

NJS Presents***Teaching NJ History*****In This Issue:*****Four Ways to (Re)consider Facilitating Discussions on Race and Social Justice*****By Lindsey R. Swindall****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.233>**

The year 2020 has offered an important opportunity to continue the important work of building anti-racist institutions. Community discussion is often challenging but is a vital part of building new institutions that are grounded in love and nonviolence. Drawing on years of experience facilitating discussions, this article offers suggestions for building trust, dealing with the consequences of the “poisoned well,” creating a pedagogy of listening, and understanding mistakes. Fostering authentic exchanges through dialogue is not easy work but it is essential to, in the words of John Lewis, “redeem the soul of America.”

In the extraordinary [final essay](#) written before his death in July 2020, lifetime activist John Lewis reminded readers, “In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.” One important way to carry forward the work of racial justice is through community discussion. For too many years, Americans have lived largely separated lives that prevent us from knowing each other, developing trust, and acknowledging the pain of systemic oppression. Without these essential building blocks, new institutions – grounded in peace, love, and nonviolence – cannot be built. Talking with each other honestly and forthrightly can be challenging, but it is paramount that we begin this journey in earnest.

The following observations are based on my sixteen years of teaching civil rights and African American history at colleges in the Northeast, Midwest, South and Mid-Atlantic regions of the U.S. I have also facilitated many discussions on race and U.S. history through the writing of James Baldwin that were supported by Humanities New York and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. Finally, I have done educational programming on the life of Paul Robeson for middle schoolers, high schoolers, and community groups. I have worked with participants young and old, audiences that were mainly White, audiences that were mostly Black, and groups that were racially diverse. These experiences have often led me to return to writer James Baldwin's 1964 observation from the essay ["Nothing Personal"](#) in which he points out cogently but poignantly that "talking with Americans is usually extremely uphill work. We are afraid to reveal ourselves because we trust ourselves so little." Establishing trust is necessary when facilitating any discussion on social justice issues. If a dialogue, especially an ongoing conversation, is grounded in trust then it can be transformative for the participants.

Trust

Establishing trust begins with oneself as facilitator. Before embarking on a single discussion or a series of conversations, a period of self-reflection is not only helpful, but indispensable. As a facilitator, it is critical to assess how one has experienced advantage and disadvantage in U.S. society. Ask yourself, what is your relationship to privilege, how have your background and your experiences informed your perspectives on these issues? What are your goals for group discussion both personally and for the group as a whole? What are your fears about leading discussion? These questions, and others, enable one to come to facilitation not as a person with all of the answers but as someone willing to delve into difficult questions and grapple with them honestly. After all, no one is an expert on what anti-racist discussions or institutions

look like because we have all been raised working with institutions that are plagued by racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression. Being willing to acknowledge these truths and consider them authentically on a personal and community level opens the door to establishing trust.

