

When the Dialogue Becomes Too Difficult: A Case Study of Resistance and Backlash

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This case study explains varied perspectives on a difficult dialogue. It provides recommendations for student affairs professionals and faculty members who work with students and teach courses in content areas that are related to diversity, social justice, and privilege.

Educators who prepare multiculturally competent students use a variety of methods to accomplish this task. Regardless of the method, however, achieving multicultural competence inevitably involves difficult dialogues regarding race, religion, and sexual orientation. This article presents an actual case describing what happened when a difficult dialogue about race took place in a classroom setting. Student development theory including Helm's (1990) White Identity Development model, Perry's (1970) Scheme and Watt's (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model are used to provide a theoretical framework in case analysis to discuss the involved parties' behavior.

Helms (1990) contends that Whites are innately benefactors of racism. Thus, she proposed a White racial identity development model designed to assist Whites in the process of adopting a nonracist White identity; for this to happen, Whites must abandon personal racism as well as recognize and actively renounce institutional and cultural racism. Phase I of the model – Abandonment of Racism has three statuses: (1) *Contact*, (2) *Disintegration* and (3) *Reintegration*. Phase II – Defining a Nonracist White Identity also has three statuses: (1) *Pseudo-Independence* (2) *Immersion-Emersion* and (3) *Autonomy* (see Helms, 1990). Perry's (1970) Scheme of Cognitive and Ethical Development consists of nine positions which students move through with respect to intellectual and moral development. These stages are characterized in terms of the student's attitude towards knowledge and are grouped into four

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categories: Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism and Commitment (see Perry, 1970). Watt's Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model consists of eight defensive reactions, motivated by fear and entitlement, when one encounters difficult dialogue. These defensive reactions are grouped under three categories: Category I –Recognizing Privilege Identity has three defense modes (1) *denial*, (2) *deflection*, and (3) *rationalization*. Category II –Contemplating privileged Identity consists of (1) *intellectualization*, (2) *principlum* and (3) *false envy*. Category III—Addressing Privileged Identity includes (1) *Benevolence* and (2) *Minimization* (Watt, 2007). Collectively, these theories focus on cognitive and affective as well as behavioral changes in college students (and others), and encourage student affairs practitioners and faculty members to explore creative and collaborative methods for reducing oppressive actions in the classroom and on campus.

Below the case will be presented and then analyzed using the aforementioned developmental theories. The article will conclude with practical applications for student affairs professionals and faculty members.

The Case (The names in the following case are pseudonyms)

Dominique Stephens is an African American associate professor who has taught diversity related graduate courses in a predominately White institution for nearly a decade. She is keenly aware of how racism shapes students', particularly White students', reactions and responses to her as a teacher and to her as an expert on how race informs college student affairs practice. Yet, she was surprised and frustrated by the events she endured one semester while teaching the Diversity in Education course.

After attending a few classes, a White male student, Kent Peterson, contacted Professor Stephens via email, indicating his discomfort with her course and the comments she and his fellow students made about race and racism. She invited Mr. Peterson to meet with her to discuss his concerns. Instead, Mr. Peterson sent another email, which he copied to her department chair, stating that the classroom environment was hostile to White males and that he was "uncertain" about returning to class. Professor Stephens and her department chair, Joseph Hayes, requested to meet jointly met with Mr. Peterson. During this meeting, Mr. Peterson asserted his belief that White privilege and racial discrimination do not exist. He cited his professor being an African American woman and Oprah Winfrey having a television program as evidence. He was also very upset that Professor Stephens allowed other students to directly disagree with him during class sessions. To address his concern, Professor Stephens suggested a new discussion policy, in which students do not direct comments to other students but to the class as a whole. Mr. Peterson agreed to return to class under this new guideline and remained in class for the semester.

Prior to the final class, Professor Stephens received an email from Mr. Peterson with a grievance letter attached. He alleged that Professor Stephens and other students had harassed him during class and that Professor Stephens graded him unfairly. In a separate email, Mr. Peterson requested the department chair assign an observer (a campus police officer) to attend the final class because he feared for his safety. Mr. Peterson was scheduled to discuss an article on White privilege during the final class.

Professor Hayes and Professor Stephens decided that an observer was not warranted because this would send a bad message to other students about their freedom to express their views. Mr. Peterson had also forwarded his allegations and request for a campus police officer to attend the class to several offices in university administration including the Provost's Office and the President's Office. Simultaneously, the Provost's Office indicated that inviting an impartial observer was a reasonable request and the department chair, who was scheduled to be out of town the night of the class, recommended another full professor, Professor Randall Cartwright (an African American), attend the class. After sensing hesitancy on the part of central administration with his choice of observers, the department chair asked a White female associate professor, Professor Stacy Mathews, to observe as well.

Professor Stephens, deeply offended by this decision, informed the associate dean of the college that she would not permit her colleagues to observe her class, but she did agree to permit campus police to be stationed near her classroom. Professor Mathews agreed to meet Mr. Peterson before class and inform him of the police presence.

Mr. Peterson made his presentation without incident. However, it was clear that other students were confused and concerned by the presence of campus police outside the door to the building. Professor Stephens felt the other students withheld reactions to some of Mr. Peterson's more outlandish comments because they sensed the tension.

The ordeal with Mr. Peterson took a tremendous toll on Professor Stephens both professionally and personally, and Mr. Peterson's behavior raised serious concerns about his ability to work within a diverse setting. The situation raised additional concerns about the university's approach to address complaint submitted by the student.

Case Study Analysis

Dynamics of Race and Gender

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1996) addressed a series of challenges African American professors face when teaching White students. She articulated the silence that can occur as a result of White students feeling ill at ease to speak out in class, especially when they assume their views are not those held by the faculty member of color. In this case, the White student expected that his professor should silence other students from voicing their disagreement with

his views during class discussions. Mr. Peterson's behavior was likely motivated by a lack of cognitive readiness to move toward establishing, what Helm's (1990) would characterize as, a positive White identity. For example, the perceived pressures of being enrolled in a required diversity course involving race-related discussion taught by a Black female Professor seemingly created quite a degree of emotional distress, which caused Mr. Peterson to resist the learning process (the diversity course). Additionally, Mr. Peterson's behavior is consistent with what Watt (2007) refers to as *fear and entitlement* as he attempted to circumvent participating in the diversity course based on "feelings of discomfort" with the professor and his fellow classmates. Moreover, it is likely that his fear of exploring his White and male privileged identity prompted him to act by voicing his concerns through a grievance process and he presumed that he would receive support because he initiated contact with those of his same race and gender who were in positions of power (i.e. department head, provost, etc.). Unfortunately, the administration's willingness to send an observer served to legitimize his feelings of entitlement and transformed the power relations between the teacher (African American female) and student (White male). This student was able to exercise his White male privilege several times while the power and reputation of the female faculty member of color were being diminished. Professor Stephens felt the absence of power, respect, and collegial support at all levels beyond the department chair. Due to the interacting dynamic of race, gender, and power, Mr. Peterson was able to act on his feelings of discomfort in ways that presumably gained him more power and took away authority from Professor Stephens. Consequently, Mr. Peterson's positive learning experiences were compromised. Regrettably, the support of Mr. Peterson's privilege as a White male was evident in the administration's willingness to accommodate the student's uninvestigated complaint by having the class observed by an outsider. Professor Stephens concluded that her power and authority would not have been questioned if not for the race and gender stereotypes that helped to empower Mr. Peterson (White and male) and diminish herself (Black and female).

Policy and Procedure

Colleges and universities throughout the country typically have established policies, procedures, and standards of conduct that are designed to protect the rights and freedoms of all members of the academic community. If student affairs professionals are accused of unprofessional or discriminatory behavior by students who hold extremist views on a particular subject, the accuser would be expected to follow the university's formal grievance protocol and process. The University and College espoused a commitment to diversity, but

when given the opportunity to demonstrate that commitment came, they failed. There were several occurrences when administration could have contacted the faculty to seek clarification on the issue that was continuously escalating, but that never occurred.

