

**Collaborative Inquiry as a Strategy for Adult Learning:
Creating Space for Generative Learning**

Lyle Yorks

Teachers College, Columbia University

Elizabeth Kasl

California Institute of Integral Studies

EDITORS

Original Manuscript Copy, now published in:

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education no. 94, Summer 2002

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Attached is Chapter 8: A Multiple-group Inquiry into Whiteness

Separate groups pursue inquiries into the impact of White hegemony on participants' lives. This project's unique infrastructure supports learning that leads to changed beliefs and new behaviors.

A Multiple-group Inquiry into Whiteness

European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness

Participants: Thirteen groups and 50 participants, including faculty, adult students and community members. Some participants earn academic credit.

Inquiry Purpose: For participants: to develop personal understanding about what it means to be a member of the dominant group in society and to translate new understanding into changed behavior and social action. For the institution: to improve environment for diversity.

Process: Most groups meet face-to-face, but several participate online via private electronic conference. Inquiries typically run for nine-months; new groups form each year. Each group determines its own action/reflection cycles. Infrastructure that supports multiple groups includes community gatherings, shared reflection papers, on-line communication among all participants, and a representative planning committee.

Outcomes: Participants report changed beliefs and behaviors, including more effective communications with other White people about racism. Many describe a new sense of community that alleviates the isolation, despair and guilt they have often associated with challenging their own racism.

When an issue arises about which members of a community recognize they need to foster learning, the federated application of collaborative inquiry may be a useful strategy. The need for better ways to address issues of racism and White privilege in a small graduate school inspired the creation of this multiple-group structure, which we believe is unique.

Birth of the Project

The birth of the project occurred during a student-led workshop that focused on raising awareness about how White¹ supremacist norms and consciousness dominate U.S. culture. During the workshop, a group of faculty and students of Color¹ decided to create a course in which people of Color could affirm their distinct cultural ways of knowing and being as scholars. Their decision inspired a group of White people to initiate a parallel course to help White people understand the impact of White supremacist consciousness on their lives. Through a series of meetings, the White group chose co-operative inquiry (CI) as a method for structuring the project because CI engages learners in focusing on their own lived experience.

Controversial Decisions

Two elements in this project have been especially controversial: 1) our use of the term "White supremacist" and 2) the separation of the project into two sections, one for Whites and one for people of Color.

Why "White Supremacist"? We are often approached by White people who sincerely want to join a dialogue about racism but who are alienated by the word "supremacist." We believe it is important to use this emotionally charged phrase. In common usage, "White supremacist" refers to extremists who advocate racial separatism based on their conscious conviction that White people are superior human beings; these White supremacists typically advocate hatred of non-White peoples. We use the term "White supremacist consciousness" — not to refer to a group of people, but to a system of thought. White supremacist consciousness describes a way of thinking that takes for granted the legitimacy of an American society dominated by White norms and values. In other words, White norms and values are normalized, thus making implicit their supremacy over other groups' norms and values. It is this normalization that maintains the institutionalization of privilege based on race.

Our impetus to use this highly charged phrase comes from people of Color, drawn from the discourse of Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1995). As critical race discourse observes, many in our society fail to understand that racism is the institutionalization of privilege, not simply a manifestation of prejudiced attitudes by individuals. When well-intentioned White people see themselves as "not prejudiced" they often assume they are also "not racist" because they are examining their personal attitudes instead of the way in which they participate in unjust distributions of power and privilege based on race.

We acknowledge that the extremists and the well-intentioned are motivated by different concerns — the former advocating hate and superiority, the latter respect and equality. What is important for understanding supremacist consciousness is not people's intentions, but the practical impact of the underlying system of thought described above. This system of thought permeates representations of race in the media and institutional structures in the US, shaping the

beliefs and actions of extremists and the well-intentioned alike. Despite their apparent and genuine differences, the two groups share similar assumptions about the superiority of White norms and values, differing only because these assumptions are explicit and overt with one group, implicit and unconscious with the other. That this supremacist consciousness is often invisible to the well-intentioned only strengthens it as a force for oppression. Identifying structural racism not only inside society, but also in the most well-intentioned of individuals has been humbling for participants in the project and represents an important aspect of the learning that has taken place.

Why Two Sections? The separation of the project into race-based groups — especially the “White only” section, with its echoes of segregation and the separate-but-equal policies that dominated the US for the century after the Civil War — is also controversial. This separation continues to be challenged by some White participants and by the wider institutional community. Questions are consistently raised about whether members of a dominant group can learn about themselves in isolation, or whether oppressive behaviors will remain invisible or, worse, be reinforced. The decision to separate arose from both principle and circumstance. It has turned out to be a positive aspect of the experience and intrinsic to the learning that has taken place.

