

Language Action for Course Syllabi

Syllabus suggestions from adhoc faculty group on syllabus language

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Introduction: In light of George Floyd's murder, the ensuing racial protests across the world, and in acknowledgement of the longstanding and chronic racism in our country, our students return to campus and our classes having experienced varying levels of engagement, with resulting varying levels of self-awareness and trauma. Faculty return after letters from Dr. Gibbs and Dr. Moore sparked a rise in engagement with racism and antiracism on campus. We invite faculty to enter our classrooms this fall as our whole selves, prepared to provide brave and nourishing space for students to show up as we teach and learn together. One way to begin engagement is to include a statement or activity in course syllabi.

Purpose: With these suggestions, we aim to help faculty craft language and utilize resources that can be used as foundations for syllabi statements, a syllabus activity, and/or an ILO for classes. Faculty may plan discussions/conversations with students that acknowledge the current context and students' lived experiences. How faculty do this early in a course sets a tone for expectations for the whole class and works to build community in the classroom.

Current college messaging for syllabus preparation

- [Land acknowledgement statement](#)
- [Community Pledge – COVID-19](#)
- Syllabi statements:
 - [Ability](#)
 - [Gender pronoun, multilingual testing, mental health](#)
 - [Inclusivity statement](#)
- [Race and Ethnic Studies statement](#)
- [An Ole Tradition of Race and Ethnic Studies](#)
- [Music Department statement](#)

Prompts/questions for faculty to consider as we prepare for classes to begin

- What and how do I teach? Who is on my syllabus? Whose/what perspectives are centered?
- What is my own positionality? [Intersectional identity](#)? Experience with racism, both personal and structural?
 - Acknowledging and discussing one's own position/race/experiences with race can model action and reflection for students
- What is the history of race in my discipline(s)? Its relationship to anti-racist work today?
- What is the history of the place where we are learning (St. Olaf/Manitou Heights, Northfield, Minnesota)?
- What is the current data at St. Olaf? Admissions, retention, hiring, promotion
- What characterizes an anti-racist class? How might we achieve this? How will we know?

- Which classroom practices create antiracist, intersectional learning space? Which ones, such as [racial spotlighting](#) or [tone policing](#), do harm? Consider developing self-reflective opportunities that enable the class's participants to be accountable to each other toward the shared goal of building antiracist, intersectional learning space.
- What antiracist pedagogical techniques have you cultivated and built into your syllabus? How do you intend to talk about them on the first day of class with your students?
- Instead of a first-day icebreaker, what antiracist spacebuilder activity have you created to enable all students to be fully present in your classroom? How will you reiterate and reinforce these spacebuilding practices throughout the semester?
- If a microaggression occurs in your classroom, have you prepared the class to respond in ways that do no further harm, carry the burden together, and enable resilience and growth?
- Treating the syllabus statement as a starting place to reflect with your students, how will you model and cultivate racial equity as an ongoing feature of your classroom?

Possible language/statements

We invite each faculty member to decide what makes sense for a particular course. We have noted here some useful ideas and concepts in anti-racist teaching.

- Strong anti-racist messaging uses words that are active, clear, and direct, e.g. this classroom “will” (replacing “strive to”)
- “Civility” has a [racial history](#) that centers white privilege and comfort. Decentering whiteness as the classroom cultural norm, how may faculty discuss and model antiracist ways of processing, communicating, actively listening, and sharing learning space? Such practices may include being mindful of how one's actions and words “take and give” space, foregrounding one's positionality as a way to talk about bias, signposting a question or comment in order to think alongside one's peers, affirming a peer's comment by articulating one's appreciation and takeaways, among others.
- Communication and behavioral norms vary by cultural background. Recognizing this, we take responsibility to learn more about varying modes of interaction. “Ole Culture” communicates a way of being that, though it may not intentionally exclude, may harm some community members.
- Phrases and concepts can include:
 - Commitment to anti-racism/being an anti-racist (use a definition below, or find your own)
 - The practice of dismantling a system marked by white supremacy and anti-Black racism through deliberate action
 - A theory that explains and exposes multiple forms of racism: overt and covert, interpersonal and institutional, historical and present day, persistent and nascent (Smith and Bunyasi)
 - Anti-racist teaching is a process and it involves unlearning; our current context demands urgent action
 - No discipline is untouched by racist ideology and practices; what is this relationship of race to this discipline, historically and now?
 - Student lived experience, ownership, agency
 - Openness to engagement
 - Setting a tone for community

