CHAPTER 2

Courageous Conversations About Race in an Online Education Course

Amy Gratch Hoyle

Key Terms and Definitions

Asynchronous Discussion	Asynchronous discussions are online discussions that participants can participate in at any time as opposed to synchronous discussions which take place in real time.
Courageous Conversations	Courageous conversations are conversations that encourage and sustain interracial dialogue about race and have the potential to lead to action and progress.
Racism	"In the United States and Canada, racism refers to white racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported by institutional power and authority, used

A. G. Hoyle (✉)
Neumann University, Aston, PA, USA
e-mail: HOYLEA@neumann.edu

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	to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of Color. Racism encompasses economic, political, social, and institutional actions and beliefs that perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between whites and people of Color" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).
White Supremacy	"The academic term used to capture the all-encompassing dimensions of white privilege, dominance, and assumed superiority in society. These dimensions include: ideology, institutional, social, cultural, historical, political, and interpersonal" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

In response to incidents on campus and throughout the nation, the President of Cabrini University, a small private non-profit institution of higher education, stated that issues around diversity generally and race specifically must be addressed in our community and in our nation (D. Taylor, personal correspondence, October 2016). Addressing such issues requires community members to engage in challenging conversations about race. As Cornel West (1993) articulated, race is an issue in American life that needs critical examination, and this examination must compel us to take action for racial justice. Talking about race and racism is critical to understanding our worlds and can provide a cognitive framework for taking socially responsible action.

Within higher education, schools have a moral imperative to prepare socially responsible critical democratic citizens; discussions about race are necessary "dismantle racism" (Bolgatz, 2005a, p. 5). Specifically, Tatum (1992) argued that universities must create a forum for discussions about race in order to create successful multiracial campuses. Miller and Donner (2000) explain that "dialogues about race and racism offer individuals an opportunity to explore who they are in relation to others while also affording them the opportunity to ponder the meanings of their own and others' social identity and group membership" (p. 34). In this chapter, we refer to these forums when they are held in the classroom as "courageous conversations." Understanding of self and others can be a basis for taking

action for more socially just communities. Yet, creating such a forum for discussions about race on a college campus poses a number of challenges. For instance, faculty members are often reluctant to have these conversations fearing they are unprepared and may sound racist themselves. In addition, faculty are reluctant because conversations about race can be divisive (Bolgatz, 2005b; Singleton, 2015; Wormell, 2016). Much of the literature and research on the challenges of facilitating discussions about race in the college classroom has been focused on and even assumes a face-to-face environment, but, as online coursework and programs continue to proliferate and become commonplace for even the most traditional of institutions, there is an equal imperative to develop antiracist curriculum and conversations in remote learning settings as well. Facilitating conversations about race in online courses can both change and increase the challenges experienced in traditional face-to-face settings.

This chapter builds on the results of a qualitative study that explored the experiences of students participating in conversations about race and racism in a fully online section of a graduate Sociocultural Foundations of Education course. The course was required for all students completing a Master of Education degree at Cabrini University. In this course, students engaged in discussions about race, racial identity development, white privilege, racism, and racial injustice. I analyzed a single asynchronous threaded discussion in the course; findings revealed ways in which the discussion was and was not productive and provided greater understanding for how to engage students in courageous conversations in asynchronous online discussions. Building on those findings, I recommend several key strategies for promoting productive and constructive courageous conversations about race in online courses and discuss informed pedagogical strategies that interrupt student resistance to these conversations. First, I provide an overview of literature about courageous conversations and online discussions. Second, I describe the findings from the study and the adjustments I made to the Social Foundations course based on the initial research findings. Those changes yielded more constructive conversations about race, privilege, and racism that led to the concrete recommendations for practice I make to conclude this chapter.

Courageous Conversations About Race

Reflecting what is found in the literature (see Bolgatz, 2005b; Singleton, 2015; Tatum, 1992), conversations about race and racism in the higher education classroom are challenging when the course is taught in the traditional face-to-face modality. Research suggests that teachers may avoid conversations about race fearing it will stir things up that they are unprepared to handle. Further, teachers report that they are concerned about saying or doing the wrong thing (Wormell, 2016) and may believe that examining race will actually create or reinforce racism (Bolgatz, 2005a). Indeed, these difficult conversations can be divisive and may result in students opting out of participating or engaging in class (Zuniga et al., 2007).

