

Tips for Talking about Race in the Classroom

Having conversations about race are adaptive not technical. This means there is no cookbook or manual that will tell you exactly what to do or say. How you have the conversation will depend on endless factors such as your role and relationship with the young person, their level of insight and openness, your knowledge of the subject matter, their age and race, your race, etc. Following are tools and strategies to take into consideration and help guide you in the process.

1. **Question! Question! Question!**

Ask questions before educating. The more questions you ask, the more work the young person must do to reflect on the impact of their words and actions. It also gives you an understanding of their thinking so when you do educate, you know where they lack insight and understanding. The best types of questions are open ended and asked with genuine curiosity.

- Say more about...
- How did you come to understand it that way?
- I'm wondering if you've ever considered another way of thinking about...
- Repeat the offending word and then wait for their response.

2. **Don't ignore what you heard:**

It's better that you say something and not get it perfect, than not say anything at all and convey you agree, don't care, or have more important things to do. Silence is not silent.

3. **Slow the conversation:**

One way to do this is by asking question. Parents and educators often want to lecture or shame and blame young people into understanding. Instead, find out why they think the way they do and how they came to understand it in that way.

4. **Meet students where they are at:**

Don't lecture kids. They stop listening. Say "all that needs to be said, not all that could be said." Depending on the age of the young person, sometimes less is more.

5. **Help develop vocabulary:**

When young people describe something, offer another way of saying it. For example, simply stating, "That's called stereotyping," or "That's a great example of what is meant by White privilege" will help them expand their vocabulary.

6. **Be comfortable with not knowing:**

When young people ask you questions and you don't have the answers, let them know you don't know. Invite them to do some research with you. In group settings, offer up extra credit as homework and continue the dialogue the next day.

7. **Non-negotiables:**

It's great to engage young people in conversation but some things should be off limits regardless of how the conversation ends. For example, a young person may argue it's okay to say the N word using an "a" at the end. Finding out why they think it is okay doesn't mean at the end of the discussion that you will allow them to use it. Identify and name behaviors that are harmful and why.

- You use it to connect with your friends. I recall a time not long ago when that word was used to dehumanize Blacks resulting in thousands of lynchings while people shouted that word. It pains me every time I hear it. While I have no say in what you do when you leave here, you may not say it on school grounds.
- If you believe using the word takes away its power, why is it that many Blacks react when Whites say it? I don't believe the power is gone. I am still pained every time I hear it no matter how it's said or who says it. Do not say it in my presence.
- Just because your friends are using it, doesn't mean you can. It was people who look like you who created the word to dehumanize Blacks. Why would you even want to say it. Coming from a White person has an entirely different meaning and impact.

8. **Guide the conversation towards empathy and respect:**

Ask questions that help the young person gain insight as to how another person might feel. If the young person is talking about race, use examples outside of race e.g., ability, age, class, gender to assist them in understanding their impact.

- I still remember years ago being called names in school. Sometimes I wonder if that person realizes the impact it had on me. How do you think it effects Jason when he hears his friends saying...?
- When you say Mexicans aren't smart it sounds like you've bought into stereotyping. How is it helpful to people to be reduced to a label or stereotype?
- I remember you telling me your sister gets left out a lot because she has a disability. What are some of the assumptions people make about her that assume she can't participate or do some of the things they do?
- When you say _____, what message does it convey?

9. **Examine Social Constructs:**

This is an opportunity to help them expand their understanding of institutional isms. After you ask questions to deepen their understanding, connect their thinking to social constructs. Come up with examples of how things have changed over time helps them to gain insight into social constructs e.g., beauty, normal, race, etc.

- I notice some of the things you are saying are based on our society's definition of beauty. When White women inject their lips to make them bigger it's seen as beautiful but Blacks with large lips are viewed negatively. Why do you think that is?
- Have you ever heard that race is socially constructed? What does social construction mean to you? What are some examples of socially constructed ideas in our society?

10. **Circle Back Around:**

If you miss the opportunity to engage young people in the moment, that's okay. Revisit the conversation later. It can give you time to consult with others and think more deeply about how you'd like to respond. Sometimes it's better to wait, particularly if you find yourself wanting to react rather than respond with genuine curiosity.

- I overheard you and Kim talking in the hallway about _____. I'm wondering...?

- Yesterday you asked me about _____. I've thought about it and realized there was more that I could have said.
- The other day you said _____. Instead of asking questions to get a better sense of why you see it that way I immediately started lecturing. Will you share more about...?

11. Initiate the conversation:

When you see or hear something going on amongst young people or occurring in society or in the media, broach it with young people. Ask their thoughts and opinions on the subject matter.

