



## **Addressing Unconscious Bias Using Multiple Learning Modalities & Arts-Centered Exercises**

by Shakti Butler, Dia Penning, and the World Trust Team

World Trust's training resources, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: Racial Equity Learning Modules*, are designed to support cultural diversity education. We are committed to supporting you in the work of building a more inclusive world. We know that one of the strongest barriers to racial justice change is unconscious bias. Each module has a specific focus that is explored using transformative learning principles. These principles, along with arts-centered exercises, can create new patterns of thought to interrupt the unconscious roots of racialization.

### **Transformative Learning gets at embedded assumptions that drive bias.**

Transformative learning asks adult learners to engage in critical reflection on their experiences and learned beliefs, for the purpose of deconstructing embedded assumptions about how the world works. This is a perfect pedagogy for addressing unconscious bias.

Learning can take place over time and at many levels, building on the numerous ways our minds take in new information. It works to replace existing thought patterns with new experiences, new stories, new habits, new ideas, and new insights – helping to work through the natural defenses that sustain the operation of bias. The result of this learning drives critical thinking and new behavior.

Racial Equity Learning Modules contain a progression of iterative exercises that approach the same topic from different perspectives, using various learning modalities. This engages participants in whole-body learning that includes images, stories, and experiences – the result being a program that can meet people where they are. From this meeting place, the material helps generate forward movement, which leads to a new understanding of the subject matter.

### **The following six elements from the Racial Equity Learning Modules reflect transformative learning principles:**

#### **1. Community Building: Relationships provide pathways from fear to engagement.**

Each module begins and ends in this way. Recognizing common unity begins with the process of shared awareness and understanding: this solidarity can ready participants to engage in new learning.



In the module *Framing Issues with a Racial Equity Lens*, participants dive deeply into an exploration of systemic bias in the media. In preparation for this exploration, the module begins with a section called "Half Lies/Half Truths," where participants hear a simple story about a troublemaking man who upsets his cousin with a story that is only 'half true.' Participants then reflect and share with one another an incident from their own lives in which an omission of information changed the meaning of a story. By sharing these stories from their own perspective, they are simultaneously building relationships and opening to receive additional shared stories via the learning materials.

At the end of a module, participants have been through a great deal of work that unearths embedded assumptions. They may have experienced what is known as a “disorienting dilemma” as a result of a shift in perceptions. People may also feel a tremendous sense of relief resulting from a deep connection to themselves, others and even the earth. Closing with community building reminds them of their innate wisdom and shared values, which grounds people and prepares them to move forward.

## 2. Depersonalizing Inequity: Use a systemic frame.

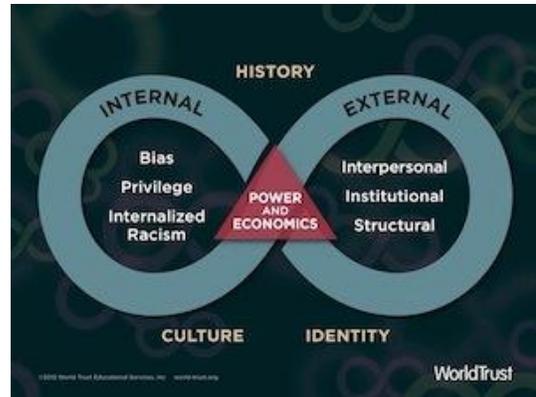
Framing race gives people access to a lens that allows them to see the bigger picture. At the same time, it develops a common understanding and language with which to explore inequity. This is critical for supporting analysis, as well as for participants to be able to ask the question, “What is really happening here, and why?” It is impossible to tackle the structural causes of inequity until this is clear. Once it is, participants can see that inequity is not caused by ‘bad people.’ Instead, it is a self-perpetuating system.

When we seek to interrupt unconscious bias, framing the system helps depersonalize the topic. Taking the focus off of individuals and redirecting it towards the system is a disarming step that can do a couple of things:

- 1) Prepare participants to see the ways in which they have been taught to hold bias. They can recognize that despite good intentions, they may be affected by the lie of individual merit as the key reason for success, or the idea that they “don’t see color.”
- 2) Make it easier to see how internalized beliefs become embedded in institutions, which perpetuate inequity through rules, policy, and custom. It is tempting to think that interrupting unconscious bias will address inequity on its own. In fact, there are systems and structures in place that require collective action: in addition to personal work, we need systemic understanding for appropriate intervention.

In the core module *Understanding the System of Inequity*, participants are introduced to the graphic above that explains the flow of the system of inequity. That system has internal and external components that reinforce each other. They are impacted by history, culture, and identity.