Strategies for addressing the challenges of facilitating and promoting conversations about race in the traditional, face-to-face classroom setting have been the focus of previous studies (see Bolgatz, 2005a, b; Tatum, 1997; Wormell, 2016). Similarly, there is an abundance of literature that examines and provides guidance for overcoming difficulties teaching online classes generally and in asynchronous online discussions specifically (see Gao et al., 2009, 2013; Gunawardena et al., 2016). There has been little research, however, that examines the challenges of and providing strategies to enhance conversations about race in online courses. Given the increase in the number of online courses and programs in higher education and the overwhelming need to confront racial injustice, it is essential to understand both the uniqueness of the online environment and the practices that help respond to facilitating learning about a deeply challenging topic, race and racism, in a distance setting.

One such pedagogical method is the "courageous conversation." According to Singleton and Hays (2008), "courageous conversation is a strategy for breaking down racial tensions and raising racism as a topic of discussion that allows those who possess knowledge on particular topics to have the opportunity to share it, and those who do not have the knowledge to learn and grow from the experience" (p. 18). Singleton (2015) argues that courageous conversation "engages those who won't talk; sustains the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted; [and] deepens the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions occur" (p. 26). They provide the opportunity for people to "work together to create solutions for problems about which we are afraid to talk" (Ferlazzo, 2017). At their best, courageous

conversations lead to action and progress. According to Meyer (2006), controversial discussions such as these may be essential to foster learning and the construction of knowledge. Meyer suggests, "If one's educational purpose is to create learning, perhaps sensible controversy in any setting [online or face-to-face] is needed to encourage new ways of thinking" (p. 184).

The literature suggests a wide range of reasons to support having dialogues about race and racism in schools. According to Miller and Donner (2000), "dialogues about race and racism offer individuals an opportunity to explore who they are in relation to others while also affording them the opportunity to ponder the meanings of their own and others' social identity and group membership" (Miller & Donner, 2000, p. 34). Further, Zuniga et al. (2007) suggested that participation in intergroup dialogue "can increase students' understanding of themselves and others, their comprehension of the roots and operations of structural discrimination and cultural hegemony, and their commitment to take concerted action to create more socially just lives and communities" (pp. 89–90). Not only are there positive outcomes for discussing race and racism, there are negative consequences when it is not addressed. When teachers fail to talk about race, the curriculum is impacted and the "hidden curriculum teaches a powerful message that race and racism are not worthy of students' attention" (Bolgatz, 2005b, p. 34).

However, conversations about race, especially interracial dialogues, are uncomfortable and can even be dangerous (Singleton & Hays, 2008). According to Wormell (2016), instructors often avoid such conversations in schools, afraid of stirring up divisive emotions and opinions that they are not prepared to handle. They may also be afraid of losing friends, saying or doing something wrong, or appearing racist and also fear that examining race explicitly might reinforce racism (Bolgatz, 2005b). Therefore, preparing and supporting instructors with strategies for facilitating difficult conversations is critical.

Strategies for Courageous Conversations

The literature includes a range of principles and strategies to promote conversations about race and racism. Bolgatz (2005b) suggested that overall "putting the issue of race on the table is not a matter of charisma. Rather it is about taking risks, being open to hearing what students think,

and maintaining an atmosphere of respect" (p. 34). Wormell (2016) integrates these same ideas in a list of principles to be reviewed and agreed on by the class in order to have candid discussions about racism with students and colleagues:

- "Assume that the other person is doing the best she can;
- Forgive yourself & others for making mistakes;
- Suppress hidden agendas and the urge to preach or politicize;
- Remain nonaccusatory;
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood;
- If you disagree with someone, paraphrase that person's point before responding;
- Avoid language that blames;
- Don't ask anyone to speak for a whole race;
- Acknowledge that candid conversation makes us all vulnerable;
- Avoid associating the quality of a colleague's teaching with comments offered in conversation about racism" (p. 21).

Wormell's principles support the creation of the atmosphere of respect suggested by Bolgatz. Further, Singleton and Hays (2008) recommend guidelines to help create safe spaces to explore race and racism and thus offer opportunities for learning—the Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation. These guidelines set the expectations for students that they must stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak their truth, and expect a lack of closure (Singleton & Hays, 2008). Maintaining these agreements is not easy to do and requires commitment and practice in traditional classroom settings.

