In the Face of Resistance –
a Lay Facilitator's Experience

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Abstract

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As "lay" facilitators, our knowledge comes largely from self-study, from the White Privilege Conference (for some of us), as well as from our own anti-racism activism. We've discovered that it can be a challenge to respond to those who are resistant. We turn often to each other, to our past experiences, or to the class itself, to find ways to deal with difficult situations that come up in class.

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Opposition vs. an Open Mind

The purpose of our course is not to debate whether racism exists. So, when a white participant announces in the first session that class, not race, is the only issue worth focusing on, or declares, "I'm taking this course because I don't get you do-gooders who are soft on people who just need to get a job," we need to stop the debate before it begins.

Such participants can create a serious distraction. As the other students seek to counter their assertions, the class risks devolving into debate. So we've turned to our facilitator group for ideas. How do we allow such participants to air their views without derailing the class and the facilitators' equanimity? One effective strategy has been to adopt a different approach to class discussions, by shifting from a whole group format to one of sharing perspectives in pairs or triads, with a facilitator paired most of the time with the "debater."

Free Speech vs. Respectful Speech

In another class, one student requested that we use the phrase "the 'N' word" rather than the word itself. "What's wrong with using the 'N' word?" asked a participant of an older generation, who went on to argue that not speaking the word aloud amounted to dishonesty, political correctness, and censorship.

As co-facilitator, I was stymied: To give myself time to think, I asked others in the class for their perspectives. One by one, they spoke about their relationships with people of color and how that word feels deeply hurtful because of the impact on people they care about. Those heartfelt responses reached the "what's the problem?" student, who, to my great surprise, said, "I see your point," and agreed to use "the 'N' word" instead of the offensive word itself. The collective voice of fellow students had been more persuasive than any rule I might have felt obliged to impose.

Being a facilitator of this class, I thought I was up on the latest jargon. But, being from the same generation as the "what's the problem?" participant, I did not grow up hearing phrases like "the 'N' word," which only started to appear in dictionaries in about 1979. And some of the newest terms, such as "temporarily able-bodied" and "cis-gendered" do not easily roll off my tongue. But I don't resist these words because I know how important they are to people I know and care about.

Intent vs. Impact

Several members of a white lesbian performing troupe took one of our classes as a way to understand why performers of color had walked out of a Gay Pride celebration, calling the white group's use of Afro wigs for a hip-hop piece racist. The troupe members, after airing their confusion and chagrin in our class, were able to appreciate the impact of their costume choice and wanted to find respectful ways to reconnect with the black troupe and address racism in their community.

But one troupe member could see no difference between her intent and its impact. She basically felt: "I didn't mean to offend so I didn't offend." Her inability to imagine that her presentation could be received in any way but the way she intended, seemed intractable.

Neither I nor my co-facilitator could immediately think of a helpful response. Only in retrospect did I realize that I might have offered her a fresh way of thinking from my own experience of resistance. The leaders of a three-day antiracist training program once called on me to agree that all white people are racist. I resisted doing so until I realized that those of us who are white *can* accept that we've absorbed racial superiority attitudes while also affirming our efforts to work for racial justice. In other words, we can be both racist and antiracist.

What we facilitators did come up with worked just as well. Instead of throwing the spotlight on this participant during class, we offered the members of the group time after class to explore their feelings and perspectives on the performance incident. We did so in part because we trusted that the experienced queer community organizer (who'd taken the class to support the troupe members)

would help the group reach a resolution, which it did.

A participant later shared the experience. "The space was safe enough that I could work through some very uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and issues about not only the performance event, but also about my own racism: issues within and surrounding me. I was relieved that there was honesty and also humor and compassion. We were all in the same place, it seemed: wanting to do something, at least within ourselves, about racism." The troupe members decided they would use their connections to get the women of color performing group access to more venues by saying, when asked to perform: "We want [women of color performance group] to perform, too." They'd also get word-of-mouth information out about not only their own group's gigs, but about both groups' performances. Their goal was to build bridges of trust that could (eventually) lead to doing a joint show.

Retreat vs. Resilience

Some participants don't resist, exactly. Instead, they just sink into depression. One young person cried out with heartfelt angst: "I wake up each morning, thinking, 'I don't want to be white!'" She was experiencing what racial identity theorists call "dissonance"—the emotional turmoil that can happen when your mindset is shaken up. White people who recognize for the first time the pervasiveness of racism and the extensiveness of their own unearned advantages, can easily sink into guilt, anxiety, and helplessness.

I've been there. Facing the enormity of institutionalized racism can make you think and feel that it's impossible to fix. What has helped me and what I now share with students, is the importance of action.

Since feelings, thoughts, and actions are interconnected, doing something can be an effective cure for hopeless thoughts and feelings of depression. Working with others to carry out a concrete action plan can create change in at least some sphere of your life.

Unrevealed Thoughts and Feelings

Silence can be the most difficult form of resistance: It's hard to deal with what's unexpressed. One white participant stayed quiet for the first classes, except for a few skeptical questions. I was troubled by her reticence but didn't know what was behind it, or how to deal with it.

And then I remembered my own silences when I first took the class that I now co-lead. I hadn't shared all the distressing situations that roiled about in my mind. But I did write them down, and eventually shared them with the co-facilitators. In this course, we ask participants to record their personal "racial awareness journeys." Our mostly silent student, after hearing the frank accounts that others had written, wrote her own. She also shared that she had been reluctant to talk for fear of revealing ignorance.

Still, in our final session, when everyone shared concrete action plans—the goal of the class—she was the only one not to bring a plan. We sensed that she wasn't ready and invited her to use her "plan report time" to simply tell us what was getting in the way. She then opened up about the upsetting situation that had preoccupied her throughout the class: A roommate of color had left their group-living situation saying she couldn't stand how white the house was and declining to give specifics. Her worst fear had come true. Yet she'd felt hurt, even resentful: "You want us to change but you won't tell us how?" After expressing that hurt, she went on to say that she knew that the "how" was her responsibility to understand. She was now ready to do so.

I've accepted that as a facilitator, I won't always know how effectively to respond to resistance, spoken or unspoken. I've also learned to reach out to my facilitator group, to use the collective voices of the class itself, and to reflect on my own experiences. I may still not always have the answers, but that no longer matters. If I'm not learning, how can I ask my students to learn?