



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 to remind herself that she knows better than to lump them together in one group and then blame them all for something. "I'm still working on it," she says. "And so it is," I responded. If we wish to unlearn racism, we need to keep challenging ourselves to bring our actions in alignment with our increasing awareness.

Becoming an anti-racist educator means creating a classroom and program where we all question our assumptions and re-examine our beliefs about people different than us. This can be a long, painful process, but an immensely rewarding one. I still have many questions about dealing with racism with adult students, but I offer these suggestions based on what I have learned in my journey so far.

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- Complicate the notion of race. Any anti-racist work should make sure that racism is not framed solely as a black and white issue. All races need to have their distinct cultures and histories acknowledged. Keep in mind that many people are multi-racial.
- Put the "infrastructure" in place right from the beginning to make any racist incidents "teachable" moments. One of the groundrules for the class and program should be, "No put-downs of any group are tolerated," or stated positively, "Respect for people of all groups is demonstrated by listening and asking questions." This groundrule allows you to then point out a put-down when it arises so the whole class can "unpack" the statement, talk about how that information was learned and consider what new information can be learned.
- Be a model of how to challenge racism. As a white teacher, talk explicitly about race. Share how you came to realize the significance of race and started working on your own racism. What is your own awareness of what it means to be white in a white supremacist society?
- Create a multicultural curriculum. Are works by people of color and other marginalized groups included? Are the achievements and contributions to society of people of color, working class people, and gays and lesbians included? Does the wall art respectfully depict many groups of people and perspectives? Are students asked to consider whose point of view is represented in any piece and whose is absent?
- Find ways to affirm your students' own histories and experiences. Especially with people who are down and out, it is crucial to begin by validating who they are, before asking them to consider how they are oppressors themselves. In working with poor whites, for instance, strengthen their own voices by honoring their struggles, contributions, and perspectives.
- Help students see how they can be both in the one-down and the one-up position, depending on the particular "ism" at any given moment. For example, as a woman, I am in the one-down position. However, relative to women 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 those from other disenfranchised groups. If you "get" one of the "isms", it is then easier to understand the others.
- Draw a map of the community to stimulate discussion about racism and poverty. Where are the affluent homes? Banks? Businesses? Where are the poor homes? Where do people of color live?
- Groups that really want to explore the issue can do this powerful exercise that looks at the institutional nature of racism: Ask each student to draw a picture of the first time that s/he became aware of his/her race or the race of another person. Then ask each student to share this first experience of racial awareness with the group. Consider such questions as, what were they told about the other group? Who told them? Then collectively analyze what institutions were named in each others' experiences such as schools, family, places of worship. What institutional practices need to be changed? Ask them to come up with their own questions for further investigation.
- Make an action plan for how to make a difference. For whites, how can we act as allies of people of color? One immediate step may be to learn how to interrupt racist acts when we witness them. Role play responses to racist comments or jokes. One effective way is to say, "I used to believe that as well. But then I learned that . . . , so now I don't think that's funny anymore."
- Challenge yourself when you feel your students can't handle tackling such a difficult issue. The resistance may in fact be your own! Don't underestimate your students. I often found that experientially they know a lot more about oppression than I do.

PROGRAM IDEAS

- Provide staff development for all staff to learn about issues of oppression.
- Include commitment to diversity as a criteria on performance reviews.
- Hire staff to represent the populations you serve. Are there people of color on staff in decision-making positions? Are there bilingual staff? Are people of color actively recruited to fill staff positions?
- Ask students about their race during intake, even when they look white. My own experience is that many times my students look at me as if I'm strange. That's when I begin to talk about race. I explain that you cannot assume a person's race by what s/he looks like as many of us are a mixture of races.
- Do a program-wide internal inquiry. Which groups of color are or are not being served in the larger community? How can you actively recruit from those groups which are under-represented in your program? Are students of color supported to hold leadership positions within the organization?

Judy Hofer was a teacher at the Literacy Project and now works on a staff development research project conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).