In addition to the importance of maintaining an atmosphere of respect, students need a historical perspective in order to better understand the experiences of people different from themselves. Zeichner et al. (1998) explained that students must "examine their own and others' multiple and interrelated identities…(and) understand their own identities as complex multidimensional people in a multicultural society" (p. 168) and then reexamine their beliefs about others. In order to do this, it is critical that students receive "accurate information about the histories, contributions, and current status of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups" (Zeichner et al., 1998, p. 168). These recommendations are consistent

with deKoven's (2011) work which stressed that as members of the dominant culture, white students often lack awareness of how the past has shaped the present for Persons of Color. According to deKoven, conversations about race are stifled when students "overtly or inadvertently use their own lives as a guide by which to measure the lives of persons of color" (p. 156). A historical perspective can help students to not judge the experiences of others based on their own experiences and background. Facilitating courageous conversations in an online learning environment brings additional challenges.

Online Learning and Asynchronous Discussions

The Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017 indicates that in 2015, over six million students in higher education took at least one distance education course. The number of distance education students increased 3.9% over two years leading up to the 2017 study; approximately 29.7% of students are now taking distance education courses (OLC, 2017). Given the increase in the number of students taking online courses in higher education, a better understanding is needed of the type of interactions needed in order to have discussions about controversial topics and the methods that foster student engagement in such interactions.

Research suggests that discussions about controversial topics, while challenging in any course context, are perhaps more challenging in the online environment (Meyer, 2006). For example, Meyer (2006) compared student reactions to conversations about controversial topics such as race, politics, and gender in a hybrid course between face-to-face and online discussions. While students in Meyer's study were less comfortable discussing controversial concepts than noncontroversial concepts, most of the students in the study preferred the face-to-face over online discussions of controversial topics. Further, students worried about hurting another's feelings, although face-to-face discussions generated the most disagreements. Regardless of this, Meyer concluded that the face-to-face discussions appeared to provide a setting more conducive to the discussion of controversial topics.

However, with such a dramatic increase in online learning, there is an increased need to learn how to engage students in courageous conversations in online environments. Research has identified strategies that strengthen online discussions. First, asynchronous online discussions support interaction among students and can help build community in

online courses (Gao et al., 2013). Because asynchronous discussion "free learners from time and space constraints, providing ample opportunity for communication" (p. 469). Second, an instructor should actively guide and orchestrate the discourse in an online discussion in order to create a sense of teaching presence (Shea et al., 2006). Shea et al. (2006) suggest that the aspects of online courses that promote teaching presence are instructional design and "directed facilitation" of discourse. While both are important to creating a sense of learning and community, students in their study identified directed facilitation as more important (Shea et al., 2006). Directed facilitation includes whether the instructor is seen as drawing in participants, creating an accepting climate for learning, keeping students on track, and diagnosing misperceptions. In addition, Shea et al. (2006) reported that students disclosed a better sense of learning and community when the instructor was seen as identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, helping students resolve areas of disagreement, reinforcing student contributions, injecting their own knowledge, and confirming student understanding. These teacher behaviors can enhance a student's sense of teacher presence in online courses and create a greater sense of learning and community.

Despite arguments in favor of asynchronous online discussions, others argue that they might not be the best approach to support teaching and learning conversational content (Thomas, 2002). Gunawardena et al. (2016) found that sharing and comparing information was more common in asynchronous online discussions, but that those experiences did not reach deeper levels of engagement that are essential to the construction of knowledge. Further, Gao et al. (2013) indicated a variety of constraints to online discussions that used threaded forums that included a lack of focused conversations and difficulty fostering in-depth and interactive discussion. Specifically, Gao et al. (2009) created a useful theoretical framework for analyzing the productivity of online discussions. Based on this framework, Gao et al. (2013) proposed the Productive Online Discussion Model (see Table 2.1) which suggested that in a productive online discussion, "it is essential for participants to embrace the following four dispositions: (1) discuss to comprehend, (2) discuss to critique, (3) discuss to construct knowledge and (4) discuss to share" (Gao et al., 2013). The Productive Online Discussion Model provides a framework of dispositions based on the premise that they are necessary in courageous conversations which demand both cognitive and affective engagement by participants.

