

Thoughts on a Conversational Approach to Race Relations

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If there is widespread consensus about the essential components of an effective antiracism program, the fundamentals are more or less as follows. Step 1: Focus on white people. Step 2: Describe the myriad ways race privilege operates invisibly in their lives. Step 3: Encourage people of color to provide personal stories of racism to inspire compassion among the white people (contrition should be kept just under the surface). Step 4: Convince white people to educate themselves about other cultures on their own time. Step 5: Remind participants to treat everyone they meet equally (while being mindful of the many ways they might offend those who are different).

We recognize the value of this model and the sociohistorical context out of which it arose. In fact, we have employed each of its components in our own teaching endeavors. But after 15 years of working with Penn State students on the issues of race relations, we have observed a growing trend—most students already know the “right answers.” And because most have been receiving this variety of cultural reeducation for as long as they can remember (some say “since kindergarten”), they clearly know what they are supposed to think and even what role they are supposed to play in the antiracism scenario. But unfortunately, this well-preparedness often does not translate into bridging the vast cultural divide that they meet and perpetuate day to day.

Given the demographics of Pennsylvania, the majority of our students still live in a world predominantly segregated by race and most still have little practice building relationships across the color lines. (And this is especially true for those who are white.) As a result, they tend to speak

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about race issues with almost rehearsed lines, cautious to maintain their appointed roles with one another—which often means that white students say little or nothing at all, while students of color press their views according to the familiar agenda described above. Few are satisfied or expanded by this kind of encounter, but it is what they have learned is customary, and so it continues.

Interestingly, it appears that most white students we observe actually believe in equality, and they believe that they put these views into practice in their daily interactions. As a result, they often turn a polite but deaf ear to the data and the stories and the attempts to further convince them that they actually continue to perpetuate a system of bigotry and racism in their everyday lives. In fact, the vast majority earnestly believe they are “above that,” even though it appears as though they continue to act and even think in ways that oppose the very ideals of equality that they espouse.

And although most students of color interact more regularly and more easily with white people (in a formal way), they clearly suffer as well from too few opportunities to develop meaningful cross-cultural relationships that would allow them to explore and rework their potent stereotypes and deep misconceptions. So they struggle to simply listen to white students, convinced that none of them will share anything novel or nuanced, and to embrace the idea that there is more to learn about race relations than what they already know.

After observing and facilitating many hundreds of conversations on race relations with this well-mannered standoff between groups, we realized that the usual model of antiracism education was severely limiting the genuine possibility we have not only for opening minds, for developing critical thinking, and for cross-cultural relationship building, but also for understanding what is happening with race relations in this generation of young adults. So over time, we began to encourage more open conversations with students and, in doing so, we discovered the clear value in creating a forum for truly unscripted dialogue. As a result, we founded a campus-wide initiative called the Race Relations Project (RRP) in which we bring together over 3,500 students each semester from every discipline across the university to discuss race issues in small groups with their peers.

The RRP trains and employs undergraduate students to be facilitators for this kind of dialogue. Using a version of the Socratic Method, they guide small groups of 8–10 students into a conversation about their personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and roles in race relations. Throughout each 90-minute conversation, two co-facilitators maintain an informal, nonthreatening posture and work to affirm all perspectives,

while respectfully challenging the incongruent views that arise. Given the complexities of students' histories regarding race issues, the facilitators are trained to engage participants from widely varying backgrounds without a clear agenda, urging them with open-ended and searching questions to uncover and express their true thoughts about race relations.

The mission of the RRP is not to tell students how they should think (as in the standard model), but rather to invite them to share what they actually think *because we see that most individuals do not even know what they think until they engage in an act of articulation*. As students progressively examine their incomplete notions and unquestioned assumptions in an informal atmosphere, inner contradictions are revealed and can be reworked—person by person, culture by culture. To be most effective, the students simply have to be willing to engage and the facilitators have to be unbiased. Clearly those are elevated expectations, especially in the context of an issue as complicated and as volatile as race relations. But the work toward those ends is unmistakably worthwhile. Let us elaborate upon some of the cornerstones of our approach.

WE DO NOT SET AN AGENDA

Each conversation begins with the particular questions or concerns the students have regarding race—what they see, what they think, what they perceive is happening, what matters to them (or does not matter to them). We find that if we do not start with material that is “alive” to students, the conversation will fail before it gets a chance to begin. So the facilitators' main concern at the outset is to help “find” the conversation that is alive for each group. If the individuals do not bring up a topic of interest themselves, the facilitators will tentatively offer a general conversation prompt to the group. For example, they might ask about the participants' social lives—the kind of people they befriend or date, the kind of social events they attend, or the kind of organizations they join. This line of inquiry often naturally leads to the ways different groups are segregated on campus and then to everything else that holds the race-based system of relationships in place. Although the facilitators sometimes have to lead the group more than we would like (often to get through the cautionary code of silence from the white students), they do so carefully, always preferring to follow the passions of the group members and always ready to let the students take over the conversation as soon as “the spark” happens.

WE TAKE A NEUTRAL STANCE TOWARDS CONVERSATION TOPICS

Although we recognize that the subject of race relations is a complicated personal *and* political one, we work to not censor or encourage any particular viewpoint. In keeping with the Socratic Method, we believe all topics are worthy of exploration and are fair to question in a civil manner. And what we find is that the more a conversation can be a neutral forum for nondefensive exploration, the more opportunity there is to discover the subtleties and complexities of an issue, as well as to examine the personal incongruities that, to some degree, everyone naturally harbors on a subject. In the RRP, students have questioned everything from “Why *should* we treat people equally?” to “Why *shouldn't* white people feel pride about their heritage?” to “What’s wrong with people segregating themselves by race?” Interestingly, what we see is that the most unexpected, even taboo questions are the ones that promote the most genuine and the most fruitful dialogue because no one has already been told “the answers” (so the participants actually have to think for themselves). In addition, when participants recognize that the RRP facilitators are not covertly pushing a particular view, they are more likely to share what they really think and, ironically, to open up the possibility of seeing an issue differently than they ever have.

