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# Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking in Antiracism Education

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## Abstract

As educators who teach antiracism education, we seek to interrupt relations of racial inequity by enabling students to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, structures, and institutions that hold racism and white supremacy in place. In this article, we share three strategies that we have developed out of our own practice as white educators who work in university and community settings, and which have been effective in our antiracism education efforts: The first we call *Silence Breakers*. This strategy addresses common fears that keep participants – and white participants in particular – on the sidelines in race discussions and in doing so prevent them from engagement; The second are *analogies* we have developed to help students conceptualize antiracism as a lens of inquiry rather than as something they have to agree or disagree with; And the third strategy are *vignettes* which are in essence stories that students can relate to but that are not as politically charged as explicit discussions of racism can be. Because they put the student in the protagonist position, these vignettes can unsettle expectations, reduce tensions, and evoke curiosity.

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*From the perspective of many well-meaning white students, learning about antiracism ought to lead somewhere definite. Presumably, there is a road leading to the anti-racist destination; all they have to do is figure out how to get on it. Ideally, the road will be a freeway with plenty of room for passing. Then they will not feel crowded and they will be able to by-pass all the little hamlets that clutter up backroads driving. … Unfortunately, the students come to realize, all the roads — along with all the rest stops — are under construction*.

—Audrey Thompson, 2003, p 389

## Introduction

Antiracism education seeks to interrupt relations of racial inequity by enabling people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, structures, and institutions that hold racism and white supremacy in place (Calliste & Dei, 2000; Pollock, 2008). In this article, we share three strategies that we have developed out of our own practice as white educators who work in university and community settings and that have been effective in our antiracism education efforts. The first strategy, which we call *silence breakers*, accomplishes two goals: It addresses common white fears and taboos about open racial discussions, and it promotes curiosity and humility towards new and challenging information. The second strategy is a series of *analogies* that offer a framework for thinking about antiracism in ways that release students from an "agree/disagree" binary, and instead invite students to consider antiracism as a *lens of inquiry*. Lenses of inquiry shape what we see, the questions we ask, and the resultant actions we take. The third strategy is the development of narrative *vignettes*. These are short stories that situate students in relatable settings and thereby diffuse some of the political charge of explicit race-talk. In doing so, vignettes allow them to see racial dynamics not currently visible to them. We begin this essay with a conceptual grounding in antiracism practice and then offer detailed explanations of each of these strategies. We explain how they work to support white participants in cultivating humility and critical thinking through an antiracism framework.

## Theoretical Framework: Antiracism Education

Although mainstream definitions of racism are typically some variation of individual "race prejudice" that anyone of any race can have, race scholars define racism as encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power to white people over peoples of color (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Collins, 2000; Hilliard, 1992; Jensen, 2005). This unequal distribution benefits whites and disadvantages people of color overall at the group level (although individual whites may be "against" racism, we still benefit from a system that privileges our group).

Racism is not fluid within the United States and Canada in that it does not flow back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting peoples of color. The direction of power between whites and peoples of color is historic, traditional, normalized, and deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. and Canadian societies (Feagin, 2009; Henry & Tator, 2006; Mills, 1999). White racial domination is enacted moment by moment

on individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels (Frankenberg, 1997). Antiracism education recognizes racism as embedded in all aspects of society and the socialization process; no one who is born into and raised in Western settler/colonial states can escape being socialized to participate in these relations (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Henry & Tator, 2006). Thus, from an antiracism perspective, the question is not "*Is* racism taking place?" but rather, "*How* is racism taking place in this specific context?"

Antiracism educators conceptualize racism as a multilayered, multidimensional, ongoing, adaptive system that functions to maintain, reinforce, reproduce, normalize, and render invisible white power and privilege. Thus antiracism education deliberately goes beyond the "celebrating differences" approach common to most diversity education efforts and instead centers the analysis on the social, cultural, and institutional systems that so profoundly shape the meaning of race.

