Teaching to Unlearn Racism: A White Perspective by Judy Hofer

Like most teachers in the field of adult education, I am a white, middle class woman. I worked as an ABE/GED teacher for almost six years in a predominantly white, rural community in Western Massachusetts. Much of my energy was devoted to figuring out how to address issues of racism in my classroom and program. This may seem odd given that most of my students were white and not surprisingly, addressing issues of racism was not what they expected from a literacy class. And yet I felt that as a white person, I was in a powerful position to support and challenge my students to better understand how racism operates and harms not only people of color, but whites as well.

My desire to push the issue of racism is based on two areas of concern. One is my students’ lives inside the classroom. I wanted to create an environment in my classroom where all people would feel welcome and could develop a sense of ownership in what we did. To do so meant that I needed to go beyond simply reacting to racist comments when they arose and proactively create an anti-racist environment. The second concern is for my students’ lives outside the classroom. I don’t feel that any of us can truly be effective workers, family and community members without addressing issues of racism and other “isms.” Learning to work together across our differences is basic to our survival.

My approach to help whites unlearn racism was not to focus solely on how racism harms people of color, but more so to look at the effects of racism on whites, to examine the root cause of racism, and together, to come up with strategies to deal with it. Racism deprives whites of our own humanity as most of us harbor deep-seated feelings of fear and guilt. It causes us to further separate ourselves from anything other than the most superficial interactions with people of color. Some of us live with the contradiction of feeling that we are decent human beings on the one hand, and the reality that we benefit from and perpetuate others’ oppression on the other. And especially for whites who are also working class or poor, racism keeps them busy fighting people of color over the crumbs, rather than working together to attain jobs with liveable wages and communities with decent schools.

At times I felt that my students and I were making progress, but many times I did not. This work is hard and slow and requires long-term interventions that are very difficult to achieve in adult education programs. I learned to celebrate our successes, even the small ones. Just being able to get my white students to talk about race with people of color is a breakthrough.

Susan, one of my white students, thanked me many months later for helping to see her through her own stereotypes of Puerto Ricans. She explained that now when she has a bad thought about Puerto Ricans, she stops herself and asks if she knows better than to jump to conclusions about all Puerto Ricans.

This was a small but meaningful gain for me. I can also look back on the long hours spent helping whites to become willing participants in the struggle against racism. I am hopeful that my students and I will continue to make progress.

I decided to focus on the issue of racism in the classroom rather than on the community at large because I felt that if we cannot together develop an environment in which we are all treated with respect, we could not work together with the experiences of those from other disenfranchised groups. If you are a woman of color, I am in a one-up position. Use your students’ understanding of what it feels like to be marginalized as a way into helping them empathize with the experiences of others from different disenfranchised groups. If you “get” one of the “isms”, it is then easier to understand the others.

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