WorldTrust
Social Impact through Film and Dialogue

# Five Hallmarks of Effective Equity & Inclusion Workshops

**Shakti Butler, PhD**

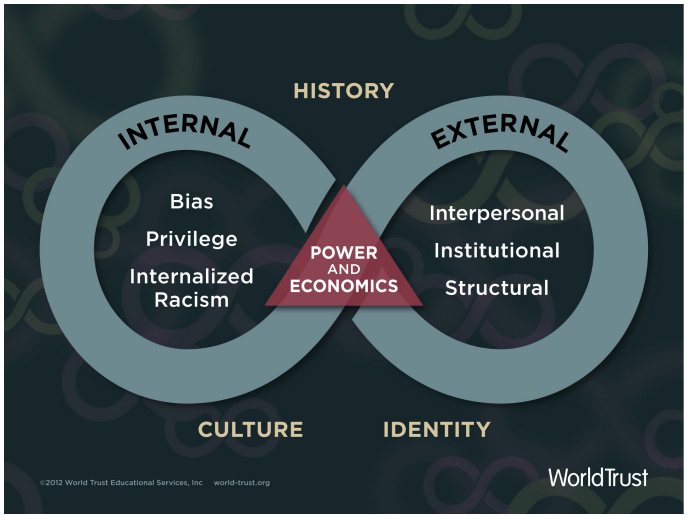
**1. Begin by building community.**

At World Trust, we **always** begin equity & inclusion events with a community building process known as *conocimiento.* *Conocimiento*[1] is a term that comes out of the Chicano movement that means 'having knowledge of.' In this context it means pooling participants' strengths and acknowledging their value to the group's collective learning and ability to take action. More than an icebreaker, the intention of *conocimiento* as a beginning activity is to draw out from each participant their own 'lived experience' regarding that topic at hand. She/he will recall what they have lived that constitutes a knowledge base (*conocimiento*) that will act as a foundation for further learning. Personal reflection and the sharing of *conocimiento* creates a more trusting learning environment that promotes a sense of belonging, critical for transformative learning on the topic of inequity.

Regardless of the amount of time you have allotted for your session or event, I recommend you begin with your own *conocimiento* or community building exercise. Participants can arrive at an equity event with stifled fear, guilt, anxiety and anger, or simply distracted by other happenings in their day and not fully present. Taking even a brief amount of time for community building links personal reflection to feelings of unity and collective humanity. This exercise could involve asking participants to contemplate a question and share their thoughts in dyads, and then culling the whole group's knowledge/values from the sharing (30 minutes or more.) If I only have 50 minutes to work with a group, I might simply invite the group to close their eyes, breathe together and recall a strength that they offer in their world. When I facilitate an evening screening & dialogue event with one of my films, I sometimes begin by teaching the entire theater a song and having them stand and sing it together. All of these exercises, and many others, can fulfill the critical role of beginning an event with community building.

[1] For more on *conocimiento*, see the work of Robert Vargas: http://www.context.org/iclib/ic17/vargas/

**2. Offer participants a simple frame that explains how systemic inequity functions.**
World Trust has developed a diagram that quickly and simply frames how the system of inequity functions. All forms of oppression intersect and operate in the same, systemic fashion. So this same frame applies to all "isms," from racism to sexism to ableism, etc. The system is composed of internal components, such as bias, privilege and internalized "-ism" that play out externally through relationships that are interpersonal, institutional and structural. I generally introduce this frame early in the session, right after the community-building exercise.




Framing helps ensure that people can see the bigger picture and share a common understanding and language for the topic of inequity. This is critical for supporting analysis and for participants to be able to begin to answer "What is really at play here, and why?"

Providing a frame is also a way to de-personalize the topic. Participants can see that inequity is not caused by "bad people," rather, it is a self-perpetuating system that we are born into; one that is embedded in history, culture and identity. By using a frame it is also easier for people to see how, despite good intentions, internalized beliefs and institutions create structures that do perpetuate inequity. Participants can see their own accountability, and then choose how they can personally or collectively act to promote equal access for all.

To create effective strategies for change, we must be able to analyze the external manifestations of racism — its policies, laws and structure. This is one reason why framing is so important. Yet, effective changemakers must also confront the influence of the internal components of the system of racialization -- bias, privilege and internalized racism. The truth is, to interrupt the self-perpetuating system of inequity, we need to engage both the head and the heart.

