



Swati Avasthi is a novelist and creative writing professor. When we asked for people to tell us about their experience with classroom discussions of structural racism, here's what she told us:

How do you define structural or institutional racism?

Structural racism is a system that provides subtle but real privileges to one group of people because of their skin color. Because it is so subtle, it often invisible, but it has been demonstrated by a number of studies that show that we like to hire, promote, and/or give preference to those whose identities match closest to those we see typically in power. We've all absorbed structural racism and so it is hard to spot and hard to fight.

What has your experience been teaching this subject? Do you face much resistance?

Most people are eager to take part in a discussion about race. That said, people are rather nervous about it. Part of it, of course, is that people are afraid of offending someone or being called out as racist. But underneath that, I think people are nervous about it because structural racism is reversed when we discuss race. In other words, those who are usually the least likely to be listened to with deference and respect (people of color) are suddenly given the authority to speak, while people who are used to speaking with authority (Caucasians) suddenly find themselves without it. This makes everyone sort of "squirmy". No one in that discussion knows the rules or how to behave; we haven't experienced conversations with that dynamic typically.

I focus on the successes, rather than on resistance, because doing so privileges those who are making progress. I give acknowledgement to those people who indicate that we are all part of the problem, but that we can also be part of the solution. We need to stay diligent about ourselves and our actions.. We need to acknowledge that almost all of us are also privileged in some manner (able-bodied, gender, class, sexual orientation) and that our privilege is a part of our success.

Our successes come through our hard work, dedication, and those opportunities we were in privileged position to get.

What works best? What do people find trouble with?

Swati Avasthi: 'We've all absorbed structural racism'

Written by Sheila Regan, TC Daily Planet
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I've found that experiential learning makes the biggest difference. A colleague and professor at Normandale College, Charlotte Sullivan, taught me a wonderful way to start a discussion about the invisibility of privilege and structural racism. I run a simulation, dividing the class in half, being sure that those people who are more likely to experience privilege are in one half. I essentially turn that half into second-class citizens by "running out of handouts," blocking their view of board, dismissing their questions, and as they get more frustrated with me, calling out their attitude. The other half of the class I treat with respect: making sure their answers are reinforced, answering their "smart" questions. At the end of the simulation, we de-brief. Much of the time those who were in the privileged group didn't notice. That's where the trouble comes; they feel ashamed and tricked into thinking they were special. Those who were in the second-class citizen group have usually grown sullen and angry. And I have to make a point to draw them out, to remind them that it was a simulation, that their voices are important and that I'm the same teacher they've trusted all semester long. At the very end, I remind them that our simulation was only for a short time, but that is not true for people of color.

Why is this an important topic?

In track and field, everyone has the same distance to run. Whoever finishes first wins.

That is system that rewards an individual for their talents; it is a meritocracy. We live in a meritocracy and we're all supposed to be able to get ahead because of our talents. But a meritocracy only functions well if we have an even start, only if we all have the same distance to run. Currently, we have a staggered start and no real athlete wants to win because others have further to run. Also, if we want our country to stay competitive, we need our best people. We can't have our best people if we only give some of our people access to the race.

A classroom discussion of structural racism led to a reprimand for Professor Shannon Gibney at MCTC. Professors and students at other colleges report that discussions are often tough, with some white students perceiving any discussion of structural racism as a personal attack. We've collected many of their accounts in [Structural racism: Can we talk? Or not?](#) To join in the discussion, post a comment or send an opinion article toeditor@tcdailyplanet.net