Resources (with brief annotations)

- [Abolitionist Teaching Network](#)
 - This online network and resource center is dedicated to developing and supporting educators to fight injustice within their schools and communities. It is action oriented, mobilizing intellectual work to assist community organizers in taking action for educational freedom. Their [resources for agitators](#) contains a list of anti-racist teaching tools.
- [Academics for Black Survival and Wellness](#)
- Associated Press [rationale for capitalizing Black](#)
- [Association for Latin American Art Statement on Racial Injustice](#)
 - An excellent example of a statement made by an executive committee.
- [Cornell University Art History Department statement](#)
 - An excellent example of a statement made by a department.
- [Chronicle of Higher Education on inclusive teaching](#)
 - This article from July 2019 offers tips that any instructor can use to minimize inequities and help more students succeed. This does not necessarily mean a complete course redesign; it could be an overlay to your current teaching practices. It addresses common questions, key principles of inclusive teaching, ways to interact inclusively with students, ideas for inclusive course design, and ways of evaluating the effectiveness of those efforts. It also contains links to further resources about [inclusive teaching](#).
- [Cruelty-free syllabus](#)
 - The syllabus sets the tone for relationships in a classroom community. This article from February 2019 addresses the issue of authoritarian, patronizing classroom policies that implicitly center a particular kind of student and marginalize or even punish students who do not fit that precise profile. The article bespeaks the need for an inclusive syllabus that affirms student diversity, agency and freedom by reducing typical commandment-like policy and repositioning the instructor not as the sole authority, but rather as a fellow human with individual circumstances and needs. A sample [cruelty-free syllabus](#) is included.
- [Everyday Anti-racism: Getting Real about Race in School](#) by Mica Pollock
- [How to be an Anti-Racist \(2019\)](#) by Ibram X. Kendi
 - “The opposite of “racist” isn’t not-racist” In this memoir, Kendi weaves together an electrifying combination of ethics, history, law, and science--including the story of his own awakening to antiracism--bringing it all together in a cogent, accessible form. He begins by helping us rethink our most deeply held, if implicit, beliefs and our most intimate personal relationships (including beliefs about race and IQ and interracial social relations) and reexamines the policies and larger social arrangements we support.
- [Lewis and Clark resources](#)
 - Here, Lewis and Clark State College provides a thorough set of resources for educators to integrate anti-racist practices “across the curriculum,” along with activities that can be implemented in the classroom.
- National Museum of African American History and Culture: [Talking about Race portal](#)

- Resources for educators, parents, and individuals for self-care, antiracist work, and communities. Includes definition of terms, readings, videos, and phrases for opening up conversations and getting comfortable with discussing race.
- [Project Biodiversify](#)
 - a collection of biologists' profiles -- women and diverse scientists
- [Reed College resources](#)
 - Reed's page includes two statements: a diversity statement from 2007 and an updated anti-racism statement from 2017 that is much more active in its messaging.
- [St. Cloud State University resources](#)
 - ARPAC is a project at SCSU that provides anti-racist training for interested faculty across disciplines. Although only offered at SCSU, the webpage includes helpful anti-racist pedagogy goals and faculty testimonials.
- [Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture](#)
- [Society for Neuroscience](#)
 - profiles of interesting Black neuroscientists, set of supplemental materials and a 1 hour webinar focused on moving from representation to inclusion.
- [Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter \(2019\)](#), by Candis Watts Smith and Tehama Lopez Bunyasi, as referenced in Yes! Magazine
- [Trauma informed pedagogy \(2020\)](#) by Mays Imad
 - How do we teach to the lonely, the fearful, and the stressed? Includes a brief list of suggestions including clarity, availability, understanding.
- [Vanderbilt University resources](#)
 - This thorough guide provides vocabulary, common challenges, a set of principles, and references to help educators address racial injustice and inequality in all the disciplines.
- [Wheaton College](#)
 - An action-oriented guide to becoming an anti-racist educator.
- [YWCA Stand Against Racism](#)
 - This web link is a part of YWCA's Stand Against Racism program and includes an article (see link below) by Boston Globe columnist Renée Graham on using white privilege to fight racism and includes [three discussion questions](#) to begin the work.

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