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What Do You Bring to The Classroom? – A Look at Approaching Difficult Dialogues

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A project based upon an independent investigation,  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study assessed and evaluated experiences of professors from different departments, regarding their encounters with difficult dialogues and the perceived response from students in their classroom through untimed, semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed to have an open dialogue with the professor about their experiences in the classroom and how they feel their identities and strategies may have influenced or shaped conversations that took place. The findings include the perspective of four white female professors, one white male professor, and one female professor of color. The results emphasize that there are effective strategies that professors have found useful and helpful to have candid and constructive conversations about taboo topic areas in the classroom, and that these conversations will continue to grow at PWI's when more diversity is embedded into the campus culture.

*Keywords: difficult dialogues, PWI, diversity, privilege, facilitation*

As an educator at the college level, it can be difficult to approach difficult dialogues in taboo topic areas, especially at a predominantly white institution where the student make-up is becoming increasingly diverse. Difficult dialogues may arise when an exchange of ideas or opinions held among students conflict due to personal experiences, beliefs, or values that may alter their individual outlooks and positions on certain topics. These topics may include: race, class, sex, sexual orientation, religion, addiction, etc. Professors may think of their classrooms as small environments or communities that serve as a place to foster this type of learning and social growth, but it is not always easy to create an open, receptive space for students. Fostering this environment of social growth and understanding in the classroom can be a daunting task that is unlikely to occur without struggle. In the fall of 2014, 715 students of color attended Providence College, which made up 15% of the total student population (Providence College Student Fact Book, 2014-2015). Since the fall of 2014, Providence College has admitted more students of color creating a more diverse campus atmosphere. The current class of 2021 includes a student body that is made up of 22% students of color (Providence College Student Profile, 2017). With increasing diversity, it is even more imperative that professors and educators understand how to approach difficult dialogues in the classroom and be able to create a class environment that is open, non-judgmental, and receptive to differing opinions that may lead to helpful and necessary discussions.

Talking about race is uncomfortable in a classroom setting. Oftentimes, professors, educators, and other students may unconsciously approach race in general, safe, politically correct terms that do not leave room for real growth or progress in discussions (Brainard 2009; Ferber 2012; Mitchell 2016). Instead of having these difficult dialogues, institutions and employers may leave the subject of diversity in the hands of special seminars or additional

mandatory trainings in efforts to appear inclusive without actually having the responsibility of conducting the conversations. We make efforts every day to not feel uncomfortable, especially when interacting with other people. Mitchell (2016) writes, “However, it is often within the discomfort that we are challenged in the first place, which may allow us to truly achieve a deeper level of consciousness and understanding about race relations and about ourselves” (p.4).

Mitchell argues that in order to foster that environment of social growth and understanding, it is essential to take action as the educator and be the one to start the conversation. Students may feel uncomfortable at first, particularly in a diverse classroom that brings a multitude of different life experiences, but through the discomfort will appear understanding, self-awareness, and growth. Additionally, the professor must be aware of what he/she may bring to the classroom environment. More specifically, white professors bring racial privilege to the classroom that may initially affect the receptiveness and authenticity of discussions about race and cultural competency. White professors may have even more to wrestle with in discussions about race because students of color will want to feel professors are competent enough to explain the problems of racism and privilege without having the experience of being a person of color. In classes that are designed to discuss social issues, professors may be more equipped and knowledgeable to lead these discussions. However, other professors that are teaching courses in other subjects and fields may feel a greater degree of anxiety and unpreparedness.

Being able to conduct difficult dialogues at a predominantly white institution is extremely relevant to social work because these conversations will help push back against the minimization of racism, reverse racism, and color-blind racism. Students will be forced to acknowledge and confront their own biases and prejudices and have an opportunity to become more self-aware. According to Abby Ferber (2012) “People of color are confronted with the reality of inequality

and oppression on a daily basis, but those who experience privilege are often unaware of how it impacts their own lives” (p.65). Students with racial privilege will be made aware of their own privilege and how their lives have been impacted by this privilege. Some students may have feelings about this, or may even respond with denial or pushback, which is okay. The essential component is that there should be spaces for impactful difficult dialogues to occur on predominantly white campuses that extend beyond social science classes. Being able to identify privilege and understand the meaning that holds for yourself, as well as someone culturally different than you, is essential to coming to understand how better to interact with individuals and the value an interaction holds. The current literature identifies a demand for successful multicultural initiatives implemented in predominantly white institutions, an increase in campus multicultural centers and organizations and their overall effectiveness, and a more prominent collaborative effort from university administrators, faculty, and students to enhance the experience of students of color (Brainard 2009; Jones 2002; Mitchell 2016).

In the social work profession, it is imperative to be able to have these conversations with clients and in situations that exist outside of a work environment. It is an obligation as a white social worker to be aware of your own privilege in order to build genuine relationships with other staff, clients, and communities of color. Additionally, it is imperative to critically engage self-awareness and look inward to challenge personal biases to understand the role we may play in maintaining oppression of marginalized groups on a day-to-day basis and potentially in professional practice. At predominantly white institutions, it is imperative to have spaces that are conducive to difficult dialogues and to have professors and other faculty members that are educated on these issues and competent enough to talk about these issues when they are raised in classrooms or surrounding current events.

