

Tough Conversations: A Primer for Discussing Race and Racism in the Classroom

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Classroom conversations about race and racism can be difficult. Often teachers and students—sometimes apologetically, sometimes angrily, but mostly unselfconsciously—avoid the topics altogether. When they do take place, conversations frequently remain superficial or simplistic. Yet if we hope to address the problems that arise as a result of what playwright Anna Deavere Smith (1993) calls ‘our struggle to be together in our differences,’ we need to be able to talk meaningfully about race and racism.”

— Adapted from *Talking Race in the Classroom* by Jane Bolgatz (2005)

Wait: The Public Forum topic for September/October is WHAT?

The Public Forum topic for the National Speech & Debate Association is, “**Resolved: The United States Federal Government ought to**

pay reparations to African Americans.”

This topic will require thousands of high school students to think about a topic they perhaps have given only fleeting consideration in the past. Most assuredly, most previously have not had the need to research the topic and all of its moving parts. Debating issues specific to African Americans, in addition to concepts of race, racism, white privilege, white supremacy, prejudice, and institutional racism, is very difficult for many. We posit that if coaches and students prepare themselves for these difficult conversations, this topic will result not only in a group of students, coaches, and judges who will be more “racially literate”; it will also provide a framework for discussions to occur at a level far beyond what we have seen in many classrooms and debate rounds thus far.

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We suggest that unless significant effort is made discussing *how* to have these conversations, we risk exchanges and levels of analysis that are watered down and polite to the point of not getting to the core of the issue(s) at hand. A fear of providing a “safe space” for our students is often confused with providing a “comfortable space.” A student’s physical safety is of unquestionable importance. However, conversations should not be avoided because individuals in the space are *uncomfortable* with the topic. Understanding community norms, as outlined below, can help us strategize how to have tough, yet fruitful, conversations on the topic. As Bolgatz (2005) indicates, according to teacher Mary Dilg

(1999), “There are some moments in these conversations that are going to be hurtful no matter what other students or a teacher can do.” Hurt and defensiveness may be inevitable. Efforts to be considerate can be a double-edged sword. The same conversation that some students see as scary will be just the beginning of a “real” conversation for others. What one student hears as reassuring, another might interpret as an effort to silence dialogue. Lorde (1984) encourages us to communicate despite the potential for trouble: “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (p. 40). This is especially true when some individuals in the space are uniquely impacted by the topic. In our minds, these are reasons to educate ourselves on *how* to have these discussions and debates—not *whether* to have them. We must lean into discomfort in discussing issues of race and racism in our society writ large—and even, dare we say, into the debate space.

While consideration of norms for classroom discussions is important, the stakes are potentially higher in actual debate rounds given that

they are debates (with a winner and loser) and not just a dialogue. In a debate, students must be mindful of listening carefully to the nuances of the opposition and then crafting responses. Thinking through both *form* and *content* of potential argument will be critical to maximizing chances of success. Attempting to engage in debates about race is virtually impossible without establishing some initial ground rules. In order to have true dialogue, some common terms and concepts need to be discussed, as well as the role those things play in our ability to have cogent discussions.

So, what do I need to know to even begin having the discussion?

FIRST – *Knowing the distinction between race and racism »*

According to Barbara J. Fields (2001), racism is the assignment of people to an inferior category and the determination of their social, economic, civic, and human standing on that basis. This unsettles the fundamental instincts of American academic professionals who consider themselves liberal, leftist,

or progressive. Racism is an act of peremptory, hostile, and supremely—often fatally—consequential identification that unceremoniously overrides its objects’ sense of themselves. Often, racism is conflated with race. As Fields continues: “Well-meaning scholars are more apt to speak of race than of racism. Race is a homier and more tractable notion than racism, a rogue elephant gelded and tamed into a pliant beast of burden. Substituted for racism, race transforms the act of a subject into an attribute of the object. Which, in a practical sense, changes African Americans from someone you act with to *something* you act upon. This is the personification of anti-Blackness. And because race denotes a state of mind, feeling, or being, rather than a program or pattern of action, it radiates a semantic and grammatical ambiguity that helps to restore an appearance of symmetry.”

