“That’s Our House! Let’s Take It Over!”:

Antiracist Pedagogy in Direct Advocacy Courses

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The political events of the last decade have made it increasingly untenable to continue teaching political science courses as they have traditionally been taught. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 forced many political scientists to finally acknowledge the centrality of white supremacy in US political culture. Uprisings in cities like Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis in response to brutal police murders of Black people have made it impossible to ignore the relentlessness of racist state violence that characterizes modern policing and punishment in the United States. Contemporary movements for racial justice in the US have demanded that each of us consider our own individual culpability for contributing to the maintenance of a white supremacist political order. For political scientists, that means we are called to consider the role we play as researchers, writers, and teachers in maintaining the status quo.

Even though the need is great, there are too few resources available to faculty who seek to integrate antiracist pedagogy into their courses and curriculum. The antiracist pedagogy literature is underdeveloped in general, and especially so within the discipline of political science.[[1]](#footnote-1) A recent review of “15 years of peer-reviewed scholarship concerned with anti-racist education”[[2]](#footnote-2) found that the majority of publications focused on antiracist education are reflections on the “resistance of white students and faculty to engaging with anti-racist curricula.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While these publications may be helpful to instructors who feel isolated and vulnerable doing antiracist work within their universities, they do not offer specific instruction or guidance for how to integrate antiracist pedagogical principles and approaches into their work.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of the publications reviewed, only 44% were found to include “reference to a specific activity or programme [sic] of activities used in educational efforts. Of these, a majority of the articles (63%) under review reported classroom-based approaches focused on individual students.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Clearly, there are many gaps in the antiracist pedagogy literature and the gaps are particularly pronounced in our discipline where (to my knowledge) there have been no publications that specifically address how to integrate antiracist pedagogy in political science courses.

In this paper, I hope to offer some useful strategies for political scientists as we undergo a long overdue reconsideration of the purpose of a political science education. I provide some preliminary considerations about how antiracist pedagogy can be incorporated into civic engagement courses in political science. Specifically, I focus on how insights from the literature on antiracist pedagogy can inform course design for direct advocacy courses—courses that put students into direct contact with government decision-makers through advocacy work on policy issues. In addition, I consider the unique challenges that direct contact with government institutions pose for instructors who seek to provide antiracist educational experiences to their students.

*Background and Context*

I teach my direct advocacy course at Metropolitan State University, a mid-sized urban in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Twin Cities is a regional name to refer to Minneapolis and St. Paul, the two largest cities in the state of Minnesota, which are adjacent to one another. Combined, the two cities’ population is approximately 725,000. Metropolitan State University is a non-residential university, serving approximately 11,000 students from the metro area. Our student population is often referred to as “non-traditional,” as our average age of undergraduate student is 30. Our student body is 50% students of color, which is notable given that only 20% of Minnesotans identify as non-white. Woman-identified persons make up 59% of our students. The vast majority of our students are first-generation college students who transfer to Metropolitan State after completing a significant number of credits at local community colleges. Our university is the most affordable public university in the state, with full-time tuition for a year of instruction costing only $7517.60.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The advocacy course I teach is modeled and named after Melissa Stimell’s course, *Advocacy for Policy Change* at Brandeis University and part of the ENACT Network of courses.[[7]](#footnote-7) ENACT courses are taught by ENACT Fellows who have completed a week-long training on how to teach the ENACT course, which provides students with the opportunity to learn about their state legislature and legislative process by researching and advocating for a bill under consideration at the state capitol. As of 2021, Melissa Stimell and her colleagues in the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life have trained ENACT Fellows in all 50 states.

Since moving to Minnesota in 2013, I have worked as a political science professor at Metropolitan State University while also working as a community organizer. Most of my organizing has been with grassroots organizations and abolitionist in focus, though some has been focused on housing. I have also been involved with campaigns related to pay and benefits for low-income, hourly workers. Additionally, I have worked in electoral politics as Elizabeth Warren’s Training Director for Minnesota during her presidential run in 2019/2020. I was a co-founder and the Campaign Director of the effort to recall Mike Freeman, the Hennepin County Attorney who refused to appropriately charge Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. Currently, I am working as the Policy Director and Training Director for a local city-council campaign in Minneapolis. I share this background because I think it’s helpful context for the work I do with students in *Advocacy for Policy Change*. In that class, my formal training in political science is just one set of experiences I bring to bear on the course. The analysis and perspective I share with students in the course is equally—if not more—informed by my experience organizing here in Minnesota.

