

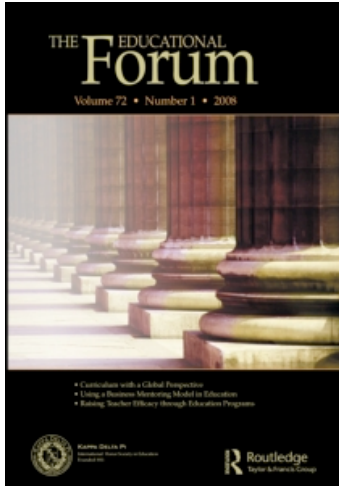
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### Adding without Contradiction: The Challenge of Opening Up Interracial Dialogue

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THE EDUCATIONAL  
**Forum**

# Adding without Contradiction: The Challenge of Opening Up Interracial Dialogue

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## **Abstract**

*This essay begins with the question, “What can educators do to minimize the risks inherent to interracial dialogue?” Though no such meaningful conversation ever will be without risk, this article offers two specific strategies that have helped foster open classroom climates: adding without contradiction and granting freedom for conclusions. Both of these strategies intervene on several dysfunctional habits U.S. participants enact in conversations about race and, thus, help enrich the ameliorative capacity of interracial dialogue.*

**Key words:** *dialogue, facilitation, race, strategies.*

*In our classrooms, the deep rift between white students and students of color [is] always present. As educators we have an opportunity, and perhaps even an obligation, to expose this rift in order to foster a truly dialogic community. (Rich and Cargile 2004, 354)*

Several years ago, Marc Rich and I (Rich and Cargile 2004) wrote about the process of facilitating interracial dialogue. As we (and many others; e.g., Nakagawa 1987; Berger 1999; Simpson 2003) described it, race talk holds great promise, as well as peril. Latent tensions can manifest themselves as overt, painful conflict and, as one student put it, “there isn’t always a happy ending.” However, because of its tremendous potential to heal deep wounds and increase awareness, dialogue remains a central component of multicultural instruction. The question thus becomes, “What can educators do to minimize the risks inherent to interracial dialogue?”

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In this essay, responses to the question raised are offered on the basis of my 15 years of experience in facilitating such dialogues. In practice, I acknowledge the failure to manage the risks well until the strategies of “adding without contradiction” and “granting freedom for conclusions” began to emerge in facilitation. Although the efficacy of these strategies has not been experimentally assessed, my extensive experience reveals and judges them to be effective. More than 3,000 students have enrolled in my basic course in intercultural communication and have shared their experiences in the form of a class journal. These journal entries further corroborate in-class, shared experiences regarding the effectiveness of these strategies (as well as testify to the ineffectiveness of previous approaches). With the written permission of the students, this essay offers a representative sample of these journal entries.

### *The Risks of Dialogue*

Interracial dialogue is risky because it brings participants into contact—the outcome of which is often unpredictable. Decades of research in social psychology cautions that intergroup contact may result in increased prejudice, ostracism, decreased self-esteem, and reinforced stereotypes—to name some of the risks (Hewstone and Brown 1986; Pettigrew 1998). As one student wrote of the dialogue experience, “This class, if anything, has made me more of a bigot than I was coming into this whole mess. It just showed me how annoying people are that support this standpoint of multiculturalism.” Though such reactions of increased prejudice are real, their incidence is rare and perhaps impossible to mitigate. A far more common, and likely preventable, negative outcome of interracial dialogue is “shutting down”—the response of disengagement.

### *Shutting Down*

*Each class period we widened the gaps and chasms that exist between the races. ... It is sad that all we do is bitch and complain. ... By the end of the course, even those of us who were active speaking participants did not want to attend class.*

As this student’s comment illustrates, one typical response to interracial dialogue is a fatigued resistance—shutting down. As Fishman and McCarthy (2005, 347) suggested, shutting down occurs when students are seen “hardening their conflicting positions and turning deaf ears to one another.” When students shut down, they suspend listening; they have firmly reached their own conclusions and are no longer open to any viewpoints but their own.

