

Ice-Breakers **for Courageous Conversations about Inclusive Diversity**

“The Association also believes that inclusive diversity requires honest and open conversation, and encourages its members and all others in the educational community to engage in courageous conversations that examine our assumptions, prejudices, discriminatory practices, and their effects.” -- WEA Continuing Resolution D-2 Multicultural Education Training

Sometimes people find it easier to discuss an issue that is already out there on the table than it is to bring up the issue in the first place. The narratives provided here are intended to help jumpstart courageous conversations about sensitive issues that might otherwise go unacknowledged or unaddressed.

Some of the following scenarios are personal accounts, while others are composite or adapted. Some come from students, while others come from staff or other adults. They are offered only as examples of courageous conversation ice-breakers. Facilitators are encouraged to select those that seem most useful for their group or situation, or to write their own based on their awareness of underlying issues.

1. I sometimes feel blamed for racial injustices in our country's past. At times I feel guilty myself about our past, but I also feel angry about being blamed. I also feel that things are so much better today. This is a touchy issue for me, so I tend to avoid talking about it openly.
2. I am a local Association president who dreads the whole RA delegate process every year. I know I should be encouraging members of color to run for a delegate position, but I feel as if they think I'm only coming to them because we need a minority delegate. I'm uncomfortable because down deep, I think maybe they're right. I feel stuck in a no-win situation.
3. Every year I feel singled out when my local President contacts me about running to be an RA delegate. Down deep I feel that the only reason she's contacting me is because she needs a minority delegate for the RA. It's like being asked by my white colleagues to share my perspective as a person of color about this or that. I don't ask them to tell me what white people think. Why do they assume I can somehow speak for all other persons of Asian heritage? Why can't they take some responsibility to educate themselves about these issues?
4. I'm a paraprofessional in my school, and every year I'm asked to participate in the Martin Luther King program. Although this is an honor and I'm glad to do it, it also brings up strong reminders that I am the only person of color in my building. I know if I bring this up that it will just cause the teachers I work with to feel uncomfortable, and our work is hard enough already, so I just keep it to myself.
5. Whenever I suggest that we have a workshop on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues at our school, I am told that this topic is really controversial and that some staff are not comfortable addressing it. How can we possibly provide safe and welcoming school environments for our students, not to mention our staff, if we can't even talk about these issues among ourselves?
6. I am a high school junior and in my eleven years of school, I never had a teacher who looked like me. As a result, I never really thought of people like me being teachers. My white classmates think I'm being too sensitive when I tell them that I feel like my school has let me down by not hiring staff who can relate to my experiences as an African-American.

7. I feel hurt and angry when my classmates, some of them my friends, say “We need to build a wall to keep them out!” Can’t they see that my family is part of the people they want to keep out? If I say anything, I know I’ll hear somebody mutter “border-jumper,” or worse. So I just sit there quietly. My teacher always looks my way when this happens, but never says anything.
8. I get so tired of hearing my classmates say that something is “so gay.” One or two of my teachers address this when it happens, but most don’t, and one teacher stopped intervening after several aggressive students asked if he were one of “them.” If I say anything, people will just tell me not to be so sensitive, or they will assume I’m gay and make my life miserable. The final straw is our annual diversity assembly where the principal says we have a zero-tolerance policy toward harassment. Right.
9. I’m a high school student and whenever issues of race or slavery or discrimination come up in my history and English classes, I feel everybody looking at me to “see how I’m doing.” I’ve learned to just shrug and not express the feelings I really have, because no matter what I say, somebody’s going to react negatively. I also know that a lot of my classmates censor their real feelings because they don’t want to offend me openly, but I know what they’re thinking. So I watch the clock instead.
10. I am a middle school teacher. Every time I see my colleagues with their pictures of their spouse and kids on their desk, I’m reminded that I don’t feel comfortable displaying my partner’s photo or even referring to her with my students or my colleagues. I know that other staff at my school will just see it as a “political statement” and resent me for reminding them of their own discomfort.
11. I was on a hiring panel for my district once and we had narrowed the list down to two people, a Latino man and a European-American woman. Both had great strengths, but neither one was strong in all of our hiring goals. The superintendent remarked that if we hired the Latino and he didn’t work out really well, this could set back minority hiring in the district. I wonder how often superintendents worry about setting back white hiring if a white employee “doesn’t work out”?
12. Shortly after I was hired I overheard two of my colleagues refer to the recent “skin-color hire.” I felt devastated. At the same time I remember one of my Black students entering my classroom on the first day and exclaiming, “I’m so excited! You’re the first Black teacher I’ve had in my life!” Our experiences are worlds apart, yet we work in the same building.
13. I have two students who sit in the back of one of my classes and really get on my nerves. It seems as if they’re always saying “Anglo this” or “Anglo that.” Why do they have to see everything as racial? Why can’t they be like me and just see people as human beings instead of this race or that? Isn’t that what Martin Luther King would have wanted?
14. I’m a high school junior in an almost all-white school. My dad is black and my mom is white, and it’s pretty clear to most people that I’m multiracial. Most of my closest friends are white, and they come up to me after class every time we discuss the civil rights movement or slavery or prejudice and say to me, “Don’t worry! We see you as a human being just like us and don’t even notice your race.” I know they’re trying to reassure me of their friendship, but I feel as if they are pretending to not see a really important part of who I am. I don’t know how to bring this up without hurting their feelings.

Please send feedback, concerns, additional accounts, or experiences with using this tool to Regon Unsoeld at regon.unsoeld@tumwater.k12.wa.us. Thank you!