## **Review of Literature**

Predominantly White Institutions are becoming increasingly diverse, and this shift brings new challenges and obstacles that students, faculty, staff, and administration have to face. The literature examines the motivations for PWI's increasing diversity along with the implications and shifts in the system. Researchers have investigated and explored the experiences of white professors versus professors of color in classrooms at PWI's and the unique opportunities and challenges this presents. Additionally, studies have examined how to effectively create spaces for constructive difficult dialogues and the obligations of faculty, staff, and administration to create environments conducive to a student body that is becoming increasingly diverse.

### **Increasing Diversity at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's)**

A multitude of research supports that a diverse campus environment is necessary to equip students to be successful both personally and professionally (Brainard, 2009; Chen, 2017; Ferber, 2012; Gloria et al., 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Martinez, 2014). However, increasing diversity at predominantly white institutions is not an easy process that occurs without initial and continued hurdles and pushback from administration, faculty, staff, and students. Minority students often have difficulty assimilating into the majority culture and may experience frustration and isolation while attending a PWI (Chen, 2017; Martinez, 2014; Reason, 2007). With lack of formal opportunities for minority and majority students to interact with one another in various contexts, isolation of different groups perpetuates. Additionally, early efforts to increase diversity on college campuses focused primarily on increasing minority student enrollment, with little thought about faculty and staff diversity (Chen, 2017). A more diverse environment with a proper plan in place has the potential to alleviate isolation for people of color on campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Martinez, 2014). In fact, exposure to diverse perspectives

during college could interrupt long-standing segregation trends in society (Brainard, 2009; Chen, 2017; Gayles et al., 2015; Reason, 2007). Additionally, according to Harper & Hurtado (2007) “Research supports that students who attend racially diverse institutions and are engaged in educationally purposeful activities that involve interactions with peers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds come to enjoy cognitive, psychosocial, and interpersonal gains that are useful during and after college” (p.14). However, PWI’s experience frequent unrest among the student body due to racially charged incidents, limited spaces for difficult dialogues to take place, and inconsistent action from faculty, staff, and administration. Part of the plan and process to honor inclusion and diversity at PWI’s should include training that increases knowledge and sensitivity for campus staff, faculty, and higher-level administrators on issues facing faculty and students of color. A true celebration of diversity and integration involves an institution-wide focus that considers students, faculty, administrators, and staff. “Institutionalizing diversity” should be an ongoing process, and will not be the result of a single action (Brainard, 2009; Chen, 2017; Gayles et al., 2015; Reason, 2007).

### **Privilege in the Classroom – Professor Preparedness for Difficult Dialogues**

Identifying what one brings to the classroom is essential in understanding and appreciating the context and content of conversations and dialogues that happen in the classroom. White professors and students will have different experiences and bring different privileges to the classroom, as opposed to professors and students of color. According to the literature, white professors perceive extremely different experiences than professors of color. Dr. Eugene Walls (2010) defines privilege as “unearned advantages that accrue to members of certain social groups solely because of membership in those groups, and at the cost to corresponding marginalized groups” (p. 2). Additionally, Francis Kendall (2002) writes,



“privileges are bestowed on us by the institutions with which we interact solely because of membership in those groups, and at the cost to corresponding marginalized groups” (p. 2). A majority of the literature identifies anxiety as one of the leading experiences of white professors in classrooms when taboo topics arise (Brainard, 2009; Burton & Furr, 2014, Chen, 2017; Martinez, 2014). Privileged white professors may have fears of revealing personal biases and prejudices and fears of losing classroom control. White professors have also expressed an inability to understand or recognize the causes or dynamics of difficult dialogues (Chen, 2017). Other experiences may include a lack of knowledge and skills to properly intervene and fear of triggering intense emotional reactions. Their anxiety also stems from a fear of highlighting major differences in worldview that they would perceive cause students to refrain from conversation. Another common experience for white professors includes reluctance and ambivalence. Avoidance may cause a stifling of the voices of students of color whose racial identities are intimately linked to their sense of self-worth (Jones et al., 2002). White professors may feel fearful that racial dialogues in the classroom will create unnecessary antagonisms between students and/or teachers.

As compared with white professors, professors of color often have different and much more frustrating experiences when taboo topic areas are presented or reflected upon in class. Professors of color experience negative consequences that may include poor teaching evaluations when faculty with marginalized identities engage in difficult dialogues in the classroom around diversity issues (Gayles et al., 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Faculty with less experience and lower in rank were most likely to have taught a diversity course and express greater sensitivity to racial issues (Garcia & Soest, 2000; Gayles et al., 2015). Additionally, underrepresented faculty may be more determined to wade through difficult dialogues because they highly value

educating students about diversity, therefore leading to more negative consequences for the professor (Gayles et al., 2015; Reason, 2007; Watt, 2007). In a study in 2014 that consisted of 20 instructors of color who reported teaching at least one diversity undergraduate course, the researchers found that instructors feel their credibility and authority challenged by students in diversity courses (Martinez, 2014). There is subtle resistance that emerges in student evaluations where they revealed a general apathy or dislike for the diversity course required for graduation. The researchers also found that teaching diversity courses “masked” in other subjects like math or science does not produce this same type of apathy or dislike, and receives generally positive evaluations from students. The other barrier that professors of color are up against is that some students may come with a pre-existing dislike of diversity, which creates additional barriers to helping students understand issues around the social and cultural inequality of the U.S. (Martinez, 2014).

