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Reading Race: Using Book Discussions to Start Dialogues on White Fragility and Other Racisms

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Reading Race
USING BOOK DISCUSSIONS TO START DIALOGUES ON WHITE FRAGILITY AND OTHER RACISMS
SUSAN A. VEGA GARCÍA AND HARRISON W. INEFUKU
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
IDEAL '19, COLUMBUS, OHIO
Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge that the land we are meeting on today has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, specifically the Shawnee, Miami, Wyandot and Delaware Nations. We honor and respect the diverse Indigenous peoples connected to this territory on which we gather.

Source: http://mcc.osu.edu/resources/american-indian-indigenous/
Session Outline

- Why and how we developed DEI book discussion series for professional development of library staff
- Benefits, challenges, and results
- Three short breakouts to give time for you to develop ideas on how you might do something similar at your institution
We come from a white space

How white is it?

Problem Manifestations

- Library and campus climate
- white "racial innocence"
- Microaggressions and pushback
- Systemic racism

2018 Census Projections; 2018 ISU Institutional Data
Examples of low cultural competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overheard Statements</th>
<th>AACU Intercultural Knowledge &amp; Competence VALUE Rubric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't have a culture.</td>
<td>• Shows minimal awareness of own cultural rules and biases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't want to hire Chinese students. I can't handle another [student's name]!</td>
<td>• Views experience of others but does so through own cultural worldview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POC who sit together are unapproachable and intimidating to white coworkers.</td>
<td>• Unable to negotiate a shared understanding in cross-cultural communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn't know it wasn't okay to touch your hair. No one taught me that!</td>
<td>• States minimal interest in learning more about other cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is judgmental in interactions with culturally different others, but is unaware of own judgment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Association of American Colleges & Universities

Some "Overheard Statements" were said publicly during or immediately after diversity lectures, training, or workshops.
Why book discussions?

Focus on text to bring up relevant issues to discuss in depth
Facilitated and participatory: participants must actively read, discuss, learn
Individual accountability and lack of anonymity
More than one-shot visit, lecture, or workshop
Can emphasize cognitive processes: remembering, understanding, analyzing, evaluating, applying/creating *


In-house DIY discussions can ask questions focused on organization's history & climate.

Book discussions complement our other DEI learning programs, including all-staff presentations.
## What did we do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Session</th>
<th># in Group</th>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Panther</strong></td>
<td>Spring 2017</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Library staff volunteers</td>
<td>5 weeks 1 mtg per week</td>
<td>Easy intro to topics on race; representations of race in pop culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bad Feminist</strong></td>
<td>Spring 2018</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Library staff volunteers</td>
<td>5 weeks 1 mtg per week</td>
<td>Establish Diversity Committee series; readings on race &amp; sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is Everyone Really Equal</strong></td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Library's DEI Committee members</td>
<td>5 months 10 mtgs total</td>
<td>Exposure and grounding in DEI topics, including power, privilege, bias, racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Fragility</strong></td>
<td>Fall 2018, Spring &amp; Summer 2019</td>
<td>54 (four groups)</td>
<td>Library Management Team, Librarians of Color, Library staff volunteers</td>
<td>5 months 1 mtg per month; 4-5 weeks, 1 mtg per week</td>
<td>Anti-racism education &amp; awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are there campus events you can tie in? Authors Coates, Gay, and Di Angelo spoke on campus as part of lecture series.
What were we addressing?

Book discussions were the means through which we were addressing a number of DEI problems.

**Black Panther**
- Connect Library to campus DEI programming
- Raise awareness of representation in media

**Bad Feminist**
- Connect Library to campus DEI programming
- Need for DEI learning opportunities
- Diversity committee in need of direction

**Is Everyone Really Equal?**
- DEI Committee in need of shared foundation for topics on racism, sexism, ableism, classism

**White Fragility**
- Library-wide need of anti-racism education
- Raise cultural competence levels

Are there campus events you can tie in? When are they decided / announced? How much lead time do you need?

**DEI Needs**: Your DEI needs may be similar or very different from ours. Examine needs & available tie-ins to help choose books.
Breakout 1: Funding

Q1. Are there funds in your library that could be used to buy the books?

- Does your library have professional development funds?
- Who controls those funds? Who can help?
- Does your campus have units that could help? A DEI office? Internal grants?
- Does any campus unit provide programming support?
- How many books / participants can you afford?

**Average per title cost** of our books was $18.00
Group size ranged from 8 to 21; **average group size** was 14 people

Think, Pair, Share:
Using Handout, think about Q1, write down some answers. Turn to the person next to you, and both of you discuss your answers.