I believe an effective equity & inclusion event should build the capacity to identify the structural drivers of social and economic inequities AND aim to disentangle internal beliefs, attitudes, and pre-judgments within. After you present a frame, I would encourage you to explore session modalities that evoke "whole body learning" such as theater, art, spoken word/poetry, film and dialogue. In my experience it is these elements that transform a thought-provoking session into a transformational one.

**3. Offer equity learning benefits to both white people and people of color.**
Both white people and people of color have much to gain from equity work. In your session, it is important to take the responsibility off of people of color to always be the ones that have to explain how structural racism has impacted them. Telling these stories can cause pain to the person telling them and are easily dismissed by those who do not have the same lived experience. This can retrigger trauma that is not useful to deep learning and effecting change. This is the case for members of any oppressed group who often bear the burden of having to tell painful stories as a way to educate others. For example, you would not ask a gay participant to speak to the impact of homophobia on their life, or ask female participants to talk about the gender bias they have experienced.

A better way is to incorporate stories of inequity that speak to a system that churns out structural barriers. In order to extend learning benefits to all participants, we have to hear the voices of people who are oppressed as well as stories from people who are part of the dominant culture. Exploring the relationship between these stories prompts deeper learning.

**4. Leverage the power of story -- the right stories -- by using film.**
Many moving and important films document the hardships and challenges that continue to impact people of color. As affecting as these films may be, the dominant culture viewer can still remain an observer, who rarely includes themselves in the story.

So, my approach when selecting stories for World Trust films and workshops differs from more traditional documentary filmmaking. I have found that weaving together numerous personal accounts more authentically informs the complexity of the system of inequity. By experiencing an abundance of voices, participants may more easily see how their own lived experiences are part of this larger story or system. And, in this way, participants' rooted assumptions, which undergird their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and actions, are more readily brought to the surface for self-reflection, analysis and sharing.

When the session is short, you may have time to present only one story. However a single story, when analyzed by participants through the lens of a systemic frame, can be adequate.
This clip from the World Trust film *Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity* is an example of a story that can be analyzed from many perspectives:

http://world-trust.org/head-heart-and-joy/

This approach to the use of story, which is anchored in transformative learning pedagogy, can combat rampant individualism and act as a catalyst for individual and collective change.

**5. Get people talking**

Yes, dialogue about race is difficult, particularly across the current racial divides. Bringing it up in conversation with a friend, neighbor or colleague can be scary, painful, guilt-ridden, and too difficult to navigate. This freezes our capacity to connect and act across crucial racial divides. Yet, if we don't talk, this dynamic is part of a system that is endlessly self-perpetuating.

So, how do you elicit productive, healing dialogue in your workshop? At World Trust, dialogue is the core component of our program logic and strategy. Using clips from our films as a catalyst, we facilitate dialogue between participants. To create ease, we often preface conversation by reminding participants that "we aren't going to solve anything today" and that this is simply a way to engage and be engaged. We find that when you prepare groups for dialogue -- through community-building, framing and offering them the right stories to reflect upon -- the result is an extremely engaged and energetic interaction. When participants dialogue productively about race at a personal, conversational level it can open insights, challenge assumptions and facilitate healing. It sometimes becomes difficult to get participants to stop talking!

Because authentic dialogue about race is so rare, your session will be rewarding, memorable, and deeply satisfying for everyone. Dialogue allows us to extend our humanity to one another. It can lead to more informed individuals that can drive community and policy action. It can help create a society less burdensome for people as a consequence of their race, color, or ethnic background. In fact, it is talking about race that opens the way for institutional change that can impact the future. This is the benefit of getting people to talk.

*Racial justice educator and filmmaker Shakti Butler, PhD is Founder and President of World Trust Educational Services. Through education rooted in love and justice, World Trust is a catalyst for racial equity. World Trust, based in Oakland, CA, produces documentary films designed to support dialogue about race. World Trust facilitators offer workshops that incorporate film & dialogue to educate and engage a broad audience in racial equity issues. World Trust is a trusted resource, engaging over 10,000 people each year in live events that build the capacity to challenge racial inequity in institutions and communities nationwide.*

© 2014 World Trust