The initial organizers of the project assumed that those who benefit from White skin privilege have a responsibility to confront racism in themselves and in society. Both people of Color and Whites felt that if White people, rather than relying on people of Color, accepted more responsibility for and could direct their own learning about racism, greater equity would be realized. When the people of Color elected to meet separately, indicating their need for a safe haven as a necessary antidote to feelings of isolation that they experience in largely White academic settings, their decision created a challenging circumstance: Whites would need to find a way to engage the questions with one another, if they were to engage at all.

The decision to use CI, with its emphasis on common experience and its explicitly non-hierarchical structure was deemed to hold potential for confronting rather than avoiding the concerns raised about Whites meeting together. All groups report that the CI process creates a context of trust such that participants are able to become vulnerable enough to acknowledge and examine felt experiences of racist thoughts and behaviors, learn from them, and change. This process is clearly facilitated by, if not reliant on, the Whites-only nature of the groups. This is not to suggest that we imagine that the fundamental challenge of confronting racism lies in this transformation process alone. Organizers have seen it as a complement to, not a replacement for, other multicultural learning experiences. Many participants simultaneously pursue other forms of diversity studies.

People of Color express appreciation that White people are meeting in separate groups, seeing it as an indication that Whites are becoming more conscious of how they must change in

relation to race. From working with other White people, White participants report that they feel better able to act as allies in multicultural settings.

Learning Outcomes

During the project's second year, one group initiated case study research to discover how the project had impacted the first year's participants. Learning outcomes for individual participants, which are described more fully elsewhere (Barlas et. al., 2000a, 2000b), include the following: increased capacity to be trusting, vulnerable and self-reflective; new use of language for conversing about race; increased knowledge about White norms; changes in behavior in work and personal settings; increased sense of community with White people; and increased compassion for self and others.

Participants describe growth and change irrespective of their different initial states of awareness. Some acknowledge that when they began participating in CI, they were completely unconsciousness regarding White normative behavior and White privilege; others began with an acute conscious awareness coupled with disdain for White people who remain ignorant about racism. No matter what quality of initial awareness characterized the participant, all but one reported a change in awareness associated with the CI experience.

The inquiry process helps participants develop capacity for critical self-reflection. Conducting CI actions, as for example “noticing what happens to you when someone makes a racist comment in your presence,” brings the inquiry into people’s daily lives. Eleanor described this experience as an “expanded instant” when her mind slows because she has heard someone say something racist. She referred to it as a “psychological internal space” and said, “It feels almost like an infinitely large little moment and then it collapses and then you have to go on with chronological time.” Using a photography metaphor, Gretchen explained, “It’s like I’m doing something and all of a sudden I get a snapshot of myself doing it.... I’m still moving but I see myself frozen in this one place in time and it kind of haunts me.” The CI actions helped Eleanor and Gretchen pay attention to particular moments; the reflection that followed in their CI groups helped them make shared meaning of their experience.

Participants are able to use their CI groups as a place to practice new language and behaviors; they notice that the vulnerability they allow themselves within their CI groups enables them to admit their ignorance and fears, leading them toward the courage to use new language and take action in other contexts of their lives. Andrew reported, "There is no question that my work in this group affects the language I use and the way I speak about the experience of internalized self-hatred and seeing myself as the oppressor.... I now have ways to talk about White supremacy with people that I didn't have before, new language, new metaphors and images.” Sarah, who was in her fourth year of a doctoral program in multicultural education,

spoke about how she learned to risk "not looking good." She believes that her participation contributed importantly to her ability to speak authentically. She noted that the humility and compassion of others in her inquiry group, especially of those she had perceived as "having it mastered," allowed her to talk about her experience and learn from her mistakes.

Increased confidence in carrying the discourse of White supremacist consciousness into social interactions is exemplified by Victoria who explained that because of her CI group she is learning to be more effective in speaking with other White people about Whiteness. Now she sees herself more often seeking to stay "in relationship" as she converses with White people about White supremacist norms, rather than what she saw herself doing previously — preaching and assuming a right/wrong dichotomous stance. She recalled talking with a family member about race. "I was trying to listen really hard to what his point of view was so that I wouldn't slam any doors.... I had a different notion inside my head about what I was trying to do than I had before I came into this group." Victoria's CI group labeled the attitude of preaching and scolding as wanting to be "the good White person" who can feel superior to "the bad White person." Daniel, who was in Victoria's CI group, explained that the idea of "the good White person" continues to influence his everyday life two years later.

Eleanor described how her experience in her CI group motivated her to become a catalyst for change in the community college where she teaches. Inspired by Eleanor's activism, other faculty and staff became re-engaged in a diversity committee and received a grant to create a diversity program.

