ISSN: 3067-2392
Review Article
Planetary Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities Research

Teaching About Race and Identity in a Global Classroom

Benjamin Abtan*

Adjunct Professor Sciences Po Paris, France

***Corresponding author:** Benjamin Abtan, Adjunct Professor Sciences Po Paris, France.

Submitted: 08 January 2025 **Accepted:** 22 January 2025 **Published:** 27 January 2025

https://doi.org/10.63620/MKPJSSHR.2025.1021

Citation: *Abtan, B. (2025). Teaching About Race and Identity in a Global Classroom. Planetary J of Soc Sci & Hum Res, 2(1), 01-06.*

Abstract

This article explores innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching about race and identity in a global classroom, informed by experiences from the US, France, Rwanda, Ukraine, Armenia and Italy with over 1,000 students from over 70 countries. Embracing an emotionally engaged methodology, the course highlights the importance of personal narratives and emotions in understanding racial and cultural identities. The facilitator's role, focused on process over content, enhances students' engagement and helps them find their own voice. Adopting a global approach, the course helps understand the global nature of race and identity. Considering the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, it proposes solutions to do better thanks to experiences of resilient local communities worldwide and the learnings of Transitional Justice.

Keywords: Race and Identity, Global Classroom, Emotional Engagement, Pedagogical Innovation, Adaptive Leadership, Transitional Justice

Introduction

The document explores innovative pedagogical strategies for teaching about race and identity in a global classroom setting. Drawing from experiences in the United States, France, Rwanda, Ukraine, Armenia, and Italy, the author emphasizes the importance of emotional engagement, personal narratives, and fostering students' voices to understand racial and cultural identities. The teaching methodology integrates adaptive leadership theories and global perspectives, addressing the emotional and social complexities of race and identity while promoting inclusive, student-centered learning.

"I learn a lot about racism in the US, but how is that related to my country?" a Harvard Kennedy School student from South Korea asked me in September 2020. I served as a teaching assistant to Professors Muhammad and Smith, who were tasked by HKS in late July with developing an intensive two-week course on race and racism for all incoming MPP students in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. This was a passionate course, focused on the US.

As I was the only non-US citizen among the teaching assistants and the only one with a history of antiracist activism, many foreign students approached me to make sense of what they were studying. "How is the concept of 'settler colonialism' related to Nigeria?" "Police violence in Spain is very different than in the US, what should be my takeaway?" "How do racial identities play a role in the social fabric in Bolivia?" The question kept coming back: "What can I do so we collectively make progress?"

I helped these students in "translating" the concepts at play into their own cultures and felt the desire to develop my own teaching. After Genocide Prevention seminars at Brandeis (US) and Yerevan State University (Armenia), I have thus been teaching for over two years other identity-related topics through my workshops and courses Toward Dismantling Global Racism and Toward Resolving Identity-Based Conflicts at Sciences Po Paris, ESCP Business School (Italy and France), Kyiv Mohyla Academy (Ukraine) and the University of Rwanda, with over 1,000 students from over 70 countries in total.

Here are my main observations, learnings, and recommendations to teach about race and identity in a global classroom.

Emotions First

Identities are personal, intimate. This explains the strong emotional load related to identity topics beyond their social, political and geopolitical stakes. How to speak about intimacy in public? This is a challenge in all the cultures I have been in contact with, in all the settings in which I have evolved, for all the individuals whom I have met. This is all the truer when the public debate is confrontational and full of symbolic violence, as is the case when it comes to identity. Who would like to invite violence into his or her intimacy?

