**Renee Romano**

**“Teaching about Race and Racism: One White Professor’s Perspective”**

**GBL Luncheon Talk**

**Lemle Talk**

Thanks: glad to be here talking about teaching and ways white faculty can be more effective in dealing with race in classroom, in teaching students about race, and in meeting needs of students of color in the classroom

Keep pretty informal today:

--I don’t feel like I’m any kind of expert; really want to leave time for conversation

--but start with about twenty minutes just offering some ideas based on what I’ve learned in nearly three decades of teaching, often teaching classes that focus specifically on race, but also in teaching US history where race is always a key part of any story even if not the specific focus of the class

What’s the work? How do it?

--categorize in three ways:

a) Internal/Intellectual work that precedes any work in classroom

b) Work in designing syllabus and being deliberate in building in certain pedagogies

c) Work in classroom in building relationships and supporting students

**I. Internal:** work to do in advance, work I think we always need to be doing

**a) Educating ourselves about history of race, systems of oppression**, about white privilege and perspective

--all of us are shaped, influenced by our own positionality and experiences

--and none of us are outside history and neither our are classrooms

--as long as racism remains a force in United States politics, institutions, cultures, and ideologies, none of us will ever teach in a classroom not influenced by that

--so if don’t feel like have a great grasp on the history that help build the world we live in today, need to take some time to read, to understand, to learn so can recognize how race affects space you are in, affects how students perceive you, affects how you might perceive students, affects how they see and treat each other

**b) And as none of us is outside history, to me means that of learning how to navigate race, bringing anti-racist practices into own life and classroom better thought of as a constant process than a particular end goal you will eventually fully achieve**

--how be an anti-racist person in a society structured on racism?

--is never-ending process: no single answer, no single act you get to do that means you’ve totally figured out how to navigate America’s racial history and landscape as a white person

--first and most important work is internal: really being willing to recognize your own positionality, perspective, and limitations

Means that question is not if you will make mistakes—you will. Question is whether you will learn from them so at least next time, you make different mistakes instead of the same one

--requires a willingness to fail, some humility

--might say the wrong thing; might not react quickly enough or powerfully enough to something that happens in the classroom

--when that happens, need to recognize it, own it, and apologize for it

--in part, then you are modeling for students how to grapple with their own failures

II. So how bring this into awareness of importance of race into classroom?

a) Start with the way construction of a syllabus

---I teach US history and often my classes focus on histories of race, so it makes sense that I’m centering issues of race in many of my syllabi, but worth thinking about no matter the subject of your class

a) I include race as key category of analysis no matter what history classes I’m teaching

--to me, can’t really fully understand any aspect of US history if don’t engage with race

--whether subject of class is WWII, Disney, or US Foreign Policy, I make sure that readings on race and the impact race had on this historical moment or representation are woven throughout the course, not just one week standing sadly on its own at end of class

b) I think consciously about readings I assign: want to make sure that students are getting opportunity to engage with both primary and secondary sources written by people with different racial backgrounds and perspectives

--important not only b/c want variety of viewpoints

--but important for students to see the work of people who share their identities be represented as sources of knowledge too

c) Don’t bring in difficult material without giving students the tools they need to engage with it in a productive way

1) Means that I often start classes by building students capacity to talk about race and to be generous with each other as they are learning

--many Americans, especially white Americans, ill-equipped to talk about race,

--have been raised to be colorblind; have grown up in schools where people are scared about offending so say nothing; may never have talked about this stuff around the dinner table, may make them very uncomfortable

--so if going to be able to talk productively in class, need to be taught how to do so and to be challenged to think about how race has shaped their own perspectives, and need to begin to see potential discomfort as ok, as sign of learning

--talk about history of whiteness assignment

--positionality exercise

2) Also make sure that students understand where, how, why we are learning about things like white supremacy, lynching or sexualized violence

--don’t just mean what has been termed “trigger warnings” but which I see as basic good pedagogy—recognizing that your students may have had experiences outside the classroom that lead them to react in different ways to challenging material in the classroom

--do offer those and try to give students notice about especially challenging class content

--mean setting a tone throughout the class that recognizes the importance of grappling with and learning about these issues and recognizing that doing so is psychologically and emotionally challenging

--set it up so that by the time we are doing some of the most difficult material, I’ve gotten to know students and we’ve established some trust in each other

