

Executive Summary

The course *Understanding Self, Race, Gender, and Class to Leverage Student Achievement* is a product of Project ASSERT at Harvard Graduate School of Education. The primary goal Project ASSERT is to develop research-based professional growth materials that engage teachers in dialogue and reflection and provide them with strategies and support for addressing issues of race, class, and gender with their students and colleagues. With this goal in mind, the online professional development course was designed¹ emphasizing the needs of the urban educator. This paper presents the results of two pre-course assessments, one formative evaluation of a course unit, two post-course evaluations and two follow-up focus groups.

The course was pilot tested in the spring semester of 2006 with 24 public high school teachers in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It was made available through Tapped-In on the Internet and teachers received course credit through a partnership between the school district and Carroll College.

The participating teachers were comprised of two separate groups. One group (n=7) was recruited specifically as New teachers (those having taught for fewer than 5 years). These teachers hailed from numerous schools district-wide. The other group of teachers (n=17) were recruited solely from Vincent High School and their years of experience ranged from less than one year to over ten. The New teachers were both older and more technologically savvy than the Vincent teachers. All of the New teachers participated in online communities at least once a week, whereas only one-fourth of the Vincent teachers were doing the same. The New teacher group was predominately female and minority. In contrast, the majority of the Vincent teachers were male and Caucasian.

Before starting the course, all teachers were asked to complete a self-assessment. The assessment addressed five broad categories: writing and resources, initiating conversations on race and gender, concerns related to race, gender and student interactions and expectations of the course. When teachers were asked whether they used writing as a method of self-reflection, half (50%) stated that they did. Of those who did, most wrote about work (75%) and teaching issues and/or personal relationships (66%). When asked about initiating conversations on race and gender most teachers (78%) were likely to talk to students who were a different race than they about racial stereotypes but were far less likely (30%) to initiate conversations about racial conflict or discomfort with colleagues who were a different race than they. In addition, fewer than half were likely to discuss feelings about racial conflict with colleagues or look for resources to

¹ The course was created by Wendy Luttrell, the Nancy Pforzheimer Aronson Associate Professor in Human Development and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Janie Ward, Associate Professor of Education at Simmons College and a Research Associate at Harvard and Jim Holland, Research Associate and Lecturer, Harvard Graduate School of Education with input from Elise Reipenhoff, former Project Manager, Professional Support Portal, Milwaukee Public Schools, who served as the course facilitator.

help them better understand issues of race or gender as related to student academic success or failure.

In discussing their concerns related to race, gender and social interactions. The groups' top two concerns about race focused on the achievement gap (minorities not performing as well as Caucasians) and stereotyping and racial attitudes. Their top two concerns about gender identified problems again with the achievement gap (boys doing less well than girls) and inappropriate social interaction/a lack of respect. Three concerns were tied for the top issue regarding student interactions. These were (a) fighting and violence, (b) a lack of respect and (c) inappropriate behavior and interactions. Almost half of the teachers stated that they hoped to gain more exposure to and an understanding of race and gender issues through taking this course.

The formative evaluation of Unit One revealed that most teachers were well satisfied with the course and the feedback they were receiving. They were particularly pleased with the feedback they received from colleagues. They were comfortable using Tapped In and the majority felt safe about sharing their thoughts about race, gender, and class in online discussions. Several were surprised at the openness and candor of the participants. Most did not experience any barriers to limit their participation. Half of the teachers made suggestions for improvements to the course. These focused on providing more course structure, allowing for anonymous postings, slowing the pace, and having more access to other communities and resources.

A final paper and pencil post-course self-assessment was administered during a face-to-face meeting on the last day of the course. One-third of the participants stated that their comfort level with technology had increased as a result of the course. (All of these were Vincent teachers.) Although as many as 25% of the teachers had never downloaded electronic materials before this course, 84% said they would be likely to do so in the future in their teaching after taking the course. Likewise, although one-third of the teachers had never participated in an online community before, after having taken the course 71% said they would consider using the online discussion model as a teaching tool if MPS were to provide the space and tools.

The same series of questions about initiating conversations about race, gender and class that had been asked prior to commencing the course were administered as part of the post-course assessments. Gains were evidenced in every category. The largest gain of 49% was demonstrated in the teachers' likelihood to look for resources on race. Prior to taking the course, 43% of the teachers stated that they would be likely to look for resources on race as related to academic success or failure. After taking the course, over 92% stated they would be likely to look for these resources. The smallest gains of 18% occurred in the likelihood of the teachers to initiate conversations (a) about racial conflict with colleagues who were the same race as they and (b) about racial stereotypes with students of a different race than they. The latter category experienced a ceiling effect since it was the most likely topic to be initiated before the course began. There was not much room for improvement there. The average gain across all categories was 29%.

Two-thirds of the teachers stated that their concerns about race in school had changed after taking the course. Their awareness of the topic had increased. While responses in the pre-course self-assessment had concentrated on students (e.g., achievement gap and stereotyping), the responses in the post-course self-assessment focused more on the teachers themselves and their own understanding. The comments centered on their understanding of the salience of race, their own teaching and their previous knowledge of racial issues. Finally, participants described a variety of benefits they gained from the course. These highlighted an increase in understanding and/or support of colleagues, an increased understanding of racial issues, and an understanding of the difference between resistance and respect.

Finally, teachers completed a course evaluation. Overall the course was very well received. Almost all (92%) of the teachers felt the course was valuable to their professional development and particularly to their performance as urban educators. All (100%) of the teachers felt the discussion helped them understand the concepts presented. Most teachers emerged with new approaches for addressing issues of race, gender and class with their students and colleagues. The only shortcoming was that the course needed to include more information about gender. Only half of the teachers felt the course addressed their concerns on this topic. Nonetheless, all (100%) of the teachers would recommend the course to a colleague and most felt the course exceeded their expectations.

The follow-up focus group sessions clarified the strengths of the course and identified specific examples of ways the course could be improved. The strengths focused on an appreciation for

- the communication with colleagues
- the materials and information
- the opportunity to write
- the provision of a safe and equitable online course environment
- self-reflection and new understanding
- the immediacy of response within the synchronous chat.

The recommendations for improvements were centered on three topics: the desire to have more information about gender and class, the desire to communicate with teachers in other districts, and the request that the topic of resistance be introduced earlier in the course.

In conclusion, the report lists 16 recommendations for scaling and sustaining the program. These include suggestions for (a) creating facilitator guidelines and/or training, (b) addressing the need for technical support, (c) increasing the amount of available information, (d) revising the synchronous chat, (e) including future evaluations, and (f) fostering continued partnerships. Overall, the course was highly successful and demonstrated its readiness for being scaled and sustained both within the district and beyond.