Table 2.1 Productive Online Discussion Model (Gao et al., 2013)

Disposition 1: Discuss to comprehend
Actively engage in such cognitive processes as interpretation, elaboration, making connections to prior knowledge
Learner Actions
(a) Interpreting or elaborating the ideas by making connection to the learning materials
(b) Interpreting or elaborating the ideas by making connection to personal experience
(c) Interpreting or elaborating the ideas by making connection to other ideas, sources, or references
Disposition 2: Discuss to critique
Carefully examine other views and be sensitive and analytical to conflicting views
Learner Actions
(a) Building upon other students' posts by adding new insights or ideas
(b) Challenging the ideas found in the learning materials
(c) Challenging the ideas in other posts
Disposition 3: Discuss to construct knowledge
Actively negotiate meanings, and be ready to reconsider, refine, and sometimes revise their thinking
Learner Actions
(a) Comparing and contrasting views from the texts or other students' posts
(b) Facilitating thinking and discussions by raising questions
(c) Refining and revising one's own views based on the texts or other students' posts
Disposition 4: Discuss to share
Actively encourage and support other students' thinking and share improved understanding based on previous discussions
Learner Actions
(a) Showing support and appreciation
(b) Synthesizing discussion contents
(c) Coming up with ideas or questions that invite further discussion

While all four dispositions are necessary for a productive online discussion, discussing to critique and discussing to construct knowledge are most vital for conversations about race and racial inequality. The overarching goal of courageous conversations, to promote, strengthen, and maintain interracial dialogue in order to address persistent disparities, requires students to participate in critique and knowledge construction, rethinking their taken-for-granted assumptions about race and racial justice, and encouraging one another to consider new information from multiple perspectives.

In order to create a deeper understanding of content in the Sociocultural Foundations of Education course examined in this study, the students and instructor must engage in discussions about race and racism even though such discussions are often challenging for students. The

study presented in this chapter was designed to explore limitations to and supports for these conversations in an online environment, specifically in asynchronous online discussions. Two research questions were posed at the outset of the study:

1. What dispositions, necessary for productive online discussions, are reflected in online conversations about race in the course?
2. What pedagogical strategies can be used to promote productive courageous conversations in the online environment?

Methodology

The qualitative study was based on analysis of one online threaded asynchronous discussion in a section of a Sociocultural Foundations of Education course. Participants interacted within online discussions in the course, and the researcher collected data from these discussions following the implementation of the course. A professor/researcher stance (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) situated the researcher as instructor in the course. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the beginning of the course.

All students earning a Master's of Education degree at the institution of higher education in this study, regardless of their program of study, are required to take the course, Sociocultural Foundations of Education. The course description is broad but suggests that students in the course will examine inequities in education as they relate to larger society:

> In light of the fact that the system of schooling should be based on principles of equitable access and that every individual has a right to educational opportunities which are just, fair and democratic, students will examine key contemporary issues, policies, and debates in education as they relate to larger society. (Course Description)

The course description and learning outcomes are in the course syllabus and are presented to students at the start of the course. Two of the course objectives directly support the need for students to study issues around race and racism:

1. Students will understand the full significance of diversity in a democratic society and how that bears on equality of educational opportunity and school governance.
2. Students will explain how education can serve the Common Good and promote equality and social justice in a democratic society using knowledge of sociological, historical, political and theoretical foundations of education.

The study of race and racism is more directly connected to additional course teaching goals, developed by course instructors but not written in the syllabus and conveyed only indirectly to students. These deeper goals include:

1. Engage students, most of whom are practicing PK-12 teachers, in courageous conversations about race in order to address persistent racial disparities;
2. Promote self-reflection and the development of empathy and self-awareness;
3. Promote a deeper level of learning (i.e., the co-construction of knowledge); and
4. Inspire teachers to take action in their classrooms and schools as antiracist educators and agents for change in regard to promoting racial equality in schools and society.

In order to achieve these goals and effect change in the behavior and attitudes of teachers, there was a focus on both affective and cognitive approaches to learning throughout the course. While there is a great deal of information that students must learn related to racism in society and schools such as the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of racism and discrimination, it is equally important that students engage in discussions at a more personal and emotional level than is often thought to be needed in academic learning situations. It is through a combination of learning the historical roots and having these deeper conversations that students come to understand themselves and others in the world. In the course, cognitive and affective approaches to learning are integrated and are grounded in learning as an active process in which the students and teacher actively construct knowledge in a community of practice. The construction of knowledge means that the learners and

teacher "create deeper understanding of course content and new knowledge through interacting with members of the learning community" (Lai, 2015, p. 564). Because this affective work is rarely part of classroom activities and discussions, students in my classes have typically not been comfortable with this.