My students start the course with little capacity to engage in a conversation about race and identity. They do not know how to manage the intense emotions that they feel during such conversations. Their first instinct is to behave as they think is expected from them. During the first sessions, they overwhelmingly use the wording and narrative inherited from the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, "White" students usually start by "acknowledging their privileges and leaving space for underrepresented voices" or by shutting down; when "Colored" students take the floor, they are always followed by several supporting statements; everybody rushes to point out that racism is systemic and institutional, present in the very institutions in which we learn together. My understanding is that they expect to get symbolic and self-image benefits from this behavior, to be seen as "good" people within the group and beyond. As a result, they get protected from the intrusion of violence into their intimacy that would make them suffer, but they also prevent themselves from having a real discussion, let alone finding their own voice or bringing about change.

I do not shy away from addressing the emotional dimension of race and identity. On the contrary, I fully go for it. I keep in mind that "emotions and feelings constitute the driving force for the group life [and that] understanding the emotional life of the group is the key to working effectively," as Lawrence and Maryann Phillips observe [1]. For example, the first exercise I propose my students is to write the memory of the first time in their life when they realized they have a racial / cultural identity, and how they felt about it. Then, I ask them to share whatever they feel like sharing with another student, before having a collective debriefing. As a result, students not only intellectually understand the intimate and emotional aspects of identity, but they also personally experience them. They find their own way of speaking about it publicly, starting in the smallest public setting.

To address the emotional dimension of race and identity, there is a challenge to overcome: to ensure that the energy released by the expression of these emotions does not destroy the group or its ability to learn. Therefore, I constantly pay attention to the "heat" within the group, as it is recommended in the Adaptive Leadership theory developed and taught at Harvard by Professor Ronald Heifetz [2]. This is a metaphorical reference to the amount of pressure and stress in the group: too low a level results in complacency, while too high a level overwhelms individuals and provokes strong resistance, both configurations impeding progress. If I feel that the "heat" is too high and prevents the groups from moving forward, I pace the work, steer toward less controversial issues, make sure more consensual voices are heard, and I use mine to that end. To evaluate the level of "heat" in the group, I observe several verbal and non-verbal indicators. Those corresponding to a high level include a body language that expresses stress such fixed facial expressions, downcast eyes, hands tied and legs crossed; participants frequently interrupting each other; only confrontational issues being raised; a small number of people speaking up while others maintain a tense silence or on the contrary many people speaking erratically; the use of a peremptory or tense tone.

As I am part of the system at work, I also observe, interpret and use my own emotions. For example, I remember having a sleepless night the day before the third session of my course in the spring of 2023. On my way to the classroom, I realized that what I was feeling was a deep fear – of not being able to make the group learn, of being put aside, of the quality of the exercises I had prepared for this session. Once in the classroom, as students entered and sat down in silence before the start time, I felt this even more strongly. I thus assumed that this fear was present in the room, for the students too, regarding their own challenges. So, I focused my attention on listening to their fears. I then modified the exercises I had initially prepared according to what I had heard, which led to a breakthrough in the group dynamic. As I recognize that my blind spots, sensitivity and subjectivity influence my interpretations, I always remain mindful of alternative perspectives I could have considered.

In terms of pedagogy, my courses and workshops are screen-free: no smartphone, no computer, no tablet. This makes all of us feel our emotions more intensively, thus more able to work on and with them. I leave space for each student to find his or her own voice, and for the group to collectively learn how to speak about race and identity in a public setting. Concretely, I start each session by not speaking but by letting my students speak during a set period of time. I ask them to abide by only one constraint: to begin with something coming from the readings – be it a question, an idea, a quote, … During these student-led discussions, I pay special attention to not "correct" them when they do not rigorously use concepts that are precisely defined in sociology, political sciences, anthropology, history or ethnic studies – I am not worried because we will study them throughout the course. In fact, I favor their appropriation and the expression of their subjectivity, rather than an intellectual or conceptual approach that would make it more difficult for them to take ownership of their emotions and find their own voice. If a debate arises, I make sure not to pick a side as I want them as a group to build together their capacity to have these public conversations. In that sense, I follow the recommendations of Norman Maier regarding group facilitation while having in mind the "paradox in facilitation" pointed by Terri Griffith, Mark Fuller and Gregory Northcraft: "the influence required to facilitate a group changes the group's outcomes [4]." I address this paradox by striving for neutral facilitation while being aware that this is not entirely achievable and by practicing this effort. Lastly, I invite and protect underrepresented voices, which are hardly ever heard in the public debate, if at all.