Resistance and its ultimate expression—shutting down—can take many forms, including silence, passive-aggressiveness, absenteeism, and overt hostility (Chan and Treacy 1996; Higginbotham 1996). Examples of the last two forms occurred in classes where students had a particularly difficult time engaging in constructive dialogue. The conversation turned so sour that a significant number of students stopped showing up, despite a policy of required attendance. Among the continuing participants were those who would greet discussion periods with both expressed and quiet rage. One student noted the palpable tension: “I have felt more hostility in this class than I have ever felt. I never knew there was so much hatred and anger about these racial issues.” As this experience illustrated,

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interracial dialogue can lead students to shut down in anger; if they do so in numbers, the discussion climate may be irrevocably changed.

Though shutting down can occur in a climate of anger, it more commonly occurs in a context of ennui in which students greet discussion with silence and passive-aggressive responses. For example, one European American student reacted to African American stories of inequality by goading her classmates: "Start looking at life as a pursuit for yourself as an individual and quit worrying throughout life about your race or culture!" Predictably, this response was met with a defense of why race (still) matters and was followed by additional accounts of discrimination. If students fail to get through to one another in situations like this, the dialogue often will get stuck as the same points of view are voiced, repeatedly. Unfortunately, breakthroughs rarely occur after one or two iterations. Instead, if the same standpoints keep being articulated, students may begin to shut down. One student explained it this way: "After this class, I find myself moving away from the pursuit of multiculturalism because of the redundancy of it all."

Shutting down is a risk of interracial dialogue that all participants face. Even so, it is important to note that this risk is not shared equally: Students who benefit from systematic inequality (European Americans in a U.S. context) are more likely to resist pedagogy and discussions that examine race than those students who do not (Levine-Rasky 2000; Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore 2002; Williams and Evans-Winter 2005). As Marx and Pennington (2003, 93) shared, European American students "often respond to such discussions in a highly defensive manner that reveals their resentment against people of color and their resistance." Seemingly, dominant racial group members have a vested interest in opposing efforts to deconstruct race—the source of their privilege. In the United States, identification with the ideology of equality brings most European Americans to the discussion, but it often does not sustain them when their racist assumptions are repeatedly challenged. In her journal, one white student noted her own aversion midway through the dialogue she was once excited about: "The black students got angered and started talking about how the 'white man' keeps them down and we oppress them. Blah, blah, blah."

When students reach the point of shutting down, there is often nowhere to go, even with non-dialogic curricula. Though they may return to deal with race in the future and in other settings, the experience of students in the context of a semester-long course is that once they are done with race, they are done. Consequently, it is important that instructors learn how to minimize the risk of shutting down in the first place.

### *Possible Strategies*

*If we can begin to see the ways that students resist, we can then also begin to answer and problematize those practices as well as cultivate more productive and enabling interactions with whiteness. (Hyttén and Warren 2003, 88)*

Anyone who has facilitated interracial dialogue is aware of the many challenges it presents. Over the years, scholars have suggested a host of strategies to better manage the conversation, and it is possible that these generic approaches also might prove effective

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in minimizing resistance and the risk of shutting down. For example, the provision of appropriate models of racial identity development (Tatum 1992; Miller and Donner 2000) may help students to both normalize and anticipate their resistance, which may in turn aid in sustaining openness. Similarly, the presentation of apt historical and sociological information (Miller and Donner 2000; Fishman and McCarthy 2005) may enrich students' compassion and, thus, expand their capacity to hear one another. Perhaps most useful to efforts aimed at minimizing resistance is the often-encouraged practice of providing a supportive, trusting, and respectful environment (Davis and Proctor 1989; Tatum 1992; Fox 2001; Marx and Pennington 2003). Of course, this is easier said than done; creating such an environment always demands experience and a bit of alchemy. Even so, two specific strategies are essential in creating a classroom climate that opens up interracial dialogue: adding without contradiction and granting freedom for conclusions.

### *Adding without Contradiction*

*American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and [emphasis added] more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it. (Baldwin 1963)*

"Adding without contradiction" is a phrase inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (as discussed in Min 2001), and represents the simple idea that opposition does not forcibly lead to negation or, put differently, that antipodes can coexist without mutual exclusion. Though elementary, the idea requires explanation because it stands in contrast to the dichotomous logic that has conditioned Western thought for more than 2,500 years (Carr and Zanetti 1999).