*Foundational Principles in Antiracist Pedagogy*

Before discussing how antiracist pedagogy can be applied in direct advocacy courses, I want to discuss some of the foundational principles in antiracist pedagogy that have been most significant to me as I have worked to transform my teaching practices and revise my courses. In this section, I discuss insights from the works or bell hooks, Priya Kandaswamy, and Kyoko Kishimoto that have guided me throughout this process. These foundational principles are applicable to any course, regardless of content area or focus. Following hooks, Kandaswamy, and Kishimoto, in this section I argue that antiracist teaching requires instructors to engage in critical reflection on their own positionality—both as individuals in a society structured by racial capitalism[[8]](#footnote-8) and as faculty members in particular departments, within an academic discipline. Further, that the course design process must take into consideration *whose perspectives* are being centered in the course design process and *how students’ emotional needs* are reflected in our teaching practices. Finally, that when it comes to antiracist pedagogy *how we teach* is as much or more important than *what we teach*.

Before any antiracist course design can begin, faculty must reflect critically upon their positionality, taking note of the various identities and experiences that orient them in the world.[[9]](#footnote-9) This includes not only the more familiar categories of race, gender, ability, class, etc., but also our identities as political scientists within the discipline, professors in particular departments and universities. One technique for reflecting on positionality is to re-tell our personal narratives through a focus on the collectivities and histories we are a part of, rather than exclusively focusing on our individual experiences. Spending time learning to re-tell your story with an eye to how group membership has shaped our identity formation is a foundational part of the work of an antiracist educator. This self-reflection process is the first step in a lifelong project of self-actualization and healing. As bell hooks notes, “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Antiracist education is about healing the deep harms caused by racial capitalism. In order to do the external work of healing the wounds of our society, we have to begin with the internal work of identifying and addressing the ways in which we have internalized damaging beliefs, values, and practices grounded in white supremacy and capitalism.

It’s important to note, though, that the self-work required for antiracist teaching need not—and cannot—be complete before integrating antiracist pedagogy into your course work. Undoing the internalization of racial capitalism’s logics is a lifelong endeavor. It is work that will likely never be complete. However, as we endeavor to do our own self-work, we can empower students by modeling what a commitment to antiracism as a lifelong project looks like. We do this when we are willing to be vulnerable with our students; to talk about our own social positionality; and to share our experiences of unpacking, unlearning, and making mistakes. As hooks explains, “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging others to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that would be coercive.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

During the course design process, the first question we must ask ourselves is: *Who is this course for?* In her wonderful article, “Beyond Colorblindness and Multiculturalism,” Priya Kandaswamy “advocate[s] that we design our courses and teach our classes with the students who not always physically present in the classroom in mind. The best way to decenter whiteness in the classroom is to ask ourselves what would we want to teach if our classrooms were truly representative of the world and insist on teaching those things.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Further, she argues that “it is essential that we assess our work by asking ourselves what those most marginalized by structures of race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism would learn from taking our courses.”[[13]](#footnote-13) As political scientists, I believe that we have a special obligation to consider this second question, as our classrooms should be places in which students learn about the political world so that they may be *powerful political actors*. The vast majority of our students are not going to graduate school to become professional political scientists. When we choose course materials to reflect the most well-known research within a subfield rather than with an eye to preparing our students to engage in politics to make the world better, we are failing our students as well as our larger social purpose. When we design our courses to be “truly representative of the world,” with a focus on the needs of those who are most marginalized under the current social order, and prepare students to exercise power on behalf of themselves and their communities, we meet our moral obligations both as teachers and as political scientists.

Teaching in an antiracist way requires that we encounter our students as whole people and attend to the emotional experiences that are part of the learning process. This is especially important as an increasing number of students nationwide are “non-traditional”[[14]](#footnote-14) and have significant family and work obligations that can put tremendous strains on them. Likewise, due to demographic shifts in the United States an increasing number of students attending college and university are BIPOC folks, whose marginalized status under racial capitalism makes a history of racial injury in educational settings likely.[[15]](#footnote-15) Antiracist teaching requires us to acknowledge the anxieties, obligations, and traumas that our students can bring with them into our classrooms and build classroom environments that honor their histories, responsibilities, and capacities.

