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FLASHPOINTS: Responding to Oppression, Privilege, and Exclusion Higher Education

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FLASHPOINTS



**RESPONDING TO
OPPRESSION,
PRIVILEGE, &
EXCLUSIONS IN**

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BRIEF SUMMARY OF BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

University campuses have become more diverse and there is increased attention to the need to create and maintain welcoming learning environments for all students. There is also a growing recognition that many faculty members lack the skills to respond to flashpoints in the classroom. “Flashpoints” are defined as those moments when “something happens” (i.e., a micro-aggression or an ongoing process or procedure that specifically impacts those with targeted or marginalized identities) that calls for a faculty response. Although most faculty members express the willingness to “say something” or “do something,” they often acknowledge that they don’t know exactly **what** to do. Sometimes they describe feeling like a “deer in the headlights,” overcome by strong personal feelings or strong student responses or simply unable to act quickly or articulate a response. And, in addition to “moments” when something specific “happens,” there are on-going, systemic, and structural inequalities that are challenging ---- implicit biases, invisibility, marginalization, and exclusion. All of these require thoughtful and timely responses.

In 2002, Mara Sapon-Shevin produced (with Richard Breyer of the Newhouse School of Syracuse University), a DVD entitled: “**And Nobody Said Anything: Uncomfortable Conversations about Diversity**”. This DVD featured five filmed situations (or conversations) in which faculty were called on to respond—to do or say something in their classrooms. These incidents related to racism, classism, anti-Arab sentiments, disability, gender and other forms of prejudice or oppression. The vignettes did not end with a description of what **should** have happened, but, rather, provided a strong stimulus for a

subsequent discussion of what **could** happen, as well as potential risks, unrealized possibilities and lingering concerns.

The DVD was used widely on the Syracuse University campus and is still used as part of the Diversity Training currently delivered by the Provost's office. It was also purchased and shown by university faculty across the country and outside the US.

Now, twenty years since the original DVD was created by Sapon-Shevin, the number of institutions and organizations implementing diversity training has increased greatly and there is a growing need for up-to-date tools that can facilitate this important work. There is research to support the idea that talking "about" things is not as effective as actual hands-on opportunities to rehearse and practice in a setting that which provides chances for feedback and discussion.

RATIONALE

The purpose of this collaborative project was to produce an updated/second version of this well-received, but somewhat dated instructional DVD. The target audiences are educators and community leaders who work in diverse settings and who want to interrogate and improve their understanding and skills in creating non-oppressive learning environments.

The final project provides a platform in which viewers are presented with individual vignettes that are well defined and described. Each vignette represents a particular flashpoint or challenge constructed from focus group data. For each vignette, there is an accompanying Discussion Guide which includes a "lesson plan" and additional resources.

There are also four faculty interviews presented in which faculty members discuss their own challenges in working with critical diversity moments in the classroom and with other faculty. These interviews offer strategies for dealing with these moments and for establishing classroom environments which are conducive to meaningful discussions and interactions. A Discussion Guide is provided for each of the faculty interviews.

METHODOLOGY

In the first phase of the project, we focused on data collection to understand contemporary forms of micro-aggressions, invalidations, and exclusions experienced by students and faculty from marginalized groups on campuses. Toward this end, we hosted focus groups with students and faculty representing various marginalized identities. Specifically, we invited women students in the sciences, Black and Asian students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, immigrant students and students receiving financial assistance to participate in focus groups . We also interviewed four faculty members who had been nominated as having exceptional skills in responding to complex teaching moments related to diversity.

Some sample interview questions included:

- Tell us about a time in one of your classes when something problematic happened that called for a faculty response which either didn't happen or was inadequate in your view.
- Tell us about a time in one of your classes when you (as a faculty member) observed or was told about something problematic and didn't know what to do.

Or perhaps you now think that your response in the moment was problematic or inadequate.

- Describe some ongoing challenges in your classes regarding issues of participation, visibility, marginalization, exclusion, curriculum, etc. Include how you became aware of each issue or how it was brought to your attention.

Based on the focus group data, eight vignettes were written and produced. For each vignette, there is a discussion guide which includes how to use the vignette as part of a lesson and additional resources.

FLASHPOINTS VIGNETTES

- **MISGENDERING**

Description: A professor (White, female) misgenders a student, and, when corrected, launches into a very elaborate apology which further embarrasses the student.

Discussion: What misgendering means? What to do when one makes a mistake? Strategies for learning and using students' personal pronouns in respectful ways.

- **DISABILITY ACCOMODATIONS**

Description: A professor (White, female) responds to two students, one who has an accommodation plan and one who does not but has a request for a modification. The professor is dismissive of the student's needs and tries to (gently) talk her out of requiring them.

Discussion: What it means to have a Disability Accommodation plan? Why it is important for teachers to be aware of students' plans? The importance of maintaining privacy and confidentiality in responding to students'

accommodations? The challenge of responding thoughtfully to students' requests for accommodations more inclusively.

