

## Introduction to this Website

- **How do you get people to address problems that create conflict and still remain involved in collaborative problem-solving?**
- **How do you create a learning environment that encourages people to see their own potential to affect the world around them?**

This site responds to these questions with examples from several learning environments and includes practical ideas from our experiences as teachers and participants in workplace, community and classroom settings. We discuss setting up and running a multi-racial learning community in seminars that discuss race and gender, large law school classes, police training programs, and community advocacy groups. We identify operating principles that are relevant to all of these settings. The law school overview describes specific activities that educators, students and community groups can use outside of a law school, in high school or college courses and community organizations as well. We provide resources for more information and a place to share your experiences.

**"This experience was so galvanizing for me that six years later, many of our discussions are still crystal clear..."**

Our video documentary titled **RACETALK: COLLABORATION THROUGH CONVERSATION** (1996), chronicles how a law school seminar builds trust, deals with controversy, fosters constructive conflict, and transforms participants into effective problem solvers. Another video explores these ideas in the context of a police academy.

This website also suggests supplementary resources for those seeking to experiment with building multi-racial learning communities. We include print-friendly PDF files with more detailed information for law school classrooms, police training programs, and other multi-racial learning communities.

## Who We Are

We, Lani Guinier and Susan Sturm, are law professors who have been experimenting for more than 10 years with learning as a democratic practice. In 1990, with our students, we built a multi-racial learning community in a law school classroom, producing an extraordinarily engaged, open, and exciting dynamic atmosphere.

We came to this project to address the needs of students of color, women and those who felt intellectually or professionally uninspired by the traditional law school curriculum.

We started by creating a space for experimentation, learning, and problem solving around issues of race, gender, social justice and social change. Although we began with a particular focus, we discovered elements that are central to learning in general. We worked with other researchers and expanded our inquiry to settings like police departments and community forums. We have continued to collaborate in teaching, research, video production, workshops, and publications to build multiracial learning communities.

## **Multi-racial Learning Communities**

We use the term "multi-racial learning community" to describe a group learning practice that involves building a community as well as building the capacities of individuals within the community. Multi-racial learning communities challenge conventional institutional frameworks and encourage learning on many levels.

Learning involves the development of:

- critical thinking,
- emotional and personal engagement, and
- communication and interaction skills, not only from the teacher but from each other.

A learning community emphasizes the development of the group's capacity to solve problems collaboratively and to remain committed to individual and joint learning. Using relevant differences in perspective, the community destabilizes received wisdom and generates new and more complex understandings.

A multi-racial learning community consciously attends to internal and external sources of power (including racial identity, gender, social class and professional role) in shaping the group's membership, the dynamics of group interaction, and the content of the inquiry. People's racial, gender or class position can affect how they participate; it may also influence their background assumptions and lead to intragroup conflict.

Conflict is inevitable in diverse groups. The critical question is not whether conflict arises, but how it is addressed. Multiracial learning communities respond to this challenge.

### **Create a Learning Environment**

Conflict is inevitable in diverse groups. The critical question is not whether conflict arises, but how it is addressed. In fact, conflict is often essential to learning; successful relationships, development and performance often hinge on the ability of groups to embrace, experience, and manage—rather than avoid—the conflicts that occur. It is helpful to flag the inevitability of conflict at the

outset and to emphasize its potential for providing learning opportunities if it is openly and constructively addressed.

The tension between the need to facilitate conflict constructively and simultaneously keep people motivated to continue to work together emerged in the experimental research Andrew Shatte conducted at our request at the University of Pennsylvania. Shatte selected a diverse group of undergraduates to discuss what was then a racially divisive issue of randomized housing at the university. The subjects were divided into 15 groups that met over a six-week period. Each group confronted the issue of randomized housing during the first and sixth week of the experiment. Led by a facilitator, the five “cognitive condition” groups spent the intervening five weeks explicitly addressing their own racial schemata and its relationship to perception, memory and judgment. In the five “collaborative condition” groups, participants worked together for five weeks to make a videotape about stress on campus. The five control groups met once to discuss the subject of randomized housing and then did not meet again until the sixth week when they continued the discussion.

Shatte’s research suggested to us the importance of a “mixed condition” that integrated the collaborative and cognitive type of interactions. On the one hand, interventions that helped participants understand the nature and impact of their own cognitive biases or implicit attitudes appeared to improve individuals’ capacity to recognize the source of the conflict. Collaborative or informal, positive social interactions, however, were instrumental in creating incentives to stay engaged in the conversation, even after it became fraught with tension.

Like Geoffrey Cohen and Claude Steele who have studied the conditions under which students are willing to incorporate criticism to revise their work, we found that a diverse group of participants function best when intellectual or substantive work on controversial issues is done in the context of a trusting set of relationships. For multiracial groups to interact dynamically, to stay together, and to produce results in which participants have confidence, our experience suggests that it is important:

- to create learning opportunities for participants to explore the role of race and other categories of demographic diversity in shaping perceptions, judgments, and experiences, and
- to create the active opportunities for participants to develop trusting relationships that encourage them to remain in the conversation.