

## **Responding to Student Reports about Racism: Some promising practices for faculty, students, and administrators**

### **King's and Brescia Anti-Racism Working Group**

The long-term goal of campus-based anti-racist work is to secure justice, equity, respect, and supportive environments for students, staff, and faculty from racialized groups, to enrich curriculum, policy and practice with diverse perspectives, and to build trust and relationships (at least partly on the terms set by community members of colour). The focus of this document is student complaints, reports, or concerns about racist acts or language either experienced or witnessed. The notes below, which are meant to be a starting point for discussion and reflection, rather than a how-to list, were created partly out of a KB-ARWG brainstorming session that attended to the voices of student members.

Western's [Anti-Racism Working Group Report](#) (2020), based on extensive campus surveys and interviews, notes that "[u]ndergraduate students (38.8%) had the highest response rate of those experiencing racism" (p. 8) and that 30.9% of undergraduate students also reported that they had observed racism. These incidents can be peer-to-peer for both students (29.6% of undergraduate students surveyed) and faculty (26.3% of faculty surveyed)... A Listening Session participant observed: "I've witnessed white instructors who have witnessed and recognized when a microaggression happens or an inappropriate comment is made and they were viscerally uncomfortable. But they don't know what to do or how to respond, so they end up ignoring it or failing to call it out. People need training in this area" (p. 8).<sup>1</sup> A participant in the King's and Brescia ARWG Survey noted: "I have had students disclose incidents of racial stereotyping, racial slurs by esteemed professors. [Authorities to whom this was reported] used standardized/canned responses, that were not informed by a knowledge of racism/discrimination.... Every single instance of racism that I have brought forward has been poorly handled at this institution because "good White people" do not actually believe they are part of the problem."

In the present-day university setting, it is most unlikely that racism will express itself in the form of open name-calling or physical assault, though these overt forms of racist behaviour have by no means been eliminated. Subtle bias, discrimination, microaggressions,<sup>2</sup> and aversive racism

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<sup>1</sup> President's Anti-Racism Working Group Final Report, May 2020. <https://president.uwo.ca/pdf/arwg-final-report-to-president-shepard-fnl.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Derald Wing Sue, extending the work of Chester M. Pierce, defines microaggressions as follows: "everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-

are what racialized students are most likely to encounter.<sup>3</sup> Racist language and imagery often show up in places where perpetrators can be anonymous: graffiti, online forums and social media that allow anonymous posts, Halloween costumes, “funny” T-shirt slogans or cartoons or memes that are not funny to some people. Concerns about institutional racism (for instance, the exclusion of Black and Indigenous history, philosophy, texts, art, political theory, and perspectives from curricula, or a heavily deficit-based institution-wide approach to racialized international students) and white supremacist thinking (the hypervaluing of the Great European Traditions at the expense of traditions developed by racialized groups; the devaluing of Black vernaculars) should also be addressed seriously.

### **Classroom Situations and individual acts of racism (student-to-student or faculty-to-student)**

One of the trickiest things about racist microaggression is that it is hard to pin down, especially as a specifically racist act: perhaps the offender is just having a bad day, perhaps they treat everyone like this. It is worth bearing in mind that many racialized people, given the accumulation of similar past experiences, will *perceive or receive* a microaggression directed towards them as a racist microaggression. Some notes for course instructors:

#### **Establish some ground rules:**

With regard racial slurs in general, and to the N-word in particular, in historical texts or reports: there should be a complete moratorium on anyone saying them aloud, in full, in class. There is no contradiction with academic freedom: if freedom to learn means being free of trauma, then retraumatizing Black students is not the best way to teach even Black history.<sup>4</sup> Always listen to the group affected by this trauma, not to those who feel the slurs are “okay in some contexts.”

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intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them.” They have a cumulative effect on the psyche of the receiver, and often perpetrators do not realize they are delivering them. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression>

<sup>3</sup>The [APA Dictionary of Psychology](https://dictionary.apa.org/modern-racism) defines “aversive racism” as follows: a form of racial [prejudice](https://dictionary.apa.org/modern-racism) felt by individuals who outwardly endorse egalitarian attitudes and values but nonetheless experience negative emotions in the presence of members of certain racial groups, particularly in ambiguous circumstances. For example, if a White employer who supports equality nonetheless favors White candidates over Black candidates in job interviews when all the individuals’ qualifications for the position are unclear, then he or she is demonstrating aversive racism.” See also <https://dictionary.apa.org/modern-racism>

<sup>4</sup> Watch Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor’s webinar on this topic, hosted by Western. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5-1tIQPmw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5-1tIQPmw&feature=emb_logo)

**Use trigger warnings:**

If, as a course instructor, you are setting texts in which such language is used, warn students, and make your abhorrence of the slurs explicit. You may often need to state your position much more explicitly than you expect to. If you are setting texts in which such language is used, have good reasons why; balance them with other texts and critiques.

