

Begin Within

Issue 52, Spring 2016

January 10, 2016

Illustration by Kyle Stecker

Educators play a crucial role in helping students navigate current events and talk openly about the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of social inequality and discrimination. Learning how to communicate about topics like police violence, economic inequality, mass incarceration and white privilege requires practice, and facilitating these conversations demands skill—regardless of who we are, our intentions or how long we’ve been teaching.

Use these strategies to build confidence and prepare yourself to normalize conversations about race and racism. You can also use them to prepare yourself to discuss other types of discrimination, such as gender bias, ableism, and religious or anti-LGBT persecution.

Assess Your Comfort Level

Many educators avoid talking about race and racism. It can be uncomfortable, controversial and may call for skills few of us possess. Often, this avoidance comes down to fears of misspeaking, sounding racist or militant, exacerbating differences or hurting feelings.

Part of getting students ready to talk about race and racism is to first deal with our own feelings and experiences. Before starting a classroom discussion, do a simple self-assessment.

Consider the following statements and select the one that best describes how you feel.

- I would rather not talk about race/racism.
- I am very uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
- I am usually uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
- I am sometimes uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
- I am usually comfortable talking about race/racism.
- I am very comfortable talking about race/racism.

Then use a sentence-stem activity to self-reflect.

- The hard part of talking about race/racism is ...
- The beneficial part of talking about race/racism is ...
- My own experiences of race taught me ...
- My students’ experiences of race are different from mine because ...

After reflecting on your own comfort level and experience, think about ways to grow confident.

- Do you worry about your ability to answer students’ questions about race and racism? If so, commit to

- accepting that you don't have all the answers, and embrace the opportunity to learn with your students.
- Do you feel ill-prepared to talk about race and racism? If so, commit to learning more about the issues by studying history, following current events and brushing up on anti-racism work.
 - Do you reroute classroom discussions when you sense resistance or anger in the room? If so, commit to riding out the discussion next time.
 - Do you feel isolated in your experience of race and racism? If so, commit to identifying a colleague with whom you can co-teach, plan or debrief.

Find Comfort in Discomfort

Teaching about structural inequality such as racism requires courage and confidence—from you and from your students. It's normal to feel discomfort or anger as you reflect on your own experiences with racial inequality. But the more you engage in and moderate difficult conversations, the more confident you'll become. The conversations may not necessarily get easier, but your ability to press toward more meaningful dialogue will expand. Stay engaged; the journey is worth the effort.

Being uncomfortable should not mean being unsafe. With your students, establish classroom norms that include a list of specific words and phrases that students commit to not using. The list might include calling people's opinions "stupid" or "lame," using the n-word or the r-word, or saying, "That's so gay!"

Students can create and sign a contract of norms and behaviors that define the classroom community as a socially and emotionally safe place. The contract might include such statements as "Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment" or "Put-downs of any kind are never OK" or "Speak directly to each other, not the teacher." If students want to tell stories about their own racial identities and experiences, consider establishing a structure that allows each person to share uninterrupted, without response from other students. (See our resource on Serial Testimony for more information: [tolerance.org/meaningful-discussions](https://www.tolerance.org/meaningful-discussions).) Established norms or a contract can help students support a healthy classroom environment and reduce the likelihood that you will have to intervene.

Be Vulnerable

Avoiding conversations about race and racism can arise from our own fears of being perceived as clueless, racist or militant. As you prepare to engage students in the conversation, consider this question: What will this discussion potentially expose about me?

Use the graphic organizer *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment* to list three vulnerabilities that you worry could limit your effectiveness. Next, identify three strengths that you believe will help you lead open and honest dialogues. Finally, list specific needs that, if met, would improve your ability to guide difficult conversations.

Address Strong Emotions

Students' reactions to talking about race and racism will vary. They may react passively, show sorrow, express anger or respond unpredictably. Some students may become visibly upset; others may push back against discussing these topics in class. Many of these reactions stem from feelings such as pain, anger, confusion, guilt, shame and the urge to blame others.

Seeing members of the class respond emotionally may elicit reactions from you or other students. Guilt and shame can lead to crying that may immobilize conversation. Anger might lead to interruptions, loud talking, sarcasm or explicit confrontations—all of which can impede important dialogue. Your role is to remain calm and assess the situation. If the tension in the room appears to be prompting dialogue and learning, continue to monitor, but let the conversation play out. If the tension boils over in confrontation that jeopardizes student safety (emotional or otherwise), take steps to diffuse the situation.

As you prepare to engage students in the conversation, consider this question: What will this discussion potentially expose about me?

Refer back to *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment*. How can the strengths you listed calm students and diffuse tension, yet avoid shutting down the conversation? Spend some time thinking ahead about how you will react to strong emotions.

Use the strategies in *Responding to Strong Emotions* to develop a plan. You know your students; consider the emotional responses likely to emerge. Add others you think might emerge, and list potential response strategies.

Planning ahead and establishing a safe space within your classroom should diminish students' discomfort. It's important to note, however, that for some students—particularly members of marginalized, nondominant or targeted identity groups—you may not be able to provide complete safety. It's also true that overemphasizing identity safety runs the risk of minimizing the diverse realities of our students' lived experiences both in and outside school. In addition to providing safety for your students, build their resilience and strength so they will be more willing to take the risks involved with feeling uncomfortable.

Take Care of Yourself

Facilitating difficult conversations can be emotionally draining or even painful. Make time to recharge in positive ways. Find colleagues or friends who can listen while you debrief conversations about race and racism. Take advantage of professional learning communities where you can discuss the dynamics in your classroom. Keep a professional journal and use writing to process and reflect.