

The difficulty—and importance—of talking about difference

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The authors served as Fulbright Roving Scholars of American Studies in the 2025-2026 school year, facilitating workshops in schools and collaborating with pupils and teachers to develop understandings of American society, culture, and language. The program was established in the aftermath of WW2 and its primary goal is cross-cultural educational exchange. Funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and supported by the Fremmedspråksenteret, teachers can book Rovers free of charge.

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Source: mediaphotos / Getty Images.

Introduction

In the year we spent living and teaching in Norway, we attempted to live the words of Fulbright's US Founder, Senator J. William Fulbright: "educational exchange can turn nations into people, contributing ... to the humanizing of international relations." In these attempts, our most interesting workshops coalesced around teaching students and teachers about difference in the United States³. Students explored difference in American culture, ethnicity,

and what we in the US refer to as race, drawing on our US-based teaching and inviting Norwegian students to consider how American history shapes American life.

As the school year progressed, we noticed echoes of American history and cultural understandings in Norwegian contexts and classrooms. We felt compelled to examine these ideas with Norwegian students and teachers, who often welcomed

them. While we do not desire to simply map our American perspectives onto Norwegian life, our lenses can serve as insightful ways to read and teach about Norway.

Creating diverse societies in the US and Norway

From our American perspectives and study of American history, Norway is on an edge, catalyzed by increased newcomers into Norway and its desire to remain an inclu-

³ We differentiate between the term difference and differences: the former refers to the many identity markers that distinguish people from each other while the latter refers to the specific identity feature that is different from others (e.g., ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class).

sive society. This edge parallels American history.

Since 2000, Norway's "foreign-born population has nearly quadrupled" (Brochmann, 2025) and 22% of Norway's current population has an immigrant background: 17.5% have arrived as immigrants and 4.2% have been born to immigrant parents (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2026). More children from newcomer families are thus in schools. They come with cultural and ethnic backgrounds different from many teachers and peers who have Norwegian-born parents. Because of Norwegians' value of social cohesion, we witnessed how students' differences are overlooked in schools so that they can be treated like their multi-generational Norwegian peers. Outside of school, this idea actualizes in robust social services, like access to health care and education.

In the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, teachers were also taught to disregard students' cultural, ethnic, and -racialized differences (Smith, 2015), believing that avoiding those differences would allow them to go away and that calling attention to them would sow division. Our experiences in the US, however, have taught us that ignoring identity-based differences is detrimental to students and to developing an inclusive society. Despite the desire to ignore differences, they exist; students can experience discrimination when their identity-based diversities don't match those in main-

stream society (Banks, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In our ten months in Norway, we observed that Norwegian society values an inherent trust that others will do the right thing, that intentions are good, and that everything will work out. Yet telling pupils who are different that they aren't—even while they are treated differently—confuses them.

Norwegian curricular goals, especially curricular standard 1, "core values of the education and training," highlight how Norwegian schooling can teach students "historical and cultural insight" (para 1) so that they can learn about the nation, and so that each student can "preserve and develop [their] identity" (para 1) and offer "insight into how we live together with different perspectives, attitudes and views of life" (para 7).

Our workshops on how the US has engaged with difference have shown us the complexities and importance of talking about differences. In David's piece, he shares how students' close reading of primary documents from an early British settlement in North America can teach about the beginnings of the crystallization of difference and how that might inform how differences are being codified in Norway. In Kristin's piece, she shares how discourses around specific immigrant populations coming to the US in the 1800s echo discourses that can be heard in contemporary Norway. In Naitnaphit's piece, she shares the importance of raising

awareness of how systems of oppression move from individuals to institutions and how students can disrupt these cycles. Taken together, these pieces offer insight into Norwegian schooling: outsider perspectives from teachers who are invested in talking about difference so that we can build and maintain inclusive societies.

Teaching about difference with primary source documents (David)

In London, on July 31, 1627, Richard Lowther signed a four-year contract, known as an "indenture," with Edward Hurd. Lowther agreed to serve Hurd for the next four years. In exchange, Hurd promised transportation to Jamestown, Virginia. At the end of his service, Lowther would also receive 50 acres of land, an incredible amount for a poor Englishman. Founded in 1607, Jamestown was the first British settlement in North America to survive. What was it like? How did slavery emerge?

To respond to questions like these, I provided Norwegian students with a packet of ten sources: indentured servitude certificates, a letter describing the 1619 sale of Negroes, colonial laws, and court cases. We worked on the first few documents together and then students worked in small groups. For each document, they were to figure out who wrote it and why. The key question: What does the document tell us about the world that created it?