As we design our courses, we should take special care to ensure that our coursework and discussions make space for students to show up fully and authentically in our classes. This can mean setting aside time to check in with one another, to share what we’re bringing with us into class today and what support we need in order to be engaged. In my classes, that means checking in with students at the beginning of class with this question: “What do you need us to know so we can support you in feeling fully present today?” Some faculty may balk at spending 20-30 minutes of each 3-hour class checking in with students about their emotions and making community agreements about how we can support folks who are struggling that day. Yet, I have found that this investment in caring for the emotional needs of my students makes deeper engagement and learning possible. Faculty may not see this kind of emotional care work as part of their jobs, “[b]ecause the specifics of care work are not articulated in our contracts or our job descriptions at our school, and because it belongs to a category of work that has traditionally been unwaged or under-waged.” Faculty may, “reframe it as ‘extra’ work, that some education workers opt into—rather than the ‘real’ work that we all have to do.” However, antiracist teaching requires we take on the work that has for too long been treated as optional. Meeting our students needs requires that we attend to them as full human beings, rather than exclusively as learners-of-content.

Kyoko Kishimoto’s work on antiracist pedagogy has been deeply influential on my thinking about and practice of teaching. Her insights will appear throughout this paper. However, before I get into the specific demands of teaching direct advocacy courses in an antiracist way, I want to highlight what I take to be the most foundational principle of antiracist teaching Kishimoto identifies. She explains, “Anti-racist pedagogy is not about simply incorporating racial content into courses, curriculum, and discipline. It is also about *how* one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In fact, it is possible—and perhaps even common—for courses with content related to white supremacy to be taught in ways that are thoroughly consistent with the logics of racial capitalism. Teaching in an antiracist way requires that we do the self-work and emotional care-work described above. It also requires that we are willing to share power with our students in the classroom. Kishimoto explains,

While academic culture promotes specialization and elitism, and does not encourage humility of the faculty, anti-racist teaching highlights learning as a life-long process. This means that even though faculty may have terminal degrees, because of our relative positions of power, we need to be aware and self-reflexive of our social locations. Acknowledgement that both faculty and students are on the journey of learning leads to sharing power and building a sense of community in the classroom. To admit that faculty are also in the process of learning and to acknowledge their oppressed identity as well as their complicity in the oppression of others is a political act. It is important to note that it is riskier for faculty of color, especially women of color, compared to white faculty to acknowledge this because of their already vulnerable positions…Faculty of color may need to self-disclose more than white faculty to justify their presence in the classroom, but rather than seeing this as a vulnerability, faculty can use their self-disclosure as an opportunity to invite students to go out of their comfort zones…Despite our advanced degrees, when discussing the impact of racism on certain communities, faculty need the humility to acknowledge that we can also learn from students and community members who may lack formal credentials but are keenly knowledgeable about how institutional racism operates. Sharing the vulnerability as well as empowering experiences can lead to creating a sense of community in the classroom. It also breaks the elitist and top-down perspective in which faculty are enlightened and only students need to raise their consciousness.[[17]](#footnote-17)

My own experience in the classroom confirms the importance of power sharing with students for teaching in an antiracist way. As a youngish, femme appearing, untenured junior faculty member, I felt enormous pressure to teach in the traditional way, to defend “rigor” (whatever that means), to demonstrate expertise and embody authority. Although I was teaching courses that included content that might have been described as antiracist, my adherence to the traditional norms of the academy made the kind of learning I hoped to enable unlikely. Only when I started to reject the traditional norms and prescriptions about university teaching did I start to see improvement in my courses. As I behaved less like a professor and more like an organizer—sharing power, being vulnerable with people, speaking from my positionality, learning and teaching with an eye to building power—I found that my teaching was not only more effective and impactful, but also more enjoyable. As I continue to restructure and revise my courses, I feel more and more strongly that bell hooks is right to remind us, “Education can be exciting and fun and that’s a radical idea.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Our teaching can and should contribute to ourselves and our students becoming more whole and more powerful.

The teaching practices discussed above are applicable in any course, in any discipline. In the remaining sections of the paper, I will discuss antiracist pedagogical approaches specifically as they pertain to my direct advocacy course. That is not to say that political scientists teaching other kinds of courses would not potentially find something useful in the remaining sections. However, from this point on, I’m moving away from a discussion of general principles and into a description of how I have applied antiracist pedagogical principles into the design of *Advocacy for Policy Change.*

*Institutional Analysis and the Structure of Power*

On the first day of *Advocacy for Policy Change*, we begin the class by defining politics as “how we take care of the people and communities we love.” This is a pretty radical departure from the classic formulation of politics as “who gets what, when, [and] how,”[[19]](#footnote-19) and I have found it to be an important one. Defining politics in this way helps to counter the common understanding of politics my students bring to the course—namely, that politics is how people with power get what they want at the expense of everyone else. Grounding politics in love and care for our people and communities allows the course to begin from an empowering position. Politics is not something *done* *to them*, but instead can be something *done by them*. Once they learn how the legislature structures power and access, and understand both the constraints and enabling conditions that will impact their effectiveness at the capitol, they can confidently take action to make Minnesota better for their loved ones.

