? What are your agreed-upon practices for respectful dialogue? Do you have a sense of who among your students may feel most vulnerable if you have this discussion? How will you foster independent critical thinking among your students? These reflective questions are not designed to discourage tackling difficult topics; rather, they are ways of awakening an awareness of the importance of forming community standards and building trust—both of which are necessary for thoughtful engagement.

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4. Whom do you trust? Teaching is a strange action. We teach in front of a group of learners who we recognize collectively, but each has their own set of circumstances that informs how they approach the material. We are members of faculties that do the same job, but our identities can make executing our responsibilities more or less challenging. Most of us teach alone, without colleagues present, but our teaching can be scrutinized by stakeholders who may never enter our classes—school boards, parents, and even cable news reporters. In light of the strange position we are put in as teachers, having trust in our own abilities is only as valuable as our trust in our colleagues and the systems in which we work. Many times, I have visited a school after a disruptive event that involved students engaging in racist acts in person or online, and that aroused discomfort across the whole school community. The first question I ask is, "From where you sit at this school, what happened?" The answers, often shared among colleagues, reveal as much about the power dynamics among educators as they do about the upsetting incident. We often focus on students' behaviors and attitudes, but rarely do we take a step back and ponder if the tense dynamics among the student body mirror the strained relationships among faculty and staff.
5. How can you cultivate more trust? Often, as colleagues recount their views on incidents and share where they stand proximate to those incidents, their counterparts begin to recognize the needs of their coworkers. This is the first step in introducing trust as a prerequisite for a schoolwide (or even an individual) commitment to addressing potentially controversial or challenging content. If teachers cannot trust their colleagues to help them confront injustice in their classrooms or if curriculum coordinators do not have a clear sense of the apprehensions of their schools' faculties, they can't do their best work. Cultivating a culture of trust means that when a teacher is offending or overlooking students, a colleague can guide them toward more responsive teaching. It means that when change is necessary, no one feels alone. And it means that educators have engaged in deep conversations that prepare them to explain their choices when challenged.

Although indicators suggest that with COVID-19 mitigation, we may return to some sense of normalcy in our schools, we do not know exactly what the upcoming school year will bring us. As with every year, we will meet new students and encounter old students with excitement about what is to come: this could be the year one of our students discovers their passion and another develops a burgeoning talent and newfound confidence. We will welcome some teachers to the first year of their careers and celebrate others' retirements. Everything else is uncertain. What we can be assured of is that what we do matters, and each new school

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Honest History

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year provides an opportunity to correct misinformation and bring people and communities closer to the learning we so value. And as I start to travel again and talk to strangers about what I do, I will overcome my reservations about sharing the details of my life's work.

What do I do?

I teach African American history. I teach the truth. ☐

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Back to School for All

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