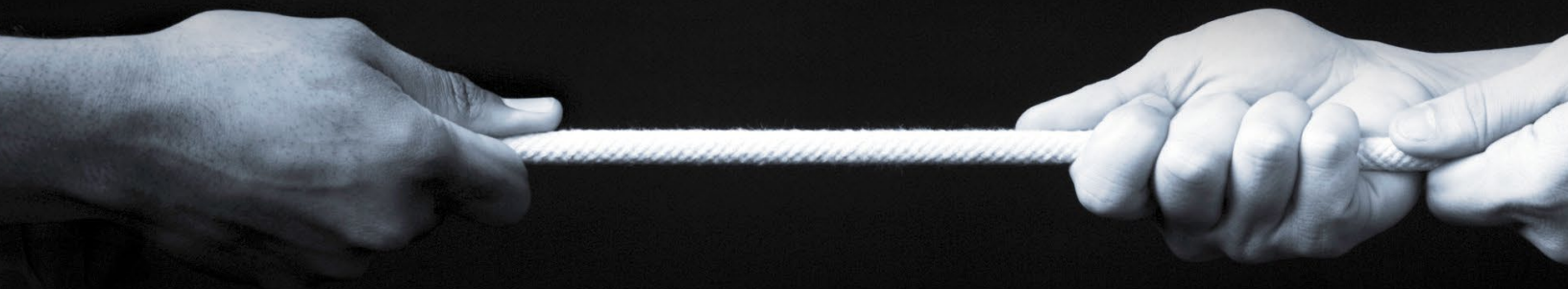


# FACILITATING DIFFICULT RACE DISCUSSIONS

FIVE INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES  
AND FIVE SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES



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Race talk is often not about the substance of an argument, but a cover for what is actually happening. To facilitate difficult dialogue about race in a productive manner, instructors need to understand not only the content of the communication but the process resulting from the interpersonal dynamics. Exploring ineffective and effective race talk strategies will lead to more positive outcomes in the workshop and classroom setting.

## FIVE INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

1. Do Nothing
2. Sidetrack the Conversation
3. Appease the Participants
4. Terminate the Discussion
5. Become Defensive

Studies indicate that instructors who have not developed a good sense of who they are as racial and cultural beings tend to use ineffective race talk strategies. These behaviors generally lead to negative outcomes in race talk but are of value in demonstrating what not to do and revealing possible solutions.

### DO NOTHING

Instructors will commonly opt for silence in the midst of heated race talk. In classrooms, for example, they allow students to take over the conversation, exhibiting behavioral and emotional passivity in their own actions. Studies suggest that although instructors are experiencing powerful emotions and anxieties when dialogue on race occurs they attempt to conceal these feelings for fear of appearing inept. Feeling paralyzed, lacking racial consciousness, and experiencing confusion about how to intervene leads instructors to a deep sense of personal failure. More problematic is that their actions or inaction suggest to students and trainees that race talk should be avoided.

“Avoidance takes many forms, and an instructor may unintentionally collude with the participant in avoiding race talk for many reasons, the ultimate result being diversion from discussing the real issues.”

### SIDETRACK THE CONVERSATION

Consider the following scenario of an unsuccessful racial dialogue.

THE CONTEXT an educator-training workshop

THE TOPIC past discrimination and oppression against people of color

Female Trainee (stating her thoughts angrily): *Why aren't we also addressing issues like sexism? We women are an oppressed minority group as well! I always feel training like this makes women invisible and that our needs are ignored. Women are paid less than men, we are treated as sex objects...I mean, everything is about race and racism, but what about us...what about our situation?*

Instructor: *Yes, I can understand that, but I can't cover every single group that has been oppressed, and this training is about the oppression of people of color and the harm they experience from oppression.*

Trainee (raising voice): *Women are harmed too...why does it have to be like that anyway? Why use an arbitrary decision in deciding which group to address? I just don't believe you can relate to my situation as a woman!*

Instructor (becoming slightly defensive, attempting to appease the trainee): *Okay, let's talk about the plight of women as an oppressed group. It's not my intent to ignore discrimination against women. In fact, many of our studies on discrimination have dealt with gender microaggressions like sexual objectification.*

The preceding vignette displays a prime example of a trainee, in this case a White female, attempting (most likely [unwittingly] to sidetrack the conversation from the topic of race to gender. In classroom settings, race talk is often uncomfortable for trainees and instructors alike. Avoidance takes many forms, and an instructor may unintentionally collude with the participant in avoiding race talk for many reasons, the ultimate result being diversion from discussing the real issues.