The result is that, after some sessions, students learn to move from a confrontation of stereotyped statements as is usual on

social media to a mature discussion in which all of them take an active part. They learn together not despite their differences of opinions, sensitivities and identities, but thanks to them. Surprising moments happen. For example, Camille, a 1st year BA student from France, shared in a collective debriefing: "I feel I don't have origins, because I come from the same village as my parents." Abdel, who has Algerian background, responded: "Until you said this, I had always dreamt of coming from the same place as my parents. I thought it would be much easier in life not to feel the constant tension that I feel about my identity." Camille: "I have felt strong tension regarding my identity too, for the exact opposite reasons." Students enhance their skills autonomously [3]. I regularly encourage them to acknowledge this achievement, to build on it beyond and after the course, and to continue practicing. Indeed, this capacity is not something that some people have and others do not have, but something that you have more the more you practice.

After the first student-led discussion, Małgosia, a 2nd year BA student from Poland, wrote: "Silence. […] Personally, I thought that the discussion ended, assuming that, like often in the classroom, the teacher will take the matter into his hands and start explaining what the interpretation should have been. But here it does not happen, which leaves us all astonished. […]

I usually do not speak in the classroom, fearing that my answer is not insightful enough to satisfy the teacher with years of experience. That is why after joining the discussion with other students, at first, I look at the professor for some sign of approval and validation. When I realize that he takes up the role of the observer, something changes in my typical approach. […] I lose the need to impress anyone, expressing my thoughts and wishing to hear what others think. Time starts to pass much faster as I am no longer in the role of student that I often create for myself to fit the surroundings appropriately."

A Required Pedagogical Position: At the Level of the Students, with them

In order to give students, the best opportunity to conduct this necessary emotional work, I have adopted the position of a facilitator as defined by Lawrence and Maryann Phillips: focused primarily on process and structure, rather than content. I am with my students, at their level [5].

Indeed, we are not talking about theoretical knowledge that someone possesses and would pass on to students, but of capacity that we all need to constantly develop. Of course, students need to acquire theoretical knowledge. I ensure they do so through readings, presentations, exercises and some of my interventions, particularly when I summarize key points and challenges at the end of sessions. Of course, not everyone has the same ability to address race and identity. However, people are not divided into those who are totally racist or antisemitic and those who are not at all. Such thinking would create essentialization and rigid categorization that would mirror the logic of racism itself. We all belong to the same societies, so we are all exposed to racism. Our reactions may differ based on our constantly-evolving identities, social backgrounds, countries, sensitivities, political orientations, ages, experience, abilities and choices, but we are all involved in the same collective movement, making similar efforts.

In terms of pedagogy, being at the level of the students means that I share with them my personal stories, my challenges. For example, I start the first class by saying "I come from a family of Jews from southern Morocco who had to leave their country because of rising antisemitism. As a teenager, I got involved in civil society to bring about change and protect the most vulnerable ones from violence. Today, I mobilize my intercultural background and international experience to dismantle racism and resolve identity-based conflicts. I feel these are burning issues, for countries, societies and individuals." Instead of coming to the class only with answers, I also come with my unfinished business, my contradictions, my questions, some of which I share openly with my students. I feel this approach embodies the attitude of constant efforts that I encourage them to adopt, lifts the paralyzing bad consciousness of not knowing everything and not having all the "good" answers, and facilitates the transfer between them and me, which I use as precious fuel for pedagogy.