Students will also have unique experiences in the classroom based on privilege. Oftentimes, white students experience discomfort while discussing race. However, both white students and students of color attribute the success or failure of racial dialogues to the multicultural competency of the classroom professor. In a case study incorporating a snowball sample of faculty across the country who teach diversity courses of semi-structured interviews of about 30 minutes after completing a demographic questionnaire and submitting their most recent syllabus, the findings suggested that faculty with more privilege and agency to choose when and how they would share aspects of their identities had students who were less combative and uncomfortable during difficult dialogues (Gayels et al., 2015). In a different study conducted by Harper & Hurtado in 2007, their findings concluded that white students were less likely than black or latino students to perceive racial tension at PWI’s because most believed racism was no

longer a problem in society. Almost all of the sampled black students reported having borne the brunt of racist remarks and most assumed that black students would be mistreated on campus. Additionally, white students that were interviewed grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods and this had limited firsthand exposure to racism prior to college (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

In a case study from 2009, eight white faculty members (2 men and 6 women) from a private university in the northeastern United States participated in a study that consisted of face-to-face semi-structured interviews of about 45 minutes. The interviews centered on how professors felt and responded when difficult dialogues were approached or encountered in the classroom. All participants had doctoral degrees and 10-25 years of teaching experience (Capidolupo et al., 2009). Six major domains were recognized from this study: characteristics, reactions, training experience, influence of professor's race, facilitation strategies, and failure to recognize difficult dialogues. One characteristic apparent during these conversations was the professor's fear of losing classroom control. One participant described, "it was a sense of loss of control...that I associated with conversations being difficult, and sometimes that loss of control is manifested in students attacking one another in ways that I am uncomfortable with" (Capidolupo et al., 2009). The study found that reactions included emotions like: anxiety, anger, defensiveness, and sadness and behaviors like: crying, students leaving the classroom, or withdrawing. Some professors felt they were ill equipped to deal with these conversations in the classroom due to lack of education and training experience regarding these topics or informal training. The professor's race played a significant role in the interaction as well. Most professors had a lack of experience with racism, and some expressed a lack of knowledge of race and culture. There was anxiety surrounding a lack of shared identity with students of color, and a

resounding perception that faculty of color would be more equipped and more credible on topics of race (Brainard, 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Martinez, 2014; Mitchell, 2016). Some facilitation strategies that were found to be ineffective included: ignoring the difficult dialogue altogether or passively allowing students to manage dialogue on their own. Some effective facilitation strategies included: acknowledging emotions, continuing dialogue after the actual event, creating safe spaces, setting precedents about addressing racial issues in class, instructors being up front and admitting their own personal challenges, and increasing awareness of racial microaggressions. Lastly, researchers concluded that some of the professors failed to recognize difficult dialogues and were not competent enough to recognize microaggressions (Capitolupo et al., 2009).

Through systemic oppression and internalized biases, many white students and professors may employ a color-blind perspective that assumes discrimination is a thing of the past and denies the reality of race and racial inequality today. This approach would argue that we should treat people simply as human beings, rather than racialized beings (Ferber, 2012). Abrams and Moio (2009) explain “claims of objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness actually normalize and perpetuate racism by ignoring the structural inequalities that permeate social institutions” (p. 250). Critical Race Theory developed during the time of the Civil Rights Movement and challenges claims of neutrality and color-blindness. Because race is socially constructed, and strictly based on physical attributes that do not correlate to genes or biological makeup, white professors, administrators, and students must recognize the force of this categorization and implication. Critical Race Theory demands constant, critical self-reflection, including awareness of times your unearned privilege may benefit you at the expense of others. For people holding racial privilege, it is dangerous to not be aware of how the structural functions of racism affect

our ways of thinking and general outlook on how the world functions. Abrams and Moio (2009) call us to “continually push ourselves, our training materials, and our teaching practices to address the systemic barriers that impede the realization of these goals for all people, both locally and globally” (p. 258).

In Felicia Mitchell’s piece entitled, “Creating Space for the ‘Uncomfortable’: Discussions about Race and Police Brutality in a BSW Classroom,” she discusses her role as a professor of color engaging a group of students who bring different racial and gendered privileges to the classroom. Her preparation for the class brought anxiety and excitement at the opportunity to engage difficult dialogues about race and police brutality following the murder of Michael Brown by a white police officer. She concludes that creating space for the uncomfortable is a semester-long process in which the classroom becomes a community that is truly engaged in learning and confronting individual and societal biases and prejudices. In one instance, she asked each member to visualize standing in an elevator alone and as the doors open slowly to picture a person standing in front of them that would make them uncomfortable. She asks them to picture what this person would like (if they were a different race, what they were wearing, if they were the same gender, and if they were wearing anything that identified them as a particular religious or ethnic group). She concluded with, “Do you feel that? That feeling in the pit of your stomach? That is our discomfort and that is our work. The person who stepped in the elevator with us is not a real treat or problem they are a manifestation of our own personal bias and prejudices and this is your work not theirs” (Mitchell, 2016).