The legitimate grievance process was subverted in this case, and the subversion seemed to be directly related to the student's exercise of White male privilege. As a matter of principle, the grievance process should proceed unencumbered by interference from upper level administrators (i.e., University President, Vice-Presidents, Deans, etc.) who are not directly involved in administering the process. Unfortunately, the ideal is not always the norm. Many student affairs professionals encounter students who ignore or circumvent the grievance process by complaining directly to the President, Provost or other high ranking official of the university. These students tend to believe that they will receive a quicker and more favorable response by "going to the top" with a concern rather than following a process. When students deliberately by-pass or otherwise circumvent the grievance process, it is the responsibility of all officials--from the support personnel in a departmental office to the University President--to re-route those students. Failure to do so compromises positive learning experiences for students, compounds the problem in numerous ways, and creates new issues among those involved.

In this case study, it would have been beneficial to have collaborative arrangement already established between the academic affairs, administrative, and student affairs offices on campus. Many higher education researchers have suggested that fostering better collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals is critical to fully maximizing campus life for students and the educational potential of colleges and universities (Smith, 2005; Magolda, 2005; Kezar, Hirsch and Burbank, 2002; Engstrom and Tinto, 2000). A student affairs professional may have been able to suggest or design professional development opportunities on campus for Mr. Peterson that were less threatening to help raise his awareness about diversity issues which ultimately might have supported his in classroom experience. In essence, this case study is an excellent example of the need for greater collaboration across university campuses, especially between academic affairs and student affairs.

Relevant Theoretical Applications

An understanding of racial identity can be helpful not only in dialoguing about race or other forms of oppression, but also in understanding the behaviors of people. According to Tatum (1992), "the introduction of race and other issues of oppression often generate powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to fear, anger and despair" (p.1).

If not addressed, these emotional responses can thwart the learning process of oppression-related content. Helms would contend that Mr. Peterson is in the *Contact Status* which is the first stage of her White Identity Development model. This Status is characterized by attitudes which suggest White is so much the norm that it is taken for granted. Mr. Peterson, an undergraduate student, seems to be in denial regarding racial privilege and oppression as illustrated by some of his comments in class. Unfortunately, the discrepancies between his expressed values and reality (as presented in class discussions and instruction) have created anxieties manifested in his negative disruptive behavior (contacting the University President's office, filing grievances, etc.). Mr. Peterson's cognitive dissonance about exploring his White identity is quite evident in Perry's scheme.

Perry's (1970) scheme suggests that students who think in dualistic ways show several predictable characteristics. First, their encounters with uncertainty or diversity are often very stressful. A classroom environment that allows for a free exchange of ideas between students (diversity of thought) as well a variety of class members from different ethnic groups (ethnic diversity) would pose a challenge for these students. Second, interpretive tasks such as essay assignments where there is typically no one right answer may feel threatening. Further, it is difficult to compare or contrast ideas when these students do not accept that a variety of legitimate viewpoints exist. Third, these students expect that all knowledge flows from the instructor who has the authority (and the responsibility) to give the "right" answers.

Students who think in the dualistic manner may become extremely annoyed with instructors who allow diversity of opinion and who change their minds about a topic after discussion. A dualistic student expects the faculty to be the authority and always right. In this case, Mr. Peterson appeared to have difficulty with the ambiguity associated with guidelines for the content, process, and grading criteria for the class. One of the goals of higher education is to promote the cognitive, social and emotional development of students, and some form of cognitive dissonance is typically employed in order for development to occur. This goal is difficult to meet when students defend their dualistic perspective and avoid dissonance by using the power and privilege to circumvent educational opportunities that promote development. Mr. Peterson avoided the dissonance he was feeling by labeling Professor Stephens and his classmates as wrong and the behavior (filing a grievance, requesting an observer) he displayed to "protect" himself as right. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) posits that when confronted with new information that is incongruent with previous knowledge, students

may experience psychological discomfort or dissonance (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). It appears that Mr. Peterson was experiencing this form of dissonance. In essence, Mr. Peterson's White identity status as well as his dualistic views seemed to have influenced his attitude and behaviors. It is also evident that some of the defense modes described in Watt's PIE Model were used by Mr. Peterson in the process of resisting the new learning.

