

## **Tools for Creating an Identity Safe and Brave Learning Community**

Adapted from *Facilitating Conversations about Race in the Classroom*

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Our approach to community building combines social emotional learning methods with what we know from the research about the power of identity formation in learning. We use empathy-based methods to engage students in dynamic conversations about their racial identities and experiences. These conversations provide motivation to both learn and act.

Dena Simmons (2019; 2021) advocates for social emotional learning to be taught in the context of social justice. While many educators feel unprepared to address topics like “racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of injustice that many students, particularly our most marginalized, experience daily,” Simmons calls for courageous educators to embrace “Fearless SEL” and offer students opportunities to reflect on the impact of their identities. She believes Social Emotional Learning removed from the larger sociopolitical context of inequity threatens to become ‘white supremacy with a hug.’”

Transformational Inquiry is the process we use to guide identity exploration and facilitated conversations is a part of that process. This method scaffolds the exploration process through four domains of learning: personal, social, cognitive, and action. The goal of Transformational Inquiry is not to shape an individual’s identity, but rather to facilitate a process that strengthens and broadens it. Helping students build strong identities helps them learn.

Conversational learning happens in the personal and social domains. These kinds of conversations inspire higher order thinking and motivate learning in the cognitive domain. Taking action completes the learning cycle, integrating the four domains of learning in the service of individual and social transformation.

### **Building Relationships: Listen to Them and Teach Them to Listen to Each Other**

Teachers are typically self-aware, socially attuned, and caring. They cultivate empathy and have a keen ear for listening. They honor students’ thoughts and feelings, offer supportive feedback, and ask good questions. They read the room constantly to gauge interest and enthusiasm. They notice body language, facial expressions, or a shift in the quality of a student’s response in class. They are genuinely curious about their students

and want to learn about them. Students want to learn when they know their teacher cares.

We know that social emotional competencies support academic performance, and an inclusive classroom climate supports both. Teachers can take learning to the next level by explicitly teaching the communication skills they practice with students every day. By teaching listening and speaking skills (and providing opportunities for students to practice), they help students make authentic connections with each other. These supportive connections foster environments in which a rich exchange of ideas can take place. In these exchanges, the power of a diverse learning community comes to life.

How can we make it safe for students to share themselves authentically in our classrooms? It helps to engage them in a norm-setting process. Ask them to generate guidelines for listening and sharing. Respectful communication skills are the building blocks of supportive relationships, and supportive relationships are the building blocks of equity and inclusion. We begin by emphasizing the importance of effective communication skills. We teach them the difference between dialogue and debate, how to listen with compassion; how to respond with supportive feedback; and how to allow themselves to be vulnerable so they can build trust in their relationships. These fundamental skills may not relate directly to racial identity, but they are key ingredients to making conversations about race effective and productive.

Research shows that at least a third of bullying is bias-related (Richardson, 2012). Students are frequently targeted because of their race, gender, religion, perceived sexual orientation, or physical or mental disability. Bullying is associated with high-risk behaviors, poor grades, and emotional distress, and when a core component of identity is targeted, the effects are even worse. Social jockeying is driven by social insecurity, and unfortunately, these social dynamics are embedded in many school cultures.

What students need is a strong personal identity grounded in integrity. When the environment is safe for self-expression, students have more attention to focus on learning. Positive academic outcomes, especially among students of color, have been related to positive racial experiences in school (Evans et al, 2010; Howard, 2019; Leah et al, 2019). Experiences that validate a student's sense of identity emerge from carefully designed interactions between students. And teachers can facilitate these interactions.

### **Bring Their Lives into the Classroom**

Engaging students' real-life experiences in conversations about race makes systemic racism visible. Students can share experiences in which they have been the target of racism, witnessed it, or been afraid to stand up to it. They can share aspects of their racial identity they honor and value, like their natural hair. They can discuss how these different experiences impacted them and how they reacted when validated or invalidated. They can develop scenarios to express how they wish they had been seen and felt.

The fundamental human response to hearing a story is empathy. When students share their stories, they relate to each other and respond with compassion and respect. These conversations give them tools to identify mistreatment, find support, and learn strategies to counteract the impact of racism. Story telling cultivates empathy, fosters perspective-taking, and builds the foundation for critical thinking. When students share their stories and experience empathy in response, their “speech acts” are empowering.

