



EDITORIAL

Paige Crowl,
Melissa Hackman,
Erica Bruchko, Jina
DuVernay, and
Saira Raza

Emory University

Organizing and Facilitating Critical Conversations around Systemic Racism: Opportunities and Challenges

Creating a more equitable institution

Early in the spring semester of 2020, members of the professional development subcommittee of the Emory Libraries Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee began to organize outreach programming to engage and educate the library staff on DEI topics¹. The committee decided to hold a series of in-person discussions, with an inaugural session that would explore terminology commonly used when discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. The subcommittee planned to invite library staff to the discussions, titled “Coffee and Critical Conversations,” to create a space for them to talk openly and comfortably about DEI issues. Part of the marketing plan for Coffee and Critical Conversations was to entice library staff with complimentary cake and coffee in an effort to attract their attention and create a relaxing and appealing environment to discuss potentially stressful topics.

In March of 2020, before the discussion programming began, Emory University transitioned to virtual work and learning in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite this change and the inevitable uncertainty regarding the duration of remote work, the DEI subcommittee committed to facilitating the conversation series virtually. We began to consider new logistics and brainstormed ways to make the virtual environment as intimate and relaxed as the in-person discussions were designed to be.

The aftermath of the gruesome Spring 2020 murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and other African Americans by police and self-proclaimed vigilantes prompted the subcommittee to change course. The group members came to a quick consensus that the focus of the conversations should go beyond DEI terminology, and that we needed

¹ Founded in 2017, the Emory Libraries DEI Committee supports Emory’s commitment to creating an inclusive environment for all, with special considerations for the needs and activities of the Emory Libraries. The DEI committee includes several subcommittees which focus on different aspects of the committee’s initiatives. The other subcommittees of DEI are outreach and engagement; communications; library spaces; peer engagement; education; and assessment. In addition to advocating for our colleagues to share their DEI-related projects with the wider library community through conference presentations and publishing, the professional development subcommittee also provides opportunities within the organization for staff to grow and develop the skills and knowledge required to create a truly inclusive place to work and learn.

to create an intentional space for library staff to talk about their feelings around social injustice toward African Americans and systemic racism in America.

Materials and Planning

As we entered the summer of 2020, we felt it was an opportune time to reflect on the impact of this moment and explore how we as a library community could address racism and oppression. When selecting materials for discussion, we kept in mind the racial composition of our staff, which like much of the profession is predominantly white. We chose to introduce more emotionally charged content gradually, guiding participants from defensiveness to openness. We settled on three session themes. First, we looked at bias and stereotypes and their effect on how we treat others. Our second theme was anti-racism and allyship, and the way privilege shapes our view of ourselves. The final session focused on our shared history of white supremacy, and the ways that our nation's past affects the present.

As a committee, we came up with ground rules for ourselves and for participants, drawing on the work of Susan A. Vega García from Iowa State University (ISU) Library's DEI committee². We established these ground rules and read them aloud at each session to ensure that people began with the same expectations of communicating with each other. This was especially important for attendees who had not participated in this type of facilitated group conversation on racism or social justice before. It was essential that all participants felt protected and empowered to share if they wanted to. To foster that feeling of safety and encourage leaning into discomfort, we cultivated an environment of respect and openness to others.

Our ground rules were:

- Own your intentions and your impact: See and acknowledge that your intentions and the impact of your words are not the same thing.
- Welcome multiple viewpoints. Make "I" statements. (For example: "You're being unreasonable" versus "I want to understand where you're coming from.") Don't speak for others.
- Be brave. Lean into discomfort. Listen actively, especially when you feel uncomfortable.
- Share the air: share and give space for others to do the same.
- Use both/and rather than either/or thinking.
- We only have a short time together. Please keep comments on track and avoid monologues. Let's all respect our short time together.
- Keep confidentiality. What is said here, stays here.

We took the modality of the content seriously and intentionally selected videos that brought in perspectives of experts with lived experiences dealing with racism and oppression. Videos are an excellent tool for sharing personal stories, as "media materials can be used positively to enable individuals to enter the lifeworlds of people who live in different cultures and societies and to appreciate their lives and cultures" (Kellner 2000). In a time where we were all isolated at home, we also used videos to allow connection and presence with

2 An example of ground rules used by the ISU Library DEI committee can be found on their LibGuide for their discussion of Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility: <https://instr.iastate.libguides.com/c.php?g=869437&p=6240385>

“...the focus of the conversations should go beyond DEI terminology, and that we needed to create an intentional space for library staff to talk about their feelings around social injustice toward African Americans and systemic racism in America.”

authors and narrators in a more personal format than an academic article. We purposefully limited the length of media by choosing short videos (under 20 minutes) or identified brief portions of more lengthy interviews to reduce the time commitment required. We usually requested that participants view these videos in advance; however, we also added additional content, in some cases readings or short videos, for attendees to view during or after each session.

