

# **Discussing Race in Diverse Classrooms: Promoting Equity and Respect**, *Flex Day Presentation by Patricia France, Kristi Vanderhoof, and Jeremiah Bodnar, Las Positas College, Fall 2016.*

## **Recommended Ways to Prepare for Difficult Discussions**

### **1. Build rapport and a safe community first**

- Do ice-breakers and group work at the beginning of the semester.
- Say hi to students when you see them in the halls and take an interest in their lives and goals.
- Tell students that their opinion matters, but they must support it with evidence.
- Avoid discussion and instead assign reflective responses if classroom dynamics are oppositional (Humphreys, 2011).

### **2. Set Norms**

- Be explicit about topics that are off limits (Humphreys, 2011)
  - For example, Humphreys tells her history students that blatantly unconstitutional comments (e.g. slavery wasn't so bad) are off limits
  - If it is not something you would hear being debated on the news, it is off limits
  - If you think you might deeply offend someone, don't say it
  - Tell students they have a right to have viewpoints that are off limits, but they may not share them since they would detract from the positive learning environment
- Have students set their own norms (reasonable ones) and then type them up and post them or give them as a handout
- Have students discuss the difference between a debate and an argument, or have them define respectful and disrespectful discourse and then set norms together

### **3. Prepare students by giving an assignment before the discussion**

- Have students answer comprehension questions after reading and then review these as a class.
- Also, require students to use evidence from the reading and not rely on anecdotal evidence in their discussion.
- Humphreys found that her students discussed the text more “maturely and respectfully” and students of all races felt more comfortable participating when she set up the discussion in this way (p. 107).

## **Techniques for Moderating Difficult Discussions**

From Stephen Burton & Susan Furr (June 2014) "Conflict in Multicultural Classes: Approaches to Resolving Difficult Dialogues":

### **1. De-Escalation Only**

- Instructor summarizes of all perspectives of students involved in the discussion.
- It is important to acknowledge the difficulty in confronting these topics and issues covered in the course. The instructor can use the technique of normalizing the emotional reactions by the students. "It is okay to be emotionally confused by the topic".
- Instructors can model humility during the discussion. For example using terms like: "it's okay to be wrong." If the instructor shares their humility it can create trust in the classroom.
- An instructor can use humor in the classroom. Even though it can be risky, it can be used after trust and safety is built in the classroom to create a lighthearted environment. This doesn't diminish the controversial topic but it will allow tension to release for the students.

### **2. Supportive Confronting**

- It is important for the instructor to summarize the student's perspective so that everyone has a clear idea of the student's point of view. Also, the student will feel "heard" while discussing the difficult topic.
- During the discussion link the broader controversial issues in the student's everyday life, processing student interpretations on the issue/conflict and then deflecting or discussing larger issues of multicultural topics in the text/classroom.
- Create in class reflective writing assignments that allow students to voice their opinions regarding difficult dialogue and issues in the less intimidating space of smaller groups of classmates.
- Set up ground rules early in the course on discussing difficult topics and continue to gently remind students of the rules throughout the course.

### **3. Protective Confronting**

- Shut down dialogue and stop intentionally, unintentionally harmful and discriminatory speech or behavior and letting it be known that it is unacceptable.
- As the leader in the classroom it is important to protect the lone outlier by taking whatever steps necessary to protect a student, whether that student is being attacked or is the attacker, from being "mobbed" by other students.

- Also, be aware that it is okay to have a time-out during a difficult discussion. You can stop contentious dialogue, acknowledge conflict, and state that it will be revisited later.
- If there is a challenging situation that requires more attention, ask to meet privately with a student to create a protected space to discuss hard conversations. In some cases, you may want to ask to meet with the student one-on-one (possibly with another professor, department chair or dean present) to resolve a conflict or issue outside of class.

## Thoughts on the Instructor Disclosing Their Own Personal Views

Reasons that some teachers don't want to disclose:

- Fear of retaliation or grievance from students and/or administration
- Concerns about stifling student discussion

Reasons that some teachers disclose:

- Humphries discloses her views because
  - She feels that it's difficult to be completely neutral or objective
  - She feels that stating her views directly helps her students distinguish between fact and opinion
  - Humphries journaled, "I would always begin a course by making it clear to my students that they would be getting *my point of view* but that I would try to be fair to other points of view. I encourage my students to disagree with me. I didn't protect that objectivity was neither possible nor desirable" (Washington & Humphries, 2011).

## Other Ground Rules

Don't single students out or expect students to represent the perspective of all members of their ethnic group because...

- Some students may be members of multiple ethnic groups
- There is disagreement within ethnic groups (e.g. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin all had different perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement)
- Asking students from marginalized groups to inform the dominant group is wrong because "It is each class member's responsibility to be an agent of his or her own education and not to reproduce disempowering societal dynamics within the classroom" (Hackman, 2005). It puts the burden on the minority student to be a spokesperson for their racial groups. This is exhausting and isolating (being identified as the "other") for the student to always explain in a classroom discussion.

## Reflective Journaling

Here are a list of questions that teachers can use when writing their journals (from Milner, 2003):

1. How will my race influence my work as a teacher with students of color?
2. How might my students' racial experiences influence their work with me as the teacher?
3. What is the impact of race on my beliefs?
4. How do I, as a teacher, situate myself in the education of others, and how do I negotiate the power structures around race in my class to allow students to feel a sense of worth?
5. How might racial influences impact my and my students' interests in the classroom? How might I connect lessons to those interests?
6. To what degree are my role as teacher and my experiences superior to the experiences and expertise of my students, and is there knowledge to be learned from my students?
7. How do I situate and negotiate the students' knowledge, experiences, expertise, and race with my own?
8. Am I willing to speak about race on behalf of those who might not be present in the conversation both inside and outside of school, and am I willing to express the injustices of racism?

## References

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