In some cases it is difficult for people to attribute changes solely to this inquiry project since many are also working at "unlearning racism" in other ways. However, nearly all participants affirmed the impact of CI. Gretchen explained, "The change in consciousness from this inquiry is subtle and slight at times to booming insights at other times."

Organizing a Multiple-group Inquiry

A federated design supports the learning outcomes described above. The project has been shepherded by Linda Sartor, who is both the project coordinator and the instructor for participants enrolled for academic credit. Linda's approach to guiding this complex project is influenced by her own research into how collaborating groups can be facilitated in ways that equalize internal power dynamics (Sartor, 1998).

We use the term "shepherding" to capture the spirit of Linda's leadership. This multiple-group project fosters self-direction and collaboration, not only within the individual groups but also in the larger supportive infrastructure. Participants share responsibility for group leadership and decision-making, with the project coordinator available for direction and support.

Getting started. The project begins each year with an open kick-off meeting. Since the project coordinator is not present in the inquiry groups once they begin, she has a limited opportunity to influence and support the groups. Linda feels that this meeting is “a critical element in the functioning of the whole project.” Therefore, we describe this element of the multiple-group structure in detail.

People are invited into the project through written documents and/or word of mouth that usually includes the phrase “White supremacist consciousness.” Consequently, when Linda begins working with the groups she presumes that participants who join “already accept that White supremacist norms and consciousness exist in our lives as members of the dominant culture, and that participants have the desire to ‘do’ something about this awareness.”

People come to the kick-off meeting to learn more about the project. Linda describes four intentions for the day: 1) to deepen relationships among potential members in the context of White supremacist consciousness, 2) to create a shared understanding of co-operative inquiry, 3) to establish each person’s commitment to the project, and 4) to help participants make critical decisions that will support group functioning.

Attendees share deeper stories of their own White supremacist consciousness. Then they discuss why strong commitment is essential: the emotional intensity generated from inquiring into one's own White supremacist consciousness is challenging; participants can slip into denial and be motivated to find reasons to “have to miss” a CI meeting. Linda provides handouts about CI and spends time explaining its validity procedures, extended epistemology, and John Heron’s application of the Appolonian and Dionysian cultures of group functioning (1996, pp. 45-49).

Inquiry groups form after lunch and conduct their first meeting during the rest of the day. Linda encourages each group to develop capacity for and ownership of the CI process among its members. The newly formed groups spend the rest of the day addressing the following items: 1) articulating an inquiry question, 2) identifying the group's first action, 3) selecting meeting times and places, 4) clarifying a confidentiality agreement, 5) planning for distress facilitation (Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996), and 6) identifying a representative to the planning committee.

Consistent with the design of CI, from then on the groups are self-facilitating and Linda is not involved in their internal procedures. In order to continue to support the groups, she relies on several elements of infrastructure, outlined below.

Implementation. In addition to keeping the coordinator informed about what is happening within each group, five structural elements of this multiple-group project also help the groups create a larger sense of community. These elements are the planning committee, the end-of-year symposium, reflection papers, an online community space, and group progress reports.

The planning committee meets on a regular basis. At least one participant of each group serves as a representative to this committee; all participants are welcome. Planning committee

meetings provide cross-fertilization among groups as well as an opportunity for Linda to stay in touch with what is happening within each group. The planning committee meetings also generate enthusiasm, commitment, and a sense of ownership for the project. In the spirit of CI, the leadership of the planning committee is intentionally collaborative. Planning committee members make decisions for the project as a whole, grappling with such issues as publicity, sustainability, and recruitment.

The committee also plans an end-of-year symposium that brings all the White group participants together for a day. The first end-of-year event gave each group an opportunity to present its work in progress. Groups used presentational modalities of storytelling, dramatizations, and visual art to describe members' growing insights about White supremacist norms and the way in which the CI process supported their learning. The whole gathering then reflected on the presentations, thus casting the symposium as a multiple-system cycle for action, reflection, and new meaning-making. For the second end-of-year symposium, project participants invited friends and colleagues to participate in a variety of activities that employed the extended epistemology (Heron, 1996) to explore White supremacist consciousness.

Brooke expresses appreciation for the symposium because of the sense of community that it brought her: "I loved the way we all came together at the end to have the symposium.... There was a sense that the community we were building in our small groups could be reflected by a larger group of committed participants that shared our learning experience." Eleanor explains, "Sharing with the bigger [symposium] group is like practice. I carry that with me." Overall, having multiple inquiry groups seems to lend momentum to the project.