Our Library Dean supported the series and made funds available for all book purchases.
What pre-planning is needed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Get Approval</th>
<th>2. Acknowledge This is Work</th>
<th>3. Intended Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Both literal approval and commitment, support, and buy-in</td>
<td>• Professional development—not free time off; need for buy-in</td>
<td>• Existing groups or open to all?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Embed within existing meeting or establish new schedule?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Number and Frequency of Meetings</strong></td>
<td><strong>5. Series for Specific Groups</strong></td>
<td><strong>6. Open Call</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider length and depth of book</td>
<td>• Announce to group what is happening</td>
<td>• Put cap on participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop a reading schedule</td>
<td>• Helpful to come from library director or group leader</td>
<td>• Give reply-by date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• First come, first served</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Librarians of Color**
For series strongly focused on racism, alternate sessions were offered for LOC only, to avoid potential (micro)aggressions.
Breakout 2: Endorsement

Q2. Do you *need* permission or endorsement?

- Library culture—is there a process or group for approving professional development programs in your library?

- **Who are intended participants?** Do you need an existing or new time slot?

- Embedding: An existing group that might grant group meeting time for the series; helps to reach a targeted group, such as library leadership

- **Endorsing:** An existing group providing support, e.g., facilitator(s) or other structure, not necessarily their meeting time

**Think, Pair, Share:**

Using Handout, think about Q2, write down some answers. Turn to the person next to you, and both of you discuss your answers.
How were the series structured?

- **Ground Rules** guided all the sessions.

- **Discussion questions** were written by facilitator in advance and shared with participants.

- **Supplemental readings** provided for some discussions.

- **Companion LibGuides** for posting Ground Rules, questions, and readings for further learning.
  - White Fragility: [http://instr.iastate.libguides.com/whitefragility](http://instr.iastate.libguides.com/whitefragility)
How did we focus engagement?

Reading Response approaches:

- **Affective**: personal reactions & interpretations
  Everyone shares; subjective; opinion- & experience-based

- **Knowledge acquisition**: cognitive-based understanding
  Everyone grapples with the content; focus is on learning from the text

*Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, pp. 6-15

Is Everyone Really Equal guidelines:

- **Move beyond personal experience**: Look beyond the personal anecdote or individual exceptionalism, and seek research-based knowledge

- **Move beyond opinion**: Acknowledge that "opinion is the weakest form of intellectual engagement" in academic discussions

*Burbank, Bates & Kauchak, 2010, p. 58

Discussion questions were written by facilitator to focus on cognitive-based understanding of difficult (not feel-good) material.
Breakout 3: Facilitation

Q3. Who can facilitate or help lead discussions?
° What degree of expertise is required / preferred?
° What knowledge / skills are necessary?

° **Reading Response approaches**: How might the type of reading response you want for your discussion series influence the type of facilitator you need?
° **Affective**: personal reactions & interpretations
° **Knowledge acquisition**: cognitive-based understanding

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*Learn by Experience:* We originally thought *anyone* can facilitate, but learned not to underestimate knowledge level required.
What have we learned along the way?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Panther</th>
<th>Bad Feminist</th>
<th>Is Everyone Really Equal?</th>
<th>White Fragility</th>
<th>All series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Define learning objectives for book</td>
<td>• Improve facilitation to stay on DEI topics • Address challenges presented when participant awareness levels vary widely</td>
<td>• Ground rules: work to decent er whiteness • Include dealing with problematic statements</td>
<td>• We needed to share discussion questions in advance • Ground rules need to address silence</td>
<td>• Facilitation and planning got easier with each iteration • Need to find sustainable funding • Realize no method is perfect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Outcomes & Actions

• "I learned how history and society shape and dictate our thoughts and feelings—knowing this provides me with the knowledge to combat racist actions I may take unknowingly and the vocabulary to speak to others about it."

• "Probably the importance of speaking up—not just recognizing the behaviors (and their insidious consequences) but working to interrupt and challenge them."

• "This was an amazing read and a truly life changing book. Thank you for providing me with the motivation and structure to read it."

• "It opened my eyes to some of the ways (that are easy to ignore as a white person) that racism infects everything for people of color."

• "Participating in this discussion group was really helpful in order to have a space to engage with it beyond just reading on my own. Thanks!"

Participants rated effectiveness of series very highly.

Staff taking action on what they've learned

95% are likely-very likely to participate in future series.

"Keep doing this. That it isn't easy means it needs to be done."
Thank you! Questions?

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References


