Dialogic Spaces: Talking about Race in the University Classroom
by Joshua Rashon Streeter

Dialogues on race in the classroom are challenging, yet critical to have. Considering the three key elements of race-based teaching—scaffolding, modeling, and community building (Brookfield, 2019), a dialogic space can support reflective and productive conversations of race and privilege in the college classroom. In a powerful video titled "Let's Talk About Race," White and BIPOC students and teachers identify the need to dialogue about these topics in the classroom (3:20-4:54), prompting inner-racial dialogues in the classroom.

Why dialogue?
Dialogue on and about race pushes learning into affective domain—considering social-emotional and academic learning goals while analyzing and interpreting what is said, by whom, how, and why. Such exchanges develop an ongoing, multi-modal dialogic space, creating a dynamic and reciprocal learning environment. Working to build what progressive educator John Dewey called "social intelligence," dialogic education is "not only concerned with individual intelligence and individual success but is intrinsically social"; "this is about the capacity of a society as a whole to think together, learn together, and respond appropriately to challenges" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 27).

A 2018 study from Wright State University found that dialogues provided a "unique and ultimately beneficial opportunity to intimately discuss often-hidden ways in which race and ethnicity operate in society" (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, p. 232). This article notes that college students identified ways that privilege and oppression operated in society at large and that intentional and ongoing dialogues "strengthened [student] commitment to improving racial and ethnic relations" (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018, p. 232).

Challenges and successes
Instructors at Vanderbilt University found that three student beliefs often surface in class that create barriers to furthering the conversation. These include "ahistorical and social ideologies (racism is the problem of a few 'bad' individuals), notions of race as Otherness (racism is only relevant to people of color), and post-racial beliefs (racism is a thing of the past" (Bandy, Harbin, Thurber, 2019). This study also identified that, within the college classroom, there might be resistance to faculty teaching about race and/or microaggressions that could arise during dialogues (Bandy, Harbin, and Thurber, 2019).

In order to combat these challenges, Thurber, Harbin, and Bandy (2019) developed five principles to support difficult dialogues on race in the college classroom. These principles, connected to classroom

strategies, are "synthesized from a comprehensive review of literature related to teaching race" and they include:

- encourage reflexivity;

- prepare for and welcome difficulty;

- meet students where they are;

- engage affective and embodied dimensions of learning; and

- build a learning community.

To operationalize some of these ideas, you may spend a few classes building community and shared norms before diving into a dialogue on race (see "Where to begin?" below). Also, consider how to access students' prior knowledge about the topic, which can serve as a starting point for a discussion on race. Then, throughout the sustained dialogue, students name their thinking, list further questions, and identify areas of growth or roadblocks through reflection responses, such as a journal or video entry. Or students might reflect on their contributions to the dialogue itself. In my classroom, I ask students to critically assess their participation and activity during class in relation to the norms that we set as a community. Finally, consider various dialogue strategies that engage students in affective and embodied learning, like It Made Me Think, Visual Mapping, Poster Dialogue, Perspective Web, or Great Game of Power.

Additionally, a 2011 study centered faculty of color and identified ways that they had facilitated successful and unsuccessful dialogues on race at various universities in the northeastern United States. Six themes arose during their interviews as effective strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues on or about race: "self-disclosing professor's biased thoughts, feelings, and mistakes; making examples personal, real, and concrete; facilitating the exploration of students' experiences; checking in with students; being aware of the professor's impact on students (Sue et al, 2011, p. 337). I have used these strategies in my own practice (as a faculty member of color) and have also seen these techniques be used successfully by White faculty.

Where to begin?
Kendra Lowery, a professor at Ball State University, suggests that faculty gain facilitation skills and experience with cross-racial dialogues as a participant first (2017). This would include involvement in workshops or institutes led by skilled facilitators with experience and training in facilitation of difficult dialogue. And then, when ready to apply facilitation skills you observed to your classroom, Lowery (2017) reminds faculty to "thoughtfully plan and prepare for a dialogue by using the ever-increasing resources that are available online or in print" (p. 120).

Lowery encourages facilitators to also "establish group norms, working agreements, or guidelines and facilitate group self-assessment of adherence to them" (p. 123). It is also important to critically analyze how establishing group norms is done to ensure that there are not possible unintended impacts for BIPOC students in the course. While challenging the common guidelines (and offering solutions to such problems), Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2014) remind us of the ultimate goal of dialogic exchange in the college classroom: "preparing students for active participation in a democratic society requires the development of specific skills" (p. 8) and "without these skills, we are ill-equipped to cultivate a just and democratic society" (p. 9).

Collective impact

As we move forward in the new academic year, consider dialogues on and about race, racism, and Whiteness essential to have in the classroom and the virtual "hallway." If we ensure that students are discussing and unpacking these concepts in multiple places and spaces across campus, we can provide a better opportunity for students to make connections across disciplines and work to understand race as a social construct. Doing so also ensures that we, as instructors, hold ourselves accountable to learn, grow, and understand more about race as it intersects with education and individual professional fields of study. Furthermore, if we all engage in this collective effort, it takes the pressure off of select BIPOC faculty members or a specific course within the curriculum to do all of the work.

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