### **Creating Space for Difficult Dialogues**

When properly and effectively facilitated, racial dialogues have been shown to reduce prejudices, increase compassion, dispel stereotypes, and promote mutual respect and

understanding (Capitolupo, 2009; Young, 2004). Research reveals that most difficult dialogues on race in the classroom are caused by racial microaggressions delivered by well-meaning white professors or students who are unaware of the offensive nature of their actions (Capitolupo et al., 2009; Martinez, 2014; Young, 2004). Bell (2007) defined social justice as a process and a goal: “The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (p.1). In order to create these safe spaces for constructive dialogue to occur, the literature has found a multitude of helpful strategies for professors that lead to environments conducive for open and honest discussion. These strategies include: acknowledging personal emotions and feelings, self-disclosing personal challenges and fears, actively engaging classroom exchanges, and fostering a classroom community (Brainard, 2009; Capitolupo et al., 2009; Chen, 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). It has also been found helpful to construct a foundation through readings and guidance from instructors on how to engage civil discourse. Additionally, incorporating community building games to create this space for open and honest conversation such as: the Game of Oppression, the People’s Court, Walk the Line, or guided reflection on multiple aspects of identity to stimulate ideas and conversation have been found to be successful and effective methods that are conducive to environments where difficult dialogues can occur (Brainard, 2009; Capitolupo et al., 2009; Chen, 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Once individuals become aware of the ways in which privilege and oppression work in society, it is difficult to ignore these situations in everyday life. Cultural competence is more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills and must deal with hidden biases and prejudices (Sue, 2005). Unfortunately, and all too often, unspoken differences and conflicts can lead to a hostile and invalidating racially charged

campus climate, perpetuate bias and prejudice, and have detrimental psychological consequences.

### **Faculty, Staff, Administration Obligation**

The literature supports that instructional leadership is responsible for creating environments that are supportive and inclusive of all faculty, staff, and students so that they can maximize their institutional and human capital (Chen, 2017, Eckel & Kezar, 2000; Gayles et al., 2015). Institutional leaders must lead a concerted effort to increase the number of diverse faculty, staff, and students on campus. With more faculty and staff of color, students of color will feel more apt and willing to reach out for help and feel heard at PWI's. Embedding diversity into the campus culture takes time, and does not occur with one action or one hire. Embedding diversity into the campus culture involves connecting a wide variety of individuals and organizations to build support and avoid resistance. Instructional leaders must fight for social justice in favor of equity, which will inspire and inform others in the academic community to build cultural and racial tolerance and acceptance (Eckel & Kezar, 2000). Additionally, in order to embed diversity into the campus culture at PWI's involves integrating diversity into the generalized curriculum of the institution. Along with the curriculum, appropriate infrastructure must be provided to ensure diversity can be actualized including: funding, policy development, and diversity-related offices like multicultural centers (Gayles et al., 2015).

The literature addresses why diversity is essential and beneficial for all students attending an institution, but does not address the motivations for why PWI's are recently striving to add diversity to their student body. The literature suggests that white professors with a strong sense of identity, agency, and cultural competency often have the most success conducting difficult dialogues, and that white professors who struggle with agency and anxiety surrounding race and

culture will not have productive and candid conversations in their classrooms about race. Additionally, professors of color feel an intense struggle to lead diversity courses with students who retain racial biases and without receiving poor evaluations. There is also overwhelming support that white professors feel professors of color would be more apt to handle issues surrounding diversity and cultural competency, which is oftentimes not well received by students, especially white students. The literature discusses what has worked best when facilitating difficult dialogues, and the obligations of faculty, staff, and administration to create environments that are supportive and inclusive for everyone. This study will seek to address and evaluate the experiences of professors at a medium-sized PWI from different backgrounds teaching various courses in which difficult dialogues may arise in the classroom, and the perceived response from students. Additionally, this study will seek to examine effective and ineffective strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues and how to create environments that are conducive for open and honest discussion.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative research study will assess and evaluate experiences of professors at a medium-sized PWI, teaching a variety of different courses, regarding their encounters with difficult dialogues and how students respond in these scenarios.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected using convenience sampling. In order to get a broader perspective, the researcher will interview six different professors from various fields of study in order to analyze a multitude of experiences. The professors in this study will include: one from the Social Work Department, one from the Women's Studies Program, one from the Sociology Department, one from the Business School, and two from the Development of



Western Civilization Department. The researcher had reached out to two different professors in the Black Studies Program, who were both too busy to participate in the study, and one professor from the Theology Department who was also not able to participate in the study. This convenience sample does have some possible biases that stem from underrepresentation of the small sample size and the potential for social desirability bias.