I also encourage other institutions' stakeholders – directors, pedagogical advisors, administrative support staff,… - to join sessions with the same approach. Their active participation bring several benefits: it puts them at work, reinforces the message that nobody and no institution is perfect but that we are all on the same boat, and creates bonds that make joint work about race and identity easier throughout the year.

Rusanganwa, a teenager son of genocide survivors in Rwanda, wrote in August 2023: "I liked the way people were free to share their experiences in the workshops. You showed us the example." Larissa, a daughter of survivors, added: "The good thing was that we were the ones doing the whole thing, because it made us free. We learned a lot unexpectedly and in a short period of time." Alice, a survivor herself and a mother, wrote: "The workshop was a blessing. Now I know how to share stories between generations in a healthy way, which will help me not only in assisting the people I work with as a therapist / counsellor, but also personally in my family, to handle some challenges that I am experiencing regarding our history as genocide survivors." Isabella, a Master student from Colombia, shared at the end of the class in April 2023: "For me, the structure of the course is its main strength. At first, I expected a traditional class where the professor speaks and students take note. But it was not the case. I feel that we were all learning together. It was not a cold, conceptual learning, it was a real shared experience."

A Global Approach is a Must

There are ongoing unresolved academic debates about the origins of racism. Does it stem from a certain sense of superiority in Ancient Greece? From la "Limpieza de sangre" in Spain in the 17th century? From an instrumentalization of science in the 19th century, represented by Arthur de Gobineau's work? However, what is not debatable is that racism is a global phenomenon, with global roots and global effects.

In 2021, I had long discussions with my friend Denzel, an African-American very active for racial equity: "the US are at the origin of racism. We invented racism in this country! This is scandalous." I strongly disagree with him. Behind the apparently very self-critical "We are the worst in the world", I can hear an imperialistic "We are the center of the world, for good or for

bad." To dismantle racism and antisemitism, to develop impactful regional, national and local policies, we need to understand their global natures and consider the evolutions of their expressions around the globe.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples and readings from different parts of the world. There is a challenge to it, as Western and English-speaking countries are way more covered by research than others. To overcome it, along with redoubled research efforts, I mobilize researchers, academics, activists, political and community leaders in various countries. I know some of them thanks to my 25-year life commitment and I continuously renew efforts to reach out to new ones. I invite them to share orally their experiences, observations and knowledge. This makes it possible to access the relevant content brought by those who do not write, or who write in a language that the students and I do not speak, or who write but are not published.

I also make use of the cultural, national, and social diversity present in the classroom through the students, in encouraging them to share their knowledge while making sure that they do not act as institutional ambassadors of countries or cultures. This diversity can also be found in seemingly homogenous classes. For example, when I taught at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, all students were Ukrainians, with similar skin colors and religious beliefs. We explored their territorial, linguistic, political, family and social differences, and used them as opportunities to be sensitive to international examples linked to these characteristics.

In my pedagogy, I also use global sources in the sense that I assign not only book chapters and scientific articles, but also songs, poems, novels, documentaries, fiction movies and speeches. Indeed, as racism and resistance to it have been present in our societies for centuries, their traces can be found in a variety of productions. As a result, my students are exposed to a large range of sources of inspiration. Using non "classical" sources exemplifies the approach that I encourage my students to pursue. Indeed, I want them to understand that only through innovative approaches can they drive meaningful change on identity-related issues.

Giuliana, a BA student from Italy, shared in September 2022: "What I like about the whole class is the variety of perspectives and cases we work on. I had no idea of the existence of most of them. I believe this is very important because it helps understand manifestations of racism in their contexts and that the same tools wouldn't work the same way everywhere. Also, as a Westerner, I believe it's important that I am confronted with conceptions of racism from other world regions, otherwise I would be stuck in a Western conception of the world."

