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Beginning Courageous Conversations about Race

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As Cornel West wrote in *Race Matters*: [1]

> Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust. In short, a candid examination of race matters takes us to the core of American democracy. And the degree to which race matters in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America.

A "candid examination" of race is not easy for educators. We discovered long ago from our work in K-12 districts and universities across the country that students are usually far better at engaging in interracial conversations about race than the educators leading them. More often than not, students from kindergarten through graduate school find exploring race edgy, provocative, and nourishing. Sometimes a conscious or precocious student does not wait for our permission to engage the taboo topic, and she will make a comment about race that launches an orderly classroom into conflict, controversy, or deafening silence.

This essay offers educators guidelines for more successful interracial dialogue about crucial issues with both students and colleagues. We call these guidelines the "Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation," which help create the conditions for safe exploration and profound learning for all. Courageous conversation is a strategy for breaking down racial tensions and raising racism as a topic of discussion that allows those who possess knowledge on particular topics to have the opportunity to share it, and those who do not have the knowledge to learn and grow from the experience.

Educators should keep in mind that interracial conversations about race are always a bit dangerous, as they unleash emotions that we have all learned

to bury. What is most courageous about interracial conversations about race is mustering the strength to facilitate them. Opening up these dialogues when it appears that certain things are much better left unsaid or unspoken is frightening. We want to acknowledge that fear and encourage educators to find the courage to risk moving beyond it. To get ready for courageous conversations about race with their students, educators might first learn to engage with their colleagues. After developing proficiency in applying the guidelines, they can assist students to examine racial issues in a variety of subjects. As educators gain familiarity with courageous conversations' ebbs and Row, they can steer their students toward safe harbors rather than allowing them to wander into frighteningly familiar stormy waters.

Educators can tackle topics that relate to their own personal experiences. High school teachers might discuss racial achievement gaps; teachers of younger students might explore students' tension-provoking uses of racial slurs on the playground. The discussion leader must have thought through these issues from multiple angles in order to steer the conversation in a positive direction. As Cornel West suggests, "How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues."[2] Educators experience extraordinary pressure, both implicit and explicit, not to talk about race.[3] To get started, educators must introduce a new set of agreements that defy and perhaps even contradict the tightly held cultural norms relating to race talk. They must stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak their truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure.

Stay Engaged

First and foremost, stay engaged. On day one and each time, until it becomes a part of the culture of dialogue, discussion leaders must explicitly invite participants into a dialogue about race. Giving peers permission to engage in dialogue about race and holding a lofty expectation that they will stay engaged in these conversations throughout the semester or year is the first of the four agreements for courageous conversation. While initially, some participants may be eager to enter into these conversations, our experience indicates that the more personal and thus risky these topics get, the more difficult it is for participants to stay committed and engaged.

Participants may notice patterns in the behavior and perspectives of white participants that differ from those of participants of color. Falling into silence is one example. Although silence does not always mean disengagement (see Schultz, Chapter 40), it is often predictable which participants will become silent, and when, and why. White participants often resort to silence in fear that their comments will be misconstrued as evidence of racist thinking, while participants of

color may feel it is unsafe or futile to give voice to their inner thoughts. The facilitator should draw attention to these patterns by acknowledging that a silence is occurring and inviting participants to reflect upon, write about, and share the thoughts and feelings giving rise to the silence. In these moments, participants may develop an awareness of patterns that can be harmful to the progress of the dialogue.

Expect to Experience Discomfort

Second, expect to experience discomfort. When most people experience personal or collective discomfort in conversations, they are prone to disengage. It is important to inform colleagues right away that a hallmark of examining race is feeling uncomfortable with what we discover about our own and others' perspectives. Those who engage in courageous conversations about race must admit that they may not know all they have claimed to know or honestly believed they knew. Since we are--individually and collectively--constantly being socialized into racialized points of view, it is likely that we will discover places of intense disagreement and experience new levels of cognitive dissonance as we unpack the perspectives we have absorbed. We must not retreat from the conversation when our opinions do not align with those of others or those we previously held. Through normalizing the presence of multiple perspectives, we can avoid a situation in which one dominant way of understanding race invalidates all other experiences and different points of view. We discover just how racialized our own identities and viewpoints have been. Participants should encourage one another to engage in self-examination of their racial identities and personal racial histories. We have found that full engagement and successful management of these intense emotions eventually give way to feelings of liberation.

