At the University of Vermont, all students are required to take a “Diversity” course that critically examines an aspect of race and racism in the United States. A course offered by the College of Education and Social Services, entitled “EDFS 001: Race and Racism in the US,” fulfills this requirement; as a 60-person and typically lecture-driven course, this class is intended to be an exploration of the history of race in the United States and an examination of its modern implications. In a marked shift from the way the course was taught in years past, the Fall 2014 incarnation of the class featured a myriad of structural changes, including: the use of three undergraduate Teaching Assistants, the implementation of interest-based discussion groups, the creation of a Facebook page, the use of a variety of media, and a fluid syllabus that allowed for further exploration of topics that were of interest to the students. In doing so, we implemented a constructivist framework that would make the scholarly study of race a more personal examination of systems of privilege and oppression.

We explore the merits and drawbacks of peer-to-peer social justice education in a required, introductory level course on race and racism. Using student work and course evaluations as well as anecdotal evidence, we explore the varied experiences of students enrolled in EDFS 001. In doing so, we explore both the positive and negative outcomes of the changes outlined above. Ultimately, this project illuminates the nuances of peer-to-peer education as both a means of and an effort to educate students on the basic tenets of social justice. It offers implications for future educators, as well as recommendations for ways to tailor multicultural education courses – particularly those that are required – towards a more constructivist and inherently socially just framework.