Chapter 37
Using Narrative and Team–Teaching to Address Teaching About Racial Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Diversity training and multicultural competency workshops typically work from a top down logic in which educators or trainers skilled in working in multi-racial settings inform less enlightened colleagues about what they need to do to communicate across difference. This 'expert to novice' dynamic can easily create resentment as participants feel blamed for their lack of racial awareness. A missing component of this work is the use of narrative disclosure by expert instructors of how they struggle with their own learned racism as they seek to navigate racial complexities. This chapter outlines a pedagogy of narrative disclosure in which an instructor's personal experience is placed front and center as a teaching tool. It emphasizes the importance of team teaching as a way of modeling respectful disagreement and an openness to multiple perspectives for students.

INTRODUCTION

Programs designed to help people create and negotiate workforce diversity are typically framed around the construct of difference. Difference is seen as positive, as part of the infinite variety of the world. A workplace characterized by differences in culture, race, gender, age, religion, ability, and sexual orientation is held to be one with a competitive edge (Cox, 2001). This is because the kaleidoscope of diversity is assumed to create a kind of creative synergy, a spontaneous combustion of multiple perspectives and experiences. If we can create a workplace where differences are respected and valued, so the argument goes, this will be the catalyst for an unending exploration of new possibilities.

What this harmoniously appealing scenario often omits, however, is the presence of various 'isms'; racism, sexism, ableism, ageism and so on. From a humanistic viewpoint, difference is a gift, a manifestation of the multitude of individual talents in the world. From the standpoint of critical theory (Brookfield,

2004) however, difference is often structured in ways that reflect wider inequities. So, in the case of racial and cultural difference, the broader material inequities that exist in the world are linked to racial and cultural identity. When Black, Brown and Red Americans are disproportionately poorer, less educated, and more frequently incarcerated than White Americans, critical theory inquires into the ways that structural barriers constantly marginalize those racial groups.

In this chapter I explore how instructors can use personal narratives – particularly when they work in teams – to teach about the ways that structural and systemic racism is internalized and then enacted. This kind of racism is not an individual choice, but a set of ideas and practices transmitted and learned from birth, and embedded in the way organizations and communities function day to day. I want particularly to look at the pedagogy of anti-racism involving White educators and trainers working with mostly White groups. How can White educators help other Whites, become aware of the ways they unwittingly and unknowingly reinforce structural racism and enact racist ideology on a daily basis? I propose the use of personal narrative as a relatively unexplored approach.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The Theoretical Background to Understanding Racism

In this chapter racism is viewed not as an expression of individual prejudice or as a matter of personal choice, but as a learned ideology; that is, as a interlinked set of beliefs and practices that are embedded in social systems and structures. This understanding is grounded in the analytical framework of critical theory, so a brief explanation of this body of work is in order.

Critical theory is a term associated with thinkers from the Frankfurt School of critical social theory, such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), Marcuse (1964), and Habermas (1987). The theory describes the process by which people learn to accept as obvious and common sense the dominant ideologies (such as White supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy and representative democracy) that are embedded in everyday situations and practices. These ideologies shape behaviour and keep an unequal system intact by making it appear normal.

As a body of work, critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized: (1) that apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities; (2) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural, and inevitable, thereby heading off potential challenges to the system, is through the dissemination of dominant ideology (n the case of the perpetuation of racism this ideology would be White supremacy), and (3) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it.

Dominant ideology comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experiences and live their lives. When it works effectively it ensures that an economically unequal, racist, homophobic, and sexist society is able to reproduce itself with minimal opposition. Its chief function is to convince people that the world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all. So if Whites are overwhelmingly in possession of power and advantage, dominant ideology makes that fact seem unremarkable, not worth commenting on. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous.

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