

Byrners and Hillis

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Learning With and From Our Students: The Need for Humility in Race and Equity Work

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Abstract

This point of view paper explores the power of words to build respect and understanding around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. As instructors in our courses who work to build self-awareness and unpack systems of power and privilege for ourselves and for our students, there are many lessons we can learn to make teaching and learning more powerful and inclusive for our learning communities.

This past year, our department chair extended an offer to the School of Education faculty to teach another section of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for our teacher candidates. While I am a white woman, I considered a number of ideas I might bring to such a class because of my intentional reflections on my own life the past few years, reading a number of books, and trying to unpack more of what it means to be White in America. In addition, I had joined a White Faculty Accountability Group on campus in the past year and was grateful for growing self-awareness and perspective through these conversations. The invitation for the faculty group (below) accurately represents our work we have engaged in together:

For white faculty committed to anti-racist and anti-oppressive education, it is necessary to develop a critical consciousness that interrogates the spectrum of internal and external responses within teachers and students alike to such education. It is also critical for white faculty to unpack their racialized identity without burdening faculty of color, which ultimately hinders efforts at solidarity in working for diversity, equity and inclusion. This faculty learning and growth group, tailored particularly for any interested white faculty, (although faculty of color are always welcome), will have a twofold aim. The first will be to work together to select and discuss literature that helps unpack the dynamics involved in teaching topics such as understanding and dismantling privilege, analyzing and mobilizing for social equity and inclusion, and responding to classroom dynamics when white supremacy is named and called out. The second is to be accountable with other white faculty, in non-judgmental relationships, as we grow in understanding our roles both in perpetuating systemic racism and in dismantling it.

I volunteered to teach the class and proceeded to plan the curriculum using content I'd read and advice from numerous conversations with faculty group members and faculty members of color whose perspective and feedback I valued. For my first Diversity,

Equity and Inclusion class, I showed up to a classroom filled with ten white women, one Alaskan Native woman and one Indian American woman (she was the first child of parents who emigrated from India).

I began with a prayer written in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day: "Show us the lies that are still embedded in the soul of America's consciousness. Unmask the untruths we have made our best friends. For they seek our destruction. And we are being destroyed... Reveal the ways the lies have distorted and destroyed our relationships... Give us courage to embrace the truth about ourselves and you and our world... Give us faith to believe: Redemption of people, relationships, communities and whole nations is possible! Give us faith enough to renounce the lies and tear down the walls that separate us with our hands, with our feet, and with our votes!" (Harper, 2012).

We then proceeded to set group norms, discuss and agree on basic definitions of race and racism, and self-reflect on how race has shaped our lives up to this point. In previous classes, when I used a similar prompt asking about how race has shaped students' lives, one of my university students wrote, "I don't think that much about my race. It just kind of is what it is." This prompt about how race has shaped our lives is such a powerful prompt and offers a key and gateway to the course, opening the door to authentic conversation, intimacy, and greater understanding of diverse backgrounds. I asked students to write down responses and was planning for students to reference their responses later in the quarter after more discussion and readings had been shared. I then shared some quotes from Robin DiAngelo's (2012) observations after using this prompt. In retrospect, this would have been a great opportunity for students to share stories, but out of concern for time, I simply had students do personal reflection through the free write. As I'll discuss in the events that followed, I now realize the importance of protecting time for students to share their responses and thoughts as a key opportunity for them (and me) to begin understanding one another and to speak from our own truths.

Because some lack of awareness around race has been a frequent

response from many of my white students through the years, I followed this reflection with an experience to deepen self-awareness called the “Color Line Activity.” I have done this several times in other race and equity workshops, and it has been an effective tool to develop an understanding of white privilege on a personal level while also seeing how our experiences matched up with our peers. This activity is based on Peggy McIntosh’s well-known article “*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*” (1989). For this activity, students filled out a survey based on Peggy McIntosh’s article, totaled their scores and then lined up next to their corresponding number. I gave the students opportunity to turn and talk with each other to process this activity and to unpack ideas around privilege together. The class then moved on to discussion about the syllabus and the assignments for the quarter before dismissal.

In a resource guide for this activity created by Cultures Connecting, the following was written for the facilitator: “This understanding of a collective experience is crucial in understanding the way racism and privilege operates. Ultimately, participants should also begin to think about how their collective experiences are related to institutional white supremacy in the United States. Due to emotions and reactions this activity can evoke in participants we recommend this activity be facilitated by at least one experienced facilitator.” I had read this before and thought I had enough experience to guide the discussion based on previous experience; I did not anticipate seeing how some of my own blind spots could turn this activity into a very painful experience for one of my students. The resource guide also noted, “Because People of Color and White people process this activity in very different ways, it is best when co-facilitated.” Another part explains: “Everyone is influenced by the dynamics of White privilege within the United States, and this activity makes people feel this on a very personal level. It brings up a great deal of emotion related to experiences of privilege and oppression.... With that in mind, it is vital to allow the time and space needed to process. You may want to do this in caucus groups.”

