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Review: High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community by Lawrence Blum

Reviewed by Sophie Bell



High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community by Lawrence Blum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012)

Lawrence Blum, a UMass Boston professor and the author of a memoir about teaching a course on race and racism to high school students, has great faith in the moral reasoning of young people who learn about the truthful history of race in the Americas. In his teaching memoir, *High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community*, Blum argues that young people develop as civic, moral, intellectual, emotional, and social beings when presented with accurate information on race. When this information is shared in a mixed-race classroom, they develop a "civic attachment to a broader group of future fellow citizens of our national political community" than most students encounter in mixed-race classes and schools (187). According to Blum, "racial literacy"—the reasoned moral discussion of race in a mixed-race group—should be a part of every high school curriculum. Indeed, his vision of racial literacy appears just as urgent and compelling an "outcome" of secondary education as other competing literacies measured on increasingly high-stakes tests.

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Blum's teaching experience makes a great story for Americans interested in learning and teaching about race in a clear-headed and collaborative way. In this review, I will distill Blum's story into a few principles that his course put into action, explicitly or implicitly.

Teach race locally.

Blum concretely identifies the diversity of the urban high school where he taught his class, the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS), as the result of progressive housing laws. These laws created affordable housing in Cambridge, a city with extremely high housing prices, and ensured that students of diverse household incomes were sent to school together in the same buildings. Following a national pattern, students of color are underrepresented in advanced classes despite the overall integration of the school. Blum's goals at CRLS were two-fold: 1. He wanted to teach high school students about the historical roots of racial inequality in the United States in order to increase their "racial literacy"; 2. He wanted to

teach an "advanced," "college-level" course on race to a group of students whose racial demographics mirrored that of the larger school. (Black and Latino students are 52% of the student body, but only 28% of the students enrolled in advanced classes.)

Don't teach race alone.

Blum's course took place at the same high school that his own children attended. One was a student and another a teacher at the time of his teaching. Added to this family and community network, the high school partnered with the college where Blum teaches moral philosophy, through the college's "urban mission." People at both institutions pushed to make the course happen and keep it going. Blum mentions key roles played by administrators, other teachers, teaching assistants, graduate assistants, security guards, and other parents. This is not the Hollywood movie about the lone white teacher who arrives out of nowhere with a leather jacket and a couple of broken rules to overcome all the social barriers his students of color have previously encountered. (It would, however, be fun to watch the movie version of this teaching memoir with Ed Harris as Blum.) Blum was deeply embedded in a community both fractured by racial divisions and determined to keep fighting back against them.

Teach race historically.

Blum's course focused on the development of eighteenth-century concepts of race in the context of New World slavery, up through nineteenth-century critiques of it. (He spells out the sequence of readings and assignments in detailed appendices.) This opens the course up to charges of a "black-white" lens that obscures the experiences of other Americans of color, a charge Blum doesn't address. If he did, I'd guess he would refer readers to the line from his introduction when he calls slavery "a central idea in the course and in the development of the American idea of race" (15). His gamble appears to be that a strong sense of the history of slavery can provide tools for examining other manifestations of racism in history and contemporary life in the Americas. He also punctuates the long historical narrative of the course with occasional contemporary materials—articles and films that draw on current racial controversies and incidents. He depicts many conversations with students in which he tried to help them use their historical knowledge to evaluate contemporary situations, such as use of the n-word, or ideas about "good" and "bad" hair and skin tone discrimination.

Listen to young people talk about race.

Blum's deep curiosity about the moral thinking of his students serves him especially well in the classroom and on the page. His habit of *not* speaking when he is not sure how to help students move forward in their thinking is one of his most powerful pedagogical tools. In chapters 5 through 12, Blum takes on tough issues for a white teacher, like internalized and horizontal racism among people of color. In these sections, the book fleshes out what I think he means by phrases like "moral self-concept," "racial literacy," and "civic attachment" that weave together the full complexity of his intellectual, moral, emotional, and social goals for the course. Blum

thinks it matters that students work out their moral and civic positions together through dialogue. And he apparently possesses the patience and respect to listen while they do it. He spends pages unpacking transcribed conversations, reflecting on the moves students made and their possible meanings. He describes a classroom conversation about whether the n-word can have a subversive or even positive connotation, which he feels out of his depth facilitating. Having decided (ambivalently) not to initiate the conversation himself, it comes up in class anyway. In his agonized account of the conversation, he ends up listening his way through the exchange and determining that students actually built community through the process of reasoning their way through the topic. He is also a canny observer of students' minds, noting one student's ability to bring old points into fresh conversations to expand the scope of the class's thinking, or another student's habit of welcoming corrections to his viewpoints to build his own understanding.

Teach race as a moral question (as well as a civic, emotional, intellectual one).

Blum is unequivocal in his own opinions on the racial questions with which his students struggle. In fact, his commitment to the morality of issues related to race reverberates in powerful, even unexpected ways. Zooming in on the historical origin of what people skirt around in the "achievement gap" conversations—the "ideology of black inferiority" (113), Blum takes his students to an historical text many educators avoid due to its naked, disturbing articulation of white racism against African Americans—Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Blum is concerned that sharing this text with students could deepen their cynicism about white racism or paralyze them in other ways. Jarringly, Blum states, "I wanted to help students understand 'black intellectual inferiority' as an idea—an evil idea, but an idea nevertheless" (90). You don't hear much about evil, let alone evil ideas, in most

educational or social science publications on race in schools. As a moral philosopher by training, this is a legitimate and refreshing move. Establishing that the notion of black intellectual inferiority is evil, he can invite students to engage Jefferson's racist assessment of black intelligence complexly. Blum "wanted students to see that ideas could be examined, analyzed, broken into parts, and further scrutinized— even when the ideas themselves were very emotionally charged" (101). He shows them how this was done by two African American contemporaries of Jefferson as well, Benjamin Banneker and David Walker. He then asks his students to garner not only moral and civic, but also psychic and collective benefits from their own head-on intellectual engagement with unbridled racism, using the tools of history, critical reading, and community that the class offered them. As he explains, "Although blacks are most damaged by the failure to reject inherent black inequality, all students are morally, civically, and personally damaged by an inability to see those of all other groups as equals" (113). To avoid the "colorblind" response to the poisonous logic of Jefferson's racism, Blum guides his students on a kind of intellectual exorcism of the legacy of such thinking in our minds.

Blum's good ideas should get in the hands of many teachers, administrators, and parents who want to try such things in schools, or to evaluate or rethink their current practices. His critiques of segregated schools and classrooms, and the emptiness of "high expectations" in serving students of color, mean that he should be read by the architects of policies like Race to the Top and assessment regimes like the Common Core standards. Further, the university-high school collaboration he was part of makes participants in the Early College movement into good audience members as well. This class is a powerful metaphor for a racially literate society, as well as a thoughtful narrative of a valuable educational experiment.



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