From this perspective, a foundational commitment of antiracism education is to interrupt relations of racial dominance by educating white people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, structures, and institutions that hold racism in place. Thus, a key aspect of antiracism education is to "raise the consciousness" of white people about what racism is and how it works. Yet efforts aimed towards educating whites on our socialization into systems of racism and white supremacy are often impeded by the well-documented white investment in and resistance to challenging racism (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Kailin, 1999; Picower, 2009; Schick, 2000; Sleeter; 2001; Soloman, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). In the following sections, we offer three strategies that we have developed and found to be helpful in shifting this resistance.

**Silence Breakers**

Antiracism educators are facilitating deeply complex issues and dynamics. These dynamics include those of *internalized dominance* and *internalized oppression*. *Internalized dominance* is internalizing and acting out (often unintentionally) the constant messages circulating in the culture that you and your group are superior to whichever group is minoritized in relation to yours and that you are entitled to your higher position. Conversely, *internalized oppression* is believing and acting out (often unintentionally) the constant messages circulating in the culture that you and your group are inferior to whichever group is dominant in relation to yours and that you are deserving of your lower position (Sue, 2010).

As antiracism educators well understand, much of how oppression operates is invisible to and/or denied by those who benefit from it; a room that seems perfectly comfortable to dominant group members may not feel that way to minoritized group members. For example, given whiteness as the status quo, the more comfortable a space is for white people (often articulated as a "safe" space), the more likely it is to be harmful to peoples of color (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Indeed, whites are socialized into a deep investment in racial inequality—materially, psychically, socially, and politically—as the producers and beneficiaries of racism. Further, the system depends on white denial of these investments. Thus, the very behaviors we believe are supportive and thus make us feel comfortable and "good" (especially for well-intended whites) are likely to be the very

behaviors that are so toxic to peoples of color; our identities as moral people rest on our not seeing our oppressive patterns. In other words, dominant group members work hard to *not* see their privilege, which is a key way they keep it protected and intact.

These dynamics are not purely theoretical, they are manifesting and negotiated in every moment in and out of the classroom, and antiracism education depends on their recognition. To this end, we want students—and white students in particular—to move into a stance of humility and critical analysis rather than certainty, rebuttal, or outright rejection. To achieve this stance, we offer a list of what we term *silence breakers*[i] The silence breakers are suggested openings intended to address two challenges for whites in cross-racial discussions: They speak to the fear of losing face, making a mistake, or not being able to manage impressions that often prevent whites from constructive engagement, and they engender a stance of curiosity and humility that counters the certitude many whites have regarding their racial perspectives. In doing so, they tend to open, rather than close, discussion and connection. The silence breakers were developed to recognize and respond to unequal power relations in the room; to help more reticent students speak up; to help more dominant students slow down; and to guide open and humble entry into the conversation.

We also regularly ask students to turn their claims into the form of a question by incorporating "question starters" into the silence breakers. For example, turn the claim, "We had one Asian student in my school and no one treated her differently" to, "There was one Asian student in my school, how might we have been communicating racism towards her?" The intended effect of silence breakers is to engender humility, develop critical thinking skills, interrogate what we think we know, and practice grappling with new information. As may be noted, many of these are intertwined:

***Silence Breakers***

1. I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but …
2. From my experience/perspective as (identity) …
3. I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but …
4. It feels risky to say this and/but …
5. I'm not sure if this will make any sense, and/but …
6. I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did.
7. It seems as though some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
8. Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?
9. This is what I understand you to be saying: … Is that accurate?
10. I've been wondering about something since we started this discussion: ...
11. I have always heard that … . What is an anti-racist perspective on that?
12. The author is arguing that only whites can be racist (etc.) ... . Can you help me understand that?
13. Is … a good example of what the author was saying?
14. How would you respond to … from a social justice framework?
15. I am having a "yeah but." Can you help me work through it?
16. Given the reality of inequitable power, how does …?

17. How does ... affect relationships between ... ?
18. This perspective is new to me, but I'm wondering if it is accurate to say that … ?

Our goals are not to create fixed, rote formulae for engaging with the materials via these prompts alone. Rather, these prompts are strategies to give students some language with which to lean *into* rather than *away from* difficult content and engagement. Leaning into an antiracism framework does not require agreement or disagreement; it is simply (but powerfully) a way to engender intellectual and emotional humility and practice critical engagement. When we use the silence breakers, the shift in the tone of the discussion is palpable. While many whites fear being "called out" in these discussions, silence breakers function to *call in*. To this end we introduce and distribute them as a handout on the first day of class, post them in the room every week where they are visible, and open discussions and check-ins by asking students to choose one that best frames what they are currently grappling with. We also occasionally ask students to rephrase comments using a silence breaker when needed.

**Analogies**

In seeking to move our students away from an *individualistic* orientation when thinking about racism (and oppression broadly) towards a *structural* orientation, we have developed a collection of analogies we regularly use in our teaching. These analogies—because they are relevant to our students' experiences—have proved to be effective in guiding their understanding of antiracism concepts. They convey the recognition that antiracism education is a complex, life-long process rather than a singular event. In so doing, these analogies help alleviate students' anxiety about getting the right "answers" and help move them away from quick-fix solutions. The following is an example:

***The Basketball Analogy***

*Most of us know the basic rules of basketball. There are two teams, and each team is trying to get the ball into the opposing team's basket while simultaneously preventing the other team from doing the same. Every time you get the ball in the basket, your team gets points. Each player has a position on her team and a novice player focuses on her assigned role. However, a skilled player is not only able to take her own position into account, but is also able to see beyond her position and synthesize the multiple dynamics in play in order to think strategically about her next move. This player considers the positions and moves of every other player in relation to her own, and bases her strategy on multiple, shifting, and contextual factors. She does not follow a rigid plan and likely does not make the same decision twice. Instead, she is always taking into account the bigger picture based on her knowledge of the other players, the rules of the game, which other players are nearby to support her, and who's blocking her as she makes decisions about her next moves.*

*Similar to the requirements of skilled basketball playing, antiracist practice requires the ability to consider multiple and constantly shifting factors. To take these multiple factors into consideration, you must first obtain a fundamental understanding of the social, political, and historic dimensions of the situation—the rules of the game. You need a basic knowledge of how power relations work in society and your own position in the matrix of these relations. Our positions intersect and interact in complex*

*ways, and we need to take this into account as we approach a given situation. The ability to generate quality "moves" on the playing field comes from a deep understanding of the game's dynamics and lots of trial-and-error practice. Similarly, the more complexity you can see in racial dynamics and the more risks you are willing to take, the more constructive (and less superficial) your antiracist "moves" will be.*

We follow this analogy with some guidelines for engaging with an antiracism framework, such as:

- Think in terms of structures and patterns, not individual acts or people.
- Assume a stance of humility as a life-long learner whose strategies will change and evolve as one gains more knowledge and skills.
- Understand that how we respond to the world (actions/practices/solutions) comes from how we see the world (perspective/theory/consciousness). When we see more complexity, we have more complex responses; therefore we must never consider our learning to be finished.
- Recognize that we are social beings, always in contextual and dynamic relation to one another.

A second analogy we call *The Grocery Store* and we use it to help students conceptualize antiracism as a *lens of inquiry* rather than as something with which they have to agree or disagree.

***The Grocery Store Analogy***

*Let's consider a social space that many of us encounter on a regular basis: the grocery store. There are recognizable features of a typical grocery store: a parking lot; carts and baskets; check-out lines and cash registers; clerks; various departments, such as dairy, bakery, deli, produce, home and health care products; and rows of dry, canned, bottled, and packaged foods.*

*While a layperson, if asked, "What do you see in a grocery store?" might answer with the above list, a different view would emerge if we were to use more specialized lenses; in other words, what we "see" in the grocery store depends on the lens through which we view it. For example, an engineer may walk into the grocery store and see wall height in relation to structural supports, type of lighting, placement of refrigeration, energy consumption, location of exits, the number of smoke detectors and sprinkler systems, parking spaces in relation to store size, foundation strength, and building materials.*

*A nutritionist might walk into the store and see the quality of food served in the deli and its calorie and fat profile, the range and freshness of vegetables and fruits, availability of organic foods, whether meat and produce is locally grown, how perishable foods are stored, and the cost and amount of unprocessed foods over processed ones.*

*A marketer may not focus on the food itself, but rather on how the food is displayed. Her interest is in the way displays can increase sales. Thus her focus would be on the amount of time shoppers spend in each aisle, what draws their attention, what the most popular items are, how the more expensive foods are positioned on the shelves, how color and signage are used, which packaging is most appealing, what kind of displays appeal to children, and*

*what items are best placed at the check-out counter to entice customers to make impulse buys.*

*Someone viewing the store through a social justice lens would likely take into account dynamics of race, class, and gender and thus focus on different aspects of the store. She might first think about the location of the store in relation to the wider neighborhood and ask questions about accessibility in terms of public transportation. She may also consider the affordability and quality of the products sold in relation to the average income of the families and individuals who live in the neighborhood. She would be concerned with the kind of food and products available in the store and whether they reflect the cultural demographics of the community. She would notice who is assigned to what sorts of work in the store—e.g., who are the people washing the floors versus managing the departments? How are employees treated? What is the pay range, schedule flexibility, and access to health insurance? She would also notice what the working conditions are for the employees, and whether or not they are unionized.*

None of these lenses are "right" or "wrong," but they do fundamentally shape what we see, the questions we ask, and the actions we will take to achieve our goals. In using the grocery store analogy, we invite students to conceptualize an antiracism framework as a *lens of inquiry*; a lens they are asked only to strive to understand and practice applying. Their assessment in the course will be based on the degree to which they can do this, and not on whether or not they agree with the framework. For example, if we take a course in Marxist theory, we are not required to become Marxists, but we are expected to grapple with a basic level of proficiency with Marxism and to practice applying its principles to a set of questions. Whether or not we "agree" with Marxist theory is irrelevant to the course goal of gaining a degree of mastery of the theory.

A final example of an analogy that we use to address another common discourse that emerges in the antiracism classroom is what we call *The Mattress Analogy*. Antiracism education, given its goal of revealing and understanding marginalized perspectives and structural social oppression, is a rare opportunity. But when—in service to "fairness"—instructors give equal time to dominant narratives (or are criticized for not doing so) we legitimize the idea that the conversation is equalizing *only when* it also includes dominant perspectives. In the context of antiracism education, demands to hear the "other side" obscure the reality that we get that "other side" in everyday mainstream media and schooling, unmarked and thus positioned as universal and neutral. This is why in our own practice we have come to deny equal time to all narratives in our classrooms (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Our intention in doing so is to correct the existing power imbalances by turning *down* the volume on dominant narratives while we focus on marginalized perspectives. In this way, we believe that restricting dominant narratives is actually *more* equalizing. We use *The Mattress Analogy* to help students understand this concept.

***The Mattress Analogy***

*Imagine that you have been sleeping on the same mattress for most of your life. Occasionally you may sleep over with a friend or family member, stay in a hotel, or go camping. On these occasions you sleep on a different mattress, but it is rarely as*