**Encourage the admission of errors and apology, if needed:**

If the dispute is about acceptable terminology, and you don't know it, accept that you don't know. Indicate your willingness to either hear more from the student (if the situation allows it) or to learn more on your own and return to the subject.

**Create an incident report:**

If the situation did not seem to be fully resolved in the classroom, create a report immediately, so that if students pursue it, there will be some information and support for them.

**Accept an investigation of the situation:**

In a she said/they said situation, always be sure to investigate the report or complaint seriously, and do not minimize its impact on the student, suggest that they were being "too sensitive," or that the instructor "meant well," or "only used the word in passing, for a second."

**Offer serious, respectful attention:**

Racist or antiracist challenges from students are inevitable. *Hear* the challenge—listen, ask questions if possible. Show compassion and empathy, sit down if needed, give the challenger some physical space, use a calm tone and non-threatening body language. Allow silence; take time yourself, to think, and give the student/s time for reflection.

**Respond in a timely fashion:**

Racist microaggressions from students towards other students should be responded to as soon as possible, ideally in class. Students value instructors addressing microaggressions rather than being passive.<sup>5</sup> If appropriate, the aggression can be dissociated from the person making the point and turned into a more abstract question. If you are an instructor in this situation, state your own position (hopefully antiracist) on the question, and explain other positions. Explain why the position or language used might be perceived as racist. If you are the target of the complaint, examine your own practices and language.

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<sup>5</sup> See Boysen, G.A. (2012) <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2012.654831>, especially p. 127.

## Racist content in syllabi

If a student shows critical awareness, take it as a good thing, and be proud of them. See it as a sign that you are using a critical pedagogy in your course.<sup>6</sup>

Take the student's complaint seriously; if there is justification, acknowledge the problem and apologize. Never put the student down, especially not in public. Ask for input: "Would you be open to meeting me after class to discuss this in greater detail? I would like to understand more."

Think about your syllabi: who is the author of the text you have assigned? Whom is it about? What other texts and perspectives are there, and how do they complicate the one/s you have set? Do you have Black, Indigenous or racialized representation in your syllabus? Does your text trade in racial or ableist stereotypes? If the text is racist in an irrelevant way, the next time you have a chance to review your syllabus, make the effort to drop the text and substitute a less racist one.

Consider what you are doing when you approach a racist or colonial text "neutrally" or even "dialogically," as if there are *some* arguments in favour of racism, slavery, or colonization.

If a text is on the syllabus to expose racism, and you are going to be doing a critical reading of a racist text, place it into your antiracist framework in the very first class that tackles the text, not later on in the course. Do not assume that you need to do other kinds of reading or analysis before you address the racism in a text ("I was going to do a Critical Race reading in my final class"). Contextualize the racist content—not to justify it, but to explain where it comes from.

Often, if the whole course contains clear antiracist content and if the instructor is unequivocally anti-racist from the start, racialized students will find it easier to tolerate any racist content that is needed for an understanding of the subject.

Use the trigger warning principle not just locally, before addressing a hurtful or difficult passage in a text, but at the start of the course, explaining why materials that have a bearing on race were chosen, and how you plan to critique them. Put information and statements in your syllabus that address this. Make your syllabus a reflection of your approach to other cultures and to race: recognizing Ceremonies as a reason for absence, for example, can go a long way towards reassuring Indigenous students that you respect and value their culture.

Invite students of colour to share their perspectives. Show and feel curiosity about your students' culture (without making students spokespersons for their culture). Don't call on them suddenly in class; but approach them privately to ask if they are interested in being experts on a

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Prebel writes: "A critical pedagogical approach recognizes writing [and speaking] as a political process through which students gain knowledge and strategies to become more critical of pervasive, dominant ideologies and oppressive (academic and social) structures" (p. Prebel, J. (2016). Engaging a "Pedagogy of Discomfort": Emotion as Critical Inquiry in Community-Based Writing Courses, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1113429.pdf>

particular subject. If there is a very small minority of racialized students in a class that will discuss race related issues, find out, by speaking to individual racialized students, how they would like you to approach the issue of race or disability.

If possible, create classroom ground rules with the help of students.

Offer strong invitations to critique in your assignment prompts, and don't make it sound as if you are expecting praise from your students for a racist text or institution.

Ask questions about content from the racial angle in your Additional Feedback questions.

Embrace and explain critical pedagogy, and how it can lead to respectful engagement.

Introduce yourself not just as a professional (professionalism discourse can be deeply alienating).