### **Make Their Identities Visible**

When we recognize the connection between the design of an inclusive culture and learning, we can use our classroom walls to reflect the identities of our students and use them as “museums” to engage them in important conversations about learning. Spence, a white science teacher in an urban middle school, was concerned about the STEM achievement gap he saw playing out in his classroom. Low performing students of color told him science was boring and checked out during his lessons. When he looked around his classroom, he saw only posters of famous white men. “Most people think of science as the domain of white men, but I knew students needed to ‘see themselves’ in the curriculum. And it wasn’t hard to find ways to represent more diversity because all kinds of people do science.”

Spence hung posters of scientists of color and women scientists on the walls. He updated his class library and challenged students to research scientists of color and women. He used his classroom walls to launch inquiries into the role of race and gender in science learning, to explore the implications of identity in the achievement gap, and to question implicit and internalized bias in the way science is performed. Students created avatars of themselves to display on an “inclusion wall,” so they were surrounded by images that “looked like them” and reflected their personal and social identities as they related to “doing” science. Spence’s strategies for inclusion transformed his relationships with his students. His students began to see him as a trusted advocate and sought him out at lunch and after school for those important conversations that take place outside of class.

Spence knows his students are engaged in a dynamic process of identity formation, constructing their identities in a reflexive relationship with him and with their environment. The images they see mirrored back to them influence who they may become. They need to see images that support their finest human aspirations in their classrooms, in the curriculum, and in their relationships with teachers and peers. We can use the walls of our classrooms to affirm our students’ intelligence and help them counteract stereotype threat. By creating an atmosphere of belonging, we can help them see themselves as valued participants in knowledge building. While students of color must learn to combat stereotype threat, all students need to learn to deconstruct stereotypes and critique what they see in the world around them. Respectful discussions about categories of identity can improve classroom climates and school cultures. The walls of our classroom can demarcate inclusive spaces.

### **Ask! What Do You Need to Feel Safe?**

We've talked to thousands of people about race. With every group we work with, we start by creating an identity-safe (and brave) learning community. We invite students to imagine what it would be like to feel free to say what they honestly think and feel without fear of judgment. We ask, "What do you need from the people in this room to feel safe to share your deeper thoughts, feelings, and experiences about race?" We give them time to think, sometimes allowing for long pauses.

Every group we've ever worked with – from fifth graders to eighth graders to high school seniors to educators to business executives - give similar answers to this question. The list they generate includes acceptance, respect, honesty, courage, confidentiality, and trust. These qualities of the heart are what every human being needs to engage in authentic, meaningful, and productive conversations about race. We ask people if they can commit to upholding these qualities for each other in our conversations. Everyone always agrees. These values foster a community where empathy is more powerful than rules, and commitment to discovering truth is greater than compliance to silence.

We recommend creating a written document that outlines the guidelines of safe and brave conversations. There are multiple sources for such guidelines, and students can collaborate to develop a shared document that everyone agrees on. This helps them take ownership of their learning community. The more they participate in generating the guidelines, the more they are committed to following them.

### **Dialogue or Debate?**

We learn to debate in school, but we rarely learn how to dialogue. The communication skills necessary for equitable conversations include recognizing the difference between dialogue and debate and having the awareness to know and use the corresponding approach to achieve our intended goals. The chart below compares dialogue and debate. Where do you most often find yourself when talking about race and racism?

Dialogue	Debate
Causes introspection on one's own position.	Causes critique of the other position.
Opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.	Defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.	Creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.

One submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.	One submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Is collaborative. Two or more sides work together to arrive at a common understanding.	Is oppositional. Two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
Finding common ground is the goal.	Winning is the goal.
One listens to the other sides(s) in order to understand, to find meaning, and find agreement.	One listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
Enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Affirms a participant's own point of view.
Reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.	Defends assumptions as truth.
Calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Calls for investing whole-heartedly in one's beliefs.
Searches for basic agreements.	Searches for glaring differences.
Searches for strengths in the other position.	Searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other's position.
Involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.	Involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationships and often belittles or deprecates the other person.
Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.	Assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
Remains open-ended.	Implies a conclusion.

\*Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).