The Ecological Catastrophe is the Frame of All Issues

Listening to my students, I have come to realize that they do not view the ecological catastrophe as just one important issue among others, nor as one that intersects with others or serves as a lens for interpreting the world. Rather, for them it is a frame in which everything else takes place. This observation is in line with Bruno Latour's work on the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, which forces us to reconsider all aspects of life [6]. This frame is not static, it is constantly tightening as the catastrophe worsens by the day. For my students, this means very practical questions that previous generations did not have to answer: should they live near the water? Have children? Build a career around fighting the ecological catastrophe?

The fact that the frame formed by the ecological catastrophe is becoming ever tighter causes ever greater tension in the system that we constitute as humans, alongside the other animals and living beings. In particular, this tension puts pressure on the categories of thought passed down by my generation (I am 44) and those before it. Students respond to this pressure in two opposite ways. Most give in to it and get rid of these traditional categories, while others resist it and seek to reinforce them. The former circulates fluidly between genders, races and sexual orientations, while the latter oppose such fluidity. Politically, these groups are usually labelled "liberals" and "conservatives", and they address race and identity in very different ways. Thus, how students respond to the pressure of the ecological catastrophe is strongly related to how they approach race and identity.

The growing pressure exerted on the system caused by the advancing ecological catastrophe has at least two additional consequences. First, students feel a sense of urgency to address race and identity. I do not have to convince them that these are burning issues. They are interested in the course and they actively participate in class. This shared sentiment may also mean potential danger at a global scale: indeed, a social crisis like the ecological catastrophe is one of the three conditions to create scapegoats as identified by René Girard - the two other ones being accusations of universal crimes and the identification of a target group, which is often defined by race [7]. I will have to write in more detail about this, especially regarding the case of antisemitism.

Moreover, the pressure exerted on the system leads some students to forcefully deconstruct the phenomena that have led us to the bad ecological situation we find ourselves in today. These phenomena are, in particular, the development model inherited from the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and slavery, together with the imperialisms, colonialisms, and racism that lie at their core. This deconstruction might sometimes take the form of what I would call "a trial of the past" which objective would be to take us back to "before". As if it were possible to erase the negative aspects of the past we inherit and create a purer, better present in doing so.

I perceive here the potential for a dangerous quest for purity. Dangerous, first of all, because it is not possible to erase the past. It is a fantasy, as is the representation of the past at play. Instead of being trapped into this fantasy, the challenge we have to face today is: "taking into account the past that we inherit from, what can we do today to make a better future?" If we stray onto other challenges, we waste precious time and energy. The quest for purity is also dangerous because it sometimes directs resentment for centuries of wrongdoings committed by many actors against certain people and organizations today. That is not fair. That can lead to the justification of hatred and even the renewal of oppression against racially identified groups. Carrying out such actions in the name of alleged deeds by some of their ancestors that contributed to the current ecological catastrophe does not alter the fundamentally racist nature of that oppression.

In terms of pedagogy, I need to do a better job of integrating the ecological catastrophe into my teaching about race and identity, although I feel that most of the tools I introduce are relevant to tackling it. For example, when we explore how policy change can help to make progress, we study the attribution of personhood status to the Te Urewera Park in New Zealand. This groundbreaking legal and political innovation has provided protection to the park, to the indigenous Tūhoe people whose homeland it is, and to its other non-human inhabitants. This has inspired similar policy change throughout the world, from India to Latin America, Africa and Europe.

Thomas, a Master student with Chinese and US background, shared his thoughts following this session in April 2023: "In the context of the broader climate crisis, the demands that are being placed on the Global South, including proposed caps on economic growth and resource development, echo some of the many issues we have raised. For one, how do we address questions of accountability for the beneficiaries and inheritors of wealth and privilege built on grave injustices that occurred centuries prior? […] Moreover, the longer we wait to act on climate change, the more expensive and radical the changes needed to reverse the worst of its effects will be. In many ways, the same could be said for addressing the violent legacy of slavery, colonialism and racism."