There is general agreement in the antiracist pedagogy literature that antiracist teaching must include an institutional analysis of power relations. Antiracist educators must attend to how racism and white supremacy are built into the structure of our institutions.[[20]](#footnote-20) We do this work so that our students can take meaningful action to dismantle the power structures as we know them. In *Advocacy for Policy Change*, students learn not only how power is structured in the Minnesota State Legislature, but who exercises power at the state capitol. We discuss the demographic characteristics of state legislators and the cultural and institutional biases that contribute to the ongoing over-representation of white, middle- and upper-class people. We talk about how race, class, and immigration history impact who runs, who gets elected, and whose interests are represented at the capitol.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is important to me that students not only learn how to exercise power at the state capitol, but also understand why some Minnesotans—typically, white and well-off Minnesotans—are so much more likely be legislators. It is only when students understand the complex, institutional factors that combine to give dominant groups advantages, that they can begin the work of dismantling those structures.

*Managing Fear and Risk*

Early in the course (typically in week three), I take my students to the capitol campus for the first time in the semester. The ostensible purpose of this trip to the capitol campus is to orient them in the buildings. Our capitol campus is a series of buildings that are connected by underground tunnels which can be confusing to navigate. Really, the purpose of the first trip to the capitol is to help students manage their fears and anxieties about being at the capitol and give them the opportunity to develop a critical analysis of the capitol grounds, who it was built for, who is welcome there, and what that says about the state of democracy in Minnesota.

As I walk students through the campus, I ask them to pay special attention to who they

see there. What are the demographic characteristics of the people they see at the capitol? What kind of clothes are people wearing and what are we meant to infer about their class location based on their dress? On our tour, we step into hearing rooms to notice who is seated at the tables. Who is testifying? What do we notice about who is listening to them? We have an extended conversation about who is present at the capitol and who is absent. We begin a discussion about the cultural and economic factors that make the capitol comfortable and accessible to some, yet inaccessible, even hostile to others. We return to this conversation throughout the class, as students have more frequent interactions with legislators, the governor’s office, and other state employees.

On our tour, we also spend a significant amount of time discussing the architecture and the art on display at the capitol. We talk about the values and perspectives expressed through the building’s design and adornment. Like most, if not all, state capitols, the Minnesota state capitol is built in the neoclassical style. The building is made of marble, with large columns, a giant dome over a large rotunda. The exterior of the building has a massive statuary, covered in gold leaf, with a white man at the center (meant to represent Minnesota), four horses (meant to represent the elements of earth, air, fire, and water), and two white women (meant to represent agriculture and industry). The statuary is based on a previous quadriga that glorified Christopher Columbus. Its name is *The Progress of the State*.[[22]](#footnote-22) Inside the building, the paintings likewise represent a settler-colonial perspective, with names such as *Discovers and Civilizers Led to the Source of the Mississippi River*, *Father Hennepin Discovering the Falls of St. Anthony*, and *The Rugged Men of the Pine*.[[23]](#footnote-23) The paintings show European colonizers “discovering” Minnesota landmarks with native Dakota people in the background or engaging in the “civilizing” of the state through extractive practices such as logging, mining, and milling. We discuss how the project of settler colonialism is glorified by the art and architecture at the capitol and how that reflects how deeply white supremacy is integrated into our history and institutions. Having frank discussions about who the protagonists are in the story of Minnesota that is told through the design of the capitol helps students develop a critical analysis of who the capitol was built for and who is meant to feel welcomed.

After the tour, students meet with a group of legislators to hear from them directly about how they made the decision to run for office and how they understand their relationship to the communities they represent. When I invite legislators to meet with students for this discussion, I make sure to invite legislators who represent the demographic groups with which my students identify. As such, the legislators I invite are usually members of the POCI (People of Color and Indigenous) Caucus. Legislators are quick to tell students how important it is that students are doing work at the capitol, how our democracy and our state needs them if we’re going to thrive as a political community. They also acknowledge, as Rep. Esther Agbaje says, “This is a space that was never really meant for women or for people of color.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The legislators talk about what motivates them to keep fighting for their communities in a space that is often not welcoming. They talk about how important it is to stay grounded in their communities, and also how they support each other in their work at the capitol. They also talk about the joy that comes from making space for their people and communities’ issues at the capitol. Agbaje continues, “it’s still kind of fun to see your name on the door, or that your badge works to get into different places.”