## Teach and Model Compassionate Listening

Facilitating conversations about race requires that you teach and model compassionate listening, explicitly outlining what listening entails: how to demonstrate respect by giving 100% of your attention; and avoiding side conversations, "exchanging looks," or laughing. We teach students to pay attention to body language; to honor silences, to ask authentic questions guided by genuine concern and curiosity. We encourage them to take healthy risks: to "lean into the discomfort;" share their truths; and let themselves be known by others.

We introduce the *7 Principles of Compassionate Listening* at the outset of our sessions to reinforce listening skills. These seven principles help establish identity-safe and identity-brave spaces where students can dare to be vulnerable and share their authentic stories with each other.

- *Be fully present.* When someone is speaking, give them your undivided attention. Be present and free of distractions of any kind. Listen silently. Your attention creates safety and focus for the entire group.
- *Listening is enough.* There is no need to fix anyone or give advice. Our job is to just listen. If our minds are busy coming up with solutions, we can't truly listen with full presence. If we listen, the person sharing has the opportunity to reflect and process their thoughts and feelings, and by doing so, can generate their own solutions. Our job, as Thich Nhat Hahn says, is to allow others "to empty their hearts."
- *Respond with acceptance.* Genuine interest and heartfelt concern make sharing one's self safe. People can be vulnerable when they sense that what they say will be received without judgment. When we ask people what they need to feel safe, the first thing we usually hear is that they need to know they won't be judged. It isn't necessary for us to agree with everything we hear. It is only necessary to suspend judgment and be present.
- *Ask authentic questions.* These conversations are guided by a genuine concern to learn about the other person's life. Ask open-ended questions. What was that like for you? How did that feel? Can you tell me more about that? If you aren't sure that you understand what the person is trying to convey, ask for clarification. What did you mean by that? Let me make sure I heard that right. Is this what you were saying?
- *Recognize that conflict is a part of learning.* Honest expression involves risk. We may not always understand each other initially, but if we are willing to stay connected and stick with the process, we will get there. When conflict is resolved, relationships grow stronger.

- *Be gentle with yourself and others.* We invite you to pay attention to your own feelings, to accept whatever you may be feeling without self-judgment. Recognize that inner conflict is a natural part of learning, so if you hear something you don't like, just sit with it. Allow yourself to be uncomfortable. Give yourself time to work through. No one is personally to blame for the situation we find ourselves in about race. We have all been conditioned by systemic racism. Allow yourself time to process any thoughts and feelings that may arise. There will be mistakes, so allow for them. Learn from them and let them go. Be forgiving. We're all learning together.
- *Treat the candidness of others as a gift.* Students feel tremendously honored by the trust others place in them. They are capable of keeping what they hear confidential. Teach them to respond with supportive and respectful comments: "I appreciate that you shared that" or "I feel as if I understand you better now," or "I respect you for the way you handled that."

### **Teach and Model Trust and Vulnerability**

We use these guidelines to help educators and students learn how to lean into these conversations with trust and vulnerability.

- *Speak your truth.* Be honest and open. When you reveal your story, you are giving others the gift of knowing you. Speak from the "I" perspective. Talk about yourself, and share your own feelings and experiences, and not those of others. Telling stories and relating your experiences is usually more effective than talking about abstract generalities. Stick with your feelings and avoid sharing your opinions, beliefs or philosophies. When you tell your story, you may be surprised at how many people feel the same way you do. Even if they don't, they may respect you for sharing your authentic perspective.
- *Lean into the discomfort.* We introduce a learning model with three psychological zones: the comfort zone, the learning zone, and the panic zone. If students stay in their comfort zones, they don't take risks, and they won't learn nearly as much. We encourage them to "lean in the discomfort" these conversations can bring up and "find their learning edge." Staying in the learning zone optimizes their potential for learning. At the same time, students need to know how to self-regulate their emotions. They need to find the boundary between leaning into the discomfort and being vulnerable and oversharing that can leave them feeling too exposed. We advise them not to go "over the edge." We coach them on how to stay out of the panic zone, where anxiety and fear interfere with learning. We remind them that they are never required to share their experiences. They get to set their own boundaries. They decide what they want to disclose.
- *Cognitive dissonance* refers to the feeling of confusion that occurs when you encounter information that conflicts with previous beliefs or "what you thought you knew." In conversations about race, cognitive dissonance is to be expected

(and welcomed). It helps to prepare students to expect cognitive dissonance to occur so they can manage it when it arises. More than one student has said, "Wait! I think I'm experiencing cognitive dissonance!"