Procedure

During the second week of this 8-week online course, students read and watched videos before participating in a discussion about privilege. The required readings for the module included McIntosh (1989), Tatum (1992), Fiarman (2016), and the first chapter in Howard (2016). Before responding to the initial prompt, students should have read about white privilege, resistance to talking about racism, unconscious bias, and the need to examine all of these things in order to teach for racial justice. The focus of the online discussion was privilege. Students were required to respond to this initial prompt early in the week through a discussion board post and then respond to other students' responses throughout the week:

> *As the readings and video in this module make clear, each of us benefits from some unearned privileges as a result of our group identity. Consider how privilege has impacted your experiences, especially your educational experiences. How have you benefited? And, in what ways do you see the effects of privilege playing out in our classrooms and schools?*

Analysis did not focus on the number of posts because the course requirement states students must post at least three times during the discussion and most students posted only three times. Content analysis was used to systematically evaluate the discussion posts and interpret and code the textual materials. Through this analysis, themes were identified. Interpretation of themes was used to determine whether the discussion was a productive online discussion based on Gao et al.'s (2009) Productive Online Discussion Model.

Nineteen students, in a variety of graduate programs in education—post-baccalaureate secondary certification, post-baccalaureate PK-4 certification, special education certification, and Master of Education—were enrolled in the course. Ten students previously took at least two fully online courses, three had taken hybrid courses in which approximately

50% of the course was offered online, and six students identified this as their first online course. One student participant identifying as Hispanic, three as Black, and the remaining fifteen as white/non-Hispanic. Consistent with work by Meyer (2006), race appeared to be a factor in student responses to discussions about race in this online learning environment, however, I did not explore participant racial identity in this study. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.

While every thread in multiple discussions has been analyzed for the main study, findings and analysis discussed in this chapter are based on a single thread of the online discussion about how privilege impacted each student's experiences. Selection of this thread was based on the high number of students who participated and on the fact that this thread reflects the findings in the overall study in terms of productivity dispositions. All dispositions exhibited in the online discussions generally are exhibited in this thread specifically, which included the initial post and eleven replies, including two from the instructor.

Findings

As research suggests (Meyer, 2006), students are often resistant to talking about race and racism. Rachel, one of the students in the course, expressed such resistance in her initial post in this discussion when she talked about white privilege.

> *After reading the articles and watching the videos for this week's discussion, I do have to admit I got mad. Before even beginning looking over anything, I think it sad that racism is even a topic of conversation. Being a White female a part of a middle-class family, I did not have to worry about money for college, and I was able to get a great education at my public high school. If you were to just read that sentence, you probably already 'judged' and thought I lived a great childhood. After reading the articles, I almost felt bad for being White and truthfully no one should ever feel bad about their race.... I believe that it is not about race, it is about how you present yourself. Socioeconomic plays more of a factor in situations than race. My fiancé, who is black, had the same privileges I did. He went to the same high school, went to a private college and ended up owning his own business. Race has nothing to do with what we were presented with and how we have benefited in life.* (Rachel)

I responded to Rachel's post before other students did and suggested that focusing on one Black person's story is not always helpful when examining issues such as structural racism and dominance. I also suggested a couple of short articles about intersectionality. In retrospect, I wish I had simply asked some probing questions in order to engage the student in reflection and critique.

Fortunately, Douglas, another student in the class replied with a number of questions. Douglas's post involved an effort to "discuss to critique" Rachel's post reflecting Gao et al.'s (2013) Disposition 2. He challenged Rachel's ideas, writing:

> *'My fiancé, who is black, had the same privileges as I did… Race has nothing to do with what we were presented with and how we benefited in life.' I have a lot of questions about your post. What does the word 'privilege' mean to you? Do you feel that you and your fiancé had exactly the same experiences growing up? Do you feel that you have had the same opportunities? Do you feel that you have had the same access to opportunity? Have you ever been followed around by a store's loss prevention staff? Have you ever been pulled over for DWB?* (Douglas)

Rachel responded to Douglas saying, "Privilege to me is some sort of advantage that someone has over someone else. I do feel that we had the same access to opportunity… I have not been followed around by a store's loss prevention staff or been pulled over for DWB, as he never has ever either." While Douglas attempted to discuss to critique, Rachel stifled further conversation, avoiding critical reflection and dialogue entirely.

Theresa challenges Rachel's position, reflecting Disposition 2, but does so less directly than Douglas. Theresa writes,

> *When I was growing up, I felt very similarly to your response. I watched many people around me have more 'advantages' than I did, and when I finally heard of the term White privilege my sophomore year of college, I felt attacked. Me? Privileged? These people who used this term had no idea what I went through in life to get where I was. There were people of color around me who had 'easier' lives than I did, or so I assumed. But what I've come to realize is that privilege is not necessarily what a person has gone through, but rather what a person has* not *had to go through.* (Theresa)

Again, this post could lead to rich conversation about privilege and racism. Instead, Rachel replies by saying, "Thanks," and no one else

engages in this line of the discussion. The dispositions for productive online discussion were largely absent in this exchange.

Attempting to make the discussion more productive, I responded again to Rachel saying that white privilege is not the idea that what a white person accomplishes is unearned or that all white people have it easy. I suggested instead that white privilege is the built-in advantage that white people have separate from effort. I asked her to consider whether or not there have been advantages built into her experiences simply because she is white. Neither Rachel nor any other student responded to my post so there was no development along this line of discussion which was an opportunity to "discuss to comprehend" by making connections to personal experience in order to interpret and elaborate on ideas presented in Rachel's post (Disposition 1).

Reflecting Disposition 1 to some degree, some students connected ideas in the readings to personal experiences and feelings, making connections to prior knowledge, discussing to comprehend, and engaging in both cognitive and affective learning. The students do not, however, interpret or elaborate on ideas and do not make connections to texts or ideas beyond those ideas based on their personal experiences. Both Douglas and Theresa engage in Disposition 2, discussing to critique, when they challenge the ideas in Rachel's post. The discussion falls far short of being productive, however, given such efforts to critique are met with silence when neither Rachel nor any other student reflects on the questions raised by Douglas and Theresa. As indicated, some students make connections to personal experience, but this seems to be done to reinforce one's position and not to interpret or elaborate. And while Douglas and Theresa challenge the ideas in the initial post, there is no discussion beyond the initial critique. Without further discussion, there is no opportunity for construction of knowledge (Disposition 3) in that students do not engage in negotiating meanings or in reconsidering and revising their thinking. While the course is based on the premise that in order to promote racial justice we need to engage in courageous conversations about race and racism, the asynchronous online discussion format in this example was not working. As this discussion indicates, change was needed and with changes to course design and teacher presence, students engaged more productively in discussions about race and privilege later in the course. The increased productivity indicates that

the changes made and described below support courageous conversations about race in online courses generally and in asynchronous online discussions specifically.

Reflection: Rachel's post potentially opened the door to many important conversations about race and privilege. I or one of the other students could have encouraged Rachel to reflect on her ideas and consider why others might challenge this perspective. In addition, I could invite other students to respond based on their understanding of course texts, their own feelings around the topics, and their own lived experiences. Rachel indicated that the topic of privilege brings up negative emotions for her, so it might have been helpful for Rachel or me to ask if any other students experienced these or other feelings. It would also be beneficial to deconstruct Rachel's narrative and consider why the story of one Black person may not reflect the structural racism that impacts people of color daily. This post, however, was one of nineteen initial posts in an asynchronous online discussion and none of these things happened. As a result, the discussion that followed was much less productive, much less courageous than it might have been.

Implications: Facilitating Courageous Conversations in Online Courses

This discussion thread illustrated the problems of fully online threaded discussions as described by Gao et al. (2009). It also revealed some ways instructors might better engage students in the construction of knowledge related to race, racism, and racial justice in online settings. In the thread described above, students did not participate in ongoing discussion with one another, but simply posted a single reply directly to Rachel's post. Based on the analysis presented here and a wider analysis of threaded discussions in the course, adjustments were made in future iterations of the course. The adjustments described below are ones that promoted more meaningful and transformative courageous conversations in future offerings of this online course and are strategies that can enhance the construction of knowledge in other online courses.

Revising the Discussion Format and Focus

Having students participate in small group rather than whole class asynchronous discussions can encourage more interaction among participants.

When students in this course participated in small group discussions they were more likely to respond to another student's ideas in an ongoing discussion. In addition, in asynchronous discussions the discussion prompt requires careful attention. A prompt that asks a more direct question about how a specific idea in the text makes students feel will promote a more engaged discussion in which students are willing to be more vulnerable and in which affective learning takes place. A prompt that encourages students to find material in the text to challenge such feelings promotes deeper reflection.

Adjusting the Overall Course

In addition to revisiting the asynchronous online discussion prompt and the grouping of students in the discussion, adjustments to the overall course were made in order to foster courageous conversations. First, I added new key topics to the curriculum and new texts. For instance, because students need to understand race and racism from a historical perspective in order to understand and accept how privilege plays out in their own lives (Zuniga et al., 2007), the curriculum was revised to include reading about and discussing the history of race, race relations, and racism. I added Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2012) book, *Is Everyone Really Equal?,* which introduces readers to key concepts in social justice education including, prejudice and discrimination, oppression and power, privilege, racism, and white supremacy. Taking time to study these concepts provided students with deeper understanding as well as language needed for conversations about race and racism. In order to foster courageous conversations, therefore, it is important to consider curricular changes, allowing time for students to examine their own and other racial identities, the history of race, racism, and white supremacy in the United States, and other social justice concepts.