Student engagement with these docu-

ments consistently exceeded teachers' expectations. Teachers who thought ten English documents too much have whispered in my ear, "they are still working well, keep going!" often working without a break for ninety minutes. Students also surprised their teachers with a willingness to ask questions in front of the entire class.

"Who named the servants on the estate property list?"

"Is Richard Lowther 'bound' to his contract in a different way than when I sign a 'binding contract' at work?"

"How does giving indentured servants fifty acres in 1627 and not giving freed slaves forty acres (or any acres) impact us today?"

I have been surprised by the intensity of Norwegian student interest—particularly from those with immigrant backgrounds, from countries as varied as Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, and Ukraine. Students particularly noticed the language describing humans: Christians, Irish, and English are more likely to achieve freedom than Indians, Negroes, or anyone "not being Christian."

No one in these documents is "white." Identifying people by country and religion mirrors how Norwegian students talk about people in Norway today. The documents name difference with a directness unusual in a Norwegian classroom. In avoiding student discomfort, teachers work hard at not calling out differences.

Many Norwegian students refuse to read the word negro out loud. I have played Martin Luther King, Jr saying "*negro*" during his "I Have a Dream" speech, or told them that the word negro is Spanish for black. The America that has an n-word does not yet exist in 1627. That America was being created and contested, a process we see in the documents!

This sensitivity to "*negro*" in a 17th century document matters because it provides another example of student discomfort with how to notice difference. Teachers have suggested students are worried about the Norwegian word "*neger*." The word also initially meant black, but over time acquired negative connotations, for example, "*negerarbeid*" or "negro work," a dirty job. Between 1970 and 2014, Norwegian media debated the term. There has been more awareness that "*neger*" has dehumanizing connotations and should not be used. The researchers who analyzed this media debate observed: "The current zeitgeist in Norway regarding racism is elusive since Norwegians do not see color, only individuals, or, if one decides to mention the 'taboo' word, it is best to subsume it under the more palatable and universal 'bullying'" (Thomas et al, 2025, p. 159). Thomas et al. argue that subsuming the specific anti-blackness of *neger* under individual bullying dilutes the problem of racism in schools and makes it harder for teachers to challenge it. This aligns with what the co-authors have seen in schools.

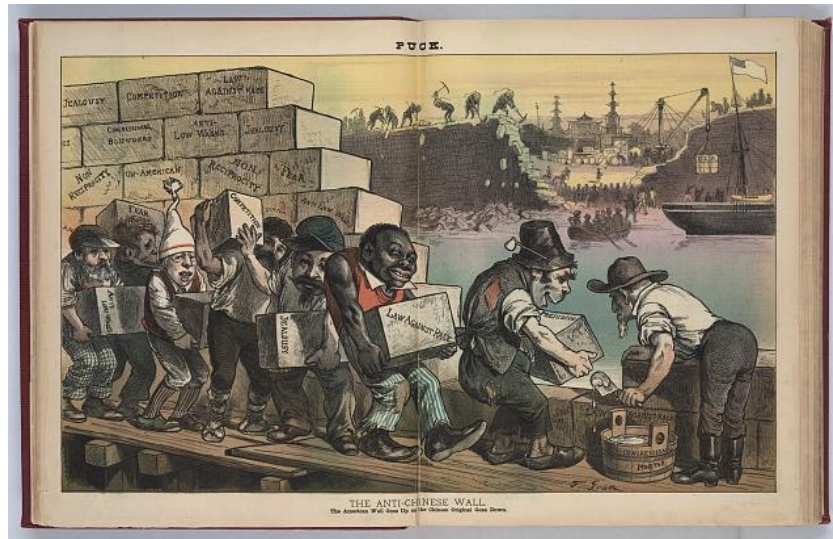
Working with 17th century documents from the Jamestown colony allowed Norwegian students to talk about ethnic, immigrant, and religious differences. American slavery created race, a complex category that does not have a direct Norwegian analogy. Allowing a glimpse into how those different statuses led some people into slavery and others into service all while becoming American, these documents provided teachers with an opportunity for students to reflect on what difference immigrant origin, religious observance, or ethnic background make in Norway today.

Immigration, history, and dialogue: Teaching difficult conversations across cultures through the Chinese Exclusion Act (Kristin)

Immigration remains a significant political, social, and economic issue in Norway and the US. It dominates headlines, shapes election debates, and influences ideas of national identity. While immigration is a contemporary concern, the language, rhetoric, and arguments surrounding it are deeply historical.