- *Dare to be vulnerable.* Sharing one's deeper truth can feel risky. We encourage students to share themselves with each other so they can be truly known. Vulnerability and trust are intimately related. Young people want nothing more than to be heard and understood. A few brave students will lead the way, and others will follow. Almost all students find the greater intimacy that results tremendously rewarding.
- *Manage conflict.* In an identity-safe and identity-brave environment, conflict rarely arises if students are schooled in communication skills that prepare them for sensitive terrain. But occasionally, conflict does arise, and when it does, it's crucial to redirect students to their feelings. Conflict most often arises because the conversation has become a debate rather than a dialogue, and debate is often a defense against uncomfortable feelings. When people debate emotional topics, they risk becoming more entrenched in polarized positions.
- *Expect non-closure.* Issues of race and racism have a long and persistent history, and they will not be resolved in a single session. That doesn't absolve us from the responsibility of trying to solve them, but it would be naïve to think it will happen overnight. Racial equity requires a long-term commitment, and processing feelings associated with race takes time. It's important for students to understand that they are engaged in a process of discovery that they must go through if they are to arrive at thoughtful action. These are urgent problems, to be sure, but action bias is a symptom of privilege. Sometimes white people want to rush to fix racism. Our students need to understand that before they can solve these problems, they need to go through a process of deep learning in order to understand them. Encourage them to stay engaged, continue to question, continue to listen to the voices of people most impacted by racism, and remain open to possible solutions.
- *Pay attention to patterns of participation.* In equitable conversations, this is a key facilitation skill. In typical classroom discourse, white males speak more than any other demographic (Pitt & Packard, 2012; Howard et al, 2006; Lee & McCabe, 2020). Equitable conversations shift that dynamic by giving more airtime to voices from demographic groups that typically speak less. In conversations about race, students of color are our experts because they live the experience. These are the voices that need to be heard. Invite them into the conversation, make sure everyone is listening, and ensure that their experiences are affirmed and validated.
- Of course, you also need to manage the students who tend to dominate the discourse. We advise students to listen ten times more than they speak. This guideline at least makes them cognizant of discourse power-sharing, and they



will begin to regulate themselves (with a little help from their friends). There will also be the more introverted students who hesitate to participate verbally. You can invite these students into the discussion or you can ask them to respond in writing. In conversations about race, it's important to keep your finger on the pulse of what students are feeling and how they're processing the material.

- *Go to the source.* If a student has an unresolved issue after a class session, we encourage them to go to the person who is the source of their conflict to talk about it if they feel safe in doing so. If they can talk it out with each other, conflict can be resolved quickly. If they aren't ready or able to do that, we ask them to come to us. They may need support in negotiating sensitive issues that may arise. Sometimes conversations about race can be facilitated in small groups of students during lunch or breaks.

### **Generative Listening**

There are three characteristics of wise teachers. 1) They see where a student is; 2) they see where a student is capable of going; and 3) they have the patience to allow the student to move from where they are to where they are going in their own way and in their own time. Generative listening involves listening to a student with full awareness of where they are, but with full knowledge of the potential they hold. It means listening while seeing their emerging self with the goal of helping them connect with their highest possibilities. It's having the patience to allow them the agency over their own growth and learning and giving them the grace to learn at their own pace and in their own time.

In conversations about race, this means seeing students as smart and as capable of moving through their own learning process to develop racial identities solidly grounded in integrity. We see the potential for them to have a strong sense of self, a strong sense of others, and a strong learning identity. We see a vision of them they may not yet see for themselves, and we hold the vision for them until they can hold it for themselves. We allow them to see themselves through our eyes. We recognize that, as Ghoddy Muhammad says, "Our youths are genius. They are not all those things that systemic oppression has created" (Ferralazzo, 2020). We see them as geniuses, and we teach them to see each other that way.

### **Conclusion**

Identity and learning are intricately related. Fortunately, educators hold enormous power to mirror students' strengths and foster their achievements. These fundamental guidelines of communication not only lay the foundation for conversations about race, but they are transferable to any domain of life and learning because authentic communication skills facilitate positive and supportive relationships, and supportive relationships are the foundation for learning gains in any area.

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