The campus tour and the meeting with legislators is designed to address students’ feelings of fear and anxiety and to empower them to take risks they might otherwise avoid. Antiracist educators often argue that creating antiracist learning experiences does not entail creating “safe spaces” that protect students from the circumstances and experiences they find fear-inducing. As Wagner notes, “safety is an untenable goal.” Instead, the antiracist educator should support students as the “learn to come to voice in an atmosphere where they feel afraid or see themselves at risk.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Confronting fear and risk head on is a necessary step in education for empowerment. “Initiating discussion which acknowledges that some of the learning will necessarily be difficult, may also result in students being less likely to feel alienated…In other words, by normalizing their feelings at the outset, their energy may be freed up to concentrate more fully on the issues.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In a classroom-based class, acknowledging fear and risk may mean confronting students’ limiting self-conceptions as “not college material” based on their non-traditional status,[[27]](#footnote-27) or concerns about discussing controversial or sensitive topics. Direct advocacy courses raise the stakes even higher, as students must engage with powerful people. As Sarah Neal discusses in her article, “Researching Powerful People from a Feminist and Anti-Racist Perspective,” even trained researchers with graduate degrees can feel anxiety when engaging with people in positions of power.[[28]](#footnote-28) Undergraduate students from non-traditional backgrounds and non-dominant groups with no professional credentials to confer authority or legitimacy are even more likely to feel intimidated when interacting with legislators. The grandiose architecture, professional attire, and presence of support staff who act as gatekeepers to the legislators only enhance students’ feelings of discomfort. Empowering students to advocate on behalf of the people and communities they love requires facing the fears students feel, and supporting them as they learn to manage fear and risk. This emotional work is central to the success of the course.

*Building Community and Care into Course Design*

One of the strategies I employ to help students manage fear and risk is an explicit focus on building community among all of us in the class. From the very first day, we talk about how we are going to be a support network for each other as we do this work together. In *Advocacy for Policy Change*, students work in teams of two or three, so to some extent they have a miniature community built into the course design. However, I am careful to ensure that we cultivate a broader community in the class, so that everyone is engaged in supporting and caring for everyone else.

Kishimoto argues that this kind of explicit focus on community building is central to an antiracist pedagogical approach. She explains, “anti-racist teaching attempts to create a sense of community in the classroom through decentering authority and encouraging collaborative learning rather than individualistic, competitive learning styles.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Ideally, “the class becomes a community where students help each other with concepts and assignments, and are interested in each others’ wellbeing beyond the class.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In *Advocacy for Policy Change*, I decenter authority by explaining to students that the only way to learn how to read bills, track legislation, and lobby public officials is to actually do that work. I position myself as a guide—someone who has done that work and can help them as they figure out how they can do the work—but not as an expert. I share about my own experiences learning to navigate the Minnesota Legislature as a member of a grassroots organization. I share my own frustrations, mistakes, and successes with them as a co-learner and am honest about the fact that each time I teach the course I, too, am learning more about how the state legislature works in my adopted home state. I invite students into creating community with me and with each other by decentering authority and providing ample opportunities each week to talk about our feelings about the readings, the assignments, team dynamics, and how our lives outside the class impact our ability to be present, engaged, and complete the work. By the end of the class, we *know each other.*We know each others’ hobbies, favorite anime films, struggles at work, our goals and dreams for the future.

The importance of community building for this class cannot be overstated. In addition to the anxiety students often feel about interacting with powerful people at the state capitol, the demands of the coursework are intense. Throughout the course, students are asked to develop research and writing skills that they are unique to the class. They learn to track legislation at the capitol, which means not only learning the legislative process in Minnesota, but also how to use the website to track bills as well as how to use the Minnesota Legislative Library to research bills, their authors, and the districts they represent. They meet with the Opinion Editor from the *Star Tribune* to learn about how to write op-eds that are likely to get published before they can write op-eds about their bills. They have to write elevator speeches and meeting agendas with scripts in preparation for their meetings with legislators and policy aides in the Governor’s Office. At the end of the semester, their turn in their legislative research report, typically between 20 and 30 pages in length, which describes their bill, its author, the author’s district, the political impact of the bill, the fiscal impact of the bill, the groups supporting and opposing the bill, and all the action that has been taken on the bill so far this session. The work they do in *Advocacy for Policy Change* is challenging both academically and emotionally. Students are pushed to develop new skills and take risks that are not common in other courses. By investing significant time in community building in the course, I can help to ensure that students feel supported as they are stretching themselves in new ways. By giving students the opportunity to share what their struggling with or what breakthrough they had in the research process, students can support each other and feel less isolated as they take on the intimidating work of developing new skills and practicing them in public, surrounded by politicians and policy experts. *Teaching Cultural Codes while Deconstructing Them*