### APPEASE THE PARTICIPANTS

Some instructors avoid deep discussions of race in order to maintain what they perceive as classroom harmony. They are sensitive to how the workshop or class is perceived by the school, college, or organization and attempt to elicit positive feelings and opinions from participants at the expense of productive discussion.

Appeasement may take many forms:

- Allowing the conversation to be sidetracked
- Avoiding confrontation with the points being made by the participant
- Stressing commonalities and avoiding differences
- Discussing superficial issues without exploring deeper personal meanings

Maintaining harmony can negate deeper explorations of biases, stereotypes, and deep-seated emotions associated with race and racism.

### TERMINATE THE DISCUSSION

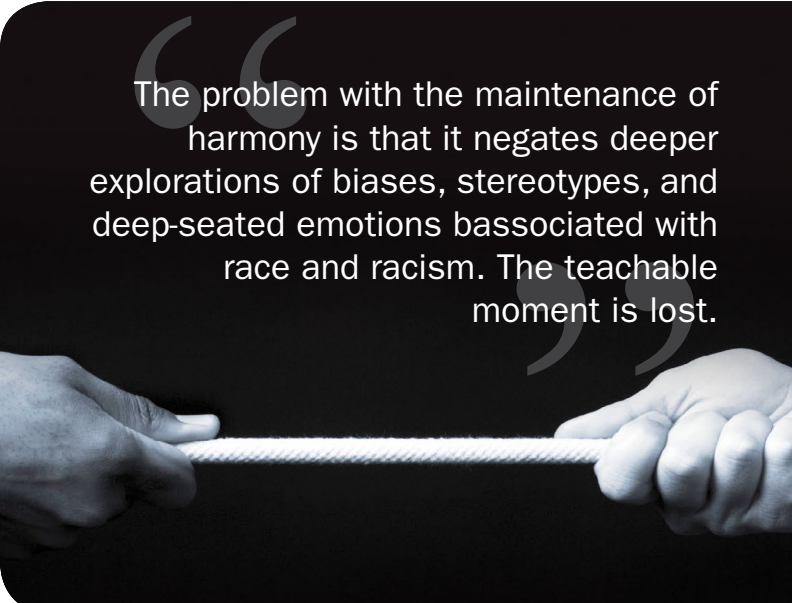
When instructors are concerned that a racial dialogue threatens to get out of control and are unable to determine how best to handle the situation, one of the most common actions is to terminate the dialogue. It may not be intentional, and it may involve these strategies:

- Placing conditions on how the dialogue should be discussed, thereby quashing the natural dynamics involved
- Tabling the discussion, not carrying through on the promise to return to the issue in the future
- Asking the parties involved to discuss the matter with him or her outside of the workshop or class
- Stressing that parties involved should calm down, respect one another, and discuss the topic in a rational manner

### BECOME DEFENSIVE

Race talk between instructor and trainee operates on the principle of reciprocity. Whether instructors are White or people of color, defensiveness or having one's buttons pushed is a common phenomenon. In order to deflect perceived criticism or uncomfortable feelings, trainees may directly or indirectly attack the content of the communication and/or the credibility of the communicator. When confronted with a defensive challenge by trainees, instructors of race talk may also become defensive when they find their message being invalidated or their credibility assailed.

Most of these ineffective reactions provide us with clues about what facilitative conditions need to exist and the types of interventions most likely to help trainees move from racial obliviousness to racial consciousness of themselves and one another.



