
The Essential Educator: Exploring the Social Issues on the Minds of Gen Z

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In our new monthly column for high school educators, The Essential Educator, guest blogger Alex Lamon, a teacher of economics, business and personal finance at Livingston High School in New Jersey, U.S., shares his experience addressing issues of race and business in the classroom. His chosen tool to teach concepts and encourage discussion around racial justice? The Wharton Global Youth Program's [Explore Business Mini-sites](#).

Race, gender, climate change, inequality. These issues are at the forefront of our news feeds and popular topics of conversation among members of Gen Z. As educators, how do we do justice to both the happenings of the world around us and the feelings, curiosities and questions of our students? Especially when these issues can lead to uncomfortable discussions? I find it important to struggle through these topics with my students, especially as a business educator. Being culturally aware and having discussions of race, especially, is an issue of relevance, cultural significance and a truly well-rounded business education, should not ignore the historical and current systemic problems in our capitalist society.

The Intersection of Race and Business

For a long time, I have worked to be aware of my status and privilege as a white teacher and understand how I can be an appropriate ally and support system for students of color, who are a minority population in my school where approximately two-thirds of the student body is white. For the last couple years, I have dived into what it means to facilitate a culturally responsive classroom, which puts issues of bias and diversity to the forefront.

Still, I found more motivation to figure out how to talk about the intersection of race and business not because of current events or school-wide initiatives, but because of a personal story from one of my students.

During pandemic teaching, one of my students stayed after our Zoom class to tell me that she was glad she decided to take Advanced Placement (AP) Economics. I told her I was glad, too. I was the one who told her to take it! And this was one of my students who admitted she would not have taken the class if I was not teaching it. However, she then shared with me her struggle. She was told by her counselor to reconsider her decision to take the course during her scheduling meeting because “students like you don’t really take AP Econ.”

This was one of my female students. This was one of my black students. Was it because she was a girl? Was it because she was black? We were not sure, but we were both upset.

“My students largely reported these discussions were interesting, relevant, and important to their success in a diverse workforce and in simply being able to participate in the conversations that are happening around them.” — Alex Lamon, High School Business Teacher

I am happy my student felt comfortable enough to tell me about what her school counselor had said. Her story motivated me to be more purposeful in setting aside time to talk about race and business.

To do this, I turned to the Wharton Global Youth Program’s free [Explore Business Mini-sites](#) for high school students, the first series of which focuses on the intersection of business and race. (A new series of three mini-sites will be launched in November and December of 2021, focusing on business topics related to Environmental, Social and Governance or ESG.)

With the help of deep conversations and analysis from actual business leaders, this unique content model provides videos, readings, and activities for teachers to use with their students. There is even a primer [Teacher Guide](#) that overviews the available resources on the mini-site. I specifically used Wharton's mini-site, [Race and the Selling of America](#) with my Business Honor Society students. I used this group as my test group as they are all passionate about business and would see a lot of relevance in the topics we were about to discuss. Two other mini-sites exploring [Race and the Entrepreneur](#) and [Race and Corporate Power](#) are great gateways into discussing deep issues affecting business and society.

The Race and the Selling of America mini-site features an hour-long conversation led by Wharton's Dean [Erika James](#) interviewing various business leaders of color in the sports and entertainment marketing fields. Wharton divided up the conversation into six smaller segments, which were perfect for my needs. I had my group of 40-something students watch the first clip as a whole class, which I felt laid a good foundation. I was able to model some healthy discussion techniques, such as sharing what I wondered and how I felt.

'Embracing Discomfort'

I then turned the tables to the students. They were allowed to pick one of three other clips I decided to allocate to our time together. I narrowed it down to three so it felt less daunting for me to prepare. I was lucky enough to be able to enlist two other business teachers in my department to serve as facilitators to the different groups. With a teacher in each group, conversations could be guided and continued if needed. However, this was a necessity of Zoom and hopefully one I will not need when we explore these mini-sites together in the physical classroom. Still, having a co-teacher buddy when talking about challenging topics is an excellent use of resources and can make you feel more comfortable when addressing these issues.

After student groups watched the video of their choice, it was time to discuss. Wharton provides guided-question PDFs [like this one](#) that can be given to students for each video segment. I decided to use these internally for my purposes, and used many of the provided questions to spark discussion among the students. With more time and offline space, I would give these guided questions to students as a reflection.

The discussion itself went well! Students were respectful and asked good questions. Encouraging them to start sentences with "I wonder..." or "I feel..." keeps tensions lower than they otherwise might be. Embracing discomfort was another important norm we set. We cannot expect everyone to say only things we are comfortable with. How we present our ideas, opinions, and feelings though with full respect for others and a plan to get through potential discomfort is what is really important. For this to work well, students need some background in active listening. "What I hear you saying is...is that right?" is an excellent sentence for them to practice using before sharing their perspective. I tell my students that if they ever want to debate a position, they should spend most of their talk time genuinely trying to understand the other speaker, and ensure they themselves are always talking in good faith.

My students largely reported these discussions were interesting, relevant, and important to their success in a diverse workforce and in simply being able to participate in the conversations that are happening around them. Our students want to gain knowledge and be able to speak on issues intelligently. The Wharton Global Youth mini-sites do an excellent job scaffolding the experience, providing the teacher with many resources, [including assessment choice boards](#) that can extend students' learning further.

I am not the best at having difficult conversations with my students. But I am always learning. I became a teacher because I truly value learning. I see no more meaningful or impactful way to embody that value than talking about issues of importance to our world and the world of our future generation.