My second strategy for managing fear and risk is explicit instruction in the cultural codes of the capitol. This strategy is reflective of the general agreement among antiracist educators that antiracist pedagogy requires us to make the cultural assumptions and hidden requirements of the university visible to our students. The goal is not to assimilate students to the dominant culture’s expectations—but instead, to make apparent how the norms, values, and experiences of the dominant group are reflected in the institution’s structure as well as the norms of behavior within the institution.[[31]](#footnote-31) While most of the antiracist pedagogy literature focuses exclusively on what happens in classrooms and on campus, the principle applies as well to courses with significant civic engagement components. To act strategically within institutions—whether that’s the university or the state capitol—students need to be aware of the cultural codes that are guiding people’s actions.

As a teacher, this component of the class is the one I struggle with the most. My commitment to multiracial, multiclass democracy makes me want to resist teaching my students the norms of the capitol that are grounded in whiteness, capitalism, and upper-middle class values. My students should not have to appear “smoothly professional”[[32]](#footnote-32) and comport themselves in ways that are comfortable for white, middle- and upper-class Minnesotans in order to be able to participate in democratic decision-making in our state. Every one of my students should be able to show up to the capitol *as their full selves* and feel welcome to contribute their voice and expertise to policy debates. At the same time, I know that when I bring my students to the capitol, I am bringing them to an environment that was not built with them in mind, in which the likelihood of mistreatment and dismissal is high. My responsibility is to prepare my students to be impactful in the world, which means having to move through racist and classist institutions. As such, I have an obligation to my students to provide explicit instruction in the norms and practices of the capitol, even as I object to the power relations the norms and practices reflect and reinforce.

When talking with students about the cultural codes of the capitol, I share my ambivalence with them. I am vulnerable and open about my discomfort in teaching the codes in hopes that students will feel safe to be vulnerable and open about their experiences learning the codes. We talk about everything from manner of address and meeting etiquette, to clothing and hairstyle choices for days at the capitol. We talk about the power dynamics between legislators, legislative assistants, and other capitol employees. By helping students to understand the power dynamics at the capitol and the cultural codes that guide actors’ behaviors, students are empowered to make their own strategic choices about how they want to appear and interact in their meetings with legislators.

*Struggles with Identity and Expertise*

More than any other course I teach, *Advocacy for Policy Change* challenges students’ conceptions of themselves and requires them to reflect on and make choices about how they want to show up in the world. While each student’s experience of the course and the challenges that it poses to them is unique, some broad themes have emerged across cohorts. First, students struggle with claiming an “expert” identity. Second, students struggle with feeling like “sell-outs” for engaging in institutional politics. Finally, students struggle over whether their moral commitments require them to show up in all spaces in the same way. Helping students as they confront these identity issues can be the most rewarding and most difficult aspect of the course.

Many students enter university having internalized the traditional understanding of education and expertise. On this view, experts are exclusively people who are credentialed in a field of study and education is the process by which experts transmit their professional knowledge to students. Students demonstrate they have “learned” the expert information when they can recite it back to the instructor in an essay or on an exam.[[33]](#footnote-33) Even students who reject this conception of education and understand teaching and learning in less hierarchical and more collaborative ways may still have internalized ideas about expertise and credentialing that align with the traditional view. As Kishimoto explains in her article, part of the work of antiracist education is disrupting the traditional conception of expertise. She writes,

Challenging what is considered legitimate knowledge…involves looking at which and whose stories and experiences have been ignored and why…While students need to learn how to use scholarly sources, it is important to have a discussion on *why* these other forms of knowledge are often excluded in academia or official histories and what can be done to recover counter narratives.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Expanding students’ understanding of *what* constitutes expert knowledge and *who* is authorized to embody the position of “expert” is important conceptual work that is done in antiracist classrooms.

In *Advocacy for Policy Change*, students are asked not only to unsettle their assumptions about expertise, but then to go a step further and actually speak *as experts* in meetings with legislators and others at the capitol. Doing this requires not just intellectual agreement with an expanded sense of expertise in the abstract, but also a willingness to take the risk to perform expertise in their meetings. Preparing students to confidently occupy the position of expert begins on the first day when we talk about our people and our communities. We begin the class from the assumption that community members are best positioned to know what their communities need from government. Only members of the community truly know what it is like to experience the world as a member of that particular group. As a result, community members have a special expertise that no amount of study or observation can provide. When we speak with our panel of legislators in week three, the elected officials reaffirm for students the special value of their stories and experiences for shaping policy discussions. As much as I would like to say that it makes a difference when I encourage students to see themselves as experts, it is far more impactful when they hear it from the representatives directly.

