

# 5

*How African American and white students and faculty develop a strong identity and healthy interpersonal relationships is explored. Faculty are encouraged to engage students in dialogue about multicultural issues and adapt their teaching practices to create a culturally responsive learning environment for students and faculty.*

## Creating a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment for African American Students

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“All students, including those from traditional White, middle class backgrounds, have a right to expect that their courses present comprehensive knowledge and prepare them to succeed in a multicultural community. Understanding the perspectives of many groups enriches the lives of all students, and promotes a more equitable society for all” (Kitano, 1997a, p. 4).

Faculty members have the power to make the learning environment for all students inclusive and supportive rather than isolating and exclusionary. This can be done successfully by creating a culturally responsive curriculum in which the life experiences of diverse groups will not be expunged from the course content. Students’ ability to understand multiple perspectives is mediated by, among other factors, their own racial identity development. Theories of racial identity development, for both people of color and whites, can help us understand this important dimension of preparing all students to succeed in a multicultural society.

Racial identity theories have been developed to understand how white people and individuals from visible racial ethnic groups identify with their racial cohorts (Carter, 1995). As children grow and develop in this society, they become aware that they belong to a specific racial group. According to Carter, “the challenge for each individual is to incorporate race into his or her personal identity” (p. 82). Specifically, an individual’s identity and personality is complex and dynamic, made up of immutable characteristics, unusual experiences, and personal challenges and choices. Personalities and identities are also products of societal influences such as the family, the

church, political processes, and schools (Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

Educational institutions perpetuate gender-role socialization as well as racial and cultural stereotyping through the hidden curriculum (Jones and Young, 1997; Sadker and Sadker, 1994) and banking education (Freire, 1970). The hidden curriculum is a covert and subliminal teaching and learning thought process that “works to both perpetuate power relationships, cultural hegemony, and political relationships and to impede the progress of those without the ability to identify and understand its existence” (Jones and Young, 1997, p. 93). Moreover, the classroom is controlled by the instructor who chooses to teach only traditional material that reflects the successes of the dominant society. This teaching method is further exacerbated by the banking education process. Freire (1970) notes that “banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power” (p. 68) by the instructors’ depositing information that they perceive is “right” and “the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 58) this material on exams. Often students regard the teacher’s knowledge as universally correct; thus stereotypes could be internalized by students without any challenge.

To understand the African American student’s meaning-making and learning process in the classroom, it is important to understand who the student is and what that student believes in, as well as the identity construction of the instructor. It is imperative that faculty use racial identity theory to understand the psychological and cognitive complexities of the diverse students they teach to make the classroom learning process a liberatory practice for everyone. Helms and Cook (1999) state that the theories and models are “pathways for overcoming internalized racism and achieving a healthy socioracial self-conception under varying conditions of racial oppression” (p. 81).

## **Racial Identity Theories**

The theories presented provide a rough map or diagram of a developmental pilgrimage from an identity that is steeped in racial biases and prejudice to an identity that is affirming of others and emancipated from racism (Helms and Cook, 1999; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, and Alexander, 1995; Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 2000). When faculty members understand the student’s racial identity process, they may become more comfortable and less threatened “by the strength and variety of student attitudes as well as their heightened emotions as they react to cultural issues” (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995, p. 51). This allows a developmental process to take place for both the faculty member and the student that is based on mutual respect for differences, dialogue, and continuous reflection.

One framework for understanding students’ racial identity processes is the Minority Identity Development (MID) model (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1993). The MID involves a five-stage process to positive racial identity

development. According to the authors, the MID is applicable to all visible racial or ethnic groups. The first stage is *conformity*, in which the individual internalizes attitudes that reflect preferences for the dominant race and negative attitudes that reflect preferences for one's own race and culture. *Dissonance*, the second stage, evokes feelings and attitudes that reflect racial-cultural confusion and conflict. In the third stage, *resistance*, individuals find themselves rejecting the dominant culture's values and embracing their cultural group of origin. In the penultimate stage, *introspection*, there is a period of reflection in which the values of the dominant and personal cultural groups are evaluated. The final stage, *awareness*, finds the individuals engulfed in a sense of self-fulfillment as the confusion and conflict from the previous stages are resolved.