To identify materials, members of the subcommittee generated a list of potential videos related to our chosen themes, using circulating lists and media that group members had previously viewed. We discussed these suggestions during our weekly subcommittee meetings and chose content we found timely, provocative, and which fulfilled our goals. We chose meaningful themes but deliberately avoided abstract and theoretical materials because we wanted an accessible starting point for people from all academic backgrounds³.

Our final selections were as follows:

Session 1: To launch the series, we chose the 2009 TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” by Nigerian author and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It explores what happens when people and their circumstances are relegated to one single, stereotyped narrative. After the discussion, we asked that participants watch a short video called “The Look,” a commercial for Proctor & Gamble, which illustrates the ongoing bias experienced by Black American men. This session guided participants to deconstruct stereotypes with storytelling.

Session 2: For the second session, we selected segments of an interview by Jemele Hill with Ibram X. Kendi, entitled “How to be an Anti-Racist,” from the Aspen Ideas Festival in 2019. Kendi introduces the notion of anti-racism and argues that to dismantle racism, we must actively and constantly critique it. We paired this with a short in-session video, “5 Tips for Being an Ally,” by actress and comedian Franchesca Ramsey. This session focused on activism and engagement in the movement for anti-racism.

Session 3: We chose to close the series with a short video from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), entitled “EJI Confronts America’s History of Racial Inequality,” from 2015. The video shows historical images of racial inequality, depicting the continuity of racism in American culture. We also asked participants to discuss two articles on the recent debate in Congress over the instruction of African American history in public schools—particularly the teaching of *The 1619 Project* created by *New York Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones. *The 1619 Project* materials emphasized how knowing our collective past brings clarity to persistent racial injustice in the present.

Once the group selected materials, we marketed the event with flyers designed in Canva and emailed communications to listservs. We invited employees from across the Emory Libraries and many of the people who participated in the discussions had never previously crossed paths⁴. To create a more comfortable and intimate environment where participants could be vulnerable and share their personal experiences, we implemented small breakout rooms—each with one facilitator and 5–7 attendees. The following indicated the total number of registrants for each session, one each in June, July, and August of 2020.

- Session 1: 51 participants
- Session 2: 33 participants
- Session 3: 44 participants

³ Curriculum materials are on the Coffee and Critical Conversations LibGuide at <https://guides.libraries.emory.edu/critical-conversations>.

⁴ Emory Libraries are composed of seven libraries serving Emory University’s colleges. We used the library-wide listserv to invite around 400 employees.

At the conclusion of each session, we requested that participants fill out a post-session survey which included a link to a LibGuide on Black Lives Matter⁵. The guide suggested further anti-racism resources for members of the Emory community and was intended to be a next step for those who wanted to learn more and take action on social justice. We also invited the library community to contribute resources of their own.

Despite having little prior experience with online facilitation, we challenged ourselves as a subcommittee to serve as discussion facilitators. Because of the immediacy and necessity of the program, we felt that it was critical to respond quickly to the social climate. After each session, the subcommittee met, discussed challenges and successes and reviewed feedback. Facilitators used this time to brainstorm solutions to issues that arose during their breakout sessions and share advice with each other. This time was also essential for providing emotional support to aid in recuperating from the emotional weight of leading challenging conversations together.

Challenges and Successes

We began each session with self-reflection. Once we shared the ground rules, we showed the Feelings Wheel developed by Willcox (1982) and invited participants to choose a word to describe how they felt that day. Facilitators encouraged flexibility in choosing a word: some attendees chose a word to describe their feelings in their personal lives, and others described their feelings about the state of the world. This activity was a low-stakes way of encouraging everyone to recognize their emotions before they engaged in an intense conversation. Mindfulness “encourages one to be aware of and observe one’s emotions as they arise without getting caught up in them or reacting to them” (Quinn 2017). Taking a few moments to step back mentally and identify our emotions before we began was a simple way to incorporate mindfulness. By modeling mindfulness, we hoped participants would in turn practice it when relating to their colleagues and communities.

Additionally, using the Feelings Wheel gave facilitators a quick picture of the emotions in the room and gave us a starting point for discussion. This was especially useful since the virtual environment made it much more difficult to read the body language of participants. If participants reported feeling “anxious” or “overwhelmed,” facilitators knew to approach topics carefully and give attendees extra time to consider the discussion prompts. If participants reported feeling “hopeful” or “interested,” facilitators could jump in with more high-energy discussion topics. We highly recommend using the Feelings Wheel or a similar tool to give participants language and latitude to begin self-reflection on their emotions, as it worked wonderfully in laying the groundwork for fruitful discussion.

It was crucial to maintain an attitude of openness and flexibility around the planning and organization of our sessions. At our first Critical Conversations session, we discovered that some attendees had not watched the assigned video. In one breakout room, none of the participants viewed the video and as a result had no context for the video-based discussion questions. We wanted to ensure that all who chose to attend could participate, so the facilitator offered some general discussion prompts. In response to this problem, we experimented with revising our format to make discussion participation more accessible. For our second Critical Conversