

## TEACHING

# Lesson Plans After the Shock: How Instructors Treated Trump's Win in the Classroom

By *Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz* | NOVEMBER 10, 2016

**A**s she watched the presidential-election returns, Sarah Klotz, an assistant professor at California's Butte College, found herself confronted with a thousand questions. The most pressing: How would she get up and teach American literature at 9 a.m.?

Donald J. Trump's upset victory shocked Ms. Klotz and academics across the country as the campaign illustrated the country's deep divide, leaving many faculty members to wonder how they would pick up the pieces in their classrooms and with their colleagues in the morning. While some professors said they would take Wednesday off, others viewed it as their solemn duty to field students' concerns in class.

Ms. Klotz is one of the many academics who changed their lesson plans after the unexpected election result, as the race to the White House provided a check of academic privilege and served as a case study of how to talk with students about polarizing issues. The professors hope those experience may outlive the initial shock on Tuesday night.

After coming to terms with Hillary Clinton's loss, Ms. Klotz said she had texted friends and reached out to colleagues on social media. She was worried that the election would divide her students, in and out of the classroom, or that she would teach a class whose members were happy with the results, leaving her as the only one foundering.

"I don't want to show up and be devastated and my students were actually gleeful," Ms. Klotz said.

## A Stunning Upset

Donald J. Trump won election as the 45th president of the United States in an astonishing upset of Hillary Clinton, a Democrat who had long led her Republican rival in the polls. Here is extended coverage of the unexpected result of their contest, and news and commentary about the coming Trump administration.

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On Wednesday morning, Ms. Klotz told her students to shelve the discussion of Emily Dickinson planned for that day. Instead, she said, the 25 students would talk about their feelings. Although she was not sure of the class's political makeup, Ms. Klotz said she had felt an obligation to create a safe space for her students to talk about the election.

She told the students to trust her as moderator of the discussion, and then asked them to describe how they felt about the election by using one emotional word. Students responded with words like "anxious," "naïve," "frustrated," and "confused," and it didn't take long for a class that started out quiet to turn into a meaningful dialogue, as Ms. Klotz built up to asking questions about how certain racial and socioeconomic groups were dealing with the results of the voting, she said.

When the class was over, Ms. Klotz announced she would hold extended office hours for students who still wanted to talk, and a few of them followed her from the classroom to her office, she said. That morning class helped her recognize that she not only had a demand from students to talk about current events, like the election results, in her English class, but also felt a responsibility to start more-robust discussions of race, racism, Islamophobia, and misogyny.

### **'The Elephant in the Room'**

Maramé Gueye, an assistant professor of African and African-diaspora literatures at East Carolina University, doesn't teach on Wednesday, but she spent most of the day figuring out how she would face her class on Thursday, she said.

Her students don't talk about politics, but she gathers that a handful were Trump supporters. As a black, Muslim, and naturalized citizen, Ms. Gueye said she fears that many Trump voters and plenty of the president-elect's campaign rhetoric were directed toward people like her. And come Thursday, she said, she would have no choice but to address her identity as a black, Muslim woman to her class.

"I have to discuss it because it's the elephant in the room, but it is what teaching is," Ms. Gueye said. "Talking about things that are uncomfortable."

The election's polling failures will leave a mark on Melissa R. Michelson's lesson plans for years to come. A political-science professor at Menlo College, in California, Ms. Michelson said many of her courses center on the importance of polling. She's concerned that this year's flaws will cause students and scholars alike to question the point of polling. And next semester, when she introduces the topic, she said she's worried that the election's echoes may undermine her class.

"The real question is, what's the point of all this polling if it's all wrong?" Ms. Michelson said. "The way I teach those lessons is going to be a lot different."

Now, she said, her lessons on polling will need to be revised and she's emphasizing a healthy skepticism more than ever.

For Rebecca J. Kreitzer, an assistant professor of public policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the election's outcomes served as a lesson in empathy for her students.

"A lot of my students, even the conservative students, have struggled in the past year with their support for Donald Trump, in part because of his rhetoric about student groups," Ms. Kreitzer said. "I think that something that was lacking in this election cycle was empathy for Trump supporters. It was lacking in the media, and it was lacking in common discussions about Trump supporters."

Now, no matter which candidate the students supported, she's telling them she's ready to listen. In the morning, there weren't many serious questions, but throughout the afternoon she fielded questions and concerns from minority students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students struggling to cope with the new realities. Students mostly want someone to tell them everything will be OK, she said.

Besides taking care of students, faculty members also have a responsibility to take care of themselves, said Nyasha Junior, an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible at Temple University, who did not address the election in class on Wednesday. And she's advising her friends and colleagues to do the same.

"Many of my academic colleagues who are people of color are teaching at predominantly white institutions," Ms. Junior said. "I'm anticipating that there may be additional pressure on them, and so I've been sending them messages all morning, you know, 'Take care of yourself, call me later, hang in there, do the minimum, don't overdo today, go home as soon as you can.'"

### **'Very Real Fears'**

For Amanda Ann Klein, an associate professor of English at East Carolina, taking care of herself after the election prompted her to deal with the guilt she was feeling as a white woman.



Rebecca Kreitzer, an assistant professor of public policy at the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: "A lot of my students, even the conservative students, have struggled in the past year."

who can speak out without fear of physical harm the way some others will be threatened — that's all the more important that we stand up and we speak."

Long before Election Day, Ms. Klein said she and five other English professors planned a meeting of their writing group, but on Wednesday morning, fearful conversations about the election took hold of the session. Minority professors were in tears when she arrived, as they struggled to grasp what the new Trump reality would look like, she said.

"Particularly, people of color, the queer community, the Muslim community — those groups in particular — are facing an entirely different set of traumas today than I'm experiencing," Ms. Klein said. "They have very real fears that they are now having to process."

And listening to her friends grieve helped her realize she had a responsibility to listen to and help them cope with not only the election's aftermath, but also the other issues they may face daily, Ms. Klein said.

"I can be upset about this election on a kind of moral and ethical level, but on a personal level the kind of fear of personal safety that a lot of my friends are feeling today, I couldn't get my head around. I don't know what that's like," Ms. Klein said. "So it's all the more important that those of us

Diana Gómez-Pereira, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education, teaches middle-school students in the university's lab school. Not only did she have to teach after her late-night vigil watching the election returns; she said she also had to think about instructing her intern teacher, a master's student, how to respond to students in crisis.

Her middle-school students, mostly children of Pitt faculty members, expressed concerns about their future after Mr. Trump's win, Ms. Gómez-Pereira said. So she listened to them talking to one another at the beginning of class, and then asked them questions based on the conversations she was hearing.

On days like this, she said, she wants both her university students and her middle-school students to know that sometimes it's more important to listen to students' needs than to go ahead with a lesson plan.

"That's my message to students — you have to mitigate their needs," Ms. Gómez-Pereira said. "This is a day where talking



Diana Gómez-Pereira, a Ph.D. candidate at the U. of Pittsburgh's School of Education: "That's my message to students — you have to mitigate their needs."

about current events has more value."

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*Update (11/10/2016, 12:41 p.m.):* After this article was published, Professor Kreitzer provided additional information about concerns raised by her students. She has now heard from minority students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students struggling to cope with the new realities. The article has been updated accordingly.

*This article is part of:*  
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