A similar racial identity developmental process is described in the Nigrescence or Negro-to-Black Conversion Model for African Americans (Cross, 1991). Cross indicates that there are five stages of identity maturation and responsiveness to others. The stages are described along with examples of students' responses to teaching and learning at each level:

1. *Pre-Encounter*. There is an identification with the dominant (white) culture and rejection or denial of any connection with African American people and culture. At this stage, the student may not contribute significantly to classroom discussion; a student may make a comment such as "I have been quiet in class, but it is because I agree with what people are saying and I don't want them to think that I am different."

2. *Encounter*. The student begins an African American consciousness-raising effort in this stage because of a traumatic encounter with the dominant (white) culture. This trauma may occur as early as the first day in a predominantly white class because of the stereotype threat (Steele, 1999), which is the fear of being "viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (p. 46). After receiving a poor grade on a paper, a student might say, "I can't believe I received a D because I got excellent marks in my advanced placement classes in high school. I talked to the instructor, and she asked me where I was from and what my ACT score was. She said most students like me do not have the basic writing skills to get an A in her class. I was so angry, I just walked out." This student has been stereotyped as below average in intelligence by the instructor's socialized belief system. The student's self-confidence has been shattered, and now the student is fearful that others have the same perception.

3. *Immersion-Emersion*. The student becomes intently interested in learning more about the African American culture. There is an in-depth immersion into the history of the culture and negating everything learned about the dominant (white) culture. As a student learns more about African Americans, a comment like this may be heard: "I am going to change my major to ethnic studies because the stuff I am learning now does not interest

me at all. I am tired of being around white students all day. I don't know whether or not I like this place any longer."

4. *Internalization*. The student embodies a strong African American identity and transcends the psychological impact of racism. Resolving these issues, the student may say, "I cannot get angry at the teacher for not singing my song or talking about my culture in class; I have to sing my own song and share that with others. Maybe the projects I write will help the teacher understand my culture."

5. *Internalization-Commitment*. The student maintains an empowered African American identity while resisting the various forms of social oppression. At this stage, the student has developed a healthy psychological resistance to negative caricatures of his or her race or culture, and the end result is liberation and empowerment (Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 1994). A student may comment, "School has been a struggle at times because I felt so isolated. I really want to help others so they will know that they can make it if there is some support."

A similar psychosocial developmental trajectory occurs in the White Racial Identity Ego Statuses Model (Helms and Cook, 1999), a seven-status process of overcoming internalized racism for whites. The statuses are divided into two phases: (1) the abdication of a racist identity ("contact through reintegration") and (2) the creation of a nonracist white identity ("immersion through autonomy") (Carter, 1995). When evolving through the statuses, the white person is attempting to replace socialized messages and beliefs of entitlement and privilege with a "nonracist and realistic self-affirming collective (racial) identity" (Helms and Cook, 1999, p. 89). The seven statuses are described next, illustrated in the context of an instructor's perspectives across this trajectory.

1. *Contact*. Contentment with racial status quo and insensitivity to racism and one's contribution to it. An example of this status is evident in an instructor's view of her syllabus: "I don't think I need to revise my literature syllabus to include African American writers because many passages in the classics do include references about people of color."

2. *Disintegration*. Confusion and distress when facing racial moral dilemmas that force one to take sides between own-group loyalty and humanism. The instructor comments that "this is everyone's literature class, not just mine. The students should know that this is American literature. I get so upset when they want to read about one ethnic group by one ethnic writer."

3. *Reintegration*. Glorified ideals of one's socioracial group and vilification of and prejudicial attitudes toward other groups. The instructor defends her syllabus by stating, "It's not my fault that the African American writers were ignored in the past and their materials were not part of the mainstream canon. I am not responsible for their misfortunes."