Based on class discussions and my own observations of the

class, I left feeling like it had gone pretty well, but I knew that one of the weaknesses was certainly trying to fit way too much into the class period. The next day, I received a call from a colleague who had been in touch with my Indian American student from the class who was struggling deeply with emotions that the first class discussions had generated for her. When we met the next day to discuss her concerns, she very graciously shared her perceptions and experience of the class. She discussed how I had framed ground rules for discussion but that some of the quotes about race I had shared were not explained with enough context. At the beginning of class when I asked students to participate in some self-reflection about how race has shaped their lives, I had not allowed space for them to process this together as a class, and she shared how she felt frustrated by the time limitations. As she shared about her experience with the Color Line activity, she (being one of the only teachers of color in the room) felt alienated because her scores were different than the others in the room. This activity primarily focused on black/white racial differences, and each of the statements in the color line activity brought up painful memories for her of being the only child who was Indian American. She shared with me that as a child, she did not fit in with the black students, and she did not fit in with the white children. As a child from Indian immigrants to the U.S., her family had to drive over two hours on the weekends to connect with other Indian families, but when she would return to school each Monday, she was isolated again. The pain of this disconnectedness surfaced in our class when she was standing apart from her peers on the color line.

This activity, which was designed to build self-awareness and collective understanding, may have done that for some of my students; but for one student, it highlighted the differences and fostered an environment that reinforced exclusion rather than inclusion. I was saddened to see that in this first effort in this course on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion that I had been an unintentional perpetrator of a microaggression, in that I had unwittingly highlighted differences between class members without providing space for the group to understand them together. It highlighted to

me how, when we are talking about issues of diversity, equity and inclusion, we must be aware that we are navigating ever complex terrain as students bring multi-layered experiences and narratives to the table; and these topics must be addressed with sensitivity, humility and ample space to listen and learn. It also showed me how my best intentions and efforts had generated emotions I couldn't yet understand or anticipate.

My student's emotions were not unusual, nor was her desire to want to be alone and process what she was feeling. Based on this experience, I now have the following strategies in mind for future experiences like this: 1) Be aware that certain activities/resources may evoke strong emotion in certain students. 2) Don't expect students of every background to react the same way, or assume specific reactions. 3) Try to create a safe space (time, privacy, etc.) for students to encounter and process their emotions, then a place for them to share as they feel led. My student shared that she actually would have preferred to do the first part of the exercise—the numbering—at home, and then she would have been open to talking about it in class.

Ironically, I had shared the following quote in class by Ijeoma Oluo (2018) in regard to conversations about race, and it was true about me: “You are going to screw this up. You're going to screw this up royally. More than once. I'm sorry, I wish I could say that reading this book would guarantee that you'd never leave a conversation about race feeling like you've gotten it all wrong and made everything worse. But I can't. It's going to happen. It's going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway” (p. 47).

As we talked, I took some time to reflect, and I owned up to the pain that I caused due to my lack of structure and my own blind spots about the possible impact of the Color Line activity. This brings another key point for instructors that we need to be ready to hear unexpected viewpoints and difficult feedback and to take responsibility for my own actions. While I was thankful that my student was courageous enough to come to me and share her experience, I grieved that my learning opportunity came at such a great expense to her. While I think that this activity is still powerful,

I believe that, depending of the make-up of the class, it does not need to be acted out in front of everyone. It could be assigned for students to do before class; then a follow-up discussion could come out of this after some time has been given for self-reflection. And more structured time and space is certainly needed for reflection. The experience taught me the risk of using activities like this if we are not careful in their preparation, but it also reinforced the power of relationships to deepen our understanding of one another.

The remaining sessions in the class were much different as I worked hard to respond to her feedback. I intentionally left much more space for students to reflect and share their perspectives and stories, and I did not try to fit in as much direct instruction. My student helped me to see that we could learn best in our small class about diversity, equity, and inclusion by learning from each other. As we broadened our perspectives from hearing more of the personal narratives in the group, we grew together as a community and gained much needed experience of practicing civil discourse around topics that can be so divisive in our society at large. This is another key point that I will keep building on as an instructor to continue to be flexible, and be willing to incorporate new ideas, especially those from within the class community. Allowing students to help shape the class encourages diversity of perspective, student engagement, and mutual respect.

I have asked this student to co-teach this same course with me next year. We have managed some messy conversations with humility and grace, and we have grown in our respect and care for each other. She has expertise and life experience that will continue to add to the richness of the conversations and will help future students grow in their own journeys in learning about these important topics of diversity, equity and inclusion. This reinforces the lesson for me to not be afraid of conflict as it's never the end of the story. If we remain committed to conversation and understanding of one another amidst conflict (and, yes, it is inevitable with complex topics such as these), it can ultimately enable us to learn, forgive, gain courage, and walk closer to the complete reconciliation we all desire.

Debbie Irving (2014) writes this in her conclusion of her book

Waking Up White: “Self-examination and the courage to admit to bias and unhelpful inherited behaviors may be our greatest tools for change. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to expose our ignorance and insecurities takes courage. And love. I believe the most loving thing a person, or a group of people, can do for another is to examine the ways in which their own insecurities and assumptions interfere with others’ ability to thrive. Please join me in opening your heart and mind to the possibility that you—yes, even well-intentioned you—have room to change and grow, so that you can work with people of all colors and ethnicities to co-create communities that can unite, strengthen and prosper” (p. 249).

Respect and understanding of issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion are simply words until they are played out in the very fabric of our relationships and communities. I am a white woman on a journey of unpacking systems of power and privilege, and I am grateful for grace to begin again and learn from mistakes when my blind spots are revealed. Our words hold incredible power, and it is important for us to use them to deepen connections and to help others feel seen and heard.

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