

Antiracist Teaching

By Robert P. Amico

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William Ayers, a noted educator and activist, suggests that “in our teaching, in our educational projects, we might do well to foreground the questions and make them explicit: What am I teaching *for*? And what am I teaching *against*?” (2004, p. 11). Students in my foundations of education course hear that same consistent message: If we are to be effective teachers, we must teach both for *and* against. This becomes a mantra of sorts that underscores an emphasis on the importance of becoming reflective and responsive teachers. As professors, we are models for our students, challenging their tendency to remain silent and to passively accept the status quo without question or critical analysis. We must have clear goals of social justice towards which we are striving, and we must actively fight against the barriers that stand in the way of achieving that social justice.

In his book *Antiracist Teaching*, Robert Amico (2015) advocates a similarly active stance. He suggests that all educators and professionals need to incorporate antiracist teaching into their curricula and programs. His is not simply an approach to take in the isolated “cultural competency” course often required in teacher education programs; rather, the active antiracist pedagogy described by Amico should be part of every discipline and even part of the core curriculum for all college students. This incorporation is vital since the dominant worldview—Joe Feagin (2013) uses the term “the white racial frame”—is one that maintains the status quo. Antiracist teaching, as described by Amico, challenges that worldview.

The organization of the book is very straightforward: Chapter one provides a detailed definition and explanation of White privilege as the “other side of the coin” of racial oppression, and chapter two discusses why teaching White students about White privilege is so difficult, focusing on the barriers that students face when they try to understand oppression and privilege. Chapter three provides a description of the core course Amico himself teaches—his class setting, pedagogical goals, and theoretical frames, and chapter four looks at the dialogic approach that Amico follows in his teaching.

Chapter five shares assessment data Amico has collected regarding the effectiveness of his course and chapter six describes the value he sees in using the dialogic approach for antiracist teaching. There are also excellent appendices with teaching materials included at the end of the book as well as on his easily-accessible website (<https://sites.google.com/site/robertpamicohomepage/>).

Amico strongly argues that antiracist teaching requires one to critically reflect first and foremost on one’s self to understand one’s role in maintaining the racist system that exists. His book provides, in addition to the discussion of the topics listed above, a look at his own journey in critical self-reflection, with personal anecdotes in each chapter. Finally, the references that

Amico cites throughout his book are an impressive list of the major voices that speak to social justice and antiracism (e.g., Joe Feagin, Patricia Hill Collins, Beverly Tatum, and Tim Wise).

As Amico notes, White privilege is a “relational concept” since it involves those who are dominated and those who benefit from that domination. Those who have privilege have difficulty seeing their own advantages and view any disadvantages that others have as their own responsibility. Those who are disadvantaged, however, are usually able to quite clearly see their own disadvantage and the advantages available to others, as well as how privilege is unearned and undeserved. Amico emphasizes that privilege is attached to social categories, not individuals, and that it is connected to how institutional systems operate to benefit some and disadvantage others (perception matters). He also shares the history of race as a social construction, rather than a biological reality. Finally, Amico provides examples of systemic privilege in terms of the job market, housing, the environment, health, law enforcement, government policies, and education. All of this provides a solid context for his approach to antiracist teaching.

The barriers to students understanding White privilege include beliefs in the myths of meritocracy, race, and the master narrative of U.S. history, along with residential segregation and “racialized” space, individualism (a focus on oneself as an individual rather than in the context of systems and society), obliviousness to privilege (which allows Whites to live and even succeed without ever really knowing what it means to not be White in this society), and misunderstanding the nature of privilege. In addition, Amico briefly makes reference to racial identity development and how this development relates to one’s understanding and cultural competence. Emotive factors that may be barriers to understanding include feeling threatened, family loyalty, fear, shame and guilt, and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. Finally, Amico discusses Joe Feagin’s (2013) “white racial frame,” an overarching worldview that incorporates cognitive and emotive factors. While the focus is on barriers to student understanding, Amico’s personal anecdotes within the book remind the reader that these barriers are also factors for us as teachers. One example Amico offers is his description of his first experience attending the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) as a major cultural shock. This experience contrasted sharply to the many other national conferences he had attended, where he felt there had been atmospheres of competition and isolation. It was the first time he remembered ever hearing the voices of those experiencing everyday oppression as well as engaging in meaningful conversations with so many people unlike himself. For Amico, this conference changed his thinking and understanding.

