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**Politics, Education, and  
Social Problems**  
Complicated Classroom  
Conversations

**Jennifer Rich**

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# PREFACE

## THE PROBLEM WITH EDUCATION

On November 9, 2016, the day after the presidential election, I woke early after a restless sleep. The news was still on in my room, and it confirmed what I heard as I nodded off: the American people had elected Donald Trump to be the forty-fifth president of the United States. Among my many concerns was a practical one: my colleagues and I had planned an event for our university's Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights, of which I am the Executive Director. It was an open conversation, meant to allow students, faculty, and staff of both political affiliations to talk to one another, to come together after a particularly contentious election season.

In all honesty, I had assumed, despite everything that had happened during the election season, that Hillary Clinton would win. I was unsure of how I would facilitate the lunchtime conversation when this was not the case, one that I thought I would be able to handle easily. I had imagined how magnanimous I could be in my liberal triumph, talking through with students how to reach out to the "other side." Instead, I was distressed. What would happen to women? Muslims? Members of the LGBTQ+ communities? What would happen to those who opposed Trump? I couldn't wrap my mind around what felt like a blow to fundamental human decency.

Students piled into a classroom for the post-election conversation—so many students that we moved out all of the furniture, seating students in concentric circles, passing pizza and soda around until everyone was

settled and had something to eat. I was shocked by the number of students there, more than had joined us for any previous event. They all looked tired and were dressed similarly in baseball hats, hoodies, socks, and flip flops. As they wandered in and I greeted them, asking them how they were, they told me they were tired, depressed, vindicated, scared, and triumphant. These brief comments told me everything I needed to know before beginning: I was facilitating a conversation between those who had voted for Clinton and those who had voted for Trump.

I am comfortable facilitating uncomfortable conversations, comfortable with debate and disagreement, comfortable with students (and other faculty) expressing beliefs that oppose my own—I see my role as being about facilitation, never indoctrination. This time, though, I hadn't processed my own concerns about the election, and worried about staying open-minded.

In the end, the conversation went well. Students were respectful; I did very little talking and a whole lot of listening. A Trump supporter and a Clinton supporter sat next to each other, and spoke with one another kindly. Though they attended the same university, and ended up sitting next to one another at the same event, they felt certain they had never met a supporter of the other candidate in person. They had mentally vilified the other but were able to see this one individual as human.

Flash forward a few months, to the semester immediately following the inauguration of President Trump. Some students wore MAGA hats around campus, others kept their *I'm With Her* buttons and stickers in prominent places on backpacks and computers. The election was over, but the divisiveness of the politics was still very present.

I was teaching a class that I regularly teach for education majors who are studying to become teachers. It focuses on schools and the communities in which they sit. Every semester I gave my students an assignment to cross a cultural boundary, to go to a place where they feel like an outsider. So, if they are straight, they can go to an LGBTQ+ event; if they are Christian, they can go to a service at a synagogue or mosque. I have had white students who went to Black Baptist churches, and Democrats who went to meetings of the Campus Republicans. The idea was to learn about people they consider to be different from them, think about how they are more similar than they might have assumed, and talk about how this might inform their future teaching.

The semester that President Trump was elected, a student in my class wrote a paper saying that he goes through life as a conservative on a liberal

campus. He didn't go to a new place for the assignment or talk about how the experience informs his thinking; he just wrote about the fact that, in his opinion, he is a political minority. I gave him the opportunity to redo his paper because he didn't complete the assignment.

The student came to my office to talk about his work. He was trying to convince me that his paper was acceptable, that it met the criteria for the assignment. He began a sentence, "it's like when you go to your church..." and I stopped him, explaining that I go to synagogue, that I'm Jewish. His response? "You're a Jew Professor?" As he said this, he pushed his chair back from my desk, putting some physical space between the two of us.