As Nisbett (2003, 25) noted, "The Greeks were focused on, you might even say obsessed by, the concept of contradiction. If one proposition was seen to be in contradictory relation with another, then one of the propositions had to be rejected." As a result, Western cultures have for millennia encouraged thought in terms of right *or* wrong, nature *or* nurture, public *or* private, quantity *or* quality, and good *or* evil. Though relatively recent strands of post-structuralist thought in the West have transcended this dichotomous logic, it nevertheless remains awkward for many Westerners to categorize the world in terms of right *and* wrong, good *and* evil.

The same cannot be said for many Easterners who have inherited blended legacies of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Indeed, adding without contradiction is entirely consistent with and informed by Eastern thought. According to Nisbett (2003, 13), "A fundamental of the Eastern stance toward life [is that] the world is constantly changing and full of contradictions. To understand and appreciate one state of affairs requires the existence of its opposite." A brief look at both Taoism and Buddhism helps to inform this Eastern outlook.

First developed in China roughly 5,000 years ago, Tao represents "the path" or "way" of life. Though the path comprehends much (and more than can be expressed in words alone), it involves recognizing that, despite appearances, everything is unified. As Watts (1994, 46) explained, when we accept the Tao, we are "above and beyond the opposites." Similarly, Buddhism has long taught about fundamental connection; in particular, this

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theory provides a detailed account of how people erroneously construct the illusion of a separate self on the grounds of union using five *skandhas*, or psychological elements (Trungpa 1993).

Buddhism instructs that duality is a product of the mind, not a quality of nature itself. The state of nature is fluid connection, yet we impose on it a duality in order to construct the self out of the non-self. As Trungpa (1993, 73) articulated, “[The ego] perceives the ‘other’ and in a panic perceives itself as another something else across from that other.” For example, when an “other” claims to be a victim, the dualistic ego hears this as an accusation of being a victimizer and will subsequently seek to defend itself. However, Buddhism intervenes on this dichotomy by pointing out its illusory nature: The self is not separate and opposed to the other; rather the self and the other are one. When others are victimized, so too are we; the natural response of big (or non-egoistic) mind is compassion, not defense (Suzuki 1970). Thus, following Buddhism, adding without contradiction is a dialogic practice that aims to intervene on habitual, reflexive opposition to the other. The benefit is that “when this understanding [of transcending opposition] matures ... it creates an inner freedom and spontaneity, a sense of being at ease in the world” (Watts 1994, 47). With this brief explanation of the concept in place, the practice of adding without contradiction in interracial dialogue can now be described more fully.

### In Practice: Adding without Contradiction

In the United States, students enter interracial dialogue with some powerfully embodied habits—ways of speaking that consistently undermine their capacity to hear one another. One such habit is found in the discourse of assimilation long ago adopted in this country (see Horsman 1981). In the beginning, assimilation orientations were perfectly obvious in the treatment of “others,” such as American Indians who were forced to attend government schools in which they were reclothed, regroomed, and renamed in the colonizer’s image. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, assimilation preferences continued to be expressed overtly and were but thinly veiled in practices such as immigration, which heavily favored Europeans as stock for the American “melting pot.” With the advent of the civil rights movement in the United States, however, such blatantly discriminatory conduct was outlawed and the expression of long-established assimilatory desires became coded primarily in the discourse of “color blindness.” As Gotanda (1991), Harris (1993), and others (e.g., Lewis, Chesler, and Forman 2000) argued, color blindness is a form of race subordination in that it denies the history of racialized oppression; it insists that we all treat one another as humans when the adopted model of humanity requires that people of color assimilate to white cultural norms.

The effect that a discourse of assimilation has on interracial dialogue is to deny difference. Within this frame, difference is something that, if encountered, should be eradicated. It is presumed to undermine national unity; thus, stories expressing themes running counter to the cultural grand narratives (e.g., “I pulled on my bootstraps and *those suckers broke!*”) are firmly challenged and shouted down. When students reflexively respond this way in the classroom—because that is the only model for cultural discourse that society has presented them—the promise of dialogue quickly fades.

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A second habit that also works against interracial dialogue is the proclivity for debate in the United States. In her book, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*, Tannen (1999, 7) rooted out the tendency in Western culture to approach public dialogue as a war in which "criticism, attack, or opposition are the predominant if not the only ways of responding to people or ideas." In this environment, fully hearing a discussion participant is superseded by the search for "weaknesses" in the "argument" of the "opponent." As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) famously pointed out, we do not simply employ the metaphor "argument is war," we live by it. Thus, in this context, the challenge of opening up productive and enriching interracial dialogue is considerable. Caught between a cultural heritage that presents debate as the means to knowledge (see Ong 1981) and a powerful ideology of assimilation, students are not prepared to use interracial dialogue as an opportunity to heal deep wounds and increase awareness. It is the job of educators to prepare them for dialogue; adding without contradiction is a dialogic practice that can be used toward this end.