### **Data Gathering**

Once participants are confirmed, the researcher will create a private and relaxed environment for the semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each participant will be asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendix A) and fill out a Demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). After the participant has signed the consent form and filled out the Demographic questionnaire, the researcher will facilitate an untimed interview process that consists of semi-structured questions (Appendix C). The participants in the study will be de-identified in the researcher's findings. The interviews will be recorded and used for transcription by the researcher after the interviews have taken place. The subjects will have consented to being taped, and the researcher will keep the tapes locked in the thesis professor's office cabinet. Following the study, the researcher will destroy the tapes.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher will look for patterns and trends from these interviews in order to draw conclusions and come up with findings outlining difficult dialogues in the classroom at a medium-sized PWI. The researcher will analyze the transcriptions for commonalities between participants and differences in responses from participants to grasp a more accurate picture of professors' experiences handling difficult dialogues in their increasingly diverse classrooms.

## Findings

In this qualitative study, participants were asked questions that allowed them to discuss their experience facilitating difficult dialogues that came up in the classroom. The participants shared stories related to their classroom environment and their general experience on the campus of a predominantly white institution. The questions led to opportunities for the participants to provide narratives about their classroom and the perceived response from their students. During the interview, several recurring themes emerged: the different interpretations of difficult dialogues, the importance of the classroom environment and class demographics, effective strategies that professors have used in their classroom to create open and honest conversations, and the overall role the professor feels that they play in their classroom and during difficult dialogues. These findings include the perspective of four white female professors, one white male professor, and one female professor of color.

### The meaning of “Difficult Dialogue”

In the interviews, professors have described difficult dialogues in similar ways. A female professor of color explained that she finds the most difficult dialogues she has ever had have occurred when she has tried to get a group of faculty to understand differences people may feel because of their culture. She went on to explain that,

*“I went to a couple of the difficult dialogue sessions, and I was not necessarily as supportive of them as maybe I should have been because I think they skirt the issue. Everyone is going around the issues, and nobody wants to confront WHY and really get into the differences to be able to pull out what is similar.”*

A white female professor explained that she believes a difficult dialogue involves talking about ideas that make people uncomfortable. She often finds that discussions about race are the most uncomfortable because “*students dance around the topic and try to say what is politically correct.*” A different white female professor believed that difficult dialogues were, “*discussions*

*that challenge people's single stories of particular issues – that questions power dynamics and challenges us to consider how we have been socialized to think about them in these spaces and that is what makes them so uncomfortable.*” Another white female professor explained, *“For me, that term was new to me until I started hearing it on campus, I think I prefer different terminology like meaningful dialogue or constructive conversation.”* A white male professor explains that he finds a lot of dialogues about sexuality and gender identity have been difficult in his classroom as it relates to religion. He explains, *“There are certain things that are sacred in a sense, and that's where people push back. Even if there is not a debate, you can feel the energy in the room.”* In any case, professors have highlighted dialogues about race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and political affiliation to make students the most uncomfortable, particularly students in the majority.

### **Classroom Environment**

The environment of the classroom came up frequently during the interviews as it related to students' willingness to dialogue and feel comfortable speaking up and sharing personal experiences. A white male professor explained,

*“I try to get to a place where students realize I am not there to push any particular agenda, I think that is really important. I think sometimes I may have disappointed some of my more liberal students in this regard, but I try to give a fair hearing to views that I may reject as false.”*

For him, it is very important for the students to know and feel that he is not pushing any sort of agenda because his primary concern is that the students understand the material and that they have some appreciation when they finish for why the material may be important. He explains that he attempts to create a classroom that is welcoming by trying to chat with students before class or getting to class early to greet students as they walk in. This participant explained that when he has felt his classes have been successful, *“the room becomes a place where people feel*

*comfortable.*” He has noticed that his honors courses tend to be less diverse culturally and ethnically, and politically more conservative. However, he has noticed the demographics of his non-honors courses become much more diverse racially and ethnically. He mentioned that he has been criticized for his stances on religion from time to time when it comes to gender and sexuality, but he explains that in classes where philosophical topics surrounding birth control and sexuality have come up, he “*has to be sensitive to not only people who may think birth control is evil, but also to people who are not going to be engaging in straight sex if they identify in the LGBTQ community.*”

A white female professor explained that she strives to achieve a classroom environment that is a “*community centered around recognizing difference*” and feels “*as long as we listen and respect each other and everyone feels like they have a voice and has the right to speak, then it does not necessarily have to be “difficult” dialogue.*” She brings a lot of her own lived experience into the classroom during discussions and recognized that it was important to do this in contexts that were relevant and comfortable for the students. Another white female professor also expressed similar reasoning and found it beneficial to bring in her own experience. She also added, “*Humor is helpful in building relationships and connections in a space to have difficult conversations. You have to have enough humor so you can make light of any situation, but with the sense that this is real, emotional, painful, etc.*”

Another white female professor similarly explained that her most effective classes where students have been able to engage and speak freely have been in classes where the demographics are much more diverse. She explained, “*One of the topics we talk about is racism, and typically it will overwhelmingly be white students in the class, the first thing I notice is that the white students are very uncomfortable, much more uncomfortable than the minority students.*” She

explained that when the class is more ethnically and racially diverse, students feel more comfortable sharing because it does not feel like one person would be singled out. She explains that at the beginning of the semester and at the beginning of most classes, she will set parameters and ground rules before the discussions even start. These parameters may include reminders of confidentiality, the importance of honesty for personal growth, and being open to hearing other people's opinions even if you may not necessarily hold the same view. Her goal to set parameters in the classroom at the beginning of the semester about openness and respect in conversations was a view that was highlighted by every professor that participated in this study.

