

Responses

Responses: Toward an Antiracist Pedagogy

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Abstract. *The authors respond here to each other's essays published in this issue of the journal. In "Holding Us Accountable," Anna Floerke Scheid and Elisabeth T. Vasko respond to Karen Teel's essay, "Getting Out of the Left Lane." In "Challenges and Convergences," Karen Teel responds to the essay "Teaching Race" by Anna Floerke Scheid and Elisabeth T. Vasko.*

Holding Us Accountable: A Response to Karen Teel

Anna Floerke Scheid

Elisabeth T. Vasko

In her article, "Getting Out of the Left Lane: The Possibility of White Antiracist Pedagogy," Karen Teel asks white theologians to explicitly engage racial justice issues in the classroom and to critically evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching strategies. Just as drivers in the far left lane may not be aware of cars trying to enter the freeway, all too often educators are unaware of the ways in which the classroom space itself replicates the dynamics of white privilege and racism. As Catholic Christian theological educators, we stand with Teel in embracing a moral responsibility to engage our students in questions about racial justice.

Teel has identified a serious problem in the literature addressing antiracist pedagogy: a lack of systemic evaluation of the strategies used to teach about racial injustice. As Teel demonstrates, many affirm the significance of social justice pedagogy for theological education, but its treatment within the literature has been largely anecdotal. Our essay joins Teel's as initial attempts to address this lacuna.

Drawing insights from multicultural social justice education theory, Teel critically analyzes her own antiracist teaching strategies. We appreciate her reflections, which at times provide rich insight into strategies that we have tried ourselves. For example, Teel's method of self-description broadens and enriches the tactic we call "the instructor monologue." While our instructor monologues focused primarily on the privilege we enjoy based on our racial identities, the tripartite narrative Teel performs (her "bootstraps," "oppressed," and "privileged" versions) strikes us as more effective for drawing out the complexities of power and privilege in shaping social location around not only race, but also gender and socioeconomic status. We plan to adopt Teel's narrative technique in the future.

Overall, we find that Teel's critical reflection on her own antiracist pedagogy might benefit further from the qualitative research methodology of SoMTL that we engage in

our essay. In reference to her tripartite narrative, Teel remarks that while students pay attention, they “do not necessarily respond by turning the spotlight back on themselves.” This reflection on student response – including emotional responses – occurs throughout Teel’s essay. For example, she declares that “Most non-Catholic students . . . proceed through my courses without feeling alienated by the faith-claims that are the subject of investigation.” At these moments in Teel’s essay, we found ourselves asking how Teel knows that her students are or are not responding in the ways she describes. The results of our study call into question easy assumptions about students’ cognitive and emotional responses or lack thereof to the material on racism. We found that students do respond to tactics like “the instructor monologue” or “self-description.” Yet, the response was not always the one we were looking for, leading us to miss it in the classroom. It was often outside the classroom, through qualitative analysis of our data, that we discovered how students were responding to us. We think that this kind of qualitative analysis would give Teel better insight into and evidence of the nature of her students’ responses to her pedagogical strategies.

Finally, and most importantly, reading Teel’s essay alongside our own revealed to us a further urgent concern regarding the effectiveness of our mutual efforts to encourage transformational learning through antiracist pedagogy. One issue that neither essay addresses is, perhaps, among the most pressing in the minds of our students, manifested in questions like: “What is my grade in this class?” or “Where do I stand in this class?” These questions point to our students’ anxiety about their course grade, its impact on their overall grade point average, and their subsequent goals for entry into tight job markets and competitive graduate programs. We are concerned that grade anxiety can have the effect of unraveling the pedagogical aims that we are hoping to accomplish. Our pedagogical goal is one of transformation: helping students to understand racism and white privilege and to become antiracism advocates. But frequently our students’ primary aims are to attain a good grade in the class and to complete the required core credits for graduation. In this economy, the pressure our students feel to get good grades is very real. This pressure is symptomatic of larger issues in U.S. culture related to the competitive nature of global capitalism. In classroom spaces “the narrative of hard work” manifests in the idea that good grades are reflective of hard work and, therefore, will translate into personal and financial success. As both Teel and we argue in our essays, this ideology of hard work and personal responsibility props up white privilege and white denial of racism. We contend that the potentially tense relationship between student grade anxiety and professorial goals for transformational learning is something worth explicitly addressing. We suggest that further research examine the significance of grade anxiety in shaping student reactions to antiracist pedagogy. How are student responses to the material influenced by concerns they may have about their grades? What pedagogical strategies are effective in contesting “the narrative of hard work” within antiracist courses, and what tactics remain sensitive to student grade anxiety while nevertheless forwarding goals for transformational learning?