So what, specifically, is the practice of adding without contradiction and how does it help improve dialogue? I introduce the concept in a course on intercultural communication when talking about Christopher Columbus. Within the U.S. cultural grand narrative, Columbus is presented as the daring explorer who discovered America. Alternatively, he is also described, significantly less often, as a conquistador who succeeded in exploiting native peoples and their land. Led by their habits of dichotomous logic, assimilation, and argument, students typically will argue about which description of Columbus is correct. Is he a hero *or* a villain? Before the debate breaks out, however, Loewen's (1995, 70) description of the man is offered and explained: "Columbus's importance in history owes precisely to his being both a heroic navigator *and* a great plunderer."

This example helps students to appreciate that what is true depends on one's point of view: From the point of view of Europeans, Columbus discovered a new land; and from the point of view of Native Americans, his arrival marked the beginning of oppression. Both of these powerful truths exist simultaneously; one does not exclude the other. Though most students can appreciate this sort of subjectivist epistemology intellectually, they do not practice it. Thus, students engaged in such discussion are encouraged to "add without contradiction" by adopting the simple habit of saying "and" instead of "but."

Throughout the semester, whenever one student rebuts another, they are challenged to say "and." For example, instead of replying to the comment, "My parents didn't have a chance to learn English when they arrived" with "But my mother enrolled in ESL [English as a second language] courses when she came here," students are encouraged to say, "And my mother enrolled in ESL courses when she came here." In this instance, "and" interjects a subjectivist epistemology into the dialogue by creating plural realities for the immigrant experience: Some immigrants to the United States have the resources to quickly develop a proficiency in English, and others do not. Students need reminders that human faces are the same *and* human faces are different.

A second way the practice is introduced is through use of a card-game metaphor. Because of the habit of argumentation, students are well-practiced in "trumping" one

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another's stories—using one account to negate another. For example, whenever an experience of “driving while black” is shared, it is regularly met by a white person's account of equally intense or suspicious treatment by police. Using Grice's (1989) Maxim of Relevance—which declares all shared comments relevant to the conversation—it is explained how the second account functions to trump the first. The second story of police mistreatment relates to the first by rebutting the explicit claim of racism with the implicit claim of racial equality—we are *all* actual or potential victims of police misconduct, regardless of race. However, instead of habitually positioning our experiences as competing claims about reality, as with Columbus, these two seemingly contradictory truths coexist: For some, race plays a role in how we are treated by police (i.e., “being black in the wrong neighborhood”) and, for others, it does not (i.e., people are mistreated, despite being white). Thus, the task in interracial dialogue is to create space in which this multiplicity of truths can be expressed; instead of using cards to trump one another, we need to simply “lay them on the table.”

When we learn to tell our stories both authentically and in a manner that does not deny or minimize the experiences of others, the conversation opens up. As one student related the following:

*I am a firm believer in adding without contradiction. ... As we began our class discussions and I listened to people talk, I began to understand exactly how it worked. In one word I was thankful because it validated each and every person's response and created an equal playing field.*

Despite this success, sharing personal narratives without shutting out others is never an easy practice when we embody habits based in argumentation. Participants need skillful and *regular* guidance in this practice. Students need help in unpacking their stories because, despite their understanding and intentions, students are on a course to trump one another. For example, one white student, eager to show his peers that he identified with them, followed up a story of hardship told by a student of color with his own account of poverty. Unfortunately, because he told it in the reflexive style of “white people are poor too!,” some peers began to roll their eyes; all they heard was another account justifying the racial status quo. Sensing this, an intervention whereby he was asked to personalize his experience while avoiding generalizing was attempted. As a result, the unexpressed enthymeme “people are poor regardless of race” became the expressed story, “I especially hear you because, adding without contradiction, I am poor as well.”