Students also develop their own feelings of expertise through their legislative research report. As they learn about the content and history of the bill, its author, and the organizations supporting and opposing the bill, they slowly come to see themselves as experts on their bill. Every time I teach the course, students return from their first lobbying meetings with legislators amazed at the fact that they know more about their bill than the legislator they just met with. They seem practically giddy when they tell their classmates that *they were the ones educating the legislators.* It takes a lot of reassurance and encouragement to get students to the point where they trust themselves to speak as experts on their bills—but once they get there, it is an empowering and joyful experience for them.

For some of my students, learning to operate within the institutional structure of the legislature is deeply threatening to their self-conceptions as organizers and outsiders. The Twin Cities has a large and vibrant movement community and many of my students have experience organizing with grassroots organizations. They are simultaneously drawn to the course out of their desire to understand how power is used in Minnesota, yet also repelled by it due to their deep distrust of institutional politics and elected officials in general. They are outsiders playing the inside game; radicals acting within the institutions they want to dismantle. Part of the emotional care work I do with students is to help them manage their feelings of identity contradiction, of being “sell-outs.” As an organizer, I have built grassroots organizations and planned disruptive actions like freeway shutdowns and protests in corporate headquarters. I’ve risked arrest, been tear-gassed, and provided jail and bail support to folks arrested in protests. This history helps me have some cred with my students whose preferred sense of themselves is as an outsider or a radical. And yet, I have also worked “within the system,” on campaigns and a recall effort. I share my stories with students about how I chose different political projects at different points in my life, but always in the service of the same values and vision. I try to model for them how someone can be committed to radical transformation of our society and still engage in incremental and institutional work when it seems strategic to do so. I encourage them to see the course as a way to gain knowledge and skills that can serve them in their organizing work, even if they never choose to participate in citizen lobbying again in the future.

Likewise, students often struggle with issues of authenticity when advocating at the capitol. Many students believe that having moral commitments requires that one show up in the same way across every social context. Students express a reluctance to alter their language based on the listener or to dress in a way that is not typical of them and expressive of their identity. With every cohort, we’ve had a conversation about whether and to what extent it is appropriate to conform to the cultural codes of the capitol in order to make oneself heard. These conversations may seem outside of the scope of a class on the state legislature—yet they are crucially important for helping students to grapple with the race- and class-based expectations at the capitol and for helping students make strategic decisions about when and how to alter their self-presentation style. Students have to balance competing priorities: showing up as their authentic selves or using power effectively; speaking primarily to express themselves or speaking primarily to be heard. White, middle- and upper-class students likely do not experience this tension around self-presentation, but for people who are BIPOC, working class, LGBTQ+, immigrants, or otherwise members of marginalized groups, these issues can and do come up. The principles of antiracist pedagogy discussed above suggest that explicit discussion of these identity-based issues is an important component of the course.

*Conclusion*

Education at its best...is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, and renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world.[[35]](#footnote-35)

*Advocacy for Policy Change* is a course on the Minnesota State Legislature. Students learn much of the information likely to be taught in any state legislature course.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is important to me that students can explain the challenges associated with being a legislator in a “part-time” legislature, or the role of the governor’s office in the legislative process. However, it is far more important to me that students in the course come to understand themselves *as political actors* able to take action to make Minnesota better for the people and communities they love. What I care most about is that students have the opportunity to find and claim themselves and their place in the world, as Parker Palmer would say.

On the last day of class, we celebrate the students’ accomplishments in the class. Students give a presentation about the work they did on their bills and what they learned about power and democracy in the course. They invite their friends and family and we all sit down to a catered meal together. The room we hold the event in is only a mile or so from the capitol building and we can see its huge white marble dome out our windows. Each team gives their presentation about their bill and their work together. Most of the time, it is clear that the students have developed deep relationships. They make inside jokes or they tell stories about how their teammates saved them from some embarrassment or supported them in a moment when they really needed it. Sometimes, the presentations reveal that the course helped students to claim themselves and their place in the world—like recently, when a student who usually tends to be a bit quiet and more reserved, ended his team’s presentation with a sly smile, pointing to the capitol dome and saying, “That’s our house! Let’s take it over!”