In the case of the female professor of color, she notices the lack of engagement whenever she has minority students in her classroom. She explained that they often become isolated from the group, and do not engage in group activities unless other students invite them in, which usually requires prompting from the professor. She described,

*“It is like the book, why do all the black kids sit together at the table in the cafeteria? It is because that is where you are comfortable. It is almost human nature to gravitate towards what you know, and the problem is trying to open it up.”*

She explains that her concern is for all of the students after they leave campus because the majority population of campus is not the majority population of the world, so she fears what will happen when white middle to upper middle class students leave campus and realize that they have been in a bubble.

### **Effective Strategies**

A lot of the participants explained that strategies came with time. They all expressed that when difficult conversations were to be had, it was important to allow every voice in the room an opportunity to express their viewpoint. Their strategies arose if someone's viewpoint may have been unconsciously racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. or if they felt a student was feeling attacked

for their viewpoint. In the case of one of the white female professors, she explained that she once had a scenario where the class was discussing abortion, and there was one particular female student who had strong opinions that she was not afraid to voice, but her opinion was different than everyone else's in the class. From the professor's perspective, she felt it would have been very easy for this one student to feel attacked because everyone disagreed with her point of view, so she made a concerted effort to align with this student in order for her to feel welcome to share her point of view, and so that the other students in the class would understand the opposite side of the argument and even have the opportunity to make their argument stronger by understanding both sides. She explained,

*“We want to hear what people who disagree with us say because that’s how I am going to decide about my argument or counter-explanation. I want the students to listen to what somebody is saying and understand why they are saying it, and what drives it.”*

Additionally, she has found it helpful for students to participate in pairs, and when they start their discussions about race, they do an exercise where they share with their partner, the first time they became aware of race. She finds that oftentimes this opens the class up to discussion more because students share stories in pairs and find common ground before sharing with the class. The white male professor explained he makes opportunities to engage different points of view. He explained that, as the professor, it would be ineffective to call a person “racist,” “sexist,” “homophobic,” etc. because that causes the student to feel defensive, and become a “pariah” to the rest of their classmates. Therefore, no learning would ensue. He says that when this happens, he will play devil's advocate and invite the person to say more about their view and explain their thinking because he has really never had an experience of a student explaining a view inherent in malice. Another interesting perspective that he explained was how he feels when comments may come up that are controversial, and he realizes that other students are sitting there in the

classroom wondering what type of action he will take, which can cause some anxiety. He discussed,

*“The first time it happens, I do not deal with it well, I feel myself get worked up personally...I’ve been in situations where someone says something and you just don’t think anyone would think that, never mind say it, and it’s a deer in the headlights, but my job would be not to lose it.”*

All four of the white female professors expressed intention when choosing readings for their classes and used the readings as a framework for their discussion in the classroom. One professor explained, *“We are not going to get into opinions until we have read the evidence and the research.”* Their goal was to present students with a lot of empirical, factual information along with first-person narratives of the subjects the class was studying. The same professor also added that her goal is to outline the dominant perspective that exists and then tries to deconstruct that dominant perspective with her students.

From the perspective of the female professor of color, she could not recall times where she has had to disengage a dialogue or facilitate a discussion about a taboo topic because of the nature of the course that she teaches, but she did mention ways that she tries to help minority students become more engaged with their classmates. She does a lot of group work, and she frequently notices the minority students in isolation and not wanting to engage, and not being invited to engage by their other classmates. She explains that in these scenarios, she will *“stroll the room”* and encourage the students to ask what other classmates are doing, and motion towards students who are working independently, oftentimes minority students, and she says, *“for some reason when you do that and realize that is what the teacher wants, they will bring that minority student in. They would not necessarily do it on their own.”* She explains that her experiences on campus or at difficult dialogues sessions can be frustrating because she feels

people do not try to really listen and understand the opposite side of the argument, but try to assault others opinions and do not experience growth and learning.

All of the professors expressed that one of the parameters that is covered at the beginning of the semester or when dialogues occur, is that students are allowed to challenge people's logic, but not somebody's lived experience.

### **The Role of the Professor**

The white male professor did not consider his role to be authoritarian by saying,

*“It's not so important that I communicate to students my authority, I am a cisgender man who is large and has a loud voice, so I get default respect, and I do not even think I realize all the ways in which I benefit from that.”*

Additionally, he kept reiterating that he does not feel that what he personally believes is important in the classroom. He feels that if students knew his personal beliefs and values that they would not sign up for his course, and that it had happened to him in the past when students believed he was too “leftist” or liberal. The white female professor explains that she is very much a part of the conversation, so she tries to push people to explain their views further and figure out the reasons they may personally feel the way they do. In the case of the female professor of color, she feels that students recognize her as authority, and she explains,

*“Because I am a minority faculty member, and I am pretty assertive in my role, I've had more issues on campus dealing with colleagues. My car gets stopped at security no matter what, and I've also had issues of people assuming I'm part of the cleaning crew...but because I'm in the front of the classroom, I think the students realize that's the teacher, I have to behave myself.”*

One of the white female professors was explaining her experiences regarding dialogues on race in her classroom and from her perspective she reflected, “*White students are extremely reticent. There is humility because they are not speaking from experience, so they do not feel like it would be proper for them to talk very much.*” Her strategy in these scenarios is to keep asking



questions to challenge all of the students in the class to think deeper about their viewpoints and what they may take away from the readings and subject material. She also added that remaining a diverse community would be beneficial for all of us because there is opportunity to learn from each other through constructive conversations, and that is lost when the majority leaves places creating greater minorities in spaces.