As illustrated in the preceding example, one specific technique that often encourages stories to be heard in a spirit of addition rather than contradiction is personalization. Similar to the concept of an “I statement” (see Burr 1990) in which a speaker takes ownership for his or her remarks, personalization entails prefacing stories with the speaker's location in social space and emphasizing the singularity of the experience. In this way, personalization helps to “contain” the speaker's story, thereby allowing room for others to add without contradiction. One student commented:



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*I think that by framing our experiences and marking them as just ours is very important. I have learned a lot by speaking in this way. Also, when I listen to other people's stories, I am able to mark them as well and know that that was their experience and it is okay if I have a different viewpoint/experience in the same situation.*

As described thus far, adding without contradiction is a conversational frame that allows dialogue participants to express a multiplicity of cultural truths. The strategy succeeds by simultaneously creating space for much needed "back talk" (hooks 1989; Warren 2000) and minimizing reactionary defensiveness. In the words of one student, "I seriously think that this approach encouraged students to tell their story more, and it also acted as a barrier to prevent other students from attacking their point of view." Indeed, the lack of such attacks in a conversation about race was conspicuous to many. As another student noted, "I have never taken such an intense class. Hearing other students speak on what they believe and somehow not getting into heated discussions was a challenge, but somehow the whole class managed."

In the end, what are participants' overall impressions of adding without contradiction in interracial dialogue? The following are some representative comments:

*I used to think that I had to simply pick my battles, when in actuality, I should have been looking at the conversation not as a war but as a learning experience. It is so easy to shut out unwanted opinions and facts, but the problem with tuning out people is that it gets you nowhere. ... I think that in order to have a multicultural conversation, laying the cards out on the table is the only means for success.*

*I don't find my blood boiling as much when I hear stories from a dominant group member because I have come to understand that this is their experience. ... I feel the want to understand our world and validate everyone's experiences while still expressing my own.*

*This approach would be so helpful. But it is still just not practiced in our conversations, I think. When we are conscious that we should not trump others, this works well. But if we are not really conscious, our old habit still comes first.*

*By listening to what was said and simply accepting it for what it was, their thoughts, I realized I have come a long way in this class. Half the struggle of understanding multiculturalism is ... simply accept[ing] other people's points of view.*

*One of the responses you showed in lecture summed up what this practice taught me: "Just listen to my story and believe it is true to me." As human beings we all just want to know that people hear us and believe us when we talk about our experiences.*

As these student comments reflect, adding without contradiction helps intervene on the dysfunctional habits often carried into conversation and, thus, enriches the capacity of interracial dialogue to heal deep wounds and increase awareness. A second

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strategy that also works to unlock the potential of dialogue is granting freedom for conclusions.

### *Granting Freedom for Conclusions*

As Buddhism inspired, in part, the idea of adding without contradiction, so too it encourages educators to grant students the freedom to draw their own conclusions. The Buddhist approach is, at its core, “framed in terms of nondualism ... and a stance of non-judgment” (Berkson 1999, 184). Consequently, by exploring non-judgment in the context of interracial dialogue, we have discovered it to mean that no matter how prejudiced a participant’s attitude or how antagonistic his or her position, facilitation may be most effective when individuals are received for who they are and accepted where they are.

It is unsurprising to recognize that people who choose to facilitate interracial dialogue are most often deeply dedicated to social justice. In this position, it is thus natural to encourage or even goad others to commit to this deserving platform. As one educator explained, “I know the direction I want my students to go. ... I want them to develop respect for all people. ... I want them to confront the moral contradictions in ... society. ... I want them to believe that they, and their society, can change” (Fox 2001, 85). Indeed, we can identify with these expressed desires. Even so, experience teaches that pushing any platform, no matter how laudable, also engenders friction. As a student once commented, “I’ll decide for myself what I believe—not the ‘class dogma’ because it’s artfully presented.”

When participants feel ideologically boxed in, they begin to resist. As Chan and Treacy (1996, 217) related, “sometimes students who object to the content of multicultural courses do so because they feel pressured to adopt certain principles or beliefs, and so these students can become very resistant to class participation.” Experiencing exactly this sort of unwillingness, implementing a non-judgmental stance to facilitation succeeds in opening up the classroom conversations about race.

