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Title: Race Themed Rhetoric Courses, Are They Really Necessary?

About the Author: My name is Brian Heider and I am a freshman attending the University of Illinois Champaign–Urbana. I like to play sports and my favorite subject is math.

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Abstract: This is the third semester that the University of Illinois has offered an Ethnography of Race and the University Rhetoric course. Some goals that the instructor has established are for the students to write, read, research, and think critically better. She is not trying to help the students better their grammar, but she is really focused on trying to get the students to think analytically and read critically. My research investigates whether or not it is necessary for the University of Illinois to offer a race themed Rhetoric course and to explore both students and instructors' perspectives on issues of race in the classroom.

The ethnographic tools that I used were interviews with students and Rhetoric instructors, as well as an observation of a Rhetoric course, and a text analysis. The main questions that were asked were if students/instructors thought a race themed Rhetoric course is necessary for freshman students, if they think that race is a big issue, and if they preferred a themed course. The results of my research show that every person has a different opinion and there are no black and white answers.

Initial Exercises: skip

Question: Are race themed courses really necessary? Couldn't race be taught in other ways besides in a Rhetoric class?

Plan: skip

Data: skip

Discuss: Brian Heider

Ligia Mihut

Rhetoric 104

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Race Based Rhetoric Courses, Are They Really Necessary?

Universities across the nation are becoming more and more diverse. Should there be classes that need to be required for students to be able to cope with this new diversity? Some faculty at the University of Illinois believe that it is necessary to have race themed Rhetoric courses, while some students do not believe this way. These students think that race is an important issue, but that it should be up to the students if they would like to take race themed Rhetoric courses. However some students feel the same way as the instructor in that courses of this nature are necessary. These students believe that race is an important issue and should be taught about.

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course. Some goals that the instructor has established are for the students to write, read, research, and think critically better. She is not trying to help the students better their grammar, but she is really focused on trying to get the students to think analytically and read critically. My research investigates whether or not it is necessary for the University of Illinois to offer a race themed Rhetoric course and to explore both students and instructors' perspectives on issues of race in the classroom.

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The first ethnographic tool that I used was a text analysis of an online journal. According to this first article "Race and Ethnicity of Students, by Institution," twenty-four percent of the students attending the University of Illinois are minorities. This is a

considerable number, but compared to other universities across the nation we are not that diverse. The University of Houston has a total student body that is fifty-three percent minorities. Also the University of La Verne is fifty-five percent minorities. Those are incredible numbers showing that maybe the University of Illinois is not as diverse as everyone makes it out to be. There are also a number of universities in the Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, and Northwest with numbers as high as seventy or eighty percent are minorities. That is three to four times more diverse than the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana is. The fact is, that the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana could be a lot more diverse. This shows that if this university is attempting to teach their students about race then if not already other universities should be doing the same. Yet, if these other universities with much larger amounts of minorities are not teaching about race and diversity and getting along fine then maybe the University of Illinois is making a big deal out of nothing.

In the next article analyzed Ben Gose says that some universities are not only attempting to diversify their student population, but their faculty as well. The article "A Michigan Faculty Group Plays Role of Watchdog," by Ben Gose says that the

University of Michigan is making their faculty more diverse. Even though Michigan is becoming more diverse Asian professors' account for most of the growth. There is growth showing though; in black, American Indian, and Hispanic professors (Gose, pg. B5). Because of the diversity in faculty at the University of Illinois there may not be as much need for raced based courses. A person can learn a lot from their teacher and sometimes if the teacher is of a different race you can learn about that race's culture. The point is that you can learn about race and diversity through many ways besides just having a Rhetoric course based on this idea. Maybe this is why the University of Michigan is attempting to diversify their faculty.

According to the article "At an Elite College, Race Influences Views of Diversity," Elizabeth Aries follows 58 black and white kids through their first year at college. Her results are very interesting. Without having race themed courses thirty percent of those students reported looking at people of different races or classes differently. Another thirty-two percent said that they learned something about a different race. Of the thirty-eight percent left, nineteen percent believed that they gained something from classroom comments of their peers of a different race (Aries, pg.