4. *Pseudo-Independence*. “Intellectualized commitment to one’s own socio-racial group and subtle superiority and tolerance of other socio-racial groups as long as they can be helped to conform to white standards of merit” (Helms and Cook, 1999, p. 92). The instructor comments, “Reading a course syllabus by my colleague who teaches literature at Prestigious University, I realize that there are a few good books written by people of color that may enhance my class discussions.”

5. *Immersion*. The search for a new and compassionate definition of being white and an attempt to debunk racist stereotypes and seek accurate information about racial ethnic groups, racism, and privilege. As a researcher, the instructor comments, “Perhaps it is time for me to reassess my perspective on literature and view what the white writers are saying about diverse groups. This may help me intellectually understand how my students perceive the literature as well.”

6. *Emersion*. A sense of appreciation and group solidarity and pride that accompanies being with other white people who are seeking new self-knowledge. The instructor thanks her colleague at Prestigious University for sharing the course syllabus and is engaged in a dialogue about infusing new material into her curriculum. The process of grappling with racial discrimination and personal prejudice has been emotionally draining and overwhelming at times, but the conversation with other colleagues helps immeasurably.

7. *Autonomy*. An affirming and informed socio-racial-group commitment and adoption of personal standards to prevent and avoid contributing to racial oppression. The instructor has decided, “I am revamping my course syllabus to include multiple perspectives by racially diverse writers. Discussions may be challenging for everyone, but at least my semester won’t be boring!”

The establishment of a nonracist white identity is an important component to developing rapport with people of color. “A person’s worldview, through the lens of racial identity, has implications for how he or she processes information, forms perceptions, understands behavior, and selects and understands what is important” (Carter, 1995, p. 113). The instructor should have a personal appreciation of the concept of culture and racial identity (Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, and Alexander, 1995). A faculty member can covertly thwart the intellectual learning process for a student of color if there is a stereotypical perception of that person’s abilities. If students of color feel empowered, respected, and connected with the people in the learning environment, they develop a capacity to concentrate; thus thinking is significantly enhanced (Kitano, 1997b; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995). It is important to emphasize the point that white students engage in the same process of racial identity formation and development as students of color.

## Effective Dialogue and Teaching Practices

There are three levels of course change that can be correlated with White Racial Identity Consciousness. Kitano (1997b) notes that level 1 is an exclusive course that “presents and maintains traditional, mainstream experiences and perspectives on the discipline. If alternative perspectives are included, they are selected to confirm stereotypes” (p. 23). This level can be correlated to the White Racial Identity Ego Statures of contact, disintegration, and reintegration, in which the instructor maintains a banking education philosophy and integrates a hidden curriculum. Information is exchanged in a didactic manner, objective or subjective written exams are used exclusively, and conversations and dialogue are controlled or directed by the instructor. It is important to note that African American students could be at the pre-encounter or encounter stage of Nigrescence and are experiencing extreme discomfort and sensing that their voices are not being heard. This environment could be frustrating and lead to student-teacher hostility.

A second level is an inclusive course change process that “presents traditional views but adds alternative perspectives” (Kitano, 1997b, p. 23). These perspectives and new viewpoints may be dispersed within the curriculum “without elaboration to efforts at analyzing and understanding reasons for historical exclusion” (p. 23). This level can be correlated with Helms and Cook’s pseudo-independence and immersion statuses of White Racial Identity Consciousness because there is some questioning whether or not it is appropriate to continue to exclude the voices of underrepresented groups from the curriculum. The African American students are keenly aware that there is not a true commitment to the curricular revisions and note that the teacher is taking a patronizing view of historical inclusion. The African American students are at the encounter stage leading into immersion-emersion.

