



Teaching Privilege that is Mindful of Identity Development

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Every once in a while, I still hear the phrase “check your privilege” being tossed around. Each time I hear it, I cringe. As an educator who works with young people on broadening their perceptions of injustice, I understand where the pain, anger or isolation comes from in the use of that phrase. I also know how that phrase can completely end a conversation. “Check your privilege” can send someone right back to her defensive, checked out, safe space.

Having spent years working with young people around understanding their privilege, I know how emotionally challenging recognizing and acknowledging one’s privilege can be. How young people have developed around understanding their identity can be vastly varied and can be greatly impacted by the experiences they have had. Educator Beverley Tatum’s (1992) work on teaching race and racism constantly reminds me of how emotionally challenging understanding privilege and systems that grant it can be for someone hearing about it for the first time. Her work specifically speaks to racial privilege, but learning how people progress to understanding and assuming their racial privilege can offer a solid framework to working with students around all aspects of privilege.

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For the purpose of this article, I pull from Tatum's (1992) and Helms' (1990) work on racial identity development to offer tools on how to work with students on understanding and acknowledging their privilege. Tatum uses racial identity development theory as a way to allow her students to process their own understanding of race. I specifically focus on her use of white racial identity development and how it has influenced the curriculum development of the service learning program at The Urban School of San Francisco, which places a huge emphasis on understanding privilege.

White racial identity development has six documented stages: the contact phase, the disintegration, the reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion/emersion and autonomy.¹

- In **the contact phase** students have minimal experience with people outside of their racial group and lack an understanding of cultural and institutional racism.
- In **the disintegration stage** a person recognizes racism as bad, yet lacks the ability to challenge racist behavior.
- **The reintegration stage** is marked by regression into the dominant belief around race.

- In **the pseudo-independence stage** a person truly begins to learn and understand more about racism.
- In **immersion/emersion**, white people are really looking for ways to be in their white identity while at the same time challenging racism.
- **Autonomy** is the final stage when a white person embraces the notion of a "non-racist white identity." (Tatum, 1992)

Each of these stages can really impact how a person relates to an understanding of his privilege even outside of racial privilege. For example, a young person in the reintegration stage will not be willing to see systemic racism or recognize it. This stage is often filled with anger that can blame people of color. A person can also feel guilt

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1. White Racial Identity Development speaks to the experiences of white people and the various ways they relate to and understand their racial identity. There are other models developed for people of color (see Cross, 1991, for Black Racial Identity Development). I use White Racial Identity Development because it is the most useful in discussions around privilege.



around learning about injustice. In this moment, asking a student to recognize her own privilege will be really difficult because of a lack of understanding of the systems that grant privilege. The student first has to work through understanding how privilege works. Another example is a student in the disintegration stage who can recognize racism as a bad thing but does not connect it to his own actions. Telling students they have privilege might cause them to retreat to a defensive place; again they need to understand a larger system and then be able to find their place in it.

In our Service Learning program, we recognize that each stage is integral in understanding students' reaction to the work they do in our curriculum. As educators, we scaffold our curriculum recognizing that students need to have space to work through their own identity development if they are to truly address and acknowledge their privilege. Below I offer a few concrete examples of how we scaffold our courses to allow students to progress in learning about and understanding privilege.

We start our Freshman Identity and Ethnic Studies course (our introductory class in the Service Learning curriculum) with students naming their own racial and ethnic identity. We practice just allowing the students time to name and explore their racial and ethnic heritage, which in turn allows them to challenge their own concept of a dominant narrative. They are not just "American"—they

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must name what their racial and ethnic heritage is and are given a variety of opportunities and projects to practice this. In the first stage of racial identity development, a white person is not going to see her racial identity. There is privilege in that, and instead of challenging the notions of privilege around "being American," this first course creates space for exploration on what "American" means and how this connects to a student's own individual identities. Students are allowed to articulate the spaces where they may hold privilege, which prepares them for deeper understanding later in the four-year program.

We do journaling throughout the four years, with prompts that speak to the variety of feelings student have throughout the courses. For example, we introduce Juniors to McIntosh's (1989) article on the Invisible Knapsack. Before and after they read the article, we do a series of activities which allows the students to make their own lists, while at the

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same time, we have to allow for space for resistance and guilt. Many students speak about the lack of relevance and that McIntosh's list doesn't apply to them. Sometimes students can revert to blaming those who "don't work hard." As their teacher, I allow space for this processing and recognize where they are in their own journey. Journals allow for students to process their resistance while also creating a safe space for their teacher to dialogue with them. Class teachers read the journals and respond to them. These are shared in a private Dropbox and only the student and teacher have access to the pieces.

Finally, our curriculum must offer examples of people with privilege doing justice work. As Tatum (1992) explores the autonomy stage in her work, an "individual may begin searching for a new, more comfortable way to be white," offering examples of white people doing justice work helps student to identify in a new way with their privilege. The same is true in how to combat systems that create privilege. Students need tangible examples of what people have done and are currently doing to acknowledge

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their privilege and use it to challenge unjust systems. In both the Junior and Senior classes, we study a wide range of social justice activists and listen to narratives on their own identity development and how they engage in justice work. In the Junior class, we specifically look at white anti-racist activists, like Peggy McIntosh, Tim Wise and Ariel Luckey. We create spaces for students to talk about their own journeys in doing this work, and to reflect on their words, their approach and tactics, and how they receive messages. These spaces allow students a number of opportunities to jump into the dialogue depending upon where they are in their own personal development.

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Understanding privilege is not easy for anyone, let alone young people. Taking into account where they are in their own identity development is key to creating a safe learning environment for young people to move through the various stages as they confront, accept, recognize, and challenge their privilege and the systems that grant it. ●

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