- Did you hear on the news some people are upset Disney is casting a Black woman as Ariel in the remake of the Little Mermaid? What are your thoughts?
- What are your thoughts about the N Word?

12. Apologize:

Model humility by acknowledging when you make mistakes. This includes not only your words, but also your tone. Apologizing does not make what the person did or said right, it means you are willing admit your mistakes. If what you or they did ties into your identity in some way, share it with them.

- I've worked hard to raise you to be different from your grandparents. I love them but they had a lot of racist ideas. When I heard you say, "Muslims are terrorists", even though you meant it to be funny, I panicked inside. They face that stereotype every day. It took me off guard to hear it coming from you. I immediately saw your words as my failing you as a parent. I owe you an apology for yelling at you rather than talking with you about it.

13. Invite other young people to participate:

When in a group setting if one person says something, invite others to share their opinions, thoughts or experiences. If there are very few People of Color in the room, do not ask their opinion. Let them participate if and when they choose to. Do not ask students to share "experiences" if for example, the conversation is about race and there are few People of Color in the room. It puts pressure on them to be the one to speak up and represent their race since they would be the only ones who are likely to be able to speak from personal experience.

- It makes sense to me why you would think that way, many people do. By a show of hands how many others have heard this or think that same way. Does anyone have a different way of thinking about it?
- What are other people's thoughts about...?
- What are other people's experiences?

14. Create an atmosphere of respect:

When someone brings somethings up, before engaging in the conversation let them know you are willing to talk about it but first you need to create ground rules. Call students in when they laugh at inappropriate moments or do or say things that are harmful to others.

- My guess is that you were intending to be funny, I'm wondering if everyone would be willing to have this conversation in a way that doesn't further harm?

- You bring up something that I think we should all talk about. Let's first discuss some ground rules to ensure that we have the conversation in a way that makes people feel safe in the room. What should we keep in mind when talking about _____?

15. Be authentic:

Share your personal feelings and experiences. Tell them if you've never had a group conversation of this sort before.

16. Share why having the conversation is important:

Let them know why you are willing to talk about it. What is your hope for them? What would you want to occur as a result?

17. Move from individual to collective experience:

Call young people in when they make stereotypical jokes about their own group identity. Assist them in gaining insight into the impact it has on their larger groups experiences as well as how they may be consciously internalizing the messages. When a young person says they are okay with the stereotype or label their peers have nicknamed them do not believe them. Indifference is often a coping mechanism. Being called names hurts and can have a long-term effect. In either case, move the conversation from the individual to a larger group impact and/or perspective.

- I hear you saying it's funny and it doesn't bother you. I'm worried about how your words have a greater impact on Native peoples. What are some of the stereotypes Indigenous Peoples have to contend with?
- When you joke about Latinx people being _____. While you may be saying it to make light of a serious issue, I'm concerned about others hearing you and what beliefs it may confirm for them about your group.
- There is a saying that the more you say something the more you believe it to be true. I'm worried you may internalize the negative self-deprecating remarks you are making about your southeast Indians.
- I hear you saying, it doesn't bother you when students call you egg roll however, it bothers me. Not only am I concerned by your being labeled, I also worry about the message that it conveys about other Asians.
- What do you think the Asian parents of students here would say if they new you were labeling Johnnie an "egg roll"?

18. The more you know, the easier the facilitation of the conversation. Keep learning. There are tons of resources available at your fingertips. Following are some websites you may find helpful:

Asian Nation: Asian American History, Demographics, & Issues. <http://www.asian-nation.org/assimilation.shtml>

Black History: Everything to know about Black history, culture, inventions, and more! <https://www.blackhistory.com/>

Mixed Heritage Center: Information and resources for people of mixed heritage. www.MixedHeritageCenter.org

Native Appropriations posts images and comments to counter stereotypes of Native people. It is a great resource for anyone seeking to better understand cultural appropriation. <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/>

Racial Equity Tools offers tips and resources for organizational change work. <http://racialequitytools.org/home>

Rethinking Schools provides articles and resources for teachers looking to infuse social justice in their practice. <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/index.shtml>

Sociological Images is a collection of visuals and critique helpful in developing a lens for seeing racism, sexism, heterosexism and other bias in media. <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/>

Teaching Tolerance has free resources including DVDs, CDs and publications for educators, parents, and kids. <http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp>

“Fighting for our deepest convictions requires relinquishing control and accepting messy uncertainties. It demands working as well as we can at efforts that feel morally right, and then having faith that our labors will bear fruit, perhaps in our time, or perhaps down the line, for somebody else.”

Paul Rogat Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*.