

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of those who make up the university's rich history. EDUC 790, Foundations of Schooling, it's a required class for all first year doctoral students at U of M school of education. In the fall of 2016, PhD candidates Kimberly Ransom and Tonya Kneff-Chang had the rare opportunity to co-teach this class with Professor David Cohen, a renowned author and researcher.

For our latest installment of StoryCorps, Kim and Tonya sat down to reflect on their time teaching together. They also discussed why talking openly and honestly about race and privilege, and teaching teachers how to do that, is so important. Tonya began the conversation by explaining why she was so excited to teach this class.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: I mean, I think it was an incredible opportunity. First of all, it's so rare to have co-teaching in the United States. I mean, even if you develop these mentorship teaching relationships, it's not the same as being in the classroom space and teaching together and being responsible for everything. But also, I had to do this because I wanted to work with David. But then when I found out you were in it too, I felt like this was an incredible opportunity that we could really, really dig into some powerful things and we would be able to draw on our own experiences and identities in very particular ways.

Kimberly Ransom: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: So, what were you thinking, going into this course?

Kimberly Ransom: I, too, am very, very happy that we taught the course together with David. I guess, embarking upon the course, I was really excited because of my own experience having taken the course the previous, maybe two years, before. I mean, my whole research project is based on that course. I knew nothing about the Rosenwald schools. I had no idea that African-Americans actually created a public school system throughout the South. I was floored that my family was a part of that, that they attended the schools. My grandmother taught at the schools. Literally, I remember being in this library, printing out my articles to read for the course, and this was the week that we read Frederick Douglass, and I literally was crying while printing out these documents. It was Fred Doug, it was James Anderson, because during my whole educational career, I had not – ever – been asked to read these things. I felt like the course really gave one an opportunity to really get in deep with the foundations of education in this country but not just one story.

There were many stories from many different cultures, many different vantage points, many different thought leaders, and I was very vocal in the class. To have the opportunity to do it again was just amazing. But, I was very nervous about it, very aware of my own subjectivity or my own identity as a Black girl. I like Black girl, I say that. I know I'm a woman, but forever a girl. So as a Black girl, trying to

deliver this information to what I imagine would be a predominantly White course in terms of the student body.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Which it was.

Kimberly Ransom: Which it was, and I felt like David taught the course effortlessly.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Yes.

Kimberly Ransom: Then, when you came onboard, when he called like, "Well, Tonya's interested," and, "What do you think?" I was like, "Oh my God, that's perfect." Because now, as two women from different cultures, it's an opportunity for us to maybe mirror some things for the students. You and I had already had a relationship built so it was an opportunity for us to, I don't know, in my mind, play good cop, bad cop, or to back each other up.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Right.

Kimberly Ransom: Or to push each other in ways that maybe the students would then begin to push one another.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Right.

Kimberly Ransom: That was my interest, and it exceeded my expectations.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: It did for me as well. One thing I remember really vividly didn't actually fall along a racial line, but it was related to a privilege space of the students and it was something where David would bring food every week. He's just one of the few professors I've ever seen do that, and it was wonderful. One of the things that we did is have feedback every class, and in that feedback, we started noticing that people were talking about the food, but the comments were like, "Oh, I love pita and hummus as much as anybody else, but how about some chips and salsa?" Or, "Wouldn't it be great to have some vegetables?" I remember being really ... I was kind of pissed off, actually, and I brought it to you because I thought, "Well, these ungracious little...students ... "

Kimberly Ransom: Whippersnappers!

Tonya Kneff-Chang: What is going on and where's ... I went back and I said, "Okay, let me check the data again." I went to all of those and I looked for any hint of a thank you. Not one. And we had a conversation about how do we approach this? David wasn't going to be there in the class, how do we bring up this really uncomfortable thing, that says, "Hey, you all are not right."

Kimberly Ransom: Tripping.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: "You're not offering gratitude for something that somebody's doing for you because he feels like he should do it. Nobody's giving him money to do this. This is a kind gesture, and you all are asking for something different."