B47). This just shows that race and diversity are important. It also shows that students are capable of learning about race in different ways other than in a Rhetoric course.

In another article, “Diversity and Merit: How One University Rewards Faculty Work That Promotes Equity,” Sheila O’Rourke says that the University of California is actually seeking faculty that will be able to “contribute to a university’s diversity mission.” Which says ““these contributions to diversity and equal opportunity can take a variety of forms, including efforts to advance equitable access to education, public service that addresses the needs of California’s diverse population, or research in a scholar’s area of expertise that highlights inequalities.”” This article goes on to say that diversity work is not valued and that there are problems with diversity due to past occurrences (O’Rourke, pg. 41). This article really articulates that race and diversity are very important topics at the university level. Also it indirectly says that race is an important issue and that it cannot be swept under the rug any longer.

Lastly, in “Silos of Academe Thwart Diversity on Campuses,” Juan E. Gilbert believes that kids are not learning

enough when it comes to diversity. She worries about the United State's diversity and how it is growing. Gilbert believes that there needs to be a nationwide conference to deal with this lack of teaching of diversity and race. She thinks that it is very important and before as a nation gets too diverse they need to deal with it (Gilbert, pg. B45). Gilbert must feel that race is an important aspect in a country that is diversifying quickly.

Through analyzing all of these articles a person should notice that they all show that diversity is very important. Some, however, show that a student could perhaps learn about race through other ways besides in a classroom. By analyzing these articles a person could say that Rhetoric courses should have a theme of race, but on the other hand a person could argue that it is not necessary to have a class of that genre. In the end it all comes down to your opinion; do you believe that they are necessary?

After analyzing those articles I analyzed the Ethnography of Race and the University Rhetoric course's syllabus. The race themed Rhetoric course's syllabus talks a lot about race and how they will be observing the University. The first page of the syllabus is based on just talking about race and the University, and the

Ethnography of the University. It says that they will be focusing on how race defines people and their actions and thoughts. It also says that they will be researching IDEALS which is scholarly work of Ethnography of the University students and faculty. Also it should be noticed that all of the essays and projects deal with observing others and different types of race. In the syllabus all of the readings deal with ethnicity and diversity. After reading this, a person should notice that the University of Illinois is focused on teaching young freshman about race and diversity. The faculty that make these classes know that the University is very diverse and that it needs to be recognized and not taken lightly. This shows that the university believes that race is somewhat of an issue if not a small issue, then a big issue.

Next, I observed the Ethnography of Race and the University's class period. While observing a Rhetoric class much can be noticed. There are many different races that are represented at the University. Even in a little class of nine students diversity can be present, showing that even on a small scale the University is very diverse. In this Rhetoric 104 class they talk a lot about the Ethnography of the University. Also they have talked about what their race is, as well as where they are all from. Most of the class

period is spent on discussing race and the readings which also deal with race. As stated previously a person can learn a lot from their interactions with people of different races. With this diversity, is it necessary to have such a course themed on race and diversity when the class is made up of very diverse people? Many people would argue the fact that it is not necessary, since students are interacting every day with many different races so why would they have to learn about other races when they are interacting with them anyways. People could also argue though that it is necessary because of the diversity at the University of Illinois students cannot fully learn about race and diversity without a class themed on this. If these race themed classes are so small it makes a person wonder why the University of Illinois is trying to teach students about race. Granted there could be a lot of courses themed on race, but even still the University could not be getting through to very many kids, so why do they even offer these courses? Could this just be a cover up for making it look like they are doing things to support race and diversity, when really they are not doing hardly anything? This is very plausible.

