

PREPARATION FOR DIVERSITY SESSIONS

Teaching This Topic: (Excerpted from *Teaching Your College Experience, A Guide for Instructors*, Edited by John N. Gardner and A. Jerome Jewler, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996, pages G-102 to G-103.)

Diversity

A good way to prepare for teaching this section is to remind yourself of the inherent limitations in dealing with issues of diversity and intolerance in one or two class sessions. There simply isn't enough time to deal with these topics in depth or to expect that your students will let go of all the blatant and/or subtle racist messages they have encountered previously. If you view the section as an introduction to a process, you may be less frustrated in your attempts to open students' eyes.

Preaching to the students won't help them become more reflective. An underlying assumption of the chapter is that if students can become more aware of what they think, they will be better able to change or expand their views when given new information that challenges their thinking. This requires that students be good listeners and good discussion participants.

As the instructor, be aware of your experiences with people from different racial and cultural backgrounds and recognize your own potentially unresolved biases. Being aware of your own "soft spots" will help prevent you from unknowingly bringing them into the class. You should also be aware of your level of comfort talking about race. Most European Americans have been taught that talking about race is unacceptable, and so they feel awkward discussing ethnic differences...Remind yourself and your students that no one is perfect and that our goals are to broaden our understanding and accept some responsibility for making things better.

Establishing Ground Rules for Discussion: Students won't find this topic boring! While you do want students to feel comfortable talking about their experiences and expressing their feelings, you don't want to find yourself in the middle of World War III. One way to make class discussions productive is to agree on a set of rules. You may have already done this at the start of the term. If you have, now is a good time to go back and review them; if you haven't, now is the time to establish some rules for discussions.

You can ask students to generate a list of rules that will allow them to feel safe, if not 100 percent comfortable. The following guidelines have worked well.

1. Only one person talks at a time.
2. Students make statements using "I" rather than "they" or "most people." No one is an expert speaking for all members of his or her race, religion, or gender.

3. Students refrain from making “character assassination-type” statements.
4. Class discussions are considered confidential.
5. Students are respectful of one another.
6. Students try not to be defensive.
7. Students agree to disagree respectfully.

As the discussion facilitator, your job is to make sure the guidelines are being followed. You may sometimes rephrase what a student has said, trying to be as neutral as possible. If some students haven’t contributed to a discussion, you may “invite” them to respond. This works well with students who just need to be given a little space to answer. Not saying something is also okay. Remember that one of the chapter goals is for students to realize how two people may perceive and interpret the same event quite differently. When this happens in class, all you need to do is point it out.

Dealing with Generalizations: Some students become concerned with the generalizations that are made or have been written about different groups (for example, European-Americans are competitive, Latinos are very family oriented). Students belonging to the different groups know that there is a wide range of differences among people who are part of the same group. The issue is how to acknowledge the unique individuality of each person as well as recognize the possible commonalities within members of a group. The best way to deal with this concern is to bring it up as an initial topic for discussion and let students know that while we do make general statements about a particular group, it is essential to remember that there is much variation within a group. There are even some members of the group who would say they don’t fit at all. Tell students that from time to time the class will need to remind itself not to over generalize about a particular group.

Some Helpful Terms: (Excerpted from Video Vignettes Leader’s Manual, Edited by Caren Keller Niss, The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1990, pages 7-9.)

It is important that certain concepts be clearly defined. You can provide definitions or create activities to establish definitions. In either case the participants of your sessions must operate within commonly accepted parameters. The major concepts that must be understood include:

Prejudice

A set of rigid and unfavorable attitudes toward a particular group or groups that are formed in disregard of facts. An unsupported judgment usually accompanied by disapproval.

Stereotyping

A stereotype is a preconceived or oversimplified generalization involving negative beliefs about a particular group. Negative stereotypes are frequently at the base of prejudice. The

danger of stereotyping is that it no longer considers people as individuals, but rather categorizes them as members of a group who all think and behave in the same way. We may pick up these stereotypes from what we hear other people say, what we read, and what people around us believe.

Discrimination

Discrimination is differential treatment based on unfair categorization. It is the denial of justice prompted by prejudice. When we act on our prejudices we engage in discrimination. Discrimination often involves keeping people out of activities or places because of the group to which they belong.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating refers to the deliberate policy of blaming an individual or group when the fault actually lies elsewhere. It means blaming another group or individual for things they did not really do. Those that we scapegoat become the objects of our aggression in word and deed. Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts lead to scapegoating. Members of the disliked groups are denied employment, housing, political rights or social privileges. Scapegoating can lead to verbal and physical violence, including death.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is prejudice or discrimination against Jews, based on negative perceptions of their religious beliefs and/or on negative group stereotypes. Anti-Semitism can also be a form of racism, as when Nazis and others consider Jews an inferior “race.”

Racism

Racism couples the false assumption that race determines psychological and cultural traits with the belief that one race is superior to another. Based on their belief in the inferiority of certain groups, racists justify discriminating against, segregating, and/or scapegoating these groups. Racists, in the name of protecting their race from contamination, justify the domination and sometimes even the destruction of those races they consider inferior.

Common Problems in Leading Group Discussion (Excerpted from Video Vignettes Leader’s Manual, Edited by Caren Keller Niss, The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1990, pages 12-16.)

