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Bridging Racial Divisions in Urban Graduate Education

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Keywords: Adult Graduate Education, Racism, Higher Education, Diversity

Abstract: One of our core beliefs is that we, as adult educators, are responsible for providing environments that include spaces where dialogues of race and racism occur, which facilitate the learning and transformation of students, our practice and ourselves. However, as white faculty we find ourselves caught in a fabric woven of power and privilege that constantly challenges us to recognize how we live in the paradox of contributing to the ongoing nature of racism as we simultaneously try to transform it. The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to wrestle with this paradox and encourage dialogue and perspectives among adult educators.

A river physically divides the community in which we reside, but our region is also separated by the diverse groups that make up the communities east and west of the river. We are middle aged, middle-class white women faculty members teaching in urban adult education graduate programs. The students in our programs reflect the diverse population of our region, mainly Black, Hispanic/Latino, and White. Besides their racial diversity, privilege divides our students; our classes are comprised of “seasoned” students, who come from advantaged backgrounds where higher education has long been the norm for members of their families to students who are the first in their families to attempt graduate study. The key to economic recovery may be education, yet the city and the university where we teach struggle to provide access to educational and economic opportunities for this diverse population. In order to promote a more equitable world and critical consciousness about the world, we believe that dialogues of race and racism are essential to helping ourselves and our students promote transformation. Our programs and courses address issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender through our curriculum, class discussions, and course activities.

As white women, we recognize that the intersection of power and privilege due to our race may make it difficult for students, both White and Black, to fully engage in these discussions or see our concerns as legitimate. Conversely, as Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998) have discussed, because of our whiteness, our dialogue and discourse concerning these topics in the classroom are probably viewed by the students along a spectrum of trivial to some, while at the same time laudable to others. We challenge ourselves to “practice what we preach” in exposing how power and privilege shape our own practices of adult education, exploring how we center discourse regarding race and create change within our classrooms

One of the important theoretical frameworks that grounds our work is Critical White Studies (CWS), rooted in Critical Race Theory. The foundation of Critical Race Theory is “the uncompromising insistence that ‘race’ should occupy the central position in any legal, educational or social policy analysis” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 98). CWS comes from this tradition in an attempt to “examine the rhetorical struggle over the cultural production of

whiteness with the aim, in Richard Dyer's words, 'to dislodge it from its centrality and authority'" (Lipari, 2004, p. 83). Within this context, the aim is to dethrone the unacknowledged lens of white privilege that pervades the academy, our classrooms, and other aspects of adult education. CWS is focused on "interrupting White privilege" (Cassidy & Mikulich, 2007) as whites acknowledge their "white supremacist consciousness" (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (EACCW), 2002) and its impact on society.

In our classrooms, we attempt to promote transformational learning among students, a theory that purports that through experiences and discussions, people may come to realize the limitations of their ideas and worldviews (Mezirow, 1991). Although dialogue and discussion may help individuals to change their way of seeing things and making meaning in the world, Mezirow postulates that a disorienting dilemma is the first step in bringing about transformation. We have made a conscious and deliberate decision to seek out ways in which students in our classes can work through their differences and find common threads of understanding (Sheared, 1999), seeking to create safe yet challenging spaces for critical reflection as a way to work through disparate, and at times, uncomfortable beliefs and values.

Our issues of positionality and privilege as white women bring unique challenges to the learners and ourselves as we try to bridge the river of racial division in urban graduate education. We endeavor to examine racial biases that affect our classroom practices related to the issues of race, equity, and social justice, facilitating discussions of theories that influence pedagogy to bring about a more equitable society. Future research and discourse should explore practical suggestions for critical adult educators to use in their classrooms, strengthening adult education's theory-to-practice tradition while laying the groundwork for new theoretical development that will further social justice.

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