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Social Issues in Class and Beyond

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Social Issues. in Cla

Whether in class or in the community, Sarah Epplen and Kristie Campana use their academic and professional skills to start conversations about race, immigration and identity.

Sarah Epplen:

Teaching Race When No One Wants to Talk

It's a pretty standard pedagogical concept: When students are allowed to come to conclusions on their own, rather than being told what and how to think, the information sticks better. This is especially true when it comes to topics and conversations that are hard to have—like those involving race and racism.

“As a grad student, I was learning so much about race and I was also teaching,” says Epplen, who now serves as assistant professor of sociology at Minnesota State Mankato. “I would try to come up with some creative ways to get students to talk about race and I kept finding that students did not want to talk. The day we were going to talk about race my otherwise chatty class would clam up.”

After standing in front of multiple classrooms of students and hearing crickets, Epplen decided to employ some pedagogical tools to help her students open up. One of the most effective activities, which she still uses in her classes, was asking students to free write about why they feel it's hard to talk about race. Then she asks them to share.

“We start the conversation about race talking about why it's hard to talk about race,” she says. “Then guess what we're doing? We're talking about race. It is going in the side door to get them to talk about it.”

Deepening Understanding Through Writing

Recently, Epplen teamed up with her former graduate school classmate, sociologist Kendra Jason, to put some of her teaching techniques in writing. The article “Interrogating Ourselves in a Racialized World: Using Personal Experience to Improve Students' Understanding of Racism,” was published in the ASA's “Sociology of Race and Ethnicity” in 2016. The paper outlines strategies for teachers who do not teach race and ethnicity courses to “create



learning opportunities for students to analyze their social environments and interrogate how their beliefs, feelings and actions concerning race and racism are shaped by their social worlds.”

The two professors—both of whom teach at majority-white institutions—proposed pedagogical approaches, including free writing, journaling and reflection, and saw learning outcomes that included the ability to distinguish between individual racism and institutional racism; identifying

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hegemonic racist ideas; grappling with consequences of racism; and a shift in race-related mental models.

“Only when students are pushed to acknowledge the social sources of their ‘individual’ perspectives will they be equipped to examine society through racialized lenses,” they write.

This is especially true, Epplen has found, for white students.

“There’s a misconception that racial issues only have to

do with minorities,” she says. “A lot of white people have the privilege and freedom to walk around the world and never think about race, never think their experiences have anything to do with race. I [try] to shake that up and get students to understand and think about how their lives are shaped by race and a racist system.”

Epplen joined the Minnesota State Mankato Sociology faculty in 2013 and, in addition to teaching, she coordinates the teaching sociology internship program for sociology graduate students.

Kristie Campana:

Making Cross-Cultural Connections

An associate professor of Psychology, Campana has been paying attention to conversations about immigrants and refugees over the last few years. Like many of us, she felt inspired to take action.

“I [wanted] to actually do something more substantive than posting angry things on Facebook,” she says.

Campana decided to put her professional and academic training to use in the community. As an industrial/organizational psychologist, Campana is adept at helping companies increase productivity and keep employees happy, safe and motivated.

“Primarily, my background allows me to use my expertise about the workplace to teach other people,” she says. “I can help people write resumes, interview, build professional skills, etc. I can also speak to the value of diversity—when we have more diverse workplaces, we make better decisions.”

It wasn’t a stretch, then, to apply some of those same principles to helping foster mutually beneficial relationships between refugees and local businesses.



Conflict increases when you have a more diverse workplace because you have to work harder to understand and get along with people who are different than you—but this benefits businesses in the long run.

Last year, Campana reached out to the Minnesota Council of Churches' (MCC) Refugee Services to see how she could help. Refugee Services, a religiously unaffiliated nonprofit, works to support refugees as they resettle in new communities.

Campana has worked on several projects with the organization, but has best leveraged her skills as an IO Psychologist while serving on the Refugee Employer Advisory Committee. She wrote about her experiences in an article for "The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist":

The goal of this committee is to find community partners who would be willing to hire and mentor new immigrants as they transition into U.S. jobs. ... One major problem among employers in our area is that there is a great need for cultural competency. Our workforce is becoming more diverse and global, and many managers continue to hold outdated notions of other cultures. This has led to a number of conflicts and problems within local workplaces where having a better understanding of diversity and its advantages would be helpful.

Bringing the Real World into the Classroom

Back at her day job, Campana has seen a natural inclination in her students to do good in the world.

"One thing that I see in my young students is that they just care about other people, they care about the world around them," she says. "They're much more interested in paying attention to diversity, being inclusive and welcoming towards other people."

As a teacher and advisor, and in her role as faculty administrator of Minnesota State Mankato's Organizational Effectiveness Research Group, Campana has been able to encourage students to combine the IO skills they are learning with their desire to make a difference.

Looking forward, she hopes to find more ways to use her own IO skills to continue her work connecting business owners and the local refugee community.

"It's about listening more than talking, and finding commonalities in goals and missions to help people connect on something they agree on, and believe they can mutually benefit one another," she says.

Teaming Up for Team-Based Learning

In addition to their work around social issues, Epplen and Campana are proponents of innovative teaching styles. The two are teaming up to conduct a study comparing learning outcomes based on the structure and layout of the classroom.

Epplen will deliver a section of Intro to Sociology in a room with auditorium seating, and another in a more flexible room with tables and moveable chairs. They hypothesize that students will be able to better engage in discussions in the flexible classroom.

Based on the fact that team and project-based learning have already proven beneficial for minority students, if the hypothesis holds, it may be one more way to address achievement gaps within those groups, Campana notes.

"Likewise, it builds community when instructors use this approach," Campana says. "This might be an important way for faculty to retain students after their first year in school, as well as helping traditionally underserved groups to be more successful in college."