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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Whiteness And Anxiety In The Diverse Classroom

Greg Carey, *Lancaster Theological Seminary*

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My friend Chuck Melchert took a significant risk once when we were playing a round of golf together. Chuck retired after serving as Dean of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, and he knows more about teaching than just about anybody I know. He also sits in on my classes from time to time.

“Can I tell you something?” Chuck asked. “When African American students in your class speak from their experience, you almost always follow up by explaining why you understand what they’re talking about.”

Chuck’s words were hard to hear because they were true. In that moment he had confronted me with my anxious desire to prove that when it comes to matters of race, I get it. I speak of an “anxious desire” because my behavior happens almost automatically. Indeed, I was not conscious of it until Chuck named it. Now that it’s out in the open, I have the chance to change my behavior. Yet even now I feel - and act upon - that impulse to prove that I’m one of the “good guys.” This anxiety, born of a well-intentioned desire to demonstrate cultural competence, creates all kinds of problems in the classroom.

Chuck’s observation named one way in which my white anxiety hinders learning. My need to show that I get it undermines the authority of my students and their experiences. It’s ugly to say this, especially about myself, but my knee-jerk responses do not invite students to speak forthrightly. Instead, they represent a not-so-subtle attempt to exert control. When I counter a student’s story with one of my own, or when I write over a student’s insight with my own

words, I cut off the potential for an unpredictable conversation to emerge. Not only do I shut down the student who is sharing, I reinforce my identity as an expert. In the process I discourage the participation and potential learning that might happen for all the students in the class. Only the most courageous students resist.



My pattern of behavior creates a second undesirable outcome: it all but implies that white people can “arrive” when it comes to race consciousness, that there’s a point at which white folk no longer need to learn. Thank God for students who don’t put up with that nonsense.

My anxiety to validate my own racial hipness fosters still another set of problems: the “teacher as hero” model of education. My own research over the years has led me to question the usefulness of hero models in all aspects of life. Yes, we need examples and role models. But no, we don’t have to adorn them with the shining garment of uniqueness. In my view this applies to Jesus: how often do people have to prevail upon him for healing? It applies to Paul: do his letters represent the only voices in those early churches, or do they reveal a vibrant, diverse, and messy movement? And it applies to my other heroes like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Clarence Jordan, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Fannie Lou Hamer: did they pop up as solitary icons of faithful resistance, or did they emerge from already robust movements? I must confess I’m among the many who entered the classroom with too much of a *Dead Poets’ Society* ethos. Instead, I’m coming to understand – way too late – that students learn best when their agency and giftedness are honored and welcomed. That kind of learning requires teachers who embody an identity as learners and create space for common wisdom to emerge.

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