

Disturbingly, these overall findings indicate that White educators are no more immune to having difficulties with racial dialogues than their White students. In one study, it was found that even the most experienced teachers were ill-prepared to productively and successfully facilitate racial discussions and interactions (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). It is important to note that both students of color and White students were unanimous in attributing a successful or failed facilitation to the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of the teacher (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009).

The Way Forward

What Must Educators Do to Become Effective Facilitators of Difficult Dialogues on Race?: Overcoming Microaggressions

If the above conclusions are correct, then it bodes ill for race education in the United States unless educators seriously explore their own biases and prejudices, confront their own fears and apprehensions, and actively develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills to successfully facilitate difficult racial dialogues. A number of personal/professional developmental issues and strategies have been identified as potentially helpful (Bell, 2003; Bolgatz, 2005; Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Watt, 2007; Willow, 2008; Winter, 1977; Young, 2004).

1. Possess a Working Definition and Understanding of Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues

When critical consciousness and awareness of race issues, racial microaggressions, and racial dialogues are absent, it leads to disorientation, confusion, and bafflement that prevent problem definition and intervention. Thus it is imperative that educators possess a working definition and enlightened understanding of the cases, manifestation, and dynamics of racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race. As we have already spent considerable time on the former, I briefly supply one on the latter. Note, however, that the following definition of difficult dialogues is complex and must be understood in terms of lived reality to have true meaning.

Broadly defined, difficult dialogues on race represent potentially threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial or ethnic

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groups when they (a) involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege, (b) highlight major differences in worldviews, personalities, and perspectives, (c) are challenged publicly, (d) are found to be offensive to others, (e) may reveal biases and prejudices, and (f) trigger intense emotional responses (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Young, 2003). Any individual or group engaged in a difficult dialogue may feel at risk for potentially disclosing intimate thoughts, beliefs or feelings related to the topic of race. (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009, p. 184)

2. Understanding Self as a Racial/Cultural Being by Making the "Invisible, Visible"

Being an effective facilitator cannot occur unless the person is aware of her or his own values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior. Questions that he or she must constantly work on exploring include: What does it mean to be White, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic American, or Native American?

3. Intellectually Acknowledge One's Own Cultural Conditioning and Biases

On an intellectual/cognitive level, teachers must be able to acknowledge and accept the fact that they are products of the cultural conditioning of this society and, as such, they have inherited the biases, fears, and stereotypes of their ancestors.

This honest acknowledgment does several things: (1) it frees the teacher from the constant guardedness and vigilance exercised in denying their own racism, sexism, and other biases; (2) the teacher can use it to model truthfulness, openness, and honesty to students on conversations about race and racism; (3) it can communicate courage in making the teacher vulnerable by taking a risk to share with students their own biases, limitations, and attempts to deal with racism; and (4) it may encourage other students to approach the topic with honesty, because their own teacher is equally "flawed."

4. Emotional Comfort in Dealing with Race and Racism

On an emotional level, it is to the advantage of teachers if they are comfortable in discussing issues of race and racism, and/or being open, honest, and vulnerable to exploring their own biases and those of students. If students sense teachers are uncomfortable, it will only add fuel to their own discomfort and defenses. Attaining comfort means practice outside of the classroom, lived experience in interacting with people or groups

different from the teacher. It requires experience in dialoguing with people who differ from the teacher in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity. It ultimately means the teacher must be proactive in placing himself or herself in "uncomfortable" and new situations.

5. Understanding and Making Sense of One's Own Emotions

Because very few teachers can have experiences with all groups who differ from them in worldviews, they will always feel discomfort and confusion when different diversity/multicultural issues arise. These feelings are natural and should not be avoided; rather making sense of them is important. Being able to monitor them and infer meaning to feelings and emotional reactions and those of students are important in facilitating dialogues. It has been found that emotive responses often serve as "emotional roadblocks" to having a successful difficult dialogue. Feelings have diagnostic significance. For example, these feelings often have hidden meanings:

- I FEEL GUILTY. "I could be doing more."
- I FEEL ANGRY. "I don't like to feel I'm wrong."
- I FEEL DEFENSIVE. "Why blame me? I do enough already!"
- I FEEL TURNED OFF. "I have other priorities in life."
- I FEEL HELPLESS. "The problem is too big . . . what can I do?"
- I FEEL AFRAID. "I'm going to lose something" or "I don't know what will happen."