While I try not to assign motivation to students without asking directly for their perspective, in this instance the antisemitism was obvious to me. I wasn't sure how to ask him why he pushed his chair back, why he used the words he did, and I wasn't sure I wanted to hear what he might say. Instead, I told the student that I wouldn't allow him to move from my class, and that we'd get through the semester together even though we both knew how he felt about me. (We did. It was uncomfortable.)

I didn't experience things like this before the 2016 election. I have no doubt that they *did* happen, but it was the first time I faced it. I've argued with colleagues (and myself) about whether it is positive or negative that the divisiveness and vitriol is out in the open, that our country and our classrooms are embroiled in such heated debate about things like race, religion, and nationalism. While I am deeply troubled by the politics of the nation, I am pleased that young people are engaging with political, social, and cultural issues—even though much of the debate centers around perspectives that are racist, antisemitic, and xenophobic. Ultimately, I take the perspective that open discussion is a good thing if we want to move forward as a society.

Later that same semester, I undertook the facilitation of a series of challenging conversations on campus, which we called "Hearing Conservative Voices." They were hour-long sessions meant to respond to students, like the one who called me a Jew Professor, who were telling me and some of my colleagues that they "felt marginalized." We had heard just often enough that students who self-identify as "conservative" feel like they are the ones who can't share their ideas and opinions, and wanted a place to air their thoughts. Our Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights decided to open up a dialogue on this subject, and give these students space to be heard.

For the first meeting, we met in a classroom and had a full house. It was primarily a room full of students, but a handful of faculty and staff came to the conversation, too. I set some ground rules, the most important being that even though (especially because) there were both liberals and conservatives in the room, we'd all assume good intentions, listen, and students would speak, not faculty. I'd facilitate. The idea was to give the conservative students a voice in order to better understand why they felt they were not heard, and to give the liberal students a chance to respond.

The first student who spoke was wearing a bright red Make America Great Again (MAGA) hat. He was unhappy because comments had been made to him about his hat, both around campus and in classes. He claimed that professors made him take his hat off, but not students wearing other hats. He said that students called him racist and "other names," and they sneered at him.

Other conservative students echoed these sentiments. They explained that "conservative" meant different things to different people. To some, it meant "Republican;" to others, it meant "Trump supporting," "racist," or even "Nazi." They felt that to those on a college campus, there was no difference. Some reported having grades lowered for expressing traditionally conservative beliefs. Others wanted to wear MAGA hats around campus but were afraid of being ostracized.

I mentally noted that the conservatives who spoke were all white men, while the liberals who responded were women, or men who were ethnic minorities. None of the liberal students used the space to talk about feeling marginalized on campus, and I wondered if it was because they are used to it, or because they feel comfortable on campus rather than marginalized. The white men who spoke about their marginalization did not speak of their privilege, and I did not raise the point. It was a flaw, perhaps, in my facilitation, though I'm not sure I was meant to take the students who spoke to task. I would have been proving their point.

The more I thought about it, I could imagine them being asked to take their MAGA hats off in classes, professors intentionally or not grading them down for making conservative arguments. I think that must be uncomfortable for them. And, at the very same time, I wanted to ask them to look around, to think differently, and to imagine what it might be like to be born into another life or another body.

After the first conversation, we had two more organized conversations and other, less formal meetings. We talked about the polarization in our country's politics and all we could agree about is that we are, in fact,



polarized. Many issues were raised, including systemic racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia, and gender identity, but the students didn't seem to want to talk about the issues specifically; they wanted to vent. To get beyond the polarization, though, we would need to discuss the issues, one at a time.

These experiences were the impetus for writing this book. It became clear that the vitriolic tone of the national conversation had become a part of everyday life.

\* \* \*

I write this preface several years after the experiences just described, in the long, timeless period that is the spring and summer of 2020. America is now in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic and racial unrest, and I am forced to be unsentimental about education—public education in general, and my own.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, the unarmed African American man who died under the knee of a white police officer, the public conversation has focused on systemic racism and white privilege. Tens of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets to bring attention to the murder of Black Americans at the hands of the police, and the seemingly intractable system that brought us here. In contrast, over the past years, my white college students have lamented that they “are supposed to feel guilty for being white.”