For those taking the inquiry project for credit, writing and sharing reflection papers affects the learning of individuals as well as the learning of their groups. Reflection papers also allow Linda to track and contribute to the CI experiences. Daniel, who was the only member of his group earning academic credit, explains,

[The reflection paper] gave me another chance to reflect and make meaning on the process and thus contributed to my own learning as well as what I brought to the group.... Feedback comments from Linda on my required writings provided supportive input from a source outside of the group. For example, I remember the critical discussion about power dynamics that was set off in the group due to one of Linda's comments on one of my reflection papers.

Such input from an outsider can stimulate validity processes that help a group constructively challenge the meaning it is making of its experience.

A fourth structural element is provision for regular online communication. Participants have access to a private electronic conference where the topic is freely discussed; additionally, Linda sends periodic email updates to the entire community of past and current participants.

The fifth structural element that serves as Linda's conduit into the CI groups is the group progress report, required at the end of each semester. All members within a group who are participating for academic credit collaborate in creating the report.

Conclusions

White people often mask their experience from themselves. When that experience is related to race, racism, privilege, or hegemony, the motive to separate themselves from their experience is strong. This multiple-group project in which White people focus on understanding their own participation in White supremacist norms and consciousness has been a catalyst for individual and group learning. Participants identify changes both in their personal capacities and in their professional practices.

We identify several characteristics of this project's multiple-group design that can be useful to practitioners considering adapting this strategy for their own organizational or community learning needs.

- focusing on an organizational or community issue that requires expanded awareness rather than problem-solving
- providing meticulous attention to the formation of each group
- reinforcing the commitment of members to the group
- utilizing collaboration on all levels and phases of the project
- implementing multiple structures for intergroup communications through which CI processes can be monitored
- utilizing cycles of action and reflection learning throughout infrastructure, as in the symposium and planning committee

The project coordinator plays an important role in monitoring and supporting the CI process. For example, Linda helps groups manage their use of validity procedures and experience-based learning processes. As our dominant learning culture tends to privilege conceptual analysis and discourse, new inquirers may require extra support to stay grounded in learning from their own experience and to use presentational as well as propositional forms of knowing. The shepherding role is made easier if there are some participants who have prior CI experience.

In this project, Linda's dual role of project coordinator and instructor creates a challenge. Evaluation of student performance conflicts with the self-directed and participatory nature of the CI process. Although the dual role is not ideal, it creates benefits. Information generated from the course requirements of progress reports and reflection papers helps her know what kinds of support are needed for the groups.

One principle of the CI process is that outcomes emerge from the practice and are not *a priori*. Thus, facilitators must recognize they have no control over outcomes. A multiple-group CI can promote organizational change but it is different from other forms of action research because there is no specific problem to be solved. With CI, changes in individual consciousness may impact the larger organization or system, but the nature of those changes can be neither predicted nor controlled. The degree to which these CI groups actually learn as a collective, rather than learning solely at the individual level, provides an interesting question for further attention. Because this project is only in its third year, we cannot yet gauge what impact it may yet have on fostering cultural change within the institution as a whole system.

Note

1. The words "color" and "white" are socially constructed designations and constitute proper names; thus they merit capitalization. When these words are written in lower case they and their social significance are "normalized" as ordinary adjectives, obscuring their social meaning and significance. Our capitalization is intended to help the reader stay aware of these designations as social constructions.

References

- Barlas, C., Kasl, E., Kyle, R., MacLeod, A., Paxton, D., Rosenwasser, P., and Sartor, L. "Learning to Unlearn White Supremacist Consciousness." *Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference*. The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 2000a.
- Barlas, C., Kasl, E., Kyle, R., MacLeod, A., Paxton, D., Rosenwasser, P., and Sartor, L. "Cooperative Inquiry as a Facilitator for Perspective Transformation." *3rd International Transformative Learning Conference Proceedings*. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, 2000b.
- Delgado, R. (ed.). *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Heron, J. *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Reason, P. "The Co-operative Inquiry Group." In P. Reason (ed.), *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in New Paradigm Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.
- Sartor, Linda (1998). Collaboration and How to Facilitate It: A Cooperative Inquiry. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58 (11), 441 (University Microfilms No. 9814533), 1998.

The EUROPEAN-AMERICAN COLLABORATIVE CHALLENGING WHITENESS fosters research and learning about the subject of White supremacist consciousness. Members, who came together originally as participants in a cultural consciousness project at the Californina Institute of Integral Studies in San

Francisco, are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Past member Roberta Kyle is an important contributor to our knowledge construction. Inquiries about the Collaborative's work can be addressed to any member via email: cbarlas@aol.com, elizabethk@ciis.edu, alecm@ciis.edu, d-paxton@pacbell.net, penro@aol.com, lindas@ciis.edu.