One of the white female professors expressed that she finds most challenging students who perceive they are more liberal or insightful than they really are. She cited a scenario in which she felt people of color might have been silenced in a space taken over by white liberals. She also added,

*“In a class of white students, talking about issues of race as a white woman helps to facilitate those conversations because students, the data shows, do not receive information from faculty of color as well, especially when you are talking about issues of racism.”*

She also cited an instance in which a male student made a sexual comment in a space that she was outlining a demonstration regarding gender norms. She explains her role as the professor is not to be a voice of a group that she is not a part of, but she also does not want to tokenize students in a space. This professor also added, *“As a female talking about sexism with a lot of students who are males, it is harder because they are thinking you are someone just crying, playing your gender card.”*

A different white female professor outlined a scenario in which her class was talking about lack of safety and fear that African American males feel in relation to the police. She acknowledged that this conversation was at times hard because there were white male students in the classroom who had white male fathers who were cops. However, she explained that everyone in the class was extremely engaged and open to each other’s opinions and lived experiences and everyone listened respectfully. She explained that there was a huge amount of education and

consciousness-raising in that one class because people were allowed and willing to share their lived experiences and listen receptively and respectfully to other's viewpoints and positionalities.

She also added,

*“As a white person who teaches race, I think it makes me feel more comfortable if I have that tipping point of diversity in the classroom because I feel I am more in a collaborative teaching mindset rather than talking to an entire class of white students about race. It shifts the whole dialogue.”*

She also added that she is very overt about checking her white privilege and will make comments about the privilege she holds as a white woman, but that she is at a gendered disadvantage and bumps up against issues of sexism.

The interviews with all of the professors highlighted areas that they felt were necessary when approaching conversations in the classroom in taboo topic areas. It was evident that having parameters set at the beginning of the semester about discussions were paramount, and that students could question each other's logic, but not one another's lived experience. White professors acknowledged their racial privilege and the perceived discomfort among white students when discussions of race were brought up. Female professors acknowledged the difficulty of facilitating conversations about gender by the nature of being female and knowing that some students will not be receptive to that positionality. Some professors found it helpful to bring in lived experience when facilitating dialogues, and all acknowledged that they wrestle with conversations internally when they are going on, but even later after the dialogue has occurred, wondering if they may have handled it the right way. Lastly, the professors did not define their roles to be authoritarian in the sense that they were there to push a particular agenda, rather their role was to provide readings and evidence to frame the discussions, and then use strategies to ask questions or push students further to understand their positionality and why their values and life experiences may be the way they are.

### **Summary/Conclusions**

This study intended to examine the experiences of professors in the classroom when facilitating conversations in taboo topic areas and the perceived response from students. The interview questions were designed to have an open dialogue with the professor about their experiences in the classroom and how they feel their identities and strategies may have influenced or shaped conversations that took place in the classroom. The findings display that professors have a plethora of experiences that involve conversations on taboo topic areas, and these conversations reach beyond departments in social sciences. Each professor has found their own strategies that they may use to facilitate conversations, and they also have each defined a role that they feel they represent in the classroom.

In each of the interviews, the professors explained and advocated that the more diverse the classroom was, the better the conversations were. Professors highlighted that they have noticed an increase in diversity in their classrooms, which has provided a shift in conversations over the years. The literature supports that a more diverse environment with a proper plan in place has the potential to alleviate isolation for people of color on campus and can interrupt long-standing segregation trends in society (Brainard, 2009; Chen, 2017; Gayles et al., 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Martinez, 2014; Reason, 2007). However, the professors noted a lack of engagement from students of color in their classroom, which suggests a perpetuated isolation for people of color at PWI's. The professor of color especially noted a lack of engagement from students of color in her classroom, and a lack of motivation from the white students to draw students of color into their group conversations or in group project settings, which is also supported in the literature (Gayles et al., 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

In terms of the role of the professor, privilege definitely played a part in the professor's experience. Underrepresented faculty may be more determined to wade through difficult dialogues because they highly value educating students about social justice, but oftentimes this may lead to more negative consequences for the professor. The professor of color noted poor course evaluations at the end of the semester with some extremely "uncalled for" comments, and two of the female professors interviewed described uncomfortable moments in the classroom from students when conversations arose about gender, which is also supported by the literature (Gayles et al., 2015; Reason, 2007; Watt, 2007). Female professors may feel their credibility and authority challenged by male students in conversations about gender, just as professors of color may feel their credibility and authority challenged by students in conversations on race. All of the professors noted that more diverse classrooms set up space for more constructive conversations, but professors also highlighted that the classroom environment was extremely important. Each professor highlighted that it was important to establish ground rules at the beginning of the semester that explained respect for all opinions in attempts to create a space that was open enough for people to share their experiences and also learn from other students' perspectives and lived experiences. The literature suggests that it has been found helpful to construct a foundation through readings and guidance from instructors on how to engage civil discourse, which was also supported in the interviews. Lastly, the literature suggests that instructional leadership is responsible for creating environments that are supportive and inclusive of all faculty, staff, and students, but that embedding diversity into campus culture takes time and involves connecting a wide variety of individuals and organizations to build support and avoid resistance (Eckel & Kezar, 2000; Gayles et al., 2015). Four out of the six participants explicitly talked about the need for institutional leadership to play a more active and concerted role to

embed diversity into campus culture, and have more strategies and plans set up in place beyond just simply hiring more diverse faculty and accepting a more diverse student body.