*comfortable and you always look forward to returning home to sleep in your own bed. The grooves in your home mattress are worn-in and familiar—so conformed to your body size and shape that you always fall into it with ease and sleep soundly. In fact, many times, you don't even think about the mattress, you just take for granted that you have it and that it's comfortable. However, at some point in your life you have an experience that spurs your growth and your mattress is no longer as comfortable. Your doctor recommends a simple solution: turn the mattress over. You do it once, but find the new side unfamiliar and your sleep is uneasy and fitful. You tell your doctor that you want to turn your mattress back to the original side but she reminds you that this will not solve your problem and that you must be patient with your adjustment to the new side. In time, she says, it will become more comfortable and certainly healthier. She is clear, "You cannot turn your mattress back to its original side if you want to accommodate your growth. You must give the new side more time and practice. It's natural that it feels uncomfortable, but try to remember that this discomfort is temporary and necessary for optimal health."*

Our students do not come to our classrooms as blank slates with no prior ideas about race. Ideologies that support institutionalized racism are normalized and reinforced every day throughout mainstream society. This results in the denial of racism except in very extreme and explicit cases such as a hate crime (and even then, it is not always accepted as racism at all). Very little—if anything—about mainstream discourse will *support* them to grow intellectually, or to practice seeing through an antiracism lens when they leave our classrooms. Despite some student complaints, one or two courses in one's lifetime are certainly not enough to "brainwash" students into a way of thinking. Thus, for the limited time that we have, we need to sustain and support their focus. We must "turn the mattress" on the conditioning into accepting oppressive systems that we all receive every day. We have found that these analogies help our students settle into what initially appears to be a "one-sided" and/or purely ideological analysis and move out of the practice of debating or playing "devil's advocate," practices that are counter-productive to antiracism education.

**Vignettes**

A third strategy that we have found to be effective in helping students engage constructively with antiracism education is the use of vignettes. While the silence breakers help students articulate their claims or questions in ways that open rather than close race discussions, and the analogies offer ways for students to think about antiracism as a conceptual lens rather than as a debate, the vignettes have provided another level of support. The vignettes are stories to which students can relate but that are not as politically charged as explicit discussions of racism can be because they put the student in the protagonist position, unsettle expectations, and evoke curiosity. As such, they have enabled our students to see structural oppression and privilege (the foundation for seeing racism). Below is a vignette we often use in our classes as a starting point for understanding the multiple dimensions of privilege.

*Imagine: You have lived your life in a small, gated community. You are surrounded by family and friends and overall live a happy and healthy life. One day the gates open and you are told that you must venture out and make your way in the larger society. You are excited about the*

*adventure that awaits you and all that you will see and discover.*

*On the way into the nearest city you stop at a café for lunch and notice people staring at you and whispering. A child points at your head while her mother shushes her, and another child begins to cry and hides behind his mother's skirt. Some people smile at you kindly and offer to help you sit down, while others turn away and ignore you. You ask for a menu and the waitress points it out on the wall behind you, and with an irritated sigh asks you if you need her to read it to you. You turn around and tell her no, you can see it just fine. When you turn your body, people look away in pity or disgust. As the waitress walks away, you notice that she has a third eye on the back of her head. You are shocked and quickly look around to realize that everyone in the café has an "extra" eye on the back of their head. Feeling very uncomfortable, you rush through your meal and pay your bill. When the waitress returns your change, you hold out your hand but she places it on the counter to avoid touching you.*

*As you enter the city, similar dynamics occur. Although you occasionally see other two-eyed people, they are usually in service positions, working with their heads down. You begin to feel shame and dread as throughout the day it becomes clear that the three-eyed people see you as abnormal and beneath them. A doctor approaches you and offers to "fix" you. He adds that although the technology to implant a third eye is expensive and dangerous, you might be a good candidate to participate in a university study he is directing. You don't want a third eye; you have done just fine throughout your life and are not interested in becoming "normal" on their terms. You try to explain this to the doctor, but he insists that you would find more social acceptance, which would help you have a better quality of life. "Don't you want to be normal?" he asks. "We have the technology, why suffer unnecessarily?"*

