

## **Operating Principles: Some Key Findings for Enabling Group Learning**

We've identified some key concepts that place responsibility for interactive learning in the hands of participants and help them develop a more critical perspective. This methodology has a dual function. It is essential for establishing the trust and building the relationships that enable discussion of controversial or sensitive issues such as race and gender. It is also relevant as a broader learning theory in classrooms or forums in which race and gender are not center stage.

### **Sharing Power**

Participants play a major role in defining the problems, selecting materials and designing the learning process and outcomes. This changes the relationship among the participants to each other and to those in "authority". Sharing power helps to disrupt habits about who is entitled to speak, who has something to say, and what is acceptable.

### **Creative Experimentation and Active Learning**

Participants explore problems using various modes of engagement that reflect different learning styles including discussion, role-plays, storytelling, and theater. New formats encourage brainstorming and innovative problem solving. Participants often plan group interactions within the classroom as well as group projects tackling real world problems.

This form of experimentation requires intensive preparation, including meeting with small groups of participants in advance. Student or participant involvement in designing innovative formats is key. It makes a huge difference to participant's willingness to take intellectual risks, to invest energy in the learning project, to retain information long-term and to begin to innovate and problem-solve creatively. Teacher-designed role-plays encourage active learning but often do not have these community building or cascading effects.

### **Critical Reframing**

Participants brainstorm about innovative frameworks for thinking about problems and are encouraged to question things that they take for granted. Developing a "critical perspective" means first understanding the assumptions and values that underlie conventional approaches to controversial issues. This shifts discussions away from polarized or zero-sum thinking to stretch for new paradigms. Being critical also means expanding the time frame and the scope for thinking about problems, by revisiting conflict in subsequent sessions. The challenge is not so much to resolve disagreement but to give participants resources to tackle big issues of racial and social justice.

To see these principles in action go to Law School Overview

## Goals for a New Approach to Shared Problems

We ask participants to stretch their conventional conceptions of race, class, gender and power. We strive to...

- Bring together a diverse group concerned about race, gender and class or whose jobs involve issues of social justice or disadvantage
- Reveal, critique, trace, and experiment with problems at the intersection of race, class, gender, power and injustice
- Create an active learning space that challenges the distinction among personal, political and professional choices, integrates research with teaching, and experiments with democratic participation
- Encourage innovation in professional and advocacy roles that reflect critical thinking and effective problem solving

**"Our experience revealed the importance of having the participants actively involved by creating the project, defining its goals, and shaping its methods of inquiry. Even with a group motivated to work together, careful attention must be paid to the method of interaction, the approach to conflict, the allocation of responsibility, and the definition of goals."**

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## Challenges

In our experience, learning environments discourage engagement when they:

- produce bi-polar thinking on complex issues
- silence or exceptionalize race, class and gender
- rely on the adversarial process as the main way to resolve conflicts
- emphasize one type of learning that downplays multiple learning styles and personal or emotional involvement
- socialize people to learn their place in a hierarchy, discouraging experimentation, collaboration and innovation, encouraging passivity, and undermining motivation to take intellectual risks
- uncritically accept underlying assumptions and categories

Multi-racial learning communities challenge these familiar framing techniques and invite learning to take place on multiple levels. They encourage sustained connection to the learning project even in the face of conflict.

**"Our class challenges the silence by questioning traditional legal pedagogy, professional identities in the law, and our position—as students— relative to this pedagogy and identity."**

## **Measuring Success**

Although each learning environment is unique, we've noticed some telltale signs that real learning is taking place.

We find it useful to ask ourselves the following questions as we proceed.

### **Motivation**

- Are participants committed to the learning process, as evidenced by time and energy devoted both inside and outside the classroom?
- Do participants continue to work on these issues or projects after the course ends?
- Do they try to meld their ideals, their professional identity and their in-class work?

### **Critical Analysis and Communication Skills**

- Do participants listen and reflect critically on their experiences and assumptions?
- Do participants cultivate varied ways of thinking and acting, addressing complex problems that inspire them to join the learning environment?
- Do participants gain new confidence to speak out in contexts where they previously remained silent?

