

5 Tips for Teaching in Times of Civil Unrest

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VALIDATE STUDENTS' FEELINGS. LISTEN AND QUESTION.

Students will have powerful feelings about the changing world around them, do not shut them down. Do not tell them how to feel. Your goal is to help students explore, process, think critically and grow. Don't substitute your feelings or perspective for the "correct" answers. Their experiences, thoughts and feelings are valid. Hear their anger and hurt. You can encourage respectful disagreement while also maintaining a safe space for vulnerable populations. Put strong discussion guidelines in place and stick to them. Don't be shocked by student responses, learn to question and talk them through their feelings instead.

2. ANALYZE POWERFUL MEDIA IMAGES & LANGUAGE TOGETHER.

Take time to analyze images and language that are in the news, with students. Ask what kind of images they're seeing, labels they've heard. This helps to draw out their questions, fears and misconceptions. Are students seeing pictures and video of diverse mass marches, full of ordinary people who have united for justice? Or are they seeing scary images of fires, weapons, destruction and police violence? Media literacy is important: help students question their sources, why might the media show more of some images and not others? Take time to dissect labels like "riot", "looter", "thug" or "terrorist". Interrogate the use of these labels throughout history. When are these words used? Are there similar circumstances in which they are not used? What do they mean? Is this an uprising, a rebellion, or a riot? What's the difference? Help students wrestle with these terms and ideas.

3. TEACH REAL HISTORY: SOCIAL CHANGE HAS RARELY BEEN "PEACEFUL."

Many in the United States have been taught that effective social change is always peaceful, orderly and nonviolent. This version of our history is a complete fabrication, ahistorical and false. Students must know that "civil unrest" is not new and it is not unpatriotic. It can be very painful and scary in the short term but in the long term, organized movements for justice often win greater rights for all. Teach the reality of the historical Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the labor movement, in which organizers were beaten, arrested, killed and frequently denounced in the press. Don't be afraid to ask students to make comparisons and connections to today. Teach about the reality of white supremacist terrorist violence (which has historically received varying levels of support and collusion from those in power) and the ways in which organizers and communities have confronted this violence over time. Teach the dark topics but shine a light on agency and resiliency in movements for justice. This knowledge can help students process and prepare for challenges they may face in movements for justice today.

4. TEACH THE MOVEMENT: OUR RIGHTS WERE WON BY ORGANIZING, EVEN IN DARK TIMES.

Our rights, the rights of African Americans, workers, women, LGBTQ folks and more, were not handed to us by benevolent politicians, but were in fact won by many years of militant, sustained, grassroots organizing by oppressed people. Students must understand the power of mass movements to create change and there is ample evidence in our history to teach them. Give students role-models, teach about people just like them, who found ways to use their talents, skills and passion to work for justice even in dark times. This is important for giving students hope and efficacy, the idea that they can do something right now to help change this world for the better. Make sure that students can see that we are surrounded by ordinary people who are organizing to make our world a better place, each day.

5. MAKE ROOM TO SHARE EXPERIENCES & PROCESS TOGETHER

Take time to make your classroom a place of healing and strengthening. Encourage reflection, writing, art and healing practices when engaging in these stressful topics with students. Participate in these activities with students, reflect and share some of what you're feeling as well. Let them know it's okay to feel their feelings. Check in on emotional well-being frequently. Share news and updates about positive organizing that is happening in your community, for students who want to do more. Where possible, participate in movements and share your experience with students, this will help demystify the protests and make students less afraid. Wherever possible, find ways to incorporate connection to the movement to your classroom practice and offer support for students seeking ways to engage in movements for justice themselves.

For a more detailed orientation, check out the "How to teach about the George Floyd protests" video on our anti-racist educator resource page!