The problem with the maintenance of harmony is that it negates deeper explorations of biases, stereotypes, and deep-seated emotions associated with race and racism. The teachable moment is lost.

## FIVE SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

1. Understand your racial/cultural identity
2. Acknowledge and be open to admitting your racial biases
3. Validate and facilitate discussion of feelings
4. Control the process, not the content, of race talk
5. Validate, encourage, and express admiration and appreciation to participants who speak when it feels unsafe to do so

Dialogues on race commonly exhibit clashes between the racial realities of one group (people of color) and another (generally Whites). The conflicts and their hidden meanings between racial groups tend to emerge in the context of race talk. Having critical racial consciousness formed from a nonracist/antiracist orientation is a key to the development and use of successful race talk strategies.

“When a heated dialogue occurs on race, the duel between participants of different races is nearly always on the content level, but the hidden and less visible levels are where the true dialogue is taking place”

Instructors can conduct positive race talks with the aid of effective facilitation strategies. These suggestions and strategies, however, are based on the assumption that instructors are enlightened individuals who have done the necessary personal work to develop nonracist and antiracist identities.

### UNDERSTAND YOUR RACIAL/CULTURAL IDENTITY

Instructors must understand themselves as racial/cultural beings by making the invisible visible. Unless they are well grounded and comfortable about who they are, a lack of insight and awareness only perpetuates ignorance in the trainees they hope to help. They cannot be effective instructors unless they are aware of their own worldview—their values, biases, prejudices, and assumptions about human behavior.

For example, what does being White, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic American, or Native American mean to them? How does

their racial identity impact the way they view others and the way others view them? Understanding oneself as a racial/cultural being goes hand in hand with how well grounded and secure one will be in a racial dialogue.

### ACKNOWLEDGE AND BE OPEN TO ADMITTING YOUR RACIAL BIASES

On a cognitive level, instructors must be able and willing to acknowledge and accept the fact that they are products of the cultural conditioning in this society, having inherited the biases, fears, and stereotypes of the society. When facilitating a difficult dialogue on race, most instructors are wary about communicating their own prejudices and will respond in a cautious fashion that may be less than honest.

Publicly and honestly acknowledging personal biases and weaknesses to self and others may have several positive consequences:

- Freedom from the constant vigilance exercised in denying their own racism or other biases
- Modeling truthfulness, openness, and honesty to trainees about race and racism
- Demonstrating courage in making themselves vulnerable by taking a risk to share with trainees their own biases, limitations, and attempts to deal with their own racism
- Encouraging others in the group to approach the dialogue with honesty, seeing that their own instructors are equally flawed

“Validating and facilitating the discussion of feelings is a primary goal in race talk.”

## VALIDATE AND FACILITATE DISCUSSION OF FEELINGS

Validating and facilitating the discussion of feelings is a primary goal in race talk. The instructor must create conditions that make the expression and presence of feelings a valid and legitimate focus of experience and discussion.

Studies in classroom settings indicate, almost universally:

- The importance of allowing space for the strong expression of feelings
- That participants talking about their anxieties or anger helped them understand themselves and others better
- That it was important to create conditions that allowed for openness and receptivity to strong emotions

Instructors are wise to seek opportunities to express appreciation to members of the group who take a risk and show courage, openness, and willingness to participate in a difficult dialogue.

Trainees in these studies greatly appreciated instructors who were unafraid to recognize and name the racial tension and the feelings emanating from the discussion because it helped them demystify its source and meaning. It can be helpful for the instructor to ask, for example, “How are you feeling right now talking or being confronted by this Black person?”

## CONTROL THE PROCESS AND NOT THE CONTENT OF RACE TALK

When a heated dialogue occurs on race, the conversation between diverse participants is typically on the content level, but the true dialogue is taking place on a less visible level (White talk vs. back talk). Common statements (content level) when White talk occurs:

“My family didn’t own slaves! I had nothing to do with the incarceration of Japanese Americans.”

“Excuse me, sir, but prejudice and oppression were and are part of every society in the world, not just the US.”

