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## Prepare to Engage

Racial affiliation, gender identification, social stratification, and ethnicity are conversational minefields where few people choose to venture. After 25 years' experience in guiding educators through these difficult conversations, we are sharing tangible, practical advice on how to explore these traditionally taboo topics on your own and with your colleagues. We write about these topics with direct and simple language that, in turn and with practice, will enable you and your colleagues to discuss them as you build community.

Although these topics are complex, we are guided by the philosophy that complexity is built from multiple simple components. And, beginning by discussing simple or basic components frees us to explore our common ill-informed understanding and ignorance and generate connections for future collaborations. More immediate, we want you to be confident when engaging in meaningful conversation about societal challenges surrounding the power dynamics founded upon classifications of race, gender, and class, and the many other excuses and reasons used for misunderstandings that fragment society and disrupt civil community.

We apply these key principles to our work and suggest that you use them to guide your conversations:

- Understanding our values and beliefs is key to knowing ourselves and why we do what we do. In knowing how we come to understand, we begin to know how others understand as well.
- Listening with empathy is important. Listening to others informs our ability to empathize with people who are thought to be different from us. Empathy further expands self-knowledge and fortifies trust within a community.
- Promoting belongingness and focusing on developing healthy relationships between and among us is both needed and wanted.
- Engaging authentically with one another requires developing skills to do so—and using them. We do not live alone.

## Read with Purpose

As an educator, you know that thinking about your intentions for reading—reading with purpose—will help you focus your learning and memory. And, one good pre-reading routine is to raise self-reflective questions about what you are going to read. Ask yourself several key questions:

- What are my assumptions about what I am going to read?
- What are my hopes for reading?
- What do I need to know about myself as I read?

We recommend the good practice of taking notes or keeping a journal. Sometimes you may be provoked in a way that reveals background information stowed deep within your life experience. Such revelation could provide insight as to your willingness or ability to respond to certain situations. Take notes about key ideas you want to remember. What spikes your curiosity may be the entry point to exciting self-discoveries and lead to knowledge of others. What ideas are discussed that are in alignment with your core beliefs? What ideas do not align with the way you self-identify? How might this book relate to you as a person and a professional?

Reading this book is an active learning experience that we hope will engage you and help you to involve others in a commitment to equity. Our hope is that it will help you to raise questions, generate ideas or new ways of thinking, and ignite your courage to have conversations of great meaning that change the culture of schools, social interactions, and larger community environments.

## Practice

You will find a Try This section in each chapter. The activities within have been carefully selected and designed to promote and support your exploration of key ideas. In many cases, a deeper experiential dive into a topic will help you grasp the simple understandings within the complex topic. Reading this book and using the questions and activities will assist you—and your colleagues, if applicable—in developing neural pathways for processing and behaving differently. These experiences can help make connections and further unpack experiences and concepts over time and can help integrate these thoughts and learning into daily life.

As humans, we aspire to social engagement and connection with our community. Through social engagement, we generate, negotiate, and renegotiate experiences to make sense of what we learn and do. Share with your colleagues what you learn and how you react as you read and participate in the activities. If possible, read this book along with colleagues and use the activities to share experiences and have larger, better-informed conversations.

## Summon Courage

As attributed to ancient Chinese philosopher and writer Lao Tzu, “Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” On those grounds, everyone has courage—though it may be a challenge to summon it when most needed. Today, our capacity to be courageous is smothered under a cloak of political correctness given the highly volatile space where relationships coalesce. The toxicity is so pervasive that it has permeated our

homes and private encampments. Some of the most contentious conversations reportedly occur at traditional family gatherings, even Thanksgiving. Even in these personal spaces and under special conditions, or perhaps because of them, summoning courage is necessary.

When we view courage as a muscle, we gain a sense of how courage development might work. As with the muscle, your courage gains strength when used regularly. We also recognize that it shrinks and weakens when not used. But what is courage? How do we describe it?

Courage: 1. the attitude of facing and dealing with anything recognized as dangerous, difficult, or painful, instead of withdrawing from it; quality of being fearless or brave, valor. 2. mind; purpose; spirit (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, May 5, 2019).

We easily understand the first part of the definition as it captures the essence of heroes and heroines in books and movies. As for the second, we believe mind, purpose, and spirit are embodied within a person's heart or *cor*. The temperament for brave action rises from within and offers us strength for acts of valor. It is *cor* that enables a person's action in the instance or instances of adversity. We encourage you to reach into your *cor* and summon courage—courage to have conversations that cross cultural borders, social status lines, and gender-specific assignments. Our intent is to help you and your colleagues follow Lao Tzu's lead to love yourself and your neighbor enough to engage in conversations that harness the potential to bind us rather than to split us apart.

These conversations take effort. If your experiences with these sorts of conversations were divisive or degenerated into shouting matches or tears, you may find it difficult to begin. If you are accustomed to generating critical conversations that lead to positive outcomes, you may embrace these opportunities. If you have been silent on many issues and feel disconnected from your community, take the opportunity to be heard and join in. Despite your experience, the risk of *not* engaging overshadows the risk of pursuit. Disengaging in a space where your participation is needed withholds an important perspective that could inform the action of the entire community. Your voice matters.

## Prepare to Engage

It is our experience that members of the education community—including students, teachers, counselors, psychologists, administrators, parents, and board members—want to connect with one another beyond societal norms. Within or across these groupings, however, conversations about gender assignments, racial identity, social classification, and ethnic affiliation are often considered dangerous to the point of being unapproachable. Connecting across all these identities or affinity groups (real and imagined, personal and professional) requires engagement and purposeful conversation along with an exchange of ideas that reach into our individual experiences, which are unique to our background knowledge or lifeworld. The act of authentically sharing our lifeworld experiences has the potential of unveiling the imaginary differences that divide us into affinity groups. Sharing who you are and your unique experiences and perceptions allows others to enter and experience the world as you do. Stripping away the illusion of separation frees us to see and explore the many nearby pitfalls and entrapments as we learn to eviscerate them from our conscious experience.

With free-flowing purposeful conversation, interconnected relationships are possible. Many school environments, however, function as conversational deserts with sparse dialogues, malnourished relationships, and withered communities. Conversationally famished educators come to our workshops and eagerly break their silence, participate in active discourse, and share their lifeworld. They frequently express fulfillment after a day of productive exchange centered on race, class, sexual orientation, and culture.

We find that conversations that flourish and are free-flowing share the following attributes.

- We love to share our stories. An exchange of struggles, concerns, and joy is a way of connecting and discovering how similar we are.
- We like to feel unimpeded when sharing elements of truth. Our personal perception is truth, at least until we hear more information or different truths. Sharing multiple versions of a story or truth gives us perspective and allows us to be open to hearing and seeing from other points of view. To be open to other points of view

is our primary orientation of expression. Consider the metaphor of a flower unfolding as it blooms to people “opening up” to communicate and exchange ideas.

- We enjoy consensus. The more we agree with one another, the more stable and confident we are in our lifeworld. The more confident we become, the more certain we are of the actions we take.
- We negotiate the perceived shared space among us. Learning the ground rules is essential, especially when cultivating new terrain around traditions perceived to threaten our lifeworld experiences.
- We believe trust is fundamental to communication. Without trust, communication breaks down and relationships are dysfunctional.

We discuss these attributes and highlight their importance in creating healthy relationships. They help us disconnect from unhealthy associations with race, class, and culture. Our intent is to establish a platform for your engagement in healthy relationships beyond these outdated affinity groups.

## Begin with a Story

We draw from our vast experience as equity facilitators working with schools and community organizations in the United States and Canada. We share our proven techniques for facilitating sensitive critical conversations and nurturing relationships. Just as important, we share stories of individuals who are traversing the journey of eviscerating oppressive behaviors and traditions from their personal and professional lives. Stories matter. We honor the years of stories shared by people who have wrestled with challenges that were presented by an illusion of separation. Their stories and insights provide richness and depth to our work. We anticipate that your experience with these topics will be confirmed and challenged, ultimately adding to the richness of your perspective and expanding your horizon of the human experience.

We use different formats to convey our key concepts. The stories, poems, reflections, and activities can help you find the materials needed to construct new meanings and forge better ideas that fit your

community. The stories are from our own experiences and from the experiences of colleagues who gave us permission to share with you. We invite you to consider your own story in similar situations, whenever appropriate. We begin with Shannon’s story.

### *Shannon’s Story*

“ My home is in Baltimore, Maryland. Of the many things that define Baltimore—poets, musicians, history—it is noted most often for the crime rate (an average of one murder each day in 2017). My city has the third largest police force in the United States and remains divided both racially and economically. As a white female in a historically white neighborhood, I feel very comfortable and safe in my community and in my three-level row home with a rooftop deck. Here is an experience that I’d like to share.

On a clear January day with sun shining and the temperature about 60°F, I decided to sit on my rooftop deck and disconnect from my busy work life. With no phone and no company, I knew at the click of the door that I’d locked myself out. Somewhat bemused, I wondered how I was going to get back inside.

My first idea was to break the glass door with the table on my deck. When that didn’t work, I climbed over the railing to the adjacent home. Three railings and decks later, I still did not have success—no one was home to hear me knock on the windows or cry out for help. Panic came over me as I wondered what I would do if I couldn’t get inside.

In desperation, I looked down and spotted a man on the sidewalk. I yelled to get his attention. When he looked up, I said, “Please help me—I am locked out of my house.” He looked shocked when I pointed to my house (three rooftops away) and said, “I live there.” He asked if it would be helpful to call the police for assistance. I insisted that he climb the fence to my backyard and enter the unlocked back door. He agreed. Within a few minutes he climbed the fence, entered my house, climbed the three flights of stairs, tracked through my bedroom, and opened the deck door. Hooray! I was free. With laughter and a sigh of relief, I

hugged him and thanked him from the bottom of my heart for having rescued me. He was my hero!

After seeing him off, I sat down on my couch and began to laugh and then cry. I called my parents and said, “Don’t worry, I am OK.” Of course, they had no idea what had happened, so I explained. They laughed and agreed that I had created quite the story.

Two days later, I took an emotional pivot. My joy at being rescued waned as a troubling reality entered my consciousness. As I traced the event from start to finish, I was saddened by the many times the story could have ended tragically. If I were a black female, would I have attempted to break the glass on my own door? Would I have climbed my neighbors’ railings, walked across their decks, and knocked on their windows? Would I have called to a stranger from a neighbor’s deck and asked him to enter my house to rescue me? Would it have mattered if the rescuer was white or black? Male or female?

These questions and more flooded my mind. What was most disturbing is that I did not think about any of these problems at the time. Why? As a white female, I am nearly oblivious to the perils that people of color face every day. I did not consider that anyone would be concerned about me climbing over railings to neighbors’ rooftops or that anyone would call the police to report me as a thief. I felt completely justified in trying to break into my own house. At that moment, I realized that my whiteness meant something. It gave me the privilege and the confidence to climb on roofs, knock on third-story doors, and demand the help that I needed. In a moment of reflection, I felt both guilt and anger: Guilt because race isn’t something I think about every moment of every day. Anger because other people have to think about race every moment of every day.

I thought of Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr., prominent scholar at Harvard University, creator and host of many PBS movies and film projects, and author of many books and journal publications. His front door jammed and Gates was arrested for breaking into his own house. The police questioned Gates about his proper identity and residence. Despite attempts to prove his identity, he was taken to jail on charges of disorderly conduct. The charges were later dropped (Thompson, 2009).



I thought of Lolade Siyonbola, an African American student who fell asleep while completing papers for her master’s degree. A white student reported her to the campus police as an “unauthorized person” in the dorm. She was questioned by police, who told her, “we need to make sure you belong here” (Caron, 2018).

I remembered Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson, two African American men arrested within 10 minutes of entering a Philadelphia coffee house while waiting to meet a friend to discuss a potential business investment. Their reported crime was “not ordering drinks and refusing to leave.” Charges were later dropped and the CEO apologized in an open letter to the public (Whack, 2018).

I thought of these events and wondered about all the ones that I didn’t hear about. I’m convinced these sorts of events happen daily. I felt anger that these atrocities occur and guilt because I have the privilege not to think of them at all.



## Exploring Your Cultural Identity

We often associate with our sociocultural identities, including race, class, ethnic background, gender affiliation, religion, occupation, and sexual orientation. In Shannon’s Story, Shannon later realized that her experience could have been different, depending on her race and gender affiliation. For this activity, explore how you might experience advantages or disadvantages related to one aspect of your cultural identity. Use the following exercise to remind yourself of a time when you experienced your identity and how the experience affected you.

1. Recall a story connected to one aspect of your social cultural identity (e.g., white, female, dad, soccer parent, or religious affiliation). Make a few notes about the story that connects with how that aspect of your identity affected the experience (who was there, where you were, and why the event was memorable).
2. Identify a trusted friend, family member, or colleague and share your social cultural identity and story. Ask your partner to do the same and share.

3. After you and your trusted friend, family member, or colleague have shared stories about your experiences, gather two or three other parties to engage in the same process (steps 1 and 2). We find it's best for you to offer your story and then allow everyone time to think and write. Give everyone the opportunity to share their experience in a dialogic setting. Below are some questions to consider when creating a safe and nurturing space for authentic sharing.

- What do members of the group need to feel safe while sharing?
- What are some ways that you would like the group to share their story? For example, round robin, in pairs, in group, or in a circle?
- What is a good location for sharing?
- Afterward, use the following prompts to guide your reflection on the activity.
  - What does this experience evoke in you?
  - What did you learn about yourself?
  - What did you learn about how groups share stories and listen to others sharing stories?
  - In what ways might you apply this learning?