

Strategies for Teaching the Insurrection and Impeachment

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A PSA recently hosted the teaching webinar “Strategies for Teaching the Insurrection and Impeachment,” with an in-depth discussion and audience Q & A with race and ethnicity scholars Andrea Benjamin (University of Oklahoma), Ashley Jardina (Duke University), Andrea Silva (University of North Texas), and Davin Phoenix (University of California, Irvine), hosted by Emily Farris (Texas Christian University). The panel was organized to help develop teaching approaches in response to the white supremacist attack on the US Capitol and President Trump's second impeachment. The panel of experts in race, ethnicity, and politics provided avenues to better understand these threats to democracy and how they approached these issues in their classrooms. Incorporating typical current events in politics in real time into the classroom can be a hurdle for faculty, and particularly given the difficulties of the pandemic and the disruptive attack on American democracy, these events could pose a unique challenge for faculty at this time. In this summary of the webinar, we offer some ideas from the presenters and reflect on some of the themes and directions for future consideration for us as instructors and others as they consider their own teaching practices.

The four panelists gave a number of valuable insights throughout the webinar. Their comments centered around three central themes: directly addressing the insurrection in class discussions, approaching conversations in a way that is appropriate and

inclusive for students' identities and experiences in their classrooms, and uplifting and prioritizing data and scientific method in the conversations and applications of current events.

First, the panelists described the thoughtful ways that they each approached discussions of the insurrection and impeachment with students. All agreed on the importance of directly addressing the topics in the classroom and making time to connect them to material across the different classes they teach. Silva approached this discussion with her students by describing the insurrection as a violent act of white supremacy and connecting it to course material, like in her immigration class where they already discuss the history of white supremacy in immigration politics and policy. Similarly, Phoenix emphasized to his students that these events were not a new phenomenon, but another manifestation of the white supremacy and nativism that persists in society today. In a broader approach, Jardina related ideas of erosion of democratic norms, racial hostility, nativism, misinformation, and conspiracy theories and how these have led to the events of January 6th.

In naming the insurrection for what it was, the panelists were also careful to name what it was not and how to set up the discussion, as Benjamin and others discussed how the insurrection may not be comparable to other protest movements and how they as instructors entered the conversation purposefully in their perspectives and classroom environments. Overall, they insisted that the insurrection and its contributing factors must be named for what they are, but naming exclusivist and nativist ideologies in the classroom required special attention to ensure a space to adequately discuss the issue at hand.

Second, the panelists shared some of the strategies they regularly use to create an appropriate space for all students in their classroom in discussions involving race and racism. One of the ways that Phoenix recommended doing this was by considering whose stories are often explored and “unpacking the unspoken narrative” by centering the perspectives and experiences of people of color. To begin this conversation in his classes, Phoenix shared his own experiences with processing the insurrection as a Black man in the United States and then gave his students the opportunity to share their own experiences in processing the event. Jardina explained that she also addresses her own identity as a white woman and discusses her position to speak on these topics in her classes, as well as intentionally reminding students they are not expected to be responsible for being representatives of their race in discussion. The panelists also considered the environments of their classrooms, with these events



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happening early in many instructors' terms before relationships with students had been built.

Benjamin wondered whether her students may have been holding back due to the recording of their class sessions given the pandemic's shift to online modes of instruction. While not recording these types of conversations is not always an option available to instructors due to university policies, as it came up in Q & A, there are other opportunities to create spaces for discussion. As in Jardina's case, she created alternative spaces for her students, starting a Slack channel for them to connect their experiences to class material, which students reported really enjoying throughout the semester. In order to maintain this environment, the panelists discuss the importance of carefully addressing challenges to their teaching or discussion in the classroom.

Finally, the panelists detailed their strategies for responding to challenges in the classroom by prioritizing data and the scientific method over opinion. Both Benjamin and Jardina frequently mentioned the importance of bringing and using data during class discussions and reminding students that they were here to discuss broader ideas and patterns. Jardina recommended that opinions not based in fact be contended with and if necessary, corrected, in relation to data before continuing on in conversation. Finally, Silva advocated for using humor in unpacking inconsistencies in students' assumptions, as well as readings and activities, like Peggy McIntosh's *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*.

The panelists also considered ways to be transparent with students about the choices they make as instructors and the challenges of these choices. The panelists reminded us that the ways in which instructors respond to challenges from students shapes the classroom environment in important ways, and the panelists offered very helpful strategies for maintaining a classroom environment with direct, evidence-based discussions.

For us, as an associate professor and as someone who will begin a teaching assistantship in the near future in graduate school, the webinar reminded us of how purposeful good instructors must be with approaching classroom discussions. We were impressed and inspired by the thoughtfulness and care of all the presenters. Particularly, we are taking away lessons from the conversation surrounding how significant it is to analyze the use of data and the scientific method within student work and discussions of it in order to maintain an inclusive classroom environment. When we are grading student work and helping students to recognize the gaps in their arguments, understanding how to carefully guide students to consider the relationship between data and their opinions across different topics will help us teach students how to build upon their skills within our courses, and what they can take beyond our classrooms. The presenters underscored how using current events, particularly the topics of the insurrection and impeachment, can be a useful and powerful way to teach much of political science and connect to students. ■



Andrea Benjamin is associate professor in The Clara Luper Department of African & African American Studies at The University of Oklahoma. Her research interests include race and politics, local elections and voting behavior, and public opinion.



Ashley Jardina is assistant professor of political science at Duke University. Her work focuses on racial attitudes, racial conflict, and the way in which group identities influence voting behavior and political preferences in the United States.



Davin Phoenix is associate professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine. His research interests include Black politics, political behavior, public opinion, urban politics, political communication, and political psychology.



Andrea Silva is assistant professor of political science at the University of North Texas. She researches Latino politics, immigration politics, racial and ethnic politics, and representation in the United States.