As a result, I've spent a good deal of time thinking about white privilege, and privilege more generally; thinking, in particular, about how I will teach a sociology course about social problems moving forward. Most, though not all, of the students I will teach are white. From past experiences, I expect many to question Black Lives Matter and the concepts of white privilege and white guilt.

I feel it, too. Not guilt, but something else. The closest word I can find is discomfort. I am not uncomfortable with the concepts—I work hard to be anti-racist, and continually try to decenter my privilege. But race isn't the only subject on my mind. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed giant gulfs in our healthcare system caused (in part) by wealth inequality. The past several years have been nonstop news cycles on repeat—shootings in schools and places of worship, and very public debates about sexual assault and harassment. All of these social problems weigh heavily on me, like so many other people in America, and across the globe.

I am uncomfortable with how much I don't know about how our country got to this place. I am overwhelmed by the unlearning and relearning that I have done, and need to continue. I grew up in New Jersey in the '80s and '90s and went through what is considered to be one of the best public school systems in the state. My hometown is overwhelmingly white, and relatively liberal. There, I learned that racism is a thing of the past, disappeared during Civil Rights and never likely to return. I did not learn that white Europeans colonized North America, not in such stark terms, instead I learned the "traditional" Thanksgiving story and the ways in which Europeans improved life for the Native Americans, the ways in which they "worked together and became friends." I had no idea that I could question this, that there was another, historically accurate story I was missing (Silverman, 2019).

I don't remember hearing about Jim Crow until I was well out of high school. I don't think I learned about systemic racism until graduate school. We never examined social class, despite living only a few miles from one of the most impoverished cities in America. The responsibility is mine to relearn American history, not American myth.

I began my career as an elementary school teacher, and I see the ways in which I perpetuated the myths that I was taught. I did not talk to my students about Black history, except in February, never spoke with them about Juneteenth, despite the fact that school was still in session on June 19 each year. To make matters worse, I taught in two different public schools in New York City, one in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and the other in Tribeca, Manhattan. In Bushwick, almost all of my Hispanic students lived below the poverty line, had parents in prison, and came to school hungry each morning. In Tribeca, my students lived in multi-million-dollar duplex apartments, had famous parents, and vacationed in Europe. These were two public schools within the same system, and the experiences and opportunities for the students were polar opposite. I never thought about this as being about race; class, perhaps, but not race. In this period of social reckoning, it is so easy to see how wrong I was.

What, though, is the responsibility of schools? Talking about race—or religion, class, or gender—in the classroom can feel like the equivalent of lighting a forest fire. Raising any of these issues in public schools can be seen as questioning all that is, quite legitimately, good about America. Everyone has an opinion, and students (not to mention parents and colleagues and administrators) are bound to disagree with one another. Further, bias and discrimination occur outside of the classroom; they

flourish in the hallways, at the lunch table, and in the locker rooms. Bias takes the form of disparaging comments and segregated friend groups, graffiti on lockers and incessant microaggressions.

So many curricula are largely dominated by narratives of rich, white, Christian men (as a student points out in the coming pages). With minimal emphasis on the struggles and successes of *all* people, students leave high school and enter the “real world” with a skewed understanding of social dynamics. By teaching students in all grades about a variety of lived experiences, students will grow more empathetic and understanding towards the struggles faced by others today. This does not only mean adding more diverse authors to summer reading, but also means transforming the way education looks in this country. By adding more content related to the struggles and, more importantly, successes of all people, students will have a more empathetic and equitable understanding of contemporary social relationships.

In this moment, America is being reimagined. This is made ever-more challenging by the acrimonious, racist politics coming from the populist, nationalist far right, which cloud every conversation and debate about race, religion, and what it means to be a good citizen. *Politics, Education, and Social Problems* is a reimagining of the goals of American public schools; it is also my way of raising my voice, not just as a protest against this set of ideas but as a roadmap for how we can move forward.

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