

From: [email redacted]

Sent: Tuesday, January 5, 2021 11:56 AM

To: Ethnic Studies

Subject: [EXTERNAL] commentary on ethnic studies course

I am a retired LAUSD history teacher who taught in that district for about 30 years mostly at the high school level. I taught at Palisades High in the 80s and 90s when it was a very racially integrated school numerically speaking. At that time under the rubric of current events, I developed and implemented a 'conversation on race relations' that consisted of about 25 topics. These topics were highly structured so that they scaffolded a process of unlearning and learning for everyone. The format did not consist of an imposition of my views but rather was mostly a combination of narrative dialogues where students learned how to communicate and together, to produce knowledge from the experience.

I am only somewhat aware of the proposed ethnic studies course and how it will integrate student narrative and academic study but I think I can offer thoughts that may be useful on the basis of my endeavors. I found that I could weave many dialogues into the continuing narrative of American history and the effects of that effort paid off for both academic study and social justice pursuits. The extended conversation on race over the course of the entire school year added a new dimension in several ways. It gave students a change to learn from others as well as opportunity to self reflect as part of a lengthy, continuing process. The time factor brought eventual comfort as a result of learning to listen, speak, respect and trust. My objective was certainly not one of having minorities teach Whites about race but rather one of mutual learning, a by-product of which was observable self-esteem and self-confidence for all students.

From the start my focus was the importance of the pedagogy of conducting the conversation. I did not promote confrontation but at the same time promoted the slow development of trust and comfort. 'Hot topics' were not avoided. These were approached at the right time, when students were apt to deal with controversy with less emotion. After goal setting and instruction on how to converse, I focused on the personal and interpersonal level of race relations as experienced by participants, principally in terms of attitudes and behavior. We also dealt extensively with socialization. While we certainly covered prejudice and bias, I realized early on that what I call, the racist/racism trap needed to be avoided at this level for the sake of all students engaged in the conversation. I have to admit, I was slow in understanding the full impact of systemic racism although we did discuss issues concerning that and I remember at least once, maybe more, institutional racism was brought up in class. In hindsight, for purposes of conversation, I still think the interpersonal should be explored first so that afterwards students can relate to the systematic. It is at that point that academic thinking on racism, oppression, etc needs to be introduced.

This is just a short indication of what and how I conducted the conversation. I hope it is helpful and I would certainly enjoy the opportunity to be of further assistance.

Sincerely, Donald Nathanson