--ensure that there is some breathing space in class: don’t want to rush through really difficult stuff

--and talk about my own choices: why I am or am not showing any photos of lynchings; why I have asked them to watch a particular film; etc.

c) And means recognizing that need to find ways to help students connect in larger classes: create learning groups that stay together all semester

--that way they really get to know each other

--put them together with some intention

III. Finally, some sense of what I’ve learned about supporting students of color in classroom

--recognize that given America’s history, race/racism going to affect the experience of students of color, but also recognize that each student and experience different: not singular

1) So first and most important pedagogy for me is this—and not specific to students of color:

--I try, as much as I can within the context of any given course, to get to know my students as whole people, to actually build some kind of relationship with them

--in large classes, have them all come to my office for conversations at start of semester: get a sense of who they are, where they are from, what they do on campus, what their interests are and where want to go next

--these 15-minute conversations do two things: 1) make sure that every student knows where my office is and knows can come see me; 2) starts building a relationship where student might be willing to come to talk to me if something arises or have problem

--you can’t know always how class will play out, personalities in the space, inevitable mistakes you will make

--but you can build groundwork for strong connections with students that give you capacity to try to address mistakes or deal with classroom situations

2) Then there’s some pedagogical practices that I really began to think about more critically when I served as a Posse mentor: these aren’t necessarily about race; but are more about thinking about how we can best support students who come to our classroom from diverse places with diverse backgrounds

a) When realized how many kids couldn’t afford book and that I was having the same conversation with each of them about strategies for getting access to books, decided needed to build that conversation into my classes

--start by talking about all the different ways one can access course readings and options if don’t want to or can’t buy books

--not only informational, but serves important purpose of normalizing the experience of not being able to get all the books

b) When Posse student: came back so dispirited after a class, says not cut out for here, etc, and was because students were talking about things she’d never heard of,rRealized the importance of very basic thing of making sure that when someone in the classroom uses a term or references an event that we haven’t talked about, it gets defined

--when we talked it through, realized was actually something she knew a lot about—indeed had far more lived experience that she could bring to bear to understand the topic--but hadn’t ever encountered the vocabulaly others were using

I of course talked to her about how she can respond to learn this stuff when happens: how to learn the vocabulary

--but that puts all the individual responsibility on student

Important for me as instructor to make sure that everyone has a chance to fully engage with whatever conversation is taking place in the classroom

--and important for me as instructor to validate multiple ways of knowing

--some students might have good theoretical understanding of an issue while other students might have deep personal understanding of that same issue

--try to convey in my teaching that experiential knowledge is crucial form of knowledge that has a place in the classroom

--has limitations but so does theoretical knowledge…

c) Creating that kind of classroom that values each student and what they bring to the space means embracing students as co-constructors of knowledge

--want my students to feel like they have some influence over what happens in the classroom, that they have the capacity to help shape the agenda, and that they understand that I certainly don’t have all the answers

--if ask students to share something of themselves with each other, I share too; not asking them to do things I’m not willing to do

--and invite their feedback and critique (lecture assignment)

d) Really work to think not only about what I say but about how others might hear it

-how you mean something may not be how students hear them

--one of my Posse kids: worked incredibly hard here, very driven, decided to pursue PhD; wanted to become professor

--really worked here to battle self-doubt, her own capacity to be here

--did good work here—but not straight As

--was talking to someone here about plans, including her plan to apply to range of grad schools, including places like Stanford

--got told: don’t bother applying to Stanford, you’ll never get in there

She came to tell me this in tears: made her question her value, worth—and also wondered how it was this person could make that claim without knowing her well

--now, I didn’t think it was likely for her to get into Stanford either

--but I also didn’t think that this was the way to put it

--actually went and talked to person who said this: to tell them how this student heard it, because I really didn’t think they meant to do any harm

--she didn’t get into Stanford, but did get in elsewhere and is currently finishing a PhD

So want to have conversation, hear everyone’s thoughts, ideas, best practices

--but key issue for me is this:

a) I see being proactive and taking race seriously as issue need to think about, teach about, respond to in classroom as really just about doing my job to make the classroom an effective learning space for everyone

--it’s not—or shouldn’t be—a choice: whether to do or not to do this work

--should be basic expectation