As recently argued by Dr. Tommy Curry of Texas A&M University (2015), “Racism is not one’s undesirable or mistaken set of beliefs; some constellation of erroneous ideas or stereotypes about the character of Black people; rather, racism is a ‘mass psychosis’ allowing whites to have no regard for the life of Blacks as humans



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or citizens” (p. 60-61). Thinking of racism as the architecture of American society allows for a more productive understanding as to how racism was able to flourish politically, economically, and culturally, despite legal mandates for equality.

SECOND – *Knowing the distinction between prejudice and racism* »

According to James M. Jones’ *Prejudice and Racism* (1997), “the essential nature of prejudice has to do with interpersonal relationships, with how individuals behave toward others. Stated simply, prejudice is a positive or negative attitude, judgment, or behavior generalized to a particular person that is based on attitudes or beliefs held about the group to which the person belongs” (p. 137). Prejudice differs from racism in that racism extends beyond mere interpersonal relations to societal relations and organization, entailing how whites may treat Blacks in the workplace, schools, etc. Traditionally, the difference between prejudice and racism has been described as power: one dominant group’s ability to enforce its personal prejudices against particular (racialized) groups through laws, institutions, and agents of society. Racism, then, refers to how society is ordered, and is tied to how Blacks are concentrated in the underclass,

how Blacks are undereducated, how Blacks overpopulate prisons, and more.

THIRD – *Understanding the concept of institutional racism* »

Institutional racism was succinctly articulated by Arthur de Gobineau in *The Inequality of the Races* in 1853. Institutional racism simply asserts that institutions in a society will reflect the will and perspective of the dominant racial group in power. This is directly tied to discrimination in that institutions are designed to reflect and enable the mobilization of certain sectors of society at the expense of others. In a racist society, the dominant race, or in this case whites, would control the access other racial groups have to jobs, education, health care, housing, etc. Racial discrimination is the act of denying access to specific arenas of society to preserve the racial order.

FOURTH – *Understanding the concept of white supremacy* »

It is imperative to recognize that, in this country, there is a pervasive system of white supremacy that is codified many times in government laws and/or regulations, and that system is at play in a variety of ways, even today. *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* defines white supremacy as “the belief, theory or doctrine,

that the white race is superior to all other races, esp. the black race, and therefore should maintain control in all relations.” This shouldn’t be a bone of contention, given the myriad mechanisms used to advance whites at the expense of people of color. From slavery to the 3/5 compromise, to separate but equal, to sharecropping, to the Federal Housing Authority that purposely kept neighborhoods segregated in a way that determined status quo housing policies and patterns in America, to lynchings and the continued legal killing of African Americans, there should be no question of the truth of codified, structural white supremacy.

Now that we know what white supremacy is, we need to determine the role it plays in our conversations about race. White supremacy can be addressed as white privilege at an institutional level and white fragility at an interpersonal level—both concepts that complicate race conversations, and so must be addressed.

FIFTH – *Understanding the concept of (white) privilege* »

White privilege is defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a transparent preference for whiteness that saturates society, but it’s not just limited to that. Vodee also describes it as permission to

escape or avoid challenges to that entitlement. This means privilege doesn't just give you what could be deemed illegitimate access to resources, but it also gives you the ability to escape questioning about how you got those resources and why you're entitled to them. This personifies itself in race conversations because the default has always been white; it means that, in many instances, whites, even well-meaning ones, lack the vocabulary and familiarity to comfortably start a conversation. Race is such a charged word with such heavy implications that people are terrified to have the conversations—they fear they'll say the wrong thing. Since most American neighborhoods are segregated by race, our exposure to people different to us is limited, and these conversations rarely develop organically. One often unacknowledged aspect of white privilege is that whites do not have to deal with race. Whites have the option to think about race, whereas people of color do not. For whites, race functions like a windbreaker, something you might choose more out of fashion than utility, and something you can put on and take off at your leisure, whereas for people of color, race is something immutable—you can't just choose to not deal with your race because everyone you interact with will use that lens for evaluation, making it

impossible to deny.