The third level, transformed, embraces the emersion and autonomy statuses of Helms and Cook’s model. The instructor is attempting to challenge the students to think globally about diversity issues. Furthermore, “a transformed course challenges traditional views and assumptions; encourages new ways of thinking; and reconceptualizes the field in light of new knowledge, scholarship, and ways of knowing (Kitano, 1997b, p. 23). At this level, instructor privilege and power are dismantled with the banking education model abandoned for a teaching method that encourages self-evaluation and reflection. The instructor also includes class projects that engender the personal transformation process and reflect real-life issues. The African American students are becoming engaged in the course content and beginning to take part in the class dialogue. The students leave the class with a sense of internalized pride and understanding as well as respect for the values of diverse groups. The third level is where all parties, students and faculty, should be to maintain a culturally responsive curriculum.

Designing a curriculum that is culturally responsive should include the following norms (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995):

1. Coursework that emphasizes a connection to human need or interest so that the students can feel a part of something that is relevant to them
2. Teachers who are collaborative with the learners by helping them understand the creation of meaning and the virtue of their own thinking
3. Students working together as a community of learners
4. Students and instructor assuming a blame-free and trusting belief in people and their potential to be transformed
5. Students being treated equally in the classroom and invited to address behaviors, practices, or policies that are prejudicial

The redesign of the curriculum also requires heightened white racial identity consciousness because there may be more flexibility and creativity for new activities at the higher statuses. A person in the early statuses would be resistant to change, may blame the students of color for not being able to persist, and may stereotype them as a group of underachievers.

There are several instructional methods and techniques, as well as learning activities and projects, that can create a culturally responsive classroom for all students. First, the instructor must be willing to empower students and be comfortable with the disagreements that come with extensive dialogue, which inevitably leads to dissonance. The teacher should not get defensive or ignore or demean students' questions. Instead, an infusion of diverse perspectives should be intertwined in the curriculum. This will encourage all learners to read about diverse perspectives and not just material from the African American or white worldview. Carter and Wilson (1994) found that the most significant factor in retaining students of color on college campuses is the quality of interaction they have with faculty members. All the more reason to abandon the hidden curriculum and banking education concept because students and faculty can learn from each other if there is reciprocal communication.

Students should be allowed to engage in self-exploration through journal writing and through raising and answering their own questions. Such activities encourage them to find their own voices and make meaning of the classroom learning process for themselves. Again, the instructor should be comfortable with affective dialogue when students vent frustration, anger, guilt, and shame when delving into issues of racial consciousness. Class activities should provide opportunities for students to share their knowledge about perseverance and cultural awareness outside the classroom (as in the case of service learning)—to a group of high school students, for example, who may be experiencing difficulty with authority figures or who lack racial or ethnic role models. The instructor should also interweave small group tasks to encourage dialogue as well as raise the students' confidence level. Case study discussions in small groups can evoke moral dilemma decision-making and group consensus processes, which lead to higher-level listening skills and multiple perspective taking. Faculty should encourage students to work in study groups to share various perceptions of their reading and to prepare for exams.

The instructor should revise the course syllabus to include reading selections that have a multicultural perspective. This could be accomplished by providing a supplemental reading list and selecting texts that treat women and people of color as an integral part of the book rather than as an addendum. The syllabus should speak to the instructor's educational beliefs and teaching philosophy and the learning process in the classroom. This will set the tone for being respectful when hearing a person's story and understanding that the learning process is a two-way street; it is not the responsibility of the teacher to deposit information. Last, instead of a review of faculty performance, have students complete an instructor-designed end-of-semester class evaluation that reflects how the content and instruction might be improved (Kitano, 1997b). This empowers students to take part in transforming the curriculum to be more inclusive and sensitive to hearing the voices of underrepresented groups.

## Conclusion

Recognizing the diverse and unique backgrounds of all students in the classroom enhances the learning experience for everyone. Interactions with students who are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds helps people acquire more accurate values and views about the systems that govern our lives. Discrimination, prejudice, and racism reduce opportunities for many African American students. Consciously and unconsciously, these biases are present in the classroom environment, and faculty should recognize that their own racial identity development and responsive teaching methods are key factors in reducing prejudice in our society.

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