Watt's PIE Model. Watt's (2007) PIE model describes eight defense modes associated with behaviors individuals display when engaged in difficult dialogues related to social justice issues. Mr. Peterson displayed at least three defenses described by Watt's (2007) PIE model. White students engaged in difficult dialogues regarding race often become conflicted. When Mr. Peterson realized he could not avoid a meeting with the department chairperson and his professor, he then moved into *denial and minimization*. In this particular case, the student seemed to have projected his own racist perspectives onto the class members and the instructor in order to resolve the dissonance he was experiencing. Although the student denied the existence of White privilege, he used that privilege to portray himself as a victim of discrimination and to silence further discussion of this topic. He also asserted that White privilege and racial discrimination do not exist. His reactions revealed the uneasiness he felt about exploring his privileged identity. To avoid his discomfort, Mr. Peterson reacted defensively by minimizing the problems related to race in this country and denying that there was even a problem. This is evidenced in his statement about Oprah Winfrey having a television show and Professor Peterson having a job. In this one statement, he minimizes the complexity of racism by denying it as a problem and presenting surface examples.

Mr. Peterson quickly moved to *Deflection* to avoid focusing on his discomfort (the actual reason for the conflict with Professor Stephens), through attempting to recruit a higher authority as an ally. In the e-mail to the department chair, Mr. Peterson quoted the *1964 Civil Rights Act*, suggesting that his rights as a White male must be protected. He deflected attention away from his discomfort and toward legislation about rights. Despite the fact that the chair communicated his support of Professor Stephens verbally and by action, Mr. Peterson still appeared to view his interactions (via email) with the chair as an act of solidarity between White men. According to Watt (2007) PIE model defense modes are relational and directional toward new awareness regarding issues related to diversity and social justice. In the case presented, the primary defense modes (i.e., denial and deflection or rationalization) displayed by Mr. Peterson in response to a diversity course (i.e., new awareness) can be categorized as what Watt calls *Recognizing Privileged Identity*.

In summary, this case demonstrates how a student's resistance to oppression-related course content resulted in behavior that ultimately interfered with positive learning. The case also raises many issues regarding how complaints involving diversity and social justice issues can be mishandled on college campuses, particularly when the complainant is White and male and the faculty member is Black and female. The case analysis considers the complexities of race and gender as well as power and privilege. Additionally, it reflects on the administrative policies and procedures when a student files a grievance. Theoretical frameworks such as Helm's Identity Development theory, Perry's Schemes and the Watt PIE Model can help us to understand the various reactions of students like Mr. Peterson as he coped with the discomfort associated with having difficult dialogues about diversity related to issues of race, power, and equity. It is therefore imperative that student affairs professionals and faculty members are knowledgeable of various student development models and theories that might assist in enhancing the multicultural learning and development of students they serve.

Suggestion for Practice

As mentioned above, the handling of this situation could have been improved upon if there were collaborations between academic affairs, senior administration, and student affairs offices on campus. Also, the conflict between Professor Stephens, the students in her class, and Mr. Peterson might have been avoided if some of the following practices for the classroom were used.

First, the instructor should design the course so that the first part is highly structured and teacher-centered with pre-arranged opportunities for discussion and the second part is more spontaneous and student group-centered. This would help a student operating from a dualistic perspective, responding from a recognizing privilege identity or in the contact stage of identity development. Second, the instructor should provide opportunities for one-on-one as well as small group interaction. The professor should challenge and support her students through consistent written and verbal feedback in the class. This provides the students with a variety of safe places to process the uncomfortable content discussed in the courses. Lastly, the instructor might consider consulting with a student affairs practitioner such as the Dean of Students at the initial onset of such behavioral challenges as well as having a colleague available as a sounding board to process the events that transpire during the course. This might help alleviate some of the stress associated with teaching diversity and social justice courses. Being able to talk with a student affair professional and a faculty colleague might also help the

instructor process some of the defensive behavior being observed and devise strategies for prevention. Although these suggestions will not make difficult dialogues any easier, they will increase the likelihood that defensive or resistant students will be able to accommodate new information and the instructor will be able to maintain a productive learning environment. They will also further collaboration between student affairs professionals and faculty members as partners in facilitating positive learning outcomes.

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