### **In Practice: Granting Freedom for Conclusions**

This process must begin first by learning to recognize our own implicit biases. I, as a biracial individual with both the educational background and personal equanimity to shoulder tough inquiries into the U.S. racial morass, realized that I embodied a reflexive critique of those positioned in the ideology of “whiteness.” In deconstructing this reflex, I discovered a metaphorical distance between myself and some of my students: Some inhabit social spheres in which critical inquiry into race is punished and, moreover, life experiences may have robbed their personal strength to take on challenges such as this. As a result, I realized the futility in expecting others to respond to racism in the ways familiar only to myself; indeed, we all walk very different paths before meeting.

With recognition of the differences and a commitment to honor the distances between myself and my students, I began enacting non-judgmental facilitation—most powerfully through nonverbal communication and most typically with stories demonstrating my role in the dialogue. I explained to students that there are no “right” answers or “correct” actions to be uncovered; instead, as with the idea of multiple truths, there are multiple answers to each of our situated predicaments dealing with race. Though I had drawn

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my own tentative conclusions, they are not necessarily conclusions that anyone else will draw; instead, each of us must take on the difficult work of deciding what answers work best in our own lives.

To illustrate these ideas, consider that while both of my maternal grandparents were born in the United States to Mexican immigrant parents, each chose a different way of being Mexican American. Grandfather took an accommodating and sometimes segregating outlook on life surrounded by European Americans; he spoke in Spanish and often of the spirit of *la raza* (the race). On the other hand, Grandmother assimilated to such a degree that, despite her lineage and native Spanish abilities, she did not consider herself Mexican American. Who chose the “right” way out of the racial dilemma in which you are an “other” in your own land? There is no answer that is correct for everyone; thus, we can salute Grandfather for making the choices that were right for him, as well as Grandmother for acting as she best knew how. As such, the frame of this story from my personal history helps demonstrate to participants my specific role in the dialogue—namely, to grant them the freedom to draw their own conclusions.

Approaching facilitation without judgment is incredibly liberating (you do not have to have all of the answers!), though accepting people where they are remains a great challenge. One student commented:

*Too many times the professors in college want students to live under their beliefs, without considering some students have experienced many different things. ... Trying to change people is not the way for them to blossom into better people; change comes gradually with life and experiences.*

So, what happens when a facilitator embodies non-judgment? At the outset, students notice—particularly those who adopt a conservative ideology. In the words of one such student, “I enjoyed the fact that you were not a hardcore liberal teacher jamming your ideology down our throats.” In instances like this, a stance of non-judgment mitigates resistance built into traditionalist discourse about multiculturalism and encourages participants to stay otherwise engaged. One student confessed:

*I know what I know and I am not afraid to ... stand up for what I think is culturally right. ... [Yet,] I don't want to be naïve anymore, so I am glad that I am able to think through things without people pushing their beliefs on me.*

In addition to mitigating resistance, granting freedom for conclusions has had the unexpected effects of stimulating additional dialogue, as well as critical thought. Because of the emphasis on the social responsibility of collecting lots of evidence on which to base conclusions, participants often are eager to survey the cultural landscape and hear others' stories. Several students shared:

*Reaching my own conclusions I've found is key. Sometimes it's hard not to become enwrapped in what my surrounding environment believes, especially when those I'm around are all intelligent and cultured individuals. But taking a piece from each*

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*student who shared has helped me to form and mold my own opinions about multiculturalism and diversity.*

*I really like the fact that I am encouraged to draw my own conclusions and beliefs, rather than having to believe what my peers or instructor believes. It really gives us a freedom that we all have but might not always be aware of. And through this, I believe, we learn more because we are more open to question things and look at all answers before we, ourselves, decide what it is exactly that we believe.*

*The idea of reaching my own conclusions definitely scared me at first because I was afraid that I would make conclusions that were not the "right" ones. ... [However,] I now feel empowered. Now, I am gaining more awareness of the choices I make, about what to believe or not believe.*

As these comments reveal, facilitators who grant participants the freedom to be who they are and to judge things for themselves may experience the emergence of open and dynamic conversations about race.

## Conclusion

This essay began with the question, "What can educators do to minimize the risks inherent to interracial dialogue?" Though no such meaningful conversation ever will be without risk, two specific strategies are offered here that can help foster open classroom climates: adding without contradiction and granting freedom for conclusions. Both of these strategies intervene on several dysfunctional habits we enact in conversation and, thus, enrich the capacity of interracial dialogue to heal deep wounds and increase awareness.

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