- **LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS (three versions)**

Description: A professor (White, male), overhears two students during a class break discussing the land acknowledgment they heard at the previous evening's basketball game. The students are dismissive of what they heard and make derogatory remarks about the land acknowledgment. In version one, the professor addresses the students directly (privately) and asks them to see him after class. In version two, the professor asks the students what they know about land acknowledgements and engages them in a discussion. In version three, the professor begins class after the break by addressing the entire class and begins a discussion about land acknowledgments and their importance.

Discussion: What is a land acknowledgment and why are they made? How should students' misinformation or inappropriate comments be addressed – punitively, privately, or as a teachable moment for the whole class? What kinds of curriculum and pedagogical strategies go beyond simply acknowledging indigenous history?

- **SPRING BREAK**

Description: A professor (Black, male) tells students that he knows that they are all looking forward to Spring Break for some “rest and relaxation.” Each of eight students is shown with their internal dialogue explaining what Spring Break means for them. The students describe an assortment of life challenges and identities that will make Spring Break something **other** than restful or relaxing.

Discussion: What assumptions do faculty make about the lives and backgrounds of their students? How can assumptions about class and privilege be damaging to students' educational experiences? How can faculty

organize classroom policies and practices that are more thoughtful regarding students' social identities and life situations?

- **CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS**

Description: A professor (White, female) asks students to share their final project plans. A Jewish student says he is going to focus on Israel as the ancestral homeland of the Jews. A Palestinian student challenges him and says that it is **their** land. A third student says that she is also Jewish but believes in Palestinian justice and doesn't like the proposed project either.

Discussion: What should faculty do when there are within-class frictions about controversial political topics? Should the conflict be responded to directly? Avoided? What is the role of faculty when there is conflict between students? Should faculty share their own feelings or attempt to remain "neutral"? How do we distinguish between "facts" and "opinions"? How should misinformation be challenge?

- **TRIGGER WARNINGS**

Description: A professor (Latino, male) remembers, belatedly, that he is supposed to provide a "trigger warning" for a film he is about to show that is about sexual violence/rape. He advises students that if any of them will find it difficult, they can leave class without penalty to their attendance points. One woman hesitates and then gathers her belongings and leaves. Two other women discuss the woman's departure and question what happened to her.

Discussion: What are trigger warnings (sometimes called Content Warnings)? Are they a good idea? Unnecessary at the college level? How and when

should they be provided? How should faculty respond to students who are, in fact, unable to participate in some aspect of the curriculum?

- **IMMIGRATION**

Description: A professor (Latino, male) asks his class to discuss ways in which the topic of immigration might play out in the upcoming election. A variety of students voice their opinions about immigrants to the U.S. and their feelings about the appropriateness/need to support their challenges.

Discussion: How can discussions that might elicit a range of opinions and questionable language be framed for a class? What is the professor's role in "managing" such a discussion. What should the faculty member do if they hear statements that are ill-informed or may be characterized as "hate speech"? What is the relationship between a professor's own identity and the topic of discussion/debate and how can this be addressed?

- **WOMEN IN SCIENCE**

Description: A professor (White, male), tells a young woman of color that she's done well in the program and he doesn't think she will have trouble getting an internship because many people are looking for "someone like her." The student looks distressed/confused and leaves. Later, she has coffee with a friend (White, female), who says that she thinks the professor's comment is positive because it means there are lots of "diversity hires."

Discussion: How is the professor's comment about "people like you" a racial microaggression when voiced to a young woman of color? What is meant by the term "diversity hire" and how is its usage problematic and offensive?

ADDITIONAL VIGNETTES: Five vignettes from the previous project are also available for discussion:

- **9/11:** A student discusses what it was like for her on campus and in class after the bombing of the World Trade Center. Focus is on the silence of the professor when fellow classmates express racist, hateful reactions. Discussion may focus on the concept that “silence is complicity” and what *could* have happened.
- **First Day of Class:** Students are asked to introduce themselves on the first day of class. In addition to what they *actually* say, we hear their inner thoughts about how they fear they will be perceived by classmates and the professor based on their identities. Discussion may focus on how “innocent” class activities may be fraught for some students.
- **Group Work:** A professor places students in small groups to complete a task and one student (audibly) reacts to being asked to work with students “who don’t even speak English.” The professor’s inaction in the moment and subsequent opportunity to address the students raises issues of what to say, when to say it, and whether responses should be public or private.
- **IQ Testing:** A professor makes a point about racial bias in IQ testing by specifically naming a White student and a Black student in the class as examples. Another student is upset and indicates that they are going to report it to an administrator. Key points include the danger and fallout of singling out students (by race) to instructional purposes
- **Faculty Discussion:** A faculty member muses about whether their handling of a student’s expressed reluctance to discuss “uncomfortable topics” was appropriate. Discussion can include strategies for wading into “dangerous territory” with students.

FACULTY INTERVIEWS

There are also four faculty interviews in which faculty members discuss their pedagogy and instructional strategies for dealing with challenging moments in the classroom and beyond. Faculty members discuss how they responded to intense discussions of identity, war, transphobia and politics.