How to do Better? Local Communities and Transitional Justice as Inspirations

Studying race and identity is not enough for students. They also want and need to find solutions. I tell them that, unfortunately, there is no quick fix nor ready-to-be-used toolbox that would have been acquired by previously-trained practitioners to provide short-term results and dismantle racism or identity-based conflicts. Rather, I propose to them an unsatisfactory objective: to do better, "imbere heza" ("for a better future" in Kinyarwanda) as the motto of the Association of Former Students Survivors of Genocide in Rwanda (GAERG) says.

Around the world, various resilient post-conflict local communities have managed to make progress but have often been overlooked because of despise and lack of documentation. Since the 1990s, the actions that allow societies to transition from conflict, dictatorship or genocide to peaceful coexistence or democracy have been studied and conceptualized as Transitional Justice. My teaching builds on the experiences of these communities and on the theories and practices of Transitional Justice. It introduces impactful tools and frameworks, and explores how they can be adapted to develop methodologies rooted in local cultures to help companies, institutions, communities and societies dismantle racism and identity-based conflicts.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples from periods ranging from prehistory to the present day, and of local communities from various countries and regions such as India, Colombia, Timor-Leste, South Africa, Jamaica, South Korea, the Balkans, Nigeria, Argentina, the UK, Guatemala, Rwanda, the US, China, Europe, the Middle East, Tunisia.

There are conditions under which these local examples can be sources of inspiration. First, none of them has ever brought a totally satisfactory "solution": we have to accept imperfection as part of the journey. Second, what works to make progress in a given place and at a given time does not mean that it will work in another place or at another time: constant adaptation is necessary. Third, racism and identity-based conflicts are global challenges, so it is only through dialogue between the local and global levels, and between the local levels of different countries and regions, that progress can be made. There is room for improvement that goes far beyond the limits of my courses, as this dialogue needs to be more structured, more abundantly nourished, with more research carried out and a higher level of institutionalization than today.

Sasha, a Master's student from Russia, wrote in May 2023 after the end of the course: "I am sure a lot of others would agree that this class even had a therapeutic effect for us. I hope we will be able to spread this effect to the people whom we will meet in our "career" and personal paths. We started our course from reflecting on our own identities. Back then I was really worried about not relating to my ethnic background. I have made some improvements in it during the course, but what is more important, I have learned so many things about the identities of others and they made me understand that identity is so much more than just your ethnic background.

Identities can be created and manipulated. People can be led on because of their identities, but they can also unite and lead others to common goals thanks to it. Identity can be of common trauma, but the common healing can create a new, healthier identity. I feel inspired now knowing all the cases of people fighting for their identity and recovering from identity-based oppression. I am glad to live in times when this "identity-care" can be discussed and institutionalized."

Conclusion

The article concludes by advocating for a global and inclusive approach to teaching race and identity, emphasizing the need for emotionally engaging, process-focused pedagogy. By integrating local and global insights, fostering student autonomy, and acknowledging the ecological crisis as a framework for modern challenges, the teaching strategy aims to dismantle racism and resolve identity-based conflicts. The document highlights the importance of leveraging transitional justice principles and community-based solutions for meaningful progress in addressing these issues.

References

1. Girard, R. (1986). Stereotypes of persecutions. In Y. Freccero (Trans.), The scapegoat (pp. 12–23). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Heifetz, R. A. (1994). Leadership without easy answers. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
3. Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

4. Latour, B. (2018). Down to earth: Politics in the new climatic regime (C. Porter, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
5. Phillips, L. D., & Phillips, M. C. (1993). Facilitated work groups: Theory and practice. The Journal of the Operational Research Society, 44(6), 533–549.
6. Maier, N. R. F. (1963). Problem-solving discussions and conferences: Leadership methods and skills. New York: McGraw-Hill.
7. Griffith, T. L., Fuller, M. A., & Northcraft, G. B. (1998). Facilitator influence in group support systems: Intended and unintended effects. Information Systems Research, 9(1), 20–36. https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.9.1.20