Embrace and explain the pedagogy of discomfort, since all efforts at academic social justice will lead to discomfort for some parties.<sup>7</sup>

### **How can instructors manage blows to self-image, perceived diminution of classroom authority and academic freedom?**

“Safe spaces” cannot be universally guaranteed; what may work is empathy that allows students to learn from an experience, rather than one that puts students on the spot. There are no safe spaces for instructors either: the same principle of learning applies. Discomfort, and the emotions that result from not being in control of the classroom discourse (defensiveness, shame, anger) can be productive in the long run.<sup>8</sup> Instructors can acknowledge that there are things they themselves do not know.

### **Student concerns about, or reports of racism: what administrators can do**

#### **Foster systemic change:**

The most durable and lasting solution is the gradual dismantling of the structural inequities that result in racism (and racism in its intersections with sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and so on). En route to this, we must foster attitudinal change—a campus-wide “reset” of thinking and

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Prebel quotes Megan Boler (the originator of this concept) on the pedagogy of discomfort: “a purposeful way of examining uncomfortable emotions we (and our students) might otherwise resist or deflect, such as ‘defensive anger, fear of change, fears of losing our personal and cultural identities,’ as well as guilt and the discomfort produced when we are forced to question our beliefs and assumptions (Boler 176).” Prebel (2016). . Engaging a “Pedagogy of Discomfort”: Emotion as Critical Inquiry in Community-Based Writing Courses, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1113429.pdf>. See also Zembylas, M. (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2015.1039274>

assumptions that automatically and often unconsciously values Whiteness and devalues the philosophies and cultures of people of colour. Many institutions have begun this process by creating reading circles and book clubs, anti-racism training, and so on.

**Create a process by which texts and curriculum are reviewed:**

Currently, a number of syllabi include materials that are actively racist towards Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, as well as biased in their representation of women and other minorities. Sometimes these materials are included so that they can be critiqued. However, if there is no critical pedagogy challenging the content, and it is offered as part of the “knowledge” provided by that course, then it should be substituted with less discriminatory material. For instance, a history of Canada that considers colonialism beneficial rather than deeply problematic is traumatizing to Indigenous students.

**Create and circulate a document that defines standards of respectful teaching and language in the classroom:**

Prevention is better than cure: draft, in consultation with students, and circulate, a document outlining the basic standards for respectful teaching in relation to race, so that the “rules” not left up to individuals. For instance, state clearly that the N-word and other racial slurs should not be used in their full form in the classroom. Explain concepts such as microaggression and aversive racism.

**Build and make known networks of allyship and accompliceship:**

There has often been a tendency to minimize such incidents when students report them or discuss them with faculty or administrators (e.g., “That instructor is quite tough with all their students, not just racialized ones”). Instead of deflecting and dismissing student complaints, faculty and student-facing administrators must refer them to campus resources that can address their concerns.

**Identify one or more advisors who can be contacted:**

Students who experience racism don’t know where to turn for support. The college should appoint and ensure the availability of one or more staff/administrators/faculty members within the campus, ideally persons who are themselves racialized, who have skills in advising persons experiencing racism, and who will use these skills to support the complainant, rather than primarily to protect the college’s reputation. If a standing committee is formed, student representation on it is important. Mount Allison University has an example of such a committee: a [Racial Justice council](#) that includes student members.

**In serious cases, identify or appoint an unbiased external investigator:**

In cases where the rights and dignity of a student or a group of students is seriously violated, ensure proper and unbiased investigation of the students’ complaint.

**Include an EDID expert within senior leadership:**

In the long run, a commitment to equity would require senior campus leadership to pay attention to the spectrum of EDID (equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization) issues among students as well as all the employee groups on campus. Otherwise, decisions will continue to be made without the input of marginalized members of the community.

**Publicize and simplify access to these and any other resources:**

Create easily accessed infographics, videos, and other ways of explaining to students how to safely report racist incidents or concerns about racism on campus. Make this step-by-step so that the student knows what the next steps are, and where to find resources.

**If a complaint is being discussed, ensure some level of transparency about developments to the complainant:**

The victim of the incident should be kept informed of developments in their case, or changes that are likely to result from it. We are aware that privacy laws circumscribe this process, but victims of racist offences should not be left feeling that no action was taken.

**Create policy for addressing complaints of racial bias or discrimination:**

The framework should ensure confidentiality for the victim of the incident (the complainant), as well as protection from reprisal. The policy should define where (spaces), when, and what kind of acts might be interpreted (e.g., "On college premises, and in other places where college community members interact with each other for college-related studies or work (conferences and travel, religious or social functions, etc.)" and telephone, email, and virtual spaces (social media, learning management platforms, tutoring hubs, etc.).

**Create an online form for anonymous reporting of racism:**

Examples from other institutions: Confederation College's [Racism Complaint Intake Form](https://www.confederationcollege.ca/webform/racism-complaint-intake-form), (<https://www.confederationcollege.ca/webform/racism-complaint-intake-form>) or Western has an [online reporting tool](#), but the Affiliate college community cannot use it.

**Consider using [restorative justice methods](#) for resolving complaints.**