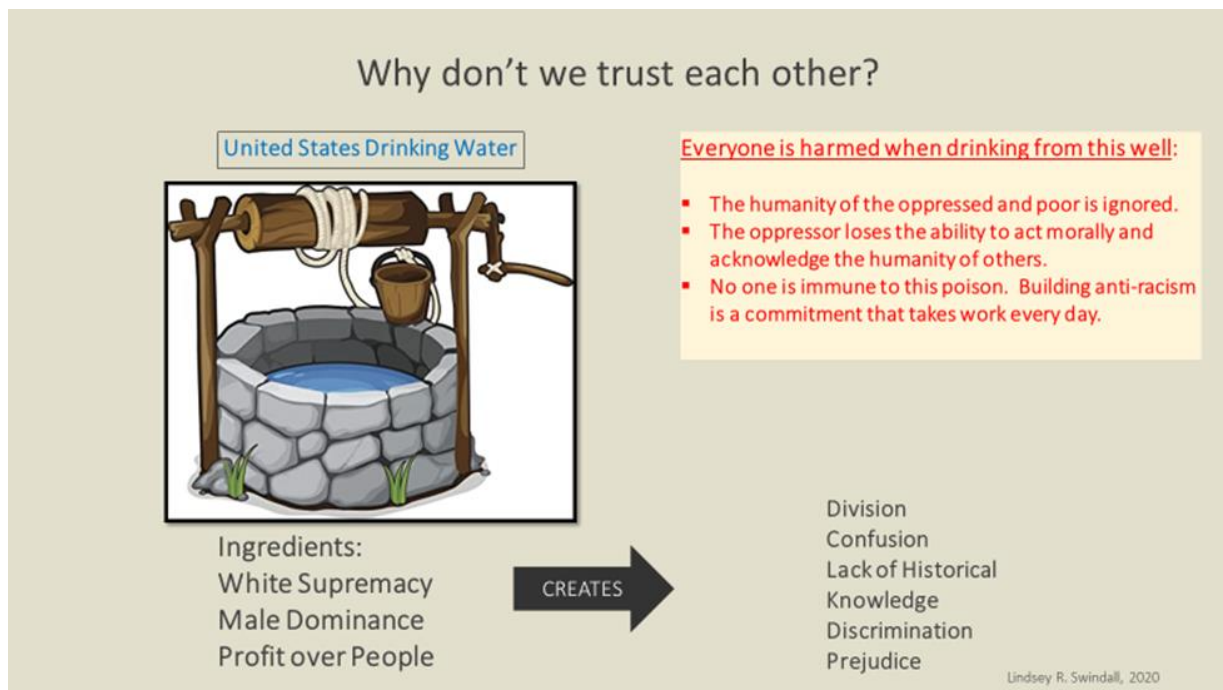
As a facilitator, consider beginning any discussion session by sharing about oneself. This does not necessitate a long biography but allowing yourself to be vulnerable in the discussion space is key to demonstrating that the space is safe. Many facilitators state that a space is safe and encourage participants to be respectful, however, opening up and sharing some of your personal story is a powerful way to accompany a statement. I was once co-facilitating a discussion at a public library with a group of about 30-40 adults. A few minutes into the introduction, an African American gentleman raised his hand and said something like: "I need to know why a white woman like you thinks she can come here and lead a discussion on James Baldwin." I am forever grateful to this participant who helped me to always remember to share who I am and how I am approaching any discussion on race. If there are elements that are possible red flags to participants, be sure to address those from the outset. For me, sharing how growing up in the deep South as a white woman informed my decision to get a degree in African American Studies is something that is not intuitive for a lot of participants so it must be discussed in order to establish trust. The man at the library was not prepared to trust me immediately but his distrust shifted somewhat when we all shared about our backgrounds and ended up having a lengthy and memorable discussion. Any elephants in the room should be addressed promptly and with sincerity. They might include anything from recent events to community history, even institutional history if the discussion is at a college or other organization with a historical relationship to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. If you feel nervous or as if you do not have all the answers, then admit that to the group. It will help break the ice because most people probably feel the same way.

If it is possible, consider teaming up with other facilitator(s) who come from different backgrounds but share similar goals in community dialogue. Dozens of the conversations I have facilitated were with Grant Cooper, who is an African American artist. Since his formative years were spent in Camden and Vineland, he is uniquely suited to engage with groups from both rural and urban New Jersey when we travel around the state. His experience as a comic is an effective counterpoint to my background as a scholar. Humor is an excellent tool to help people feel comfortable, trust the discussion space, and help participants start to trust each other. However, why is it so difficult for us, as Americans, to trust each other?

The Poisoned Well

Answering this question, or addressing it in some manner, can be an effective way to start a discussion on race or another social justice issue. Chances are strong that participants feel uncomfortable or isolated when the conversation begins. Gently talking about that issue from the beginning can be a good way to alleviate the power of distrust. In his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the activist and orator used the metaphor of poison to describe how slavery impacted U.S. society. This poison harmed the oppressed and it also hurt the oppressor because one cannot be fully human while ignoring or actively denigrating the humanity of another. Therefore, society as a whole was damaged by that immoral system. This metaphor is relevant today in what I have called as the poisoned well. We have all been drinking from well water that has been poisoned by systems of racism, patriarchy, and putting profits over people, among others. No one born and raised in this society can avoid being impacted by these systems because of their entrenchment going back to the founding of the republic and the colonial era. We must first recognize and acknowledge that we have all been affected by these systems in some manner before being able to move to a place where we can critique the systems in conversation and begin to

imagine something new. The following illustration might be useful for discussing the poisoned well:



As a facilitator, the realization of everyone having been poisoned can manifest in a variety of ways. It is helpful to understand that feedback from participants can be valid and useful even if it might be, at times, painful. Participants might bring perspectives that the facilitator has not encountered or experienced. This means that the facilitator, to be most effective, should embrace humility and be open to new viewpoints. If the facilitator can do this without being defensive or argumentative, this behavior can provide a powerful model for the other participants to follow when they encounter new perspectives. For example, I was co-facilitating a discussion on African American activist Paul Robeson at a high school in NYC where the students were all Black. One student, who was obviously frustrated, pointedly remarked, “Why should I trust you to teach me this history?” His frustration stemmed not just from me, a visitor at his school, but the fact that most teachers at his school were White and he was rightfully critical of the lack of African

American role models in his education. I responded that it was up to him to decide if he could trust me. We were in the middle of a five-week discussion of my biography on Paul Robeson, so I asked if he was reading the book and whether he had looked me up online. If my work was sound, then he could decide for himself whether to trust me. Also, Grant was working with me at this session and it helped that he could point to the trust that existed between he and I. The conversation then turned toward the need for African American teachers at the school, which weighed on many of the students, and it seemed helpful for them to have an outlet in which they could freely discuss that significant issue. If a facilitator can turn a challenging moment into a moment where learning and meaningful exchange can occur, then the pain of acknowledgement (in this case, the students' need for Black role models) can be transformed into a new direction for possible activism.

The poisoned well can also lead people, facilitators included, to prejudge participants. I have had several consequential encounters that reminded me not to judge students or discussion participants. For example, in a graduate class that I taught in the South, a White student came into the classroom on the first day with several Civil War tattoos on his arms. This was a U.S. history class on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so we were dealing with the establishment of segregation law after the collapse of Reconstruction. I became uneasy about the future of these discussions when I saw this student because of his tattoos. However, he turned out to be a very thoughtful student with a degree in Philosophy who was open to critical discussions on race. He enjoyed teaching with historical documents and had a knack for engaging undergraduates who were interested in military strategy. His tattoos in no way represented the complexity of his identity and I had to check myself because I had prejudged his perspective before I knew him. He and I remain friends to this day. Visible markers on a person's body can be

misread and misinterpreted so easily, and none of us is above falling into this trap. This is one of the reasons why Americans need to build greater trust through discussions in which we get to know each other.

Listening

One vital way to get to know each other is through listening. As a facilitator, it is not one's responsibility to fill the time primarily with your insights. Ideally, the rapport and trust built between the facilitator and participants will enable participants to ultimately listen to themselves and listen to each other as they share. A pedagogy of listening can be an important foundation for meaningful exchanges. Facilitating dozens of conversations on James Baldwin's observations about American society has taught me this lesson. Conversation can be framed around listening on several levels. First, participants listen to an article or other text that is introduced for its content. Encourage someone to read a portion of the text out loud and then let participants sit quietly with that insight for a full minute (or more). This gives them time to listen to themselves. Participants need a little time to discover how a text resonates with them, how it fits with their life experiences.