Unless a teacher gets beyond his or her own feeling level or that of students, blockages in learning will occur. If a teacher experiences these feelings, it helps to acknowledge them even when they do not make immediate sense. Teaching and encouraging students to do so as well will lessen their detrimental impact.

6. Control the Process and Not the Content

When a heated dialogue occurs on race, the duel between students is nearly always at the content level. When referring to dreams, Freud took the stance that the manifest content (conscious level) is not the "real" or latent content of the unconscious. Some common statements when racism is discussed, expressed by both White students and students of color, are:

- "So what, we women are oppressed too!"
- "My family didn't own slaves. I had nothing to do with the incarceration of Japanese Americans or the taking away of lands from Native Americans."

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- "Excuse me, sir, but prejudice and oppression were and are part of every society in the world ad infinitum, not just the United States."
- "We Italians (Irish; Polish; Koreans) experienced severe discrimination when we arrived here. Did my family harp on the prejudice? We excelled despite the prejudice. Why? Because the basic founding principles of this country made it possible!"
- "I resent you calling me White. You are equally guilty of stereotyping. We are all human beings and we are all unique."

These emotive reactions are defensive maneuvers used to avoid feelings of guilt and blame. Unmask the difficult dialogue by (1) acknowledging the accuracy of statements (when appropriate), (2) intervening in the process rather than the content, (3) helping students see the difference between intention and impact, and (4) moving to the feeling tone level of the communication.

While these statements are to the greatest extent "true," they can hinder a successful dialogue by covering up the real dialogue. By agreeing with the statement, it no longer becomes the distraction and allows the facilitator to focus on the real issues, feelings, and conflicts in worldview. Avoid being "sucked into the dialogue" by taking sides in the debate of content. Rather, intervene in the process by directing students to examine their own reactions and feelings. Encourage them to explore how their feelings may be saying something about them.

The blame game creates monologues. Help students differentiate between their intention and the impact. When a White female student says "So what, we women are oppressed as well!" Help them distinguish between intention and impact. Refocus the dialogue to feelings. "I wonder if you can tell me how and what you are feeling." Teacher: "John (Black student) has just agreed with you that women are an oppressed group. Does that make you feel better? (Usually the student says "no".) "No, I wonder why not?" (Try to help the student to explore why the feelings are still there. If there is continued difficulty, enlist speculation from the whole class. The last option is that you, the teacher, make the observation or interpretation.)

7. Do Not Be Passive or Allow the Dialogue to Be Brewed Over in Silence

When a difficult dialogue occurs and an impasse seems to have been reached, do not allow it to be brewed over in silence. The facilitator has

three options: (1) tell the class that you want the group to take it up at the next meeting, after everyone has had time to process their thoughts and feelings; (2) personally intervene by using interpersonal recall, microtraining, or any number of relationship models that attempt to have students listen, observe, and reflect or paraphrase back to one another; or (3) enlist the aid of the class members. This latter technique is very useful because it actively involves other members of the class by asking: "What do you see happening between John and Mary?"

8. Express Your Appreciation to the Participating Students

It is important to recognize, validate, and express appreciation to students for their courage, openness, and willingness to risk participating in a difficult dialogue. This strategy should be employed throughout the class.

- "Mary, I know this has been a very emotional experience for you, but I value your courage in sharing with the group your personal thoughts and feelings. I hope I can be equally brave when topics of sexism or homophobia are brought up in this class."
- "As a class, we have just experienced a difficult dialogue. I admire you all for not 'running away' but facing it squarely. I hope you all will continue to feel free about bringing up these topics. Real courage is being honest and risking offending others when the situation is not safe. Today, that is what I saw happen with several of you and for that, the class should be grateful."

These suggestions for dealing with racial microaggressions in the classroom and for successful facilitation of difficult dialogues on race may be equally applicable to conversations on gender, sexual orientation, and other difficult topics. Education holds one of the primary keys to combating and overcoming the harm delivered to people of color, women, LGBTs, and other marginalized groups. Unfortunately, few teachers or educators are sufficiently trained in antiracism, antisexism, and antiheterosexism strategies. If our society is to become truly inclusive and allow for equal access and opportunity, then our educational systems must reflect a multicultural philosophy and stance that is operationalized into the policies and practices of schools, the curriculum, teaching/learning styles, and in the teachers who educate our children.