Amico has applied his understanding of White privilege to his own course and his teaching. Basically, he reminds us of the importance of starting where our students are, not where we want them to be. His pedagogical goals are the following:

1. The student understands culture as a social construct. The student understands that “culture” is more than race or ethnicity.
2. The student is capable of deconstructing foundational beliefs and is aware of the effects of these beliefs on present behaviors.

3. The student engages the dynamics of culture through criticism and social analysis and recognizes that in the United States some people are treated unjustly only because of who they are.
4. The student is capable of deconstructing dominant group privilege and understands how prejudice and racism affect her or his life. The student understands the “costs” of racism and prejudice to people of her or his race and can imagine how her or his life and world would be different if not affected by prejudice and racism (p. 47).

These goals form the basis for Amico’s assessment of the course and his students—if students acquire greater understanding of cultural competency by the end of the course, they are progressing in these goals.

Five approaches to consider in one’s teaching framework are examined: dialogue (specifically, Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic approach), intersectionality, transformative multiculturalism, confrontation-conversations, and narrative analysis. He notes that while each offers a different emphasis in the teaching of race awareness and White privilege, they are not mutually exclusive. The dynamics of “students of color in the antiracist classroom” (p. 61) are addressed; Amico cites work by Deanna Blackwell (2010), who focuses on ensuring that education is antiracist for students of color. Blackwell (2010) reminds us that one challenge involves constantly reflecting on whether we as teachers use students of color in our classes to enhance the experience of the White students—at the expense of those students of color.

Amico applies the dialogic approach in both the content and the methodology of his course. Bakhtin’s (1981) notions of *critical moments of dialogue* and *zones of contact* (people must experience conflict and struggle with varying viewpoints) that lead to *punctuated equilibrium* are incorporated throughout the course. Critical moments occur when one is faced with tension and conflict that alter one’s consciousness. This leads to punctuated equilibrium, a time when one must reorganize one’s familiar thinking. The power of this process toward change in one’s thinking is evident in the “Experiencing Whiteness” assignment Amico gives to his students (Amico, p. 99).

To foster this process, Amico advocates starting where students are, so his course begins with a multicultural history book. He has found that his students rarely have a thorough grounding in United States history, and he uses Takaki’s (2008) *A Different Mirror*, a re-telling of United States history through the eyes of varied ethnic and racial groups, to provide that grounding. The remainder of this chapter, along with the appendices and his website, provides a step-by-step description of his course. It is clear that while his goal is to raise student awareness about the system of White privilege as well as to change their attitudes, he also challenges the students to change their behaviors and to take action. The assignments he uses push the students to reflect and to act; raised consciousness is not enough.

As teachers, we are often required to collect student evaluations of our teaching and our courses. The evaluations are used as evidence of one’s effectiveness as a teacher, but given the nature of standardized instruments, they can result in biased and one-moment-in-time snapshots instead. The assessment process that Amico shares to determine any changes in student beliefs and attitudes is impressive in that it adds further documentation to support teaching effectiveness and

student learning. He uses personal inventory questions designed to assess various cultural competencies as a pre-test and post-test. His qualitative analysis of the data indicates there is indeed a significant change in student beliefs and attitudes, lending credence to Amico's belief that his dialogic approach is an effective methodology.

Amico's focus on *antiracist* teaching, as opposed to "diversity" or "multiculturalism" or the typically other-focused "cultural competence" is a direct challenge. Often, in a desire to avoid controversy, we avoid the issue of race in our classrooms and in our teaching. Amico confronts the problem head-on and provides a detailed description of an approach any teacher could take in any content or discipline. Indeed, it is an approach that we must all consider as we strive to be both "teachers for and teachers against."

Author Notes

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