It has been a transformative experience for me to be able to support students as they struggle through the difficult coursework and the questions of power and identity this class brings up. When I first started teaching *Advocacy for Policy Change*, it felt scary to show up as my organizer self (rather than as my academic self) in the classroom. But showing up as an organizer, rather than a political scientist or a professor, was the best choice I could have made for that class. Because I took that risk, I get to experience the joy of watching my students step into their power and—as both a teacher and an organizer—there is nothing better than that.

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1. The *Journal of Political Science Education* is the journal with the greatest focus on teaching and pedagogy in the discipline. A search of the *Journal of Political Science Education* produces only 16 results for articles that include the word antiracist (or variant spelling anti-racist) anywhere in the text. Of these, 11 articles are false-positive responses. In these cases, the prefix “anti-” appears somewhere in the text along with the word racist or racism. None of these 11 articles explicitly focus on antiracist pedagogy in political science courses. Of the remaining articles, 2 deal directly with teaching “race and racism” in the classroom (See Watson “Hard Truths,” and Takeda, “A Model Minority?”). One considers “teaching” outside the classroom in conversations with family members (Mobley and Fisher, “Political Scientists in Polite Company”). Another focuses on teaching “diversity courses,” which should be noted are not antiracist in approach (Holland, “Teaching and Learning in Diversity Courses”). A final article focuses on student expectations for “objective,” depoliticized instruction (Ekström and Lundholm, “‘How Much Politics Is there?’”). None of the five articles just described explicitly advocates for antiracist pedagogy in political science courses, nor offers an explanation of what antiracist pedagogy might entail. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lynch, Swartz, and Isaacs, “Anti-Racist Moral Education,” 129. Note, authors differ with respect to whether they hyphenate antiracist. There is no consistent style across publications and authors. I personally do not hyphenate the word, but in quotations from sources that do, I have left their formatting as it appears in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For examples, see Edwards, “The Whiteness is Thick” and Whatley Smith, “The Question of Comfort.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lynch, Swartz, and Isaacs, “Anti-Racist Moral Education,” 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All data about Metropolitan State University can be found on their website. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For information about the ENACT Network, see Glover, Cole, and Owens, “ENACT-ing Leadership at the State Level” as well as Glover, Lewis, Meagher, and Owens, “Advocating for Engagement.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kishimoto 542-543; Wagner, “Unsettling the Academy,” 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kandaswamy, “Beyond Colorblindness and Multiculturalism,” 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cox, *The College Fear Factor*, 7. According to Cox, “the popular notion of the young adult who is enrolled in school full-time is outdated. Althoug the traditional image is a compelling and persistent one, the current college-going population exhibits a great many non-traditional characteristics, which may include financial independence, part-time college attendance, delayed enrollment after high school, full-time employment, and time spent caring for dependents…nearly 75 percent of all undergraduates possessed non-traditional characteristics and…28 percent were highly non-traditional, exhibiting four or more of these characteristics” (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Georgis and Kennedy, “Touched by Injury,” for a discussion of racial injury and its impacts on antiracist education in university classrooms. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kishimoto, “Anti-Racist Pedagogy,” 540. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 544. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lasswell, *Politics.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anderson and Foster, “Disturbing the Comfortable,” 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In this section of the class, we read chapters from Bhojwani, *People Like Us* and Carnes, *White Collar Government*. We also read Reingold, “Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Representation in State Legislatures.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thompson, *Minnesota’s State Capitol*, 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Minnesota Historical Society, “List of the Art.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dernbach and Ansari, “In St. Paul, the Most Diverse Minnesota Legislature Ever Is Just Getting Started.” Rep. Agbaje has talked about this with my students directly in class, though this quote comes from a news article. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Wagner, “Unsettling the Academy,”265. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Cox, *The College Fear Factor*, 25. Here she explains that the non-traditional students she interviewed for her work, “seriously doubted their ability to succeed,” and “were anxiously waiting for their shortcomings to be exposed.” She found “for many students, past failure provided objective evidence of their academic inadequacy” (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Neal, “Researching Powerful People from a Feminist and Anti-Racist Perspective,” 523. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Kishimoto, “Anti-Racist Pedagogy,” 549. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Kishimoto, “Anti-racist Pedagogy,” 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Neal, 523. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cox, *The College Fear Factor*, 98. Cox’s qualitative study of college students’ confirms that most students enter higher education with a conception of teaching and learning that is analogous to the banking model of education, as described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Kishimoto, 547. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. I use Rosenthal’s *Engines of Democracy* as the primary text in the course, just as many other state government instructors do. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)