I remember just being like, I can't look at any more of their reviews or their comments and see them in a gracious way because I'm feeling frustrated, so I thought we've got to address it. Do you remember?

Kimberly Ransom: I do remember.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Talking about this?

Kimberly Ransom: And I remember thinking, I was all in my identity. I mean, I'll be frank. I'm not saying this to a room of almost all White students. They're going to hit me with the daggers, not literally, but you know? I was happy you brought it up. I was also taken aback that you wanted to address it. Not taken aback like, "Oh we shouldn't do that," but taken aback like, "Oh, we do this?" We can like, "Oh-

Tonya Kneff-Chang: We can call them out?

Kimberly Ransom: "We can call them out? For real? Okay." It was more of that, right? I think what was interesting, is we use it as an opportunity to model and we're actually honest with them about how ... Because the class was all about race. I mean, we talked about race.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Yes.

Kimberly Ransom: So this was an opportunity also for us to let them know we see you. We see your privilege, we see that you're not even thinking about the big picture here. But also as future, perhaps, professors, all of them, also talk to them about the difficulty and the conversations that you and I had in preparing to address them. That conversation included race.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Right.

Kimberly Ransom: I'm like, "Un-uhh-"

Tonya Kneff-Chang: That's right.

Kimberly Ransom: "You can say it."

Tonya Kneff-Chang: That's right.

Kimberly Ransom: But I thought that our difference helped us be able to come to a middle ground on how to address it well and the students, I felt, they heard us and they fixed it.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: They did.

Kimberly Ransom: I know we only have a little bit more time left so-

Tonya Kneff-Chang: I know.

Kimberly Ransom: Where do we want to end?

Tonya Kneff-Chang: I don't know. Maybe the question of what would you say is one thing you learned from teaching with me and then ... or teaching in this context.

Kimberly Ransom: Be fearless. The next semester, I taught a course on my own and there were maybe three minority students, the entire class was White, and I literally opened up the class and said, "Okay, I just want you all to know, I'm going to come out the closet. I'm a Black girl," and they all bust out laughing.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Of course, right?

Kimberly Ransom: Right? But that was a way for me to begin to say, "We're going to talk about race," blah, blah, blah, "but just because I'm a Black girl, I don't want you to hold back." Then we began to talk about, safe spaces and my beliefs on relationship building and whatnot, which really helped along the way for us to have some really candid conversations, versus "Oh, my Professor's Black, I got to tiptoe through this class." No, I want you to dance through this class, because when you get out there and you're serving kids like me, I want you to be able to love them and to care about them and to teach them. The only you're going to do that is to dance in here on the hard stuff.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: That's right.

Kimberly Ransom: So we can do better when we get out there. So that's what I want.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: I love that metaphor. Let them fall in the classroom. Let us learn how to do it there, yeah. For me, I learned about the process, and how it's so important to have the different spaces to let things go in the process. So if I need to vent about how I think I want to push these White kids in the pool, metaphorically, so that they just learn how to swim through these hard topics of race, I needed you and David to say, "Okay, well, no, no, that's not a good idea." But I could be that way in the conversation with us three, so that when we got to the classroom, that was already taken care of. That was an instant gut reaction that I just needed to do to be me. I think that's something that I miss when I don't have another partner to teach with, so I'm already in love just with the co-model, but specifically with the model that allows us to bring in our different identities and, always, with a model that allows me to teach with Miss Kim Ransom.

Kimberly Ransom: And Miss Tonya Kneff.

Tonya Kneff-Chang: Girl power.

Kimberly Ransom: Yes.

Speaker 1: That was Kimberly Ransom and Tonya Kneff-Chang, graduate students in U of M's School of Education, discussing the importance of talking about race and privilege with students. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, [www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org). For more from the series, just visit [arts.umich.edu/storycorps](http://arts.umich.edu/storycorps).