It is important to acknowledge that we are born into a system we did not create. However, we are all accountable for change. This is empowering, and helps to shift the energy from guilt to action.



[Download this System of Inequity Graphic as a PDF](#)

### 3. Creating New Stories: Film & Dialogue

Film offers a way to present a multitude of stories that can challenge both conscious and unconscious beliefs. Dialogue then allows for processing and integrating new stories with a larger community. This is a particularly strong way of combating unconscious bias. For this reason, they are the foundation of all of the work that World Trust does, and feature prominently in the Racial Equity Learning Modules.

View this example film clip from the core module, **Understanding the System of Racial**

**Inequity**, featuring social justice consultant J. Elena Featherston speaking about privilege: <http://youtu.be/eVW9CKBrXVE>



J. Elena Featherston on Privilege, a clip from the film *Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity*.

### 4. Facing One's Own Bias: Creating a disorienting dilemma.

Learning that the world does not function the way you thought it did can create a phenomenon that transformative learning theorist Jack Mezirow called a “disorienting dilemma.” Abrupt change in your own way of thinking can have a curious effect on the mind and body. It can rip the ground out from under your feet, interrupt the misinformation we all carry about the world. But in the space left by the sudden shift, our points of view have the potential for expansion.

In Racial Equity Learning modules, one exercise accomplishes this without referencing race at all. By playing on the cultural assumptions held about artists, we provide an ‘aha’ moment – further opening participants to a personal experience of their own biases.



Art by Judith Scott

The module *Shifting Perspectives in Education* uses video of the artist Judith Scott to create a disorienting dilemma. By experiencing her art before learning more about the artist herself, participants have a visceral experience of their own assumptions and bias. This creates a sense of wonder, making people aware that each person views the world through their own unique set of experiences; it also generates curiosity about looking at the world beyond the assumptions that we make.

### 5. Use the Arts to Connect: Multiple modalities offer layers of depth and texture.

The power of the arts in learning is the ability to offer a different kind of experience. The creative experience deepens the lived experience, expanding our view of who we are in relationship to each other. The arts allow us to access our shared power of innovation, bypassing the conscious mind and invoking the looser, more associative riches of the imagination.

We can explain what a banana is – a long fruit that is yellow and sweet, with a thick peel – to give someone a sense of it. However, touching, smelling, and tasting a banana will increase our understanding and expand on the description offered by someone else. The richness offered by the arts is another way we can override unconscious bias, which consists of a lot of half-built ideas (like the ideas we had about the banana) with no experiential knowledge to back it up.

In the module *Building Community in Our Schools*, participants are introduced to the art of Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo, courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Her work memorializes the disappeared (victims of the brutal Colombian Civil War) in large-scale installations of old, unpaired shoes placed in niches around a room. Through reflection and group dialogue, participants relate her message to their own experience or that of others in their lives. When someone drops out of school or is taken off to jail, even killed, that disappearance leaves a hole in the community.



View the SFMOMA video utilized in the exercise featuring Doris Salcedo here:  
<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/210>

### **Preparing for Action: Using case studies and group exercises.**

Another way to interrupt unconscious bias, or overcome ingrained ways of handling information, is by putting new learning into practice. In this way, practitioners encode new ways of seeing and being in the world to be accessed again in future. They start to practice new habits of thinking. Some modules contain case studies or role-playing in order to facilitate this process.

In one section of the core module called *Taking Action/Becoming Allies*, participants watch a TEDTalk by Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative. Using the understanding of the system of inequity that they have acquired in previous sections, they then take on the task of creating interview questions to ask potential candidates for local office. The questions are geared toward identifying an understanding of a candidate's ability to adequately represent one's community – and to be aware of the types of responses and outcomes they might seek.



Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative.  
View his TEDTalk here:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan\\_stevenson\\_we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_an\\_injustice](http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice)

### **Together, all of these components have the potential to override unconscious bias.**

Learning materials that incorporate these elements, such as *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: Racial Equity Learning*, invite participants to look deeply within themselves, and at the structures and institutions that surround them. This clear seeing, along with open hearts and deep awareness, is the bedrock for creating systemic change.

### **Explore Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: Racial Equity Learning Modules**

World Trust offers this resource in DVD form, with video embedded PowerPoints and facilitator guides, for purchase here: <http://www.World-Trust.org/REL>

*In addition, World Trust has made available all of the exercises referenced in this paper here: <http://www.RacialEquityTools.org/REL>.*

*Racial justice educator and filmmaker Shakti Butler, PhD, is Founder and President of World Trust Educational Services. As Education Manager at World Trust, Dia Penning lends her background in arts education to strengthen the creativity and curricular richness in our education resources. Through education rooted in love and justice, World Trust is a catalyst for racial equity.*