WE DO NOT TEACH OR CORRECT “MISINFORMATION”

The facilitators are trained to move a conversation, not to teach, so they are expected to *not* correct the group members’ views or their facts. They will ask other participants to comment on uncontested or possibly misinformed views that arise in the conversation, or even to remark that others who are not currently present in the group may have a different view than what has already been shared, but they lose their effectiveness as facilitators when they step even gingerly into the role of “expert.” In fact, when they accidentally do so, what we see is that participants almost always become defensive and rote in their responses. It is as if they are back in a classroom and they respond in kind—by actively or passively resisting the opportunity to offer their opinions and engage in self-directed critical thinking.

WE TREAT EVERYONE EQUALLY IN THE CIRCLE

Every person who enters the conversation has a unique history that can broaden the perceptions and prior understanding of other group

members. As such, the facilitators must take care to receive each person's contribution with equal weight and must regularly counter the tendency among students to subtly mock and deride those with few multicultural experiences, or to back away and not explore the claims of those who are considered "diverse." For example, at Penn State, rural white students are the most disempowered in the race dialogue. And because these students wrongly believe they have little to add to such a discussion, they can be easily silenced. One way the facilitators work against this particular dynamic (besides simply inviting more balanced participation from individual group members) might be to ask the participants to compare and contrast the lives of white rural students who have little multicultural experience with the lives of urban students of color who themselves often have a rather mono-cultural upbringing. This interesting juxtaposition often opens the conversation enough to keep all the students involved. And that balanced involvement is essential for a meaningful kind of engagement that transcends the conventional script.

WE FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES NOT POLITICAL ISSUES

Rather than asking students to engage in a battle of wits or a sober debate on an issue, the facilitators invite students to tell stories about their lives in relation to race. What we find is that these private tales (and the personal exchanges that follow) often lead the participants to uncover the varied and hidden ways their experiences and relationships are structured by "seeing color." By contrast, if the facilitators introduce academic terms like "white privilege" to the discussion, participants typically shift into the half-listening, "glazed over" disengagement that unfortunately occurs in many of their other educational endeavors. So, when a political topic like affirmative action is brought to the conversation by a participant, the facilitators refrain from a discussion of who is for and who is against it *per se*. Rather, they ask for the personal stories and experiences that can illuminate *how* individuals arrived at their views, as well as what is currently happening in their lives to keep those views in place. In this way, the participants gain access to the intricacies of thought and emotion that may underlie a disagreeable perspective so that they may begin to truly understand how those with "opposing" views logically arrived at their conclusions. And incidentally, when a group thoroughly explores such anecdotal details, they are paradoxically teasing out the issue's broader implications.

WE WORK WITH THE FEELINGS OF PEOPLE FROM ALL GROUPS

Whatever one's role in the race relations scenario, feelings naturally accompany that position—whether confusion, grief, guilt, indignation, relief, or simple annoyance. As such, in contrast to the conventional anti-racism model which tends to favor expressions of emotion primarily from participants of color (and to silence expressions that border on “offensive”), our experience tells us that it is critical that we accept and explore the thorny feelings of all participants. In fact, we see that these are often our most fertile moments in a conversational exchange. So when any student is engaged enough in a discussion to stumble upon emotions, our facilitators recognize that this person is communicating in a very direct (although maybe disordered) way. They also recognize that, by reacting, the student is offering to themselves and to the rest of the participants an opportunity to grasp an issue or incident with greater richness and depth because an emotion unveiled can often be worth hours of talk (e.g., “If you cry, I get a clearer sense of how much something hurts”). Consequently, the facilitators always work to investigate feelings that are expressed (or even suggested) in the conversation because facing the messiness of personal sentiments is the natural territory of a race dialogue—no matter who is doing the expressing.

WE ARE NOT SEARCHING FOR RACISTS

Seeking out “the racist” is an unacknowledged undercurrent in conventional antiracism programming and it is a prevailing assumption on the part of students who convene to discuss race. The idea has become a powerful force that inspires unspoken fear and anger in participants, and it has the effect of shifting the potential for a genuine conversation into the superficial realm. When this occurs, the result is that students from all groups can actually conclude the dialogue with their pet stereotypes intact because true sincerity tends to be rare in such an exchange. In fact, participants typically feel that they have little choice except to either attack or run (or become invisible). Clearly, this is not a sturdy foundation for constructive dialogue. What we see when we give students the chance to freely explore how their lives are positioned in relation to one another (without the need to identify who is racist) is that they often uncover for themselves their own limited views—as well as the essential decency of the others in the room. The rest is up to them.

The RRP is a dynamic work in progress that is highly regarded by Penn State students (<5% evaluate the conversation as “not worthwhile” in postprogram surveys). Although it is not *the solution* to our intractable race problem, it is a first step in discovering what can happen when we address what is behind the sociocultural roles, break from the worn anti-racism script, and reach for the core of each individual in order to disentangle fact from fiction. Because it is the rare participant who does not offer a part of themselves to a genuine conversation, and who does not uncover new ideas simply by being encouraged to articulate their old ones, students generally discover that race issues are as personal as they are political. This is a critical shift because it means that people have the authority to directly influence the nature of race relations “simply” by transforming themselves. That very idea keeps the staff of the RRP inspired to continue this often tumultuous and painstaking work. And although we can never predict the outcome of any single encounter, our challenge is to have the conversation anyway.