*“I resent you calling me White. You are equally guilty of stereotyping. We are all human beings.”*

The *substance* of these assertions has validity, but to deal with them strictly on the content level will only result in having race talk sidetracked, diluted, diminished, or ignored. Understanding the subtext that generates these statements is critical for both the instructors and trainees to deconstruct.

Consider the earlier vignette: the instructor controlled the **content** rather than the **process** of the dialogue. An important education exercise is to practice analyzing these statements from both the content AND process levels.

## VALIDATE, ENCOURAGE, AND EXPRESS ADMIRATION AND APPRECIATION TO PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK WHEN IT FEELS UNSAFE TO DO SO

Participants can feel threatened when engaging in race talk. Accordingly, instructors should express appreciation to those who take a risk and demonstrate courage, openness, and willingness to participate in this difficult dialogue. Examples of what an instructor might say:

*“Mary, I know this has been a very emotional experience for you, but I value your courage in sharing with the group your personal thoughts and feelings. I hope I can be equally brave when topics of sexism or homophobia are brought up in class.”*

*“As a group, we have just experienced a difficult dialogue. I admire you all for not ‘running away’ but facing it squarely. I hope you all will continue to feel free about bringing up these topics. Real courage is being honest and risking offending others when the situation is not safe. Today, that is what I saw happen with several of you, and for that, the group should be grateful.”*

We opened with a less-than-successful racial dialogue. Let's close with an example of a successful racial discussion.

Female Trainee (stating her thoughts angrily): Why aren't we also addressing issues like sexism? We women are an oppressed minority group as well! I always feel training like this makes women invisible and that our needs are ignored. Women are paid less than men, we are treated as sex objects...I mean, everything is about race and racism, but what about us...what about our situation?

Instructor: I'm glad you brought that up. You make excellent points. Yes, women are definitely an oppressed group, and we can talk about that as well. Before we do that, however, I'm picking up on lots of strong feelings behind your statement and wonder where they are coming from. (The instructor controls the process by refocusing exploration on the trainee.)

Trainee: What do you mean?

Instructor: You seem angry at something I've said or done.

Trainee: No, I'm not...just upset that women get short-changed.

Instructor: I can understand that, but the intensity with which you expressed yourself made me feel that my points on racism were being dismissed and that issues of racism were unimportant to you. Being a woman, you clearly understand prejudice and discrimination. Can you use the experience of having been oppressed to better understand the experience of people of color?

Trainee: I guess so...I...I guess racism is important.

Instructor: You don't seem very sure to me. . . you still seem upset. What is happening now? Can you get into those feelings and share with us what's going on?

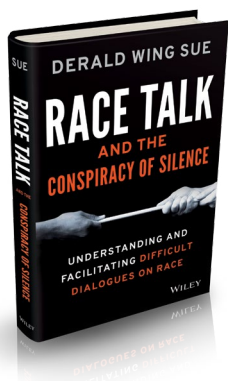
Trainee: Nothing is going on . . . it's just that, you know, it's a hot topic. I guess, talking about racism, it seems like you are blaming me. And, I don't like to feel wrong or at fault or responsible.

Instructor: Tell me about feeling blamed. In what ways do you feel blamed?

Trainee: Well, maybe there are feelings of guilt, although I'm not to blame for slavery or things of the past.

Instructor: Good, let's all (referring to entire workshop group) talk about that. Now we are getting somewhere. (Turning to entire group of instructors who have been transfixed by the interaction) I wonder if some of you can tell me what you see happening here. Do any of you feel the same way? What sense do you make of the dialogue we just had here?

As educators involved in racial conversations, whether spontaneous or planned, we will continue to be confronted in our teaching or training with challenges about how to turn tricky discussions into teachable moments rather than failed exercises. Will we opt for a journey of silence, avoiding honest racial dialogues? Or will we choose to effectuate real change—starting in our classrooms and workshops—by following the path of racial reality, which may be full of discomfort but guarantees to offer benefits to all groups in our society?



Offering in-depth exploration and multiple effective strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues about race, Derald Wing Sue's book, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence* can be found [here](#).

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