*You quickly leave the doctor and enter a sunglasses store in the mall. Three teenagers are having fun trying on a range of trendy styles. Although the extra lens at the back isn't necessary for you, you can still wear them like everyone else does, wrapped fully around your head. You smile, excited by what you see, but as you pick up a stylish "trio," a saleswoman approaches, takes the glasses out of your hand, and offers you a choice between two "modified trios" while gently patting your arm.*

*The modified glasses are bulky and unattractive and you don't want them. The girls stop talking and watch your interaction with the saleswoman. You overhear one of them say, "Oh my god, can you imagine being born like that?" Then one of them calls out across the store, "What happened to you?" At this point you have had enough, so you tell her that nothing happened to you and that she is being rude. Shocked, she replies, "Whatever. I was just asking. You don't need to be so sensitive." Her friends nod along in agreement. The saleswoman steps in and says, "Dear, maybe you should go," as one of the teens snaps a picture of the back of your head with her cell phone. Frustrated and near tears, you walk out. The last thing you hear is the saleswoman asking, "What was she doing in here anyway?"*

*Wanting to avoid further interactions, you decide to take in a play at the theater. As you purchase your ticket an usher hands you a white cane and tells you that you need the cane to get to your seat. You realize that although you don't actually need the cane, it does serve the purpose of*

*alerting others to your difference. You sit down and try to read the program but it's written in a way that assumes a third eye; folded in order to be visible simultaneously to you and the person sitting in front of you. As you fumble with trying to figure out the sequence of the text, a three-eyed person sitting next to you glances over and, speaking very loudly and slowly, asks, "Do. You. Need. Help?" Feeling insulted, you ignore her.*

*The play starts and you realize that it is a biographic drama. It takes place in a special community much like the one you grew up in. But although you loved your neighborhood, it is clear that from the perspective of the three-eyed people it is a sad and depressing place. The main actor is depicting a character who has lost his third eye in a tragic accident. The play tells the story of his struggle to come to terms with his "disfigurement." Once considered a handsome and talented young man with his life ahead of him, it is obvious to you that the three-eyed people now see him as ugly and his life as pointless. You notice that the main actor is actually a three-eyed person concealing his third eye (you later learn that this actor wins an award for his "courageous and inspiring" portrayal of a two-eyed person).*

*When the play ends, you feel very self-conscious about what the three-eyed people who are the majority of the audience might be thinking about you, and quickly exit the theater. You walk home with your head down, feeling ugly, and begin to wonder if you are crazy.*

While there is obviously no "three-eyed" society that enacts and reinforces its position in this way, we use this imaginary scenario to illustrate many very real dynamics minoritized groups must navigate every day (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). These dynamics include both structural and institutional dimensions, as well as internal and attitudinal dimensions of systems of oppression and privilege. The *Three-Eyed People* vignette allows us to map out the following dynamics inherent in systems of oppression for those privileged within them:

- The belief that your group has the right to its position.
- The internalization of messages of your group's superiority.
- The lack of humility that results from your limited knowledge of the minoritized group.
- The integration of dominant group norms into the structures of society.
- The circulation of your group's norms as the standard by which others are judged and inevitably fall short.
- The construction of what's normal and not normal by the dominant group.
- The ability of your group to set the policies and procedures that benefit you and constrain minoritized groups.

Like the basketball analogy, this vignette also addresses the quick-fix orientations with which many students come to us by helping them understand the depth of ideological, institutional, and behavioral shifts that would need to occur in order to challenge systems of oppression.

Along with our colleagues who work from an antiracism framework, we too struggle to find the right combination of classroom activities, materials, and conditions that will result in constructive learning of antiracism concepts and practice. The strategies outlined in this essay build on the work of those who have gone before us,

as well as on our own struggles as educators who have often felt ineffective and unable to respond constructively to challenging power relations in our classrooms. While we do not claim that these strategies are foolproof or that they will work in the same way in every situation, we have found them to be helpful in unsettling some of the most common challenges antiracism educators face.

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[i] Adapted from course materials co-developed by DiAngelo and Anika Nailah.

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