Teachable Moments in Some Tough Times

Hundreds of thousands of students will be returning to their campuses across the country in the coming weeks. Many are back already as the country continues to find its footing in one of the most racially charged environments in many of their lifetimes.

As one of many professors beginning another semester of teaching, we must be mindful that the events of the last few weeks will continue to unfold and shape the emotional state of our classrooms.

For those of us teaching public relations, pulling lessons from the news cycle can be either promising and perilous if we don’t exercise care in how we construct these teaching moments. As an African American professor and practitioner, this is an especially sensitive issue as I must be careful not to influence my students with my views as they’re searching to formulate their own. In addition, as Director of Diversity Outreach for the PRSA Educators Academy, there is a special obligation to seek and find lessons that can touch lives in some meaningful ways.

Fortunately, I know there are some great resources available that can help public relations professors of every hue use these tough times to help students develop the skills they need to become the talented practitioners we hope they will be.

Here are some recommendations and I encourage others to use this forum to share their ideas and best practices with all of us.

* **Listen first, not lecture:** I have found that, with all the images, words and opinions that have come to define our incessant news cycle, there’s not a lot of listening going on. Those first couple of classes for the semester can provide an outlet for students – many of whom who have never been exposed to the emotions they may be feeling. The classroom – with some skilled moderating by the professor – can create a safe space for students to simply express their views in laying a foundation for honest dialogue that can last throughout the semester. The key is to show students how to listen to each other and resist the urge to argue or influence a view that might be counter to their own. The best practitioners are those who master the art of listening as an invaluable tool in managing an issue – no matter how complex or controversial.
* **Protect the Silence:** Let’s face it. Not everyone will feel comfortable expressing their views on these types of topics. Forcing everyone to participate can put unwanted pressure on some who don’t feel ready to engage. Give them their space and honor their silence.
* **Don’t Assume Another’s Perspective:** As a professor of color, I am often asked to “represent” a viewpoint that is conferred upon me simply because I am African American. As faculty, we sometimes put our students of color on the spot (sometimes as a minority voice in a majority setting) assuming they can “speak from experience” when discussing matters of race. That puts an unfair burden on those students and often marginalizes their voices further by relegating them to the “voice of color” in the dialogue. Let students find their own level and resist imposing our own expectations of what their perspective “should” be.
* **Find the facts to fight the rhetoric:** With the information overload that has become our daily media diet, it has become increasingly important to know the facts of a story to counter what might be the rhetoric of a story. There are some great fact-checking sites and resources out there (and more that are emerging) that are perfect tools for times like these where separating fact from fiction can help create better understanding.
* **“The Talk,” the Tweet and Other Teaching Tools:** A couple of weeks before Charlottesville, there was considerable dialogue on social media and in various settings about Proctor & Gamble’s internet-released video entitled, “The Talk.” It depicts African American parents having to have a talk with their children of various ages through multiple generations about racial encounters they have had or will have. It’s a great conversation starter on the topic of race: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovY6yjTe1LE)> Specifically related to all of the events that have emerged from racial unrest in Charlottesville, VA, educators have already started to gather teaching material and resources under the hashtag #CharlottesvilleCurriculum. It is a great compendium that will continue to grow. And finally, what tools are you using? Feel free to use this forum to share your ideas as we all strive to use these tough times to build better bridges of understanding among all of us.

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