### **Relationship Building**

- Do participants solve problems as a group and build on the strengths or diversity of opinion that other participants offer?
- Do they develop relationships outside of class for moral support, the pursuit of transformative ideas, and innovative professional identities?

### **Intellectual Risk-Taking and Engaged Disagreement**

- Are participants willing to make mistakes, expose their vulnerabilities, and speak up when they disagree?
- Do they learn from error and conflict rather than retreat?
- Do they involve themselves in the group and reach for new challenges?

## **Transformation**

- Do participants experiment with their roles and grasp their potential as innovators?
- Do they rethink their perspectives on issues and question their own roles as law students, lawyers, parents, police officers, educators, or professionals?
- Do they begin to understand and address complex problems in new ways?

## **Challenges**

These experiments of this type are resource intensive and may unsettle existing institutional arrangements and culture. For such experiments to endure in an educational setting, they require changes in the calculation of faculty course loads, allocation of student credit, and grading policies. They also call for an expanded conception of the professional role or the ability to find outside partners. In many environments, participants confront peer resistance and backlash, reinforced by the institutional culture. In the community context, recruiting teachers willing to work with parents may prove challenging. Overcoming such obstacles often requires committed individuals with persistence and energy and flexible leadership supportive of individual experiments. Sometimes these experiments thrive as under-the-radar laboratories, at the margins. Community training programs also require financial support to pay facilitators and to rent space.

## **Incentives for Participation**

Because the learning process we describe can be quite demanding of participants time and energy, it is important that participants choose to be involved. Those who are motivated to rethink their learning and practice environment often jump at the chance to participate. Similarly, the opportunity to work with a group of people who share goals or interests can also bring people to the table. However, even those with a desire to participate may be hampered in their ability to do so. To ensure full participation, it is critical to think through the circumstances some people face that otherwise prevent their involvement and to respond accordingly. Some of these circumstances, such as travel, childcare, and financial needs, are fairly easy to identify and remedy. Others, such as fear of disapproval from supervisors or retribution from the community, may be more difficult to discern but must be considered.

### **Facilitation Skills**

Some background and familiarity with the skills and process of facilitation make a big difference in the effectiveness of the facilitator. One way to cope with inexperience is to co-facilitate with a more experienced partner. Another is to build relationships with community partners who can trouble shoot from time-to-time. A third is to draw explicitly on the potential expertise of students or teaching fellows who may have facilitation experience. In addition, it is important to adjust the facilitator's role and the expectations of the participants to accommodate the inexperience of the facilitator. Finally, it may help to involve the entire group in building expertise around facilitation.

### **Balancing Learning and Expertise**

We have encountered tension between the desire to teach inexperienced group members how to facilitate and the desire to ensure substantive learning. In the law school setting, we have confronted the personal challenge of sharing power with our students. Although we believe that sharing power is important for creating community and promoting active learning, we sometimes feel compelled to redirect our students efforts in the interest of effective substantive learning for the larger group. As faculty facilitators, we are sometimes faced with a choice between asserting expertise to create a more successful dynamic in the larger classroom and giving students room to make mistakes in order to learn. This tension was heightened by students' pre-existing notion that expertise is about mastery of information and the credibility that comes with credentials, rather than about building the capacity of others to learn, analyze, and solve problems. The key is to flag these predictable tensions, to understand the trade-offs and to pay attention to the balance that is struck over a period of time.

### **Adjusting for Size and Resources**

It isn't always possible to create the ideal conditions for multi-racial learning communities. There are ways of compensating for a larger faculty-student ratio, more formal classroom design, and less faculty control over course curriculum and participants. A useful strategy in the large class is to create small sections and to involve more experienced students as teaching fellows. This still requires considerable work for the faculty facilitator in equipping the teaching fellows to function as advisors and quasi-faculty. It has a side-benefit of creating a teaching community for the faculty member, who receives continuous feedback and input from a seasoned group of students. Some schools have provided teaching fellows with course credit or a financial stipend to support the experimentation with these formats in large classroom settings. In the community context, the size of the group often depends on factors over which the facilitators have no control.