Engaging the Affective Domain

As mentioned, this work requires both cognitive and affective learning experiences, and revisions to the course design have taken both aspects of the learning experience into account. While some student participants mentioned feelings about ideas presented in the course, they did little to investigate the feelings or to critically examine their own lived experiences. Personal experiences and feelings were accepted at face value and

not scrutinized to understand how these formed identities and taken-for-granted assumptions. In order to support affective learning it is valuable to help students deconstruct their personal narratives.

Engaging in more learning experiences that are both cognitive and affective requires devoting additional time to creating "safe spaces" for conversation in the class (Kay, 2018). In order to maintain a "safe" space and an atmosphere of respect throughout conversations about race and racism, it is critical that time is set aside to establish agreements at the start of the online course just as it is in the face-to-face course. In the face-to-face setting, an entire class session had always been devoted to developing agreements or principles that would guide the courageous conversations throughout the course. The online course is only eight weeks long, so time had not devoted to establishing the agreements or guidelines. The results of this study made clear that taking this time at the start of the course was essential. While Singleton and Hays' (2008) Four Agreements were the basis for our discussion of agreements and guidelines, each class was encouraged to include in their guidelines whatever they decided was needed to create and maintain a space in which they could hold courageous conversations. While establishing our agreements, I provided examples from various sources including Singleton and Hays' (2008) agreements, Wormell's (2016) principles, and others. The discussion needed to establish the agreements provided an excellent opportunity to practice listening to one another and respecting multiple perspectives. In addition to establishing and committing to our agreements, I reminded students frequently that a strong opinion is not the same as informed knowledge and that putting effort into protecting rather than expanding our current worldview prevents our intellectual and emotional growth. The class agreements were revisited throughout the course and were especially important when conversations get heated on one hand, or stall on the other.

Reinforcing Agreements

Conversations during online synchronous sessions provide opportunities for reinforcing the agreements made as well as for developing the dispositions (Gao et al., 2013; see Table 2) needed for productive online discussions. I made adjustments to reinforce those agreements and develop dispositions. During synchronous sessions, I will post responses to comments that model dispositions for productive online discussions.

My comments, for instance, were designed to prompt reflection and dialogue about uncomfortable or even contentious topics. Singleton and Hays (2008) provided several reflective questions that prompt both critical reflection and thoughtful dialogue: "(a) Can you tell me what you mean when you say…? (b) Is it possible for you to say more about…? (c) Have your thoughts been shaped by others or is this your own personal perspective? (d) Why do you think others might want to challenge your perspective?" (p. 21). These questions promoted reflection as well as ongoing discussion when used in instances where there was pervasive silence following a student's comment or when a student's comment seems to reflect a racist ideology. Further, during synchronous class meetings, students had opportunities to work in small groups in breakout rooms. This provided another opportunity to reinforce class agreements, created a safe space, and encouraged the construction of knowledge. I was able to visit these virtual breakout rooms and facilitate conversations, reinforcing what was needed to create a safe space and a conversation that included negotiation of meaning.

Maintaining Teacher Presence

In conjunction with curricular and pedagogical adjustments, the study reinforced the need for teacher presence in online courses. As indicated by Shea et al. (2006), teacher presence must be promoted in online courses in order to generate a sense of connectedness among learners and to engage learners in more critical reflection. Through a combination of independent writing, asynchronous discussions, and synchronous online sessions, I am able to engage with students as they process knowledge in a variety of ways. Throughout the study of white supremacy, students wrote reflective journal entries which I read and respond to but did not grade. After reading about white supremacy, students began participating in small group asynchronous online discussions. The goal of the discussion for each group was to identify misconceptions about white supremacy and explain how it is manifested in institutions. We then hold an online synchronous session with the entire class in which each group presented their conclusions and students talked about the aspects of the small group discussion and the study of white supremacy that were challenging and/or made them uncomfortable. Based on this discussion, we reviewed misconceptions about racism and began to define antiracist education. In addition, throughout the exploration of white

supremacy, students engaged with authors of various texts, their peers, and the instructor. Being exposed to multiple perspectives in a variety of formats provided opportunities for knowledge construction and refining and revising one's worldviews.

