

“Professor Stamps, you just said that ethnocentrism is evaluating others based off of standards and norms of one’s own culture, right? If so, would ‘Black Lives Matter’ be an example of ethnocentrism, and ‘All Lives Matter’ actually be more inclusive?” This statement came from one of my students in an “Introduction to Communication” course. As a Black male, I stood in front of 35 students, some of whom sunk down in their chairs fearful of what was to come next, and others, who delighted in the uncomfortable tension within our environment. It would be easy and less confrontational for me to redirect the conversation and table that topic for a personal talk after class or during office hours. However, I was elated to engage. As a teacher, my philosophy is to engage in the unfamiliar, embrace uncertainty, and I intentionally participate in thought provoking topics and encourage students to wrestle with tough topics that challenge them to apply theory to contemporary issues.

In that moment my student was applying a concept from our textbook and subsequent discussion; he was attempting to associate this new term, ethnocentrism, with the outside world, while trying to make sense of its application. After that question was shared with the class, our initial discussion shifted, and I decided at that the class would research “Black Lives Matter,” including how this movement is defined by the individuals who coined the term, and the intentions behind its creation. During this encounter, my students shared their thoughts and ideas about social movements, connotations associated with racialized slogans (e.g., Make America Great Again) and practices (e.g., kneeling during the national anthem). Students applied class concepts and discussion topics to wide-ranging, societal issues that affect their lives outside of the classroom and all the while, we came full circle addressing our lesson on social identities and group-based behaviors. After that class, students mentioned that our conversation was “cool”, and they felt comfortable and supported asking difficult questions. Students often comment on their evaluations, “I like our conversations, Professor Stamps isn’t afraid to go there. I’m always excited for what’s to come.”

I actively integrate students’ curiosities into the course and try to guide students in learning so that they can make meaning for themselves. I believe that the goal of learning is to acquire the skills with which to engage in the unfamiliar, not to remain comfortable. I trust that confrontation is a natural part of learning and in order for *us* to grow; *we* sometimes need to engage with uncomfortable and unfamiliar topics. Within all of my classes, we exercise critical thought, we question assumptions, test theories, and critique societal practices. I often recite the Maya Angelou quote to my students, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” In my classes, students discover that learning requires dedication, but if they do their best, ask questions, and embrace the unfamiliar, they will learn more, know more and do better.

In addition, I bring all of my experiences into the classroom including my background as a public relations and media practitioner, my various intersecting identities, and my experience teaching across multiple institution types. Collectively, I use my narrative to encourage students to develop a sense of historical empathy, to make connections with class material, and to understand that communication is more than just the study of the exchange of information, ideas, and societal practices. I expect students to critically engage and ask how certain exchanges happen and how people understand, explain, and live with what happens through various communicative engagements. I share my experiences, bringing my vulnerabilities into the space, which I feel can help students feel comfortable exploring their own perspectives through an academic lens.

I am at my best when in the classroom or in a space with a lively crowd of students. When I am teaching and facilitating discussions and I see students listening, challenging what they hear and potentially reshaping their worldview, I feel accomplished. In other instances, I am a mentor and a resource for my students. I support students as they work on their graduate school applications or review their resumes as they explore internship opportunities. My goal is to continue to cultivate conversations where my students and peers continue to grow as thoughtful, well-rounded, human beings.