I should say here that I am also a teacher of mindfulness meditation and a long-time practitioner of meditation. Mindfulness has without a doubt made me a better teacher and facilitator of discussions. Early in my career, having participants sit with a text silently for a couple of minutes would have been excruciating. However, I now view it as essential. We live in a world that is incredibly fast moving and impatient. These values sometimes prevent us from having authentic, meaningful encounters, with ourselves and with others. Presence is extremely important in a conversation about something as significant as social justice. By presence, I mean being not just physically in the space but bringing intention, attention, and honesty to the group. All of these

take focus and can contribute to active listening. When a facilitator demonstrates these characteristics, the participants often follow this model. For example, on several occasions I have facilitated public discussions in libraries where people who are homeless or touched by mental illness share stories. I have been moved by the patient and loving way that groups listen to these people express their pain. On two occasions, it was clear that the participants who were sharing had been frequently ignored or abused and simply needed to be recognized as human beings. I was so grateful to be in groups that listened thoughtfully and in so doing acknowledged their humanity through their pain. As a facilitator, if you find yourself talking less while participants are listening more, it is often a sign that the conversation is moving to a deeper level of sharing rooted in trust and sincerity. This can be powerful when it happens. The energy in the room changes and people are touched by the connections that occur. I have been in spaces where people gathered as strangers and left after two hours hugging and professing friendship. When people do not want to leave the discussion space, it is a positive symbol of a meaningful exchange.

Mistakes

Finally, the issue of mistakes needs to be addressed. Fear of making mistakes or saying something wrong often dissuades people from engaging in dialogue on important issues. Let's clear this up: you will make mistakes as a facilitator. I have. Everyone who has ever tried to talk about important issues has made mistakes. It cannot be avoided because we are human and subject to frailties. Additionally, very few of us have witnessed or participated in meaningful conversations about race so it is often perceived as a mystery better to be avoided. Avoiding the issue, however, does nothing to help ameliorate it. We must engage with racism in order to decrease its power in U.S. society. This is not easy, but it is necessary. As a facilitator, one can try to recognize that mistakes will be made when undertaking self-reflection. Mistakes can offer

openings for learning to take place or they can have a deleterious effect on a conversation. How a facilitator deals with mistakes is key. Mistakes must be acknowledged quickly, or they will fester and become potentially deep wounds that prevent positive engagement. Again, this calls for humility from the facilitator who must recognize what occurred and process it, sometimes using improvisation in a tense situation. Experience is an effective, but sometimes merciless, teacher in these cases. Self-reflection after a conversation and an honest assessment of one's expectations as a facilitator can be helpful. If a facilitator has built trust within a group, the existing rapport can help minimize the potential damage of a mistake. When participants know that the facilitator, and all or most participants, is coming to the space with authenticity, honesty and sincerity, then the mutual trust fostered through those values will often prove to be stronger than a mistake made in a momentary error of judgement.

For example, Grant and I were facilitating a five-part discussion series on James Baldwin at a charter school in New York City. We had worked with administrators to make sure that the students, teachers, and parents who came to the event were fed because it was close to dinner time and everyone was coming from a long day of work. On one occasion, teachers who did not stay for the discussion came into our room and took food which interrupted our discussion. The students were immediately angered by this because they felt a sort of betrayal that the teachers were not participating in a discussion that was important to them and, on top of that, were taking food set aside for participants. We had to quickly intervene and make sure that in the future it was not possible for anyone who was not participating in the discussion to take food until after the discussion concluded. In an interesting way, this mistake helped demonstrate that the space we created was unique and comfortable for the students who wanted to share. It was so special to them that when it was violated, by the outside teachers, the students felt stung by their lack of

respect. Owning mistakes and moving through them toward positive growth can be challenging but is part of the necessary work of anti-racism.

In conclusion, it is absolutely understandable to feel nervous or even afraid when facilitating discussions of importance on race and social justice. What is not acceptable, is doing nothing because then nothing changes, and no new ideas come to fruition for new kinds of anti-racist institutions. I encourage you to be one of the people who John Lewis describes as “ordinary people with extraordinary vision” because it is these folks who will “redeem the soul of America.”¹

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¹ Suggested Reading: *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 4th edition (Routledge, 2018) and *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2016)