Lastly, I chose to interview students and faculty. By interviewing these students and faculty a person can come up with

some conclusions on where that person stands on certain issues. After asking these students and instructors about race, I have made conclusions about their statements. Some students believe that race should be talked about on a small scale and not in depth, while others believe/want to go in depth about the issue of race. The students that feel that race is not a topic that should be taught in depth say that it is a dull topic and they would like to learn about topics of more interest than race. One interviewee by the name of Melissa says that “... I think that race and Ethnography of the University is important, but going over it for a whole semester is tedious and boring.” Thus, these students believe that they can learn more about race through interacting with people of different races in everyday life rather than in the classroom. Not only that, but these students would like to learn more about writing better. The majority of students that would not like to study race in depth believe that race is not a big issue. One student says that race is somewhat of an issue, but a Rhetoric course is not going to change anything and that some problems with race will always be there no matter what anybody does.

On the other hand there are some students that feel the same way that the faculty does. These students say that race is a

big issue and that it should be taught to freshman in a Rhetoric course. They would also prefer themed courses that way they know what they are going to learn and it is easier to follow. These students are mostly minorities so they have most likely experienced more when it comes to race issues than a person that is not a minority. This could also be the basis for their answers. When asked if they would like the Rhetoric course to be race based, one student said that “Yes, I have a lot of things to say about race because I am a minority in this society. I can give examples of racist situations and stories about that,” This student believes that there is still a lot of race segregation. She also believes that the society is divided by race. These comments show that she has had past experiences that deal with race. Also she must notice and feel the segregation that the United States has. Should the United States work on these diverse issues; this student believes so. Furthermore, these students also view the University of Illinois as very diverse which is why students need to be taught about race so they will learn something about and from most racial and ethnic groups represented at the university. If students learn more about other races, they are more likely to get involved with everybody and not just with people of their own race.

The instructors' opinions follow that of the opinions this last group of students showed. They think that race is a big issue at the University of Illinois. They may feel this way due to the fact that they are instructors and they can see how students react with each other. They can also observe how students of a particular race interact with students of other races. One instructor thinks that it might not be necessary to have a Rhetoric course based on race, but taking the course is a great opportunity for the students and it will help them become aware of what they are a part of. The other two instructors feel as though a course of this nature is important. They think that a Rhetoric classroom is a good place to address issues of race. Richard Nardi, the Associate Director of Undergraduate Rhetoric Programs, says that "The issue of race is extremely important to/in our country and in the world. It is one that is easily masked and hidden, yet one that needs to be addressed directly in order to raise awareness of the many layers of societal problems that have at their core racial/ethnic origins in terms of intolerance and domination." Nardi obviously feels that race is an important issue that needs to be taught to students to help them cope with the issues of diversity that they are now facing at college. Perhaps these instructors are also biased towards these

questions because they are instructors teaching classes that are based on these issues. They might offer these answers to make them feel like they are actually doing something worthwhile. Their views may be influenced by their position at the University which must reflect the University's beliefs and values with regards to diversity and race. This is part of the institutional constraints that each employee might experience, for example to be in alignment with the employer's teaching philosophy.

In conclusion, everybody's opinion presents a different perspective and the reasons for those opinions are going to be diverse. Some students feel that a class based on race is important and others do not. The University can only respect those opinions and try to incorporate as many perspectives as possible when they offer classes to the students. The University of Illinois might not offer race based Rhetoric courses, but other general courses that have race themes where the students have the choice to pick that class. That way it is not completely forced on them. Granted it is not forced on them now, but some students do not have the flexibility in their schedules to take other Rhetoric courses. So what do you think? Do you think it should be necessary for students to take Rhetoric courses with themes of race, or that it

is not necessary?

Finally, I should conclude that my research was conducted on a small scale, but maybe more research should be further conducted to explore students' views and their preferences for classes.

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Appendix

Questions that were asked during the interviews.

Instructors:

Do you think a race based course for incoming freshman is necessary? Why?

Do you think race is a big issue on campus at the University of

Illinois Champaign-Urbana?

Why do you think the university offers a race based course?

What would you have liked to learn about when you were a freshman in a Rhetoric class?

Do you like teaching about race or would you prefer something else?

Students:

Would you prefer a themed Rhetoric class?

Would you like it to be race based?

Do you think that it is necessary?

Do you think race is a big issue at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana?