

Talking about Race: A Class Discussion

Introduction:

Because of the historic nature of the 2008 election, with an African American candidate (or more accurately biracial) candidate representing one of the major parties, race is a topic of conversation in a way it has not been in previous elections. In March, Senator Obama gave a major speech on race in the aftermath of the controversy over the revelation of his former pastor's remarks that many found inflammatory. The speech provides an excellent text for a classroom discussion. In order to bring balance to the conversation, this lesson also includes a speech marking the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's death given by Senator McCain in April 2008. The two speeches can be discussed together, or you may hold two discussions, with half the class reading and discussing each speech.

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Closely analyze a text on issues of race in the United States.
- Pose questions about the issue of race in the United States.
- Take part in a civil discussion on the topic of race in the United States.

Materials and Preparation: You will need copies of the two **Readings** and the **Discussion Prep Sheet**, as well as the Transparency explaining the discussion format.

Procedure:

1. Ask students what effect they believe Senator Obama's race is having on the presidential election. (*Accept all answers.*) Point out that one effect is that there is somewhat more discussion of this topic than usual; in general, Americans seem to be uncomfortable talking about the topic of race, but events in the campaign have placed the topic in the spotlight. Tell students they will have the opportunity to look closely at some of Senator Obama's and Senator McCain's views on race but examining speeches they have given in 2008 on this topic.
2. Distribute the readings and prep sheets to students. You may have all students read both speeches for a combined discussion or half of the students read each speech for two parallel discussions. You could also have students select the speech they wish to read. Explain that students are to read the speech, highlighting important passages, and answering the questions on the prep sheet. Students are likely to need some coaching on what makes a good discussion question, as they are initially likely to pose factual questions that ask for additional information. While these questions can be good spurs to additional research, they are not successful discussion questions. Good discussion questions ask students to think about an issue, to take a position, and to back it with evidence.

The discussion model used in this lesson is adapted from the civil conversation model developed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation.

3. Arrange students' chairs or desks in a circle; it is important for the discussion process for everyone to be able to make eye contact. If you are doing separate discussions on the speeches, arrange the chairs in concentric circles; one group will sit in the outer circle and observe as the other group sits in the inner circle and discusses.
4. Project the Transparency and go over the norms. Stress that students should not speak again until three other students have spoken and, even when that has happened, they should be aware of not dominating the conversation. You may want to model the step of succinctly restating the point the last speaker made and getting his/her approval of your restatement.
5. You can begin the discussion in several ways:
 - Conduct a “whip-around” in which each student briefly states either something they disagreed with or their most pressing question. You can then begin discussing something that a number of students disagreed with or a question that more than one student posed.
 - Ask a student volunteer, someone who is particularly passionate about some aspect of what they read, to launch the discussion.
 - Pose a question that you think will spark a good conversation.
6. Following the discussion, students should have the opportunity to reflect on the discussion and assess their own and others' contributions. This reflection can be prompted using such questions as: What worked? What improvements can we make in our next conversation? What insights did you have as a result of listening to others' ideas? What common ground did you find with other members of the group? How might the United States move forward in discussing and resolving issues around race?

Extension/Enrichment:

Senators McCain and Obama both wrote brief articles on their views on patriotism for *Parade* magazine this summer. These articles would be excellent texts for a similar discussion <http://www.parade.com/features/mccain-obama-patriotism>.

Transparency

Norms for Discussion

- Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
- Everyone in the group should participate in the conversation. Invite others into the conversation. After speaking, wait until at least three other people have taken part before speaking again.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying. Before you speak, succinctly restate the point the last speaker made and get his/her approval of your restatement.
- Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
- Be respectful of what others are saying.
- Refer to the text to support your ideas.
- Focus on ideas, not personalities.

Reading: **Excerpts from "A More Perfect Union" Speech**

On March 18, 2008, presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama gave a speech about race in the United States. Below are excerpts from the speech.

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."

Two hundred and twenty-one years ago . . . a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

. . . I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them

together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. . . .

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. . . . if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an

earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families—a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them.

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was

passed on to future generations—those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. . . . the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. . . .

. . . That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in

polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. . . .

. . . to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns—this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. . . . But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice is we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

. . . what we know—what we have seen— is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope —for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper. . . .

. . . This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation . . .

It is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.

Reading:

Excerpts from "Honoring the Dream" Speech

On April 4, 2008, the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Senator John McCain presented a speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization that Dr. King led. Below are excerpts from the speech.

Thank you. Alvieda King, Ralph Abernathy Jr., Dr. Montgomery, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: I appreciate your kind invitation, and I am honored to stand with you at this place on this day. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not a man to flinch from harsh truth, and the same is required of all who come here to see where he was in the last hours of his life. The Lorraine Motel is a civil rights museum now, but in the memory of America it will always be a crime scene as well. On the National Register of Historic Places, there are few sites remembered with more regret, or touched with so much sorrow.

If we think only of that day and that moment, there is no inspiration to be gained here. The man we remember was a believer in the power of conscience and goodness to shape events. But this place will always stand as a reminder that cowardice and malevolence lay claim to their own victories. No good cause in this world -- however right in principle or pure in heart -- was ever advanced without sacrifice. And Dr. King knew this. He knew that men with nightsticks, tear-gas, and cattle prods were not the worst of what might be lying in wait each day and night. He was a man accustomed to the nearness of danger. And when death came, it found him standing upright, in open air, unafraid. We see him today from a distance of four decades, more time than the man himself lived on this earth. And it would not be unusual if his

stature or reputation had faded with the passing of the years. It happens sometimes that the judgments of history overrule contemporary opinion, indifferent to the fame and approval of the moment. But this has not been the case with the firstborn son of Alberta and Martin Luther King, Sr. He only seems a bigger man from far away. The quality of his character is only more apparent. His good name will be honored for as long as the creed of America is honored. His message will be heard and understood for as long as the message of the gospels is heard and understood.

Forty years and more after the great struggles of the civil rights movement, we marvel that such fierce passions could be aroused in defense of such petty cruelties. Separate lunch counters, the preferred seat on a bus, one restroom for whites and another for everyone else -- these were among the prerogatives fought for as if on a point of the highest principle. There is no end to human pride when it goes unchecked, no limit to arrogance and presumption when they pass uncorrected. Like every citizen he spoke for, Martin Luther King had seen the underside of life in America, where the rules of respect, and fairness, and courtesy were thought not to apply. It was a humiliating existence, unjust in matters both large and small, merciless in its routine of insult, sparing not even the elderly or little children from its crude bullying. For black men and women, as Dr. King wrote, it was a life "plagued with inner fears and outer resentments." And yet, as he knew, fear alone would never right the offense. And resentment alone would never overcome the wrong. "Along the way of life," he said, "someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil. The greatest way to do that is through love."

Martin Luther King today is honored by the world, in such a way that it is easy to forget he once knew the scorn of the world. And it wasn't just force of personality that made him the man he was. It was the power of truth, spoken with a servant's heart and a voice like no other. . . . When Dr. King and his comrades began to break that chain with their campaign of peaceful protest, there were those who said, "Wait. Just give it a little more time. Be patient. Be patient, and one day America will come around." But patience had been tried, over many generations, and still millions lived in what he called the smothering, airtight cage of injustice. For his marches in Birmingham, Montgomery, and elsewhere, for his sit-ins and his sermons, he was called an agitator, a trouble-maker, a malcontent, and a disturber of the peace. These are often the terms applied to men and women of conscience who will not endure cruelty, nor abide injustice. We hear them to this day -- in Darfur, Zimbabwe, Burma, Tibet, Iran and other lands -- directed at every brave soul who dares to disturb the peace of tyrants.

Sometimes the most radical thing is to be confronted with our own standards -- to be asked simply that we live up to the principles we profess. Even in this most idealistic of nations, we do not always take kindly to being reminded of what more we can do, or how much better we can be, or who else can be included in the promise of America. We can be slow as well to give greatness its due, a mistake I made myself long ago when I voted against a federal holiday in memory of Dr. King. I was wrong and eventually realized that, in time to give full support for a state holiday in Arizona. We can all be a little late sometimes in doing the right thing, and Dr. King understood this about his fellow Americans. But he knew as well that in the long term, confidence in the reasonability and good heart of America is always well placed. And always, that was his method in word and action -- to remind us of who we are and what we believe. His arguments

were unanswerable and they were familiar, the case always resting on the writings of the Founders, the teachings of the prophets, and the Word of the Lord.

Perhaps with more charity than was always deserved, he often reminded us that there was moral badness, and there was moral blindness, and they were not the same. It was this spirit that turned hatred into forgiveness, anger into conviction, and a bitter life into a great one. He loved and honored his country even when the feeling was unreturned, and counseled others to do the same. He gave his fellow countrymen and his fellow Christians the benefit of the doubt -- believing, as he wrote, that "returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

I remember first learning what had happened here on the fourth of April, 1968, feeling just as everyone else did back home, only perhaps even more uncertain and alarmed for my country in the darkness that was then enclosed around me and my fellow captives. In our circumstances at the time, good news from America was hard to come by. But the bad news was a different matter, and each new report of violence, rioting, and other tribulations in America was delivered without delay. The enemy had correctly calculated that the news from Memphis would deeply wound morale, and leave us worried and afraid for our country. Doubtless it boosted our captors' morale, confirming their belief that America was a lost cause, and that the future belonged to them.

Yet how differently it all turned out. And if they had been the more reflective kind, our enemies would have understood that the cause of Dr. King was bigger than any one man, and could not be stopped by force of violence. Struggle is rewarded, in God's own time. Wrongs are set right and evil is overcome. We know this to be true because it is the story of the man we honor

today, and because it is the story of our country.

And yet for all of this, forty years and a world away, we look up to that balcony, we remember that night, and we are still left with a feeling of loss. Here was a young man who composed one of literature's finest testimonies to the yearning for equality and justice under law -- writing on the margins of a newspaper, in the confinement of a prison cell. Here was a preacher who endured beatings, survived bombings, suffered knifings, abuse, and ridicule, and

still placed his trust in the Prince of Peace. Here was a husband and father who will stand to children in every generation as a model of Christian manhood, but never got to raise his own sons and daughters, or to share in the gift of years with his good wife. All of this was lost on the fourth of April, 1968, and there are no consolations to balance the scale. What remains, however, is the example and witness of The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and that is forever. Thank you.

Handout

Discussion Prep Sheet

1. Who delivered the speech that you read? What is the significance of the speech's title? How does the title frame your reading of the speech?
2. According to the speech, what are some of the historical issues of race that still influence U.S. race relations today?
3. Does the speech suggest any actions that Americans should take?
4. What ideas in the speech do you agree with?
5. What ideas in the speech do you disagree with?
6. What discussion-worthy questions do you have about the speech and the ideas presented in it?