We recognize that both of these essays have only just begun to evaluate strategies for social justice and antiracist pedagogies within theological classrooms. We look forward to continuing fruitful conversations with Teel and other educators devoted to, in Teel’s words, holding “the academy responsible and accountable to society” by addressing “issues that do not conveniently park themselves outside the academy but often arise precisely within classrooms.”

Challenges and Convergences: A Response to Anna Floerke Scheid and Elisabeth T. Vasko

T. Vasko
Karen Teel

Hooray! Professors Anna Floerke Scheid and Elisabeth T. Vasko have produced exactly the kind of work I need to advance my own pedagogical efforts around “teaching race”: concrete, qualitative research on what it is like for white students to learn about this topic. I am grateful to the editors of *Teaching Theology and Religion* for bringing our ideas together. In this space, I want to highlight three points that sharpen my current thinking on teaching about racism and white privilege, or “whiteness” for short: correspondences between Scheid and Vasko’s research findings and my anecdotal observations; the use of service-learning in courses that address race; and the goal of “teaching race” across the curriculum.

First, the correspondences. Since writing “Getting Out of the Left Lane,” I have taught the course that I describe in my conclusion, “Racial Justice: Catholic Perspectives.” I had an entire semester to address topics that Scheid and Vasko courageously tackled in a few weeks. Although I did not track student responses systematically, I can report that my students exhibited signs of insecurity, frustration, and cognitive dissonance quite similar to those described by Scheid and Vasko. At the end of my course, one white student commented (eliciting nods from others) that he had been convinced that whiteness was real only gradually, and that as late as halfway through the semester he might still have tried to argue against it. Even as some white students were still struggling to understand exactly how whiteness implicates them personally, virtually all grasped that it is bigger than they are, and some began demanding to know what they could do about it. I had been concerned that students of color would feel left out or bored in these conversations, but several stated that they learned a lot and appreciated the opportunity to discuss racism in a mixed-race group. Considering Scheid and Vasko’s experiences along with my own, it seems clear that prolonged exposure to and dialogue about these issues are essential. “Race” is not something most white students can comprehend quickly.

Second, Scheid and Vasko’s suggestions are valuable; I plan to adopt several, with thanks, to tweak my own strategies. One about which I remain uncertain, however, is service learning, traditionally conceived. The anticipated benefits are perhaps obvious: students increase knowledge and empathy by working with people in underserved communities. Unfortunately, when encountering people (of color) from such communities, privileged (white) students may adopt a “tourist” mentality that can do more harm than good.¹ Avoiding this requires preparation that I doubt is possible in one introductory course.² I hesitate to push white students into the broader community before they have practiced working with their peers on racial justice issues. This leads me to imagine projects local to our own university campus, which boasts no shortage of racial dynamics that students can competently evaluate and into which they might responsibly attempt to intervene. Indeed,

¹ Indeed, Scheid and Vasko discuss insights that students gained from taking public transportation to get to their service placements, rather than from the placements themselves. See Perkinson (2012).

² One solution would be to adopt a developmental approach in which students take more than one course on the topic. This, however, is not something that a professor can implement single-handedly (see third point, below).

some of my students, brainstorming about ways they might take action to educate their peers, thought of wearing buttons for a day that read “ASK ME ABOUT WHITENESS.”

Third, Scheid and Vasko note, correctly in my view, that teaching race across the curriculum must be our ultimate goal. This is more than I dare to hope for in my own conclusion, and frankly, I have no idea how we get there from here. Their supporting observation, though, is downright frightening: their white students knew little about our racial history; “a good portion” could not define lynching, and accordingly thought James Cone was exaggerating and should “get over it.” Together with the profound ignorance of white students about present-day racism and white privilege, this indicates a problem reaching far beyond the world of formal education. Something is seriously wrong with the way we white parents are raising our children.³

In closing, I want to exhort all of us to continue this work. As we do, I hope we can begin attending to the experiences of non-white students when we are “teaching race.”⁴ At USD, students of color know their peers are majority white; at the end of the semester, students in one section of “Racial Justice” openly celebrated the fact that among our number had been not just one but *two* black students! In such a setting, students of color may approach discussions on race and racism with modest expectations for their own edification. Nevertheless, their learning is crucially important. Sooner rather than later, we must begin to document it, to ensure that *all* students have access to worthwhile, even “transformative” experiences in courses that confront racism and white privilege.

Bibliography

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³ Yancy offers some analysis of white parenting vis-à-vis race and racism in *Look, a White!* (2012, 21–29). In the second chapter of this book, Yancy discusses teaching race to mostly white students as a black professor.

⁴ One relevant text is Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi* (2010), a detailed account of research showing that “stereotype threat” – worrying that one’s behavior may be taken to confirm a stereotype of one’s social group – measurably impairs, among other things, the academic performance of students in ability-stereotyped groups. Chapter nine contains suggestions for ameliorating this threat and empowering students to perform at their full potential. I thank the staff of USD’s Center for Inclusion and Diversity for bringing this book to my attention.