Singleton's former professor at Stanford University once described this phenomenon: "like a flying trapeze artist, he must eventually let go of the rope he is holding onto in order to reach out and grab the next rope swinging before him. In a moment he is suspended between the two ropes, wondering if he will survive the transition or fall to the nets below." Each of us must let go of the racial understandings that we have been holding onto in order to move forward. One of the most common themes educators have defined as a part of the racist tapes that play constantly in their heads is the habit of focusing on factors external to the school, or solely blaming the students themselves when explaining low achievement, rather than examining instructional and school-wide practices as well. A courageous conversation requires that we grow accustomed to the discomfort of abandoning old habits.

Speak Your Truth

Third, speak your truth. A courageous conversation requires that participants be honest about their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Too often participants are afraid of offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant in conversations about race and fall silent, allowing their beliefs and opinions to be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Many beliefs concerning race are based on misconceptions. It is precisely through the sharing of honest and heartfelt sentiments--regardless of whether the participant believes them to be embraced by the discussion leader, their peers, or people of other races--that participants can begin to transform themselves. The discussion leader must help participants open up and share their perspectives regardless of how unusual or unpopular they fear those views might be.

At times, because of the pervasive silence that cloaks or smothers racial discourse in schools, participants do not actually know what they feel about racial issues. As people try to formulate opinions on the spot, they may rely on the problematic, unexamined perspectives of friends and family. They may sit quietly in agonizing uncertainty. It is crucial that we not mistake this silence for resistance to engage in the conversation, or quickly deem any perspective to be an indication of a participant's fixed racist ideology. In these situations, the discussion facilitator can engage more deeply with the participant using reflective questions:

- Can you tell me what you mean when you say
- Is it possible for you to say more about .....?
- Have the thoughts you shared been shaped by others, or is this your own personal perspective?
- Why do you think others might want to challenge your perspective?

Questions like these prompt reflection a~1d grant participants an opportunity to reconsider the opinions they expressed.

Expect and Accept a Lack of Closure

Fourth, expect and accept a lack of closure. As much as participants appreciate definitive answers, conversations about race usually provide no resolution. Just as teachers help their students to recognize that the classroom cannot provide closure for a topic that is not closed in the real world, participants should accept that their courageous conversations will be ongoing.

Conclusion

Discussion facilitators cannot leave the flow and direction of race conversations to chance. The Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation-stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure-provide a roadmap for negotiating interracial conflict.

Racial topics in the United States tend to be "hot button" issues that cause people of color to become vocally angry and white people to become silent, defiant, or disconnected. Although the vast majority of Americans accept this interracial disengagement, we must engage one another in courageous conversations about the racial issues we face. Using these strategies to facilitate a deeper dialogue about race over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed lively, gut-wrenchingly positive conversations with educators, as well as with students from kindergarten through graduate school. Everyone of these transforming interactions has enhanced our confidence in our peers' and students' ability to create a more compassionate and socially just world.

RESOURCES

Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton. *2006. Courageous Conversations about Race:* A *Field* Gu*ide for Achieving Equity in Schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Beverly Daniel Tatum. 1997. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race.* New York: Basic Books.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 **Principle:** Why might educators find talking about race particularly difficult?

2 **Strategy:** If you have had-or tried to have-conversations about race with your colleagues, or with your students, what happened? If you have not, describe a time you wish you had, and what stopped you from initiating or participating fully in the conversation.

3 **Try tomorrow:** If you were to start a conversation about some race issue with your colleagues, what issue would you like it to be?

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