

Considering who “takes up space”

Christina “V” Villarreal and her students explain why it is sometimes appropriate for students to adopt a listening, empathetic approach to discussion

Featured faculty: Christina Villarreal

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Class: T004: Ethnic Studies and Education (Fall 2016), 23 graduate students

MK KIRIGIN, HGSE STUDENT: I think one of the main takeaways I have from this class is who takes up space and who is allowed to take up space. And I think one of the rare aspects of this course is that the students who don't have much experiences with ethnic studies, or with thinking about oppression, or with thinking about privilege take a step back.

CHRISTINA VILLARREAL, LECTURER: So much of the Ethnic Studies class is really centered around and dependent upon the student's willingness and capacities to really bring their full selves and kind of their, their autobiographies to the table. And I think that that's important to recognize the ways in which some of people's backgrounds and personal experiences are sanctioned and privileged, right? Systemically, right? Ideologically, right? Institutionally, interpersonally more than others, historically and in contemporary contexts.

COURTNEY WOODS, HGSE STUDENT: In most of my academic experiences, classrooms have always been a place where -- whenever I speak or engage -- I'm typically perceived as being disrespectful or disruptive, because I'm traditionally resisting the dominant narrative that I'm learning in schools. In this course, V positioned the dominant narratives to be critically analyzed and to be questioned. The classroom is not safe space. It's a brave space.

[Classroom footage]

JUSTIN HAUVER, HGSE STUDENT: I taught middle school social studies. I had had a lot of conversations that were explicitly around racism, both in personal and systemic levels. So, I wasn't, I wasn't inexperienced, but it was very helpful to me to think about what my place as a white male is when someone is discussing something very emotional that's in their family, or in their community, that I don't have lived experience with. And that's very real, and very raw, and very, very emotional, but also very connected to the broad concepts that we were, that we discussed throughout the class.

COURTNEY: Traditionally, white students voices are amplified, because they're already represented in the course material. So it's refreshing, actually, to be in a classroom environment where white students don't colonize the space.

JUSTIN: I think the idea that everyone needs to participate was, was not a guiding principle of discussions. Some people...chose, I think, to take a more listening and more empathetic approach, because maybe it was their first significant exposure to not only the intellectual ideas we were exploring but also to sometimes the raw emotions that could be expressed and the lived experiences that were shared. I do think that those people were given space and opportunities to participate in, in other ways that weren't discussion, whether it was smaller groups or activities, or even just discussions that were maybe a little bit less charged.

VILLARREAL: There oftentimes can be resistance if you've been taught through a Eurocentric lens for the entirety of your schooling experience, and you do not, and you're not introduced to really the epistemologies developed by and for historically targeted and marginalized populations, that can be, that can be a pretty intense moment in anybody's learning experience. And so I think that's the biggest challenge in the class because that looks very different for every student, no matter what their background. And, as the instructor of the course, it's challenging to, to meet them in that place and to try to meet them in that place with as much informed empathy as possible and navigate through that journey with them.