### **Implications for Future Practice, Policy and Research**

Some implications for future policy, practice, and research would be to use a larger sample size. Furthermore, the study would have benefitted from the perspectives of professors in the Theology Department and the Black Studies Program, but these professors were unfortunately unable to participate in the study after multiple attempts to recruit them. Further studies would benefit from even more fields of study such as: Education, Biology, Chemistry, Health Policy, Theatre, etc. The findings in this study can provide future research about how professors prepare and strategize facilitation in the classroom and how students may respond in these scenarios. It would be interesting to explore this topic from a student perspective in order to find out what it may be like to be present in a classroom that may not be conducive to open and honest discussion. However, it is evident that there are effective strategies that professors have found useful and helpful to have candid and constructive conversations about taboo topic areas in the classroom, and that these conversations will continue to grow at PWI's when more diversity is embedded into the campus culture. If researchers were to revisit this topic and conduct their own research study, the researcher would suggest having a wider variety of academic disciplines represented and more faculty of color as participants in the study.

This topic is extremely important and relevant as diversity is increasing at predominantly white institutions and this shift can bring up tensions for the dominant culture, and anxiety and isolation for minority students and faculty assimilating into this culture. Creating a classroom environment that is conducive to open and honest discussion, and having effective strategies to facilitate dialogues can be helpful for minority students to feel more comfortable in spaces where

they are often underrepresented or silenced, and allows consciousness raising to occur for students in the majority that benefit from social privileges.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **Principal Investigator: Kate Holleran**

**Study Title:** What Do You Bring to the Classroom? – A Look at Approaching Difficult Dialogues

#### Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study that assesses how difficult dialogues are approached and conducted in the classroom on taboo topic areas.

You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

You are being asked to participate in this study as you are part of the faculty at Providence College. As such, you likely have experiences with handling difficult dialogues that may come up in class discussions.

#### Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the professor's experience handling a difficult dialogue in the classroom, and to explore strategies that may have been found to be effective or ineffective. The topics of difficult dialogues may have to do with: race, sex, class, religion, political affiliation, etc. Additionally, this study will seek to address and evaluate the perceived response from students.

#### What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to complete an in-person interview with the researcher. The interviews will be audio-recorded, unless you specify otherwise. The interview questions will ask you to answer a few brief demographic questions, as well as questions regarding your background at Providence College.

Interviews are expected to take around 30 minutes.

#### What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

There are no foreseen risks associated with this research study aside from the possibility of being unsure of how to answer or uncomfortable with some questions. If any issue should arise, you are invited to decline from answering any question(s) that you wish and/or withdrawing from the study.

#### What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, it is hoped that your participation in the study may positively impact the understanding of approaching increasing diversity at a medium-sized Predominantly White Institution.

#### Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

Individuals will not receive payment for their participation, but participation is greatly appreciated.

How will my personal information be protected?

The information gathered from this study is collected by the researcher. Identifying information will not be included in the final outcomes of this research study.

Information collected from your responses during the interviews will be recorded on a digital audio-recorder, for later transcribing and statistical analysis. The hardcopy original audiotape, along with the transcripts completed will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the faculty researcher's (Dr. Kranz's) campus office and destroyed within three months of the date that you completed it.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not wish to. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have further questions about this study or if have a research-related problem, you may contact Dr. Kranz at 401-865-1581 or Kate Holleran at 508-813-7268.

By signing the line below, you are agreeing to participate in this research study. Through providing your consent, you are agreeing to allow the research team to use your responses for outcomes in this study.

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Participant Printed Name

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Date

---

Participant Signature

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Date

**Appendix B:**

# **Demographic Questionnaire**

1. What is your race/ethnicity?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What Department(s) do you currently teach in at Providence College?
4. How many years have you been teaching at Providence College?
5. Do you notice more diversity on campus and in your classroom?
  - a. Has this impacted your teaching in any way? How?
6. Has there been value in increasing diversity of the student body, faculty, and administration? Why?
7. What course(s) fulfill(s) the diversity requirement for your Department?
8. Do you feel this course (or courses) adequately engages and enhances the students' understanding of diversity? How so?

## **Appendix C:**

### Interview Questions

- Please describe your meaning of difficult dialogue.
- Can you describe strategies you have used to facilitate a difficult dialogue?
- What kind of classroom environment do you envision for teaching and learning?
- Can you tell the story of a difficult dialogue which occurred in your classroom?
  - How did you approach it?
  - What were you thinking?
  - What do you think impacted the outcome of the dialogue?
  - In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?
- Do you have any other comments about difficult dialogues in the classroom?