The following are suggestions to help ensure successful and productive discussions. Included are some of the “what if’s” that you might encounter as an educator. Remember, you are not expected to have all the answers. You don’t have to be a “prejudice expert.” The combined wisdom of the whole group can be greater than the wisdom of one person.

What if . . .

A.... one person wants to do all the talking?

*Establish goals at the beginning of the session. State that one of the goals is providing an opportunity for everyone to share.

* Humor helps.

*You may have to interrupt. You can say, “Thank you, I am going to stop here so

we have time for other responses.”

B.... people aren't participating?

*Use methods that make sharing easier.

Use 3 X 5 note cards: There are a number of advantages to having participants respond to a question in writing first: (1) the cards serve as a “crib sheet” and allay the what-will-I say anxieties; (2) you as the educator can collect the cards and read the responses anonymously.

Share in pairs: Ask the participants to find a partner he or she may not know very well and respond to questions in pairs. It is much easier to say something to one person than it is to a large group, and it warms participants up for large group sharing.

Share in groups: You can create small groups to discuss questions and/or issues. Small groups can be less intimidating and give participants the opportunity to interact more closely with one another.

Model responses: Sometimes it helps people to share if they hear an example from you. Your sharing also makes you a part of the learning process.

Wait: Give people time to think. If you interrupt a period of silence you may convey nervousness that might be contagious. Remember: There are no quick answers to most of the questions asked.

Ask for clarification: Encourage people to talk by asking for more information.

Create a “safe” environment: Participants may not want to share if they feel their ideas or opinions will be attacked. Be respectful of everyone and establish the ground rule that only one person talks at a time.

C.... only one point of view is brought out?

*You may ask, “Who agrees with that statement?” Then ask others what they think.

*You can provide other information by saying, “Let me play devil’s advocate, what would you think if. . . ?”

What do you do when. . .

A....misinformation is presented?

*You may ask, “Does anyone think differently?” or “Does everyone agree with that statement?” If no one from the group contributes another opinion it is up to you to present other views. Don’t let misinformation stand; it implies you agree with it. If you don’t know the facts, say so, and try to find out the correct information.

B.... conflict occurs?

* Expect it, be prepared, some of these issues bring up gut responses.

* Recognize the possibility that you may be hesitant about confronting some bigoted remarks.

* It is the educator’s job to “manage the traffic.” Sometimes “freezing” the moment, literally stopping all conversation, helps people to step back and look at what’s happening. This method can have the effect of removing the onus from two people engaged in a conflict, and offers an opportunity for the whole group to

problem solve the situation. You can say, “Freeze! What’s happening here? What triggered this? What different opinions are being debated?”

* Sometimes a conflict between two people has to be mediated privately.

Whatever the outcome, it is important for the participants who witnessed the conflict to hear about the resolution, keeping in mind, however, that some things may have been shared in confidence.

*Remind the group to stay focused on the subject at hand. Don’t hesitate to say, “That’s interesting, however, the question was . . .,” or “That’s another important point, but let me remind you of what we were originally discussing.”

*An open conflict provides a perfect opportunity to talk about “baggage” that we all bring to situations. It is our job to lighten the load that comes from carrying around prejudiced thinking.

C.... the group doesn’t seem to understand a response?

*It helps to summarize or restate comments. Try to listen carefully. How well you facilitate will depend to some extent on how well you can hear (translate) what is being said and also what is not being said.

*Writing participants’ responses on a flip chart helps make the information public. It enhances learning by adding visual information to the auditory learning experience. Make sure you write everyone’s responses; if you write selectively, people whose comments were not included might feel that their contributions are not valuable, or that they were intentionally left out.

* If you are unable to restate a complicated response, you can ask, “Did everyone understand that?” If other people express confusion, you can ask the person who made the comment to restate. If that person gets stuck, ask if someone else in the group would like to attempt to restate the idea.

* Listening carefully is a key to successful facilitating.

D.... discussion stops suddenly, or never takes off?

*Acknowledge that it is occurring. You can ask “What’s happening here?” Sometimes a local issue that you may/may not be aware of is so pressing and immediate it prevents participants from being able to focus clearly on other topics.

* Sometimes having multiple populations in a workshop can be intimidating. For example, the presence of an administrator may make employees, teachers or students feel they cannot be candid in front of “the boss.” If this occurs, continue to keep conversation on target and encourage multiple perspectives from various levels of your group.

* Note: It is often very valuable to conduct workshops in pairs (if staffing resources permit). People of different race, religion, ethnicity, etc., may respond differently to situations presented. A second person may see additional opportunities to explore and discuss.

E.... it’s time to move on to another topic and people seem engaged in a lively discussion?

*Try to be flexible about time. If something good is happening assess the value of leaving that discussion or activity in favor of completing your established agenda.

*Give a two-minute warning or “just two more comments” in preparation for wrapping up the discussion.

*Acknowledge at the beginning of the session that time will be a factor, and that some people might feel uncomfortable about leaving unfinished business. Then you can use this as a point of reference for closing a discussion. (You can say, “Remember when I said it might be hard to stop a discussion, this is what I meant; however in order to...”)

* Summarize the content of discussions or ask a participant to do so for the purpose of making logical transitions between the various segments of the workshop.

*Acknowledge the difficulty of leaving a good discussion and use it as a reason for additional sessions. These are ongoing issues and learning is a life-long agenda.