Because privilege allows one to sidestep conversations that might be uncomfortable, it means people are not generally taught the necessary language and vocabulary to have conversations about race without experiencing severe discomfort. In complex conversations that require high-level critical thinking and reasoning skills, there are bound to be moments of discomfort. However, in conversations of race, these moments translate to a feeling of not being safe—for some, causing actual physical discomfort. Professor Robin DiAngelo (2015) describes an instance where a woman had to leave a conversation about race because her chest started hurting and she was in fear that the conversation might cause her a literal heart attack, which stopped the conversation on race and re-focused the attention on her well-being. This is one example of the interpersonal aspect of white supremacy, white fragility, which DiAngelo defines as “the state where even a minimal amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” that involve but are not limited to emotional feelings of anger and guilt

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and behaviors such as silence and leaving the stressful situation.

This concept is at the core of problems facilitating a conversation about race. We want to have conversations about race without the discomfort that may happen during that conversation. It's imperative to understand that there is a fundamental difference between an uncomfortable conversation and an unsafe conversation. We engage in conversations about race as if they are unsafe to have, as if there is a possibility of physical danger from these tense conversations. This is not the case, but it does create a problematic catch-22: nobody wants to have conversations about race for the fear of the conflict the conversation might cause, so no conversation happens and the status quo replicates itself, making the need for the conversation even greater, which increases the fear about having the conversation, and the circle of inaction continues.

Now that we are aware of some of the things we need to know to enter the conversation, what is the best way to deploy it? *What should I do*, you might ask? As a guide, below we offer several recommendations to equip teachers and students to be able to embrace tough conversations about issues of race and racism in general—and, more specifically, in the context of the September/October topic on reparations. (Note: *Some of these concepts are adapted from the National Association of Independent Schools guidelines on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity.*)

Community-Classroom Norms Dealing with Controversial Topics (especially issues of race/racism/reparations)

- Be fully present and actively engaged in the discussion.
- Acknowledge the facts, and the various dimensions of the facts, surrounding racism, slavery, Jim Crow, and imperialism in America. (Literature to inform and educate yourself include studies of Black History, Critical Race Theory, Anti-Colonialism, and Black Power Studies.)
- Trust your ignorance on the matter. This is an opportunity to learn, not retreat into theories of convenience like liberalism or integrationism, or multiculturalism, or faux radical theories like intersectionality or Afro-pessimism. Use this moment to think about the specific history and creation of Black poverty. (Literature includes the work of Ira Katznelson and Joe R. Feagin.)
- Rid yourself of notions like white privilege and talk about structural and ideological

foundations of white supremacy. This is not something to be discussed and remedied through acknowledgement, but instead pursued through active citizenship, demands on politicians, and policy changes in the real world.

- Understand (and accept) that profound cultural differences exist in how people argue.
- Never be offended by the truth.
- Speak from the “I” perspective.
- Be self-responsible and self-challenging.
- Critically listen to what is being said from all involved in the discussion.
- Consider restating the point made by those in the discussion to make sure you have an understanding of their point before rushing to respond to it.
- Lean into discomfort.
- Experiment with new behaviors in order to expand your range of response.
- Take risks. Being honest in conversation will mean you will make some mistakes in how you word things. Be willing to learn from those mistakes and then let go.
- Accept conflict (and its resolution) as a necessary catalyst for learning.
- Be comfortable with silence.
- Be crisp; say what is core.
- Treat the candidness of others as a gift; honor confidentiality.
- Suspend judgment of yourself and of others.
- Understand that there is a distinction between being “unsafe” in a tough discussion

as, opposed to being “uncomfortable.” A lack of comfort is inevitable in tough discussions, and necessary to move the discussion forward. Physical safety is a reasonable expectation; being comfortable is not.

- Expressions of emotions are acceptable. Expressions of emotions do not mean that the conversation should stop.
- Understand the importance of your nonverbal communication in the conversation. Your body language, gestures, distance from the other speakers, etc., are important factors in determining how you are perceived.
- Develop an understanding of (and then avoiding) micro aggressions (micro invalidations, micro insults and micro assaults) as you pursue difficult conversations.

We would suggest that these guidelines are the beginning of the conversation as a community on how to discuss, and debate, issues of race. While they are in no way exhaustive, we hope they are helpful. ✈



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