Given immigration's importance, educators face challenges in providing space to help students navigate civic discourse. How can teachers help students engage in productive conversations about immigration? How can they provide students with the skills needed to discuss difficult topics? And, what role can history play in creating space for dialogue?

Figure 1. "The Anti-Chinese Wall" (Puck Magazine, 1882).



CAPTION: Gaetz, Friedrich, "The anti-Chinese wall," Puck Magazine, N.Y. : Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann, 1882 March 29. Chromolithograph. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-28462. (digital file from original print), <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012645635/>

As a historian and educator, I believe that studying the past can help us understand the present. History provides context for contemporary debates and reveals patterns that can inform how we think about social and political issues. Cross-cultural learning is valuable because it encourages students to examine familiar topics from new perspectives while developing their critical thinking.

As a Roving Scholar, I worked to combine historical content with dialogue skills, encouraging students to engage with

challenging topics. One of the most rewarding—and difficult—aspects of this work involved teaching American concepts of race, ethnicity, and immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). This law, which remained in effect until 1943, was the first US legislation to prohibit immigration from a specific nationality. It offered students an example of how immigration policy can be shaped by racialized fears, economic anxieties, and shifting ideas about identity⁴. It also illustrates how concepts of race and ethnicity evolve alongside changing immigration patterns.

To understand the Chinese Exclusion Act, students analyzed primary sources, which helped them investigate why Chinese immigrants became targets. However, teaching this history required more than presenting historical facts. It also demanded careful attention to language.

In the US, *race* is enmeshed with a history of enslavement, segregation, and pseudo-scientific theories that attempted to justify social hierarchies. Although modern science has rejected biological definitions of race, it remains a powerful social reality with significant consequences. *Ethnicity* generally refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, history, and customs. Understanding the distinction between these concepts is essential for analyzing American immigration history.

The Chinese Exclusion Act is particularly useful for exploring these complexities because it demonstrates how racial categories change over time. During the late nineteenth century, immigration transformed America. Chinese immigrants challenged existing racial frameworks that were defined through Black-white relations. Economic competition, xenophobia, and racial prejudice fueled hostility toward Chinese laborers, culminating in exclusionary legislation. The Act reveals how race, labor, and immigration became intertwined in politics and public opinion.

⁴ The United States House and Senate formally apologized for the Act in 2012 and 2011, respectively.

⁹ Birthright citizenship has been contested in the US Supreme Court since its establishment in 1866 in the wake of the Civil War; it is a means of guaranteeing citizenship for all regardless of racial status. Notably, it was the Chinese Exclusion Act and the case of *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) that formalized the protection of birthright citizenship when Wong Kim Ark argued that, despite the Chinese Exclusion Act, by virtue of having been born in the United States, he was a US citizen. In *Trump v Barbara* (2026), a case of vital importance to the future of immigration, citizenship, and identity in the United States, the Court ruled again in favor of birthright citizenship, specifically that children born to undocumented parents or parents temporarily in the US are “citizens at birth under the Fourteenth Amendment’s citizenship clause.” https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/25-365_4hdi.pdf

To make this history accessible, I used a *Puck* magazine cartoon, “Building the Anti-Chinese Wall” (1882), which depicts workers of different ethnic and racial backgrounds constructing a wall made of bricks labeled “Competition” and “Jealousy” while Chinese workers dismantle another wall (see Figure 1). The imagery and text provided students with an engaging entry point. By analyzing the cartoon and connecting it to broader historical developments, students developed interpretations of why the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted.

Two significant challenges frequently emerged in these discussions. First, language can become an obstacle. Unlike the United States, the concept of race is largely absent from institutional language and public data collection; Norwegian official statistics focus on immigration status rather than race or ethnicity. Students may find these terms unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or difficult to apply. Words carry historical and emotional weight, and concepts developed in one society cannot simply be transferred to another.

Second, classroom culture influences how students engage with controversial topics. Norwegian classrooms are often characterized by restraint and students may be hesitant to speak publicly, especially when discussing sensitive issues. These conversations can therefore require scaffolding and opportunities for comparison between multiple contexts.

This tension makes such workshops important. Examining American debates about immigration helps students develop analytical tools to apply to Norwegian society⁵. My goal is not to import American frameworks into Norwegian classrooms, but to encourage reflection about how societies define difference and belonging.

As immigration continues to shape public life, history offers a valuable framework for dialogue, providing students ways to understand how language, policy, and prejudice intersect and helping to frame the skills needed to engage with questions that continue to define our societies.

Raising awareness to disrupt systems of oppression (Naitnaphit)

“I did a ‘test run’ on racism as a topic linked to life skills a couple weeks ago and my students loved it. So much so I got a text message from one ... telling me the class had talked about it after school and agreed it was probably the best lesson they ever had.”

I received this message after facilitating a teacher version of my most requested workshop, “How Systems of Oppression Persist.” The teacher’s note echoed what pupils have shared with me: they have faced discrimination in Norway; others have treated them poorly because of their skin color, ethnicity, gender, religion; they want to thank me for the workshop; they feel like no one is talking about their expe-

riences. Their teachers likewise comment that student participation increases during this workshop.

In Norway, as in the United States, oppression occurs as part of a system. Learning what this means and how we can disrupt these systems leads to building societies where all members are and feel valued.

But it can be difficult to talk about difference. In workshops with Norwegian teachers-in-training and teachers, they have confided that they hesitate to identify and discuss identity-based differences because it might break classroom unity. But a reluctance to talk about difference—versus the differences themselves—is what threatens the social cohesion foundational to Norwegian society. In the Systems of Oppression workshop, rather than just identify differences, the goal is to raise awareness that these systems persist, how we participate in them, and to brainstorm how they can be disrupted.

To open the workshop, I asked students what they think should be changed about Norway while I provided US examples. After some time to brainstorm, students shared that there should be equal pay for men and women for the same work; immigrants should have better resources to help them learn about and become part of Norwegian society; mental health services should be more accessible; there should be free lunch for school kids. Some said they didn’t know. Some thought Norwegian society was perfect.

Then we defined key terms: *oppression*, *dominant identities*, and *minoritized identities*. We translated *oppression* into Norwegian and students identified morphemes they recognized to support their definitional work. After defining terms, we worked through their persistence.

Systems of oppression begin with *ideological oppression*: the belief that one group is better than another because of identity markers like religion, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. If ideological oppression isn't stopped, it becomes interpersonal oppression when discrimination occurs between people.

Eventually, interpersonal oppression becomes institutionalized oppression, when a group of people who believe they are better than others and who have legislative power turn their discrimination

into law. For example, governments attempted to assimilate Indigenous populations by removing Indigenous children from their homes, putting them into boarding schools or with foster parents, and banning Indigenous languages and cultural practices, as the US government did to Indigenous populations and the Norwegian government did to Sámi, Kven, and Forrest Finn populations during Norwegianization.

Finally, these oppressions compound to create *internalized oppression*, when the person with a discriminated identity believes what the discriminator believes about them.

I taught pupils these different kinds of oppressions, drawing from Dumbrell & Yee (2018) and Mullaly (2010), and then we shared historic and contemporary exam-

ples from US and Norwegian contexts. To close the workshop, I asked students what it would take to disrupt this system. Their answers offered hope: to learn more about others, to talk about these ideas, to have true respect for other ways of life instead of believing that your way is the only or best way, to call out discrimination when it happens, to reject laws that codify discrimination. They are moving toward curricular goals of "liv[ing] together with different perspectives, attitudes and views of life" (para 7).

Discussing with students how discrimination persists as a system and how we might disrupt—in Norway and in the US—offers a way for all Norwegians, and especially all Norwegian children, to feel included in the life of the society.

Looking ahead

National identity in the United States is rooted in pluralism: to create an inclusive society for those who live there. While the current population is also made up of Indigenous Americans and the descendants of formerly enslaved peoples, US national identity contains a strong "nation of immigrants" narrative, whose ethnically diverse army defeated Germany in WW2 (Gerund et al., 2025).

As Americans, we continue to ask: is it possible for society to develop a cohesive culture when comprised of peoples from different geographic, ethnic, cultural, religious, and racialized groups? In contrast,



Source: Gemini KI generated.

Norway is a nation rooted in cultural homogeneity and the profound influence of social traditions; the rapid rise of immigration over the last five decades tests core elements of national identity.

Norwegian and American teachers who recognize the difficulty and importance of teaching about difference can work together in cross-cultural contexts, as we have this year: raising awareness, engaging students in dialogue, and drawing on historic documents to ground conversations.

And school is an ideal place to talk about difference, where ideas can be tested and students can be taught “to read the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The classroom is an especially fruitful place: students learn and try new ideas, hear others’ perspectives, and rehearse interactions and encounters they will have outside the classroom (Buehler, 2016; Rosenblatt, 1995). Cross-cultural inquiry further allows students to examine relevant ideas from abroad, affording distance and perspective to practice discussion of important current issues. We hope these vignettes, teaching strategies, and resources inspire educators to learn and talk about difference and consider how cross-cultural inquiry can help build more inclusive societies.

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