One of the issues that seems to stifle online asynchronous discussions was some students' lack of clarity about the audience. As mentioned above, using small group asynchronous discussions was also beneficial to address that concern. In small groups, students began talking with one another rather than simply writing to and for the instructor. Typically, a student's first post is written to the person who has created the prompt, most often the instructor. In the revised course, students worked in groups of three or four; this structure encouraged them to write to and for each other. I would then join the conversation, asking questions and adding information; however, the conversation in this instance was more natural and fluid.

Teacher presence in these asynchronous discussions must be intentional. First, I encouraged students to focus on areas of agreement and disagreement (between the students, between the students and the texts, etc.). Second, I asked questions to encourage students to help students resolve disagreements and look for consensus or at least understanding of one another's views. Third, I reinforced student contributions to the discussion and added my knowledge while also confirming student understanding. Teacher presence is essential in online courses and small group asynchronous discussions can provide more opportunities for teachers to engage with learners in constructive ways.

Course Assignments: Privilege

Assignment 1: Privilege and Cultural Identity Development (Journal Entry)

Students complete this journal writing assignment after completing the McIntosh (1989), Tatum (1992), and DiAngelo (2018) readings as well as the Introduction and Chapter 1 in Howard (2016) and after a synchronous discussion about categories of oppression and agent and target groups. This assignment is shared with only the instructor who provides feedback, asking questions to encourage students to engage in critical reflection. Through some questions I am able to bring relevant

ideas from the texts to the student's attention. This assignment is required but not graded.

> *In this week's journal entry you will reflect on your own cultural identity development and how privilege has played out in your life. There are many categories of oppression including racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism. We have discussed agent and target groups in each of these categories. Identify a category in which you are a member of the agent group and reflect on the unearned privileges you have been given as a result of this group membership.*

Assignment 2: Racial Privilege (Asynchronous Online Discussion)

After receiving feedback on Assignment 1, we engage in a synchronous discussion about unearned privileges generally and racial privilege specifically. Students discuss the following prompt online in small groups. The instructor engages in the small group conversations with the goal of encouraging groups to ask questions, engage with the texts, and challenge one another's taken-for-granted beliefs.

> *The texts explored in this unit suggest that each of us benefits from some unearned privileges as a result of cultural group identity. In what ways do you see the effects of racial privilege played out in classrooms and schools? Have you witnessed the effect of racial privilege in your own educational experience (as a member of either the agent or target group)?*

Conclusion

Deliberate and consistent teacher presence and intentional course design are essential when developing and implementing online courses, especially courses that seek to engage students in cognitive and affective learning. When the educational outcomes include participation in courageous conversations about race in order to address persistent racial disparities, attention to teacher presence and course design is even more vital.

Based on findings from the initial study described in this chapter, a number of adjustments have been made to this course and are resulting in more productive conversations about race. Focus has been placed on more frequent and varied approaches to teacher presence, a shift in course curriculum to emphasize key concepts in social justice education, and a change in pedagogical approaches to teaching. It is important

that I continue to study the course generally, focusing on the dynamics and content of online discussions, to ensure that the changes made in the course continue to generate more productive and courageous conversations.

The research also needs to be extended to include attention to the influence of race and gender. In a face-to-face class setting, interracial dialogue is necessary for courageous conversation (Singleton, 2015). In generating such conversation face-to-face, when and how the instructor engages with students, teacher presence, is a key factor, suggesting teacher presence is also a key factor in online spaces. Future research must include attention to the intergroup aspects of online discussion. For example, the race as well as the gender identities of students need to be included in the analysis in order to understand who participates, how and when they participate, in what ways they participate, as well as how participation by students of different genders and races influences the dispositions of students and the outcomes of the discussion.

It is critical that we engage in discussions about race and racism as an important step in the move to action for racial justice. While challenging, with thought given to course design and teacher presence, it is possible to create a forum for these discussions in online courses. While such dialogues do not guarantee action, through the construction of knowledge around race and racism in the United States students gain the capacity to become engaged citizens in the fight against racism. As with other antiracist education, an approach to education that emphasizes courageous conversations about race focuses on the inequitable distribution of power. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explained that antiracist education, "centers the analysis on social, cultural, and institutional power that so profoundly shape the meaning and outcome of racial difference… Antiracist education seeks to interrupt these [power] relations by educating people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, ideologies, structures, and institutions that keep racism in place" (p. 119). With thoughtful course design and intentional teacher presence in online courses, students exhibit dispositions—discussing to comprehend, critique, construct knowledge, and share—which are critical to courageous conversations about race and the action for social justice generated as a result of these conversations.

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