

UNVARNISHED

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION IN THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN UNITED STATES

TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for teaching *Unvarnished*. This is an important American story that builds essential understandings for solving problems we face today.

We know that teaching this history can pose unique challenges. Many of your students may have experienced discrimination or trauma in their lives, including in school settings. Topics such as discriminatory housing practices and exclusion can impact students of color and/or people who have struggled with housing insecurity, eviction, or other housing issues. Here are some ideas to help prepare us and our students to discuss this history.

It's important to remember that some of our students will be able to approach this curriculum by intellectualizing the intersecting structures that influence the way our country has addressed housing - including racism, religious discrimination, and issues of economic status - while others grapple with the ongoing lived experience of those structures. This can make discussions about housing difficult as students are coming to this material through different "ways of knowing."

Avoid declaring your classroom a "safe" space for these discussions as safety looks different for every student based on their own lived experience. Rather, work to set clear guidelines with your students in advance of beginning this curriculum.

Guidelines establish the group's expectations for how all participants will engage with each other and can be helpful in preparing a group to engage with integrity.

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Guidelines are always more effective and more likely to be upheld by your students if they develop them themselves. To help them generate guidelines unique to your learning community, you might ask:

- What do you need in order to speak more openly and listen with curiosity?
- What are your concerns about talking about these topics?
- What would productive conversation around these topics look like?
- What do you need from me to do your best work on these topics?

Remember that guidelines should be responsive to challenges that arise in your classroom - and larger community - and should be specific to the unique culture(s) and content within your immediate environment. You may find inspiration in some of these ideas:

- **Lean into the hard.**
Learning new information is hard, especially when it challenges previously held beliefs. We commit to leaning in and sticking with it, even when things get uncomfortable.
- **Assume good intent.**
We will make missteps in talking about these issues. We commit to giving each other the benefit of the doubt and the chance to further explain.
- **Stay engaged.**
Defensiveness can cause us to become dismissive. We're committed to staying engaged with this content and with each other.
- **You do not need a clear position to speak.**
It's okay to be confused and to change your mind.

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- **Use “I” statements.**

Avoid speaking on behalf of others or making broad generalizations about groups of people.

Throughout these lessons, regularly remind students of the guidelines, and ask your students if any of them need to be amended or if new guidelines need to be added.

In addition to guidelines, consider the non-negotiables surrounding this content. Racial, religious, and ethnic discrimination in housing happened. You can and should be unapologetic in your critique of the systems that enabled that discrimination to occur. Being clear about - and naming - those non-negotiables can help you more effectively respond when students articulate ideas that are factually incorrect. In those cases, you might try:

- **Gathering more information and inviting self-reflection.**

Keep these questions/statements short and clearly worded. Try: “Tell me more about that,” “How did you come to that?” or “What experiences have you had with that?”

- **Encouraging your students to reframe their beliefs as questions.**

For example - if a student were to say “I don’t think there’s discrimination; people just like to live with other people who are like them,” you might ask them to inquire: “People like the Shelley family, W. Ashbie Hawkins, and William Warley were interested in moving to homes in a mostly White neighborhood where they would be living with people of another race. Can you help me understand that?”

- **Using the historical sources provided in Unvarnished.**

Try: “It’s not enough just to say you believe in something; we have to be able to articulate and support our positions. Given all of the sources we’ve examined, why does that idea persist?”

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And some final things to remember:

- Avoid asking students to share from their personal experiences with housing, racism, religious discrimination, or economic instability.
- Work with your students to stay in the “could” - i.e., what could local governments put in place to address these issues? “Could” can generate possibilities. By contrast, “should” and “would” statements often invoke judgment or shame which can inhibit personal learning.
- Be aware of your own positionality on the issues raised in this curriculum. Teachers of all backgrounds can be equally effective in leading this content, yet students may respond differently to you on the basis of what they perceive about your identity and/or lived experience.
- Stay focused during these conversations and activities and move through groups when they are engaged in classroom work. Asking students to examine these topics can cause discomfort, and discomfort can lead to microaggressions - subtle, often unintentional, interactions or behaviors that convey bias and perpetuate stereotypes. When possible, address these in the moment they happen and then continue the conversation and activities.

We hope you and your students will find that learning with *Unvarnished* leads to rich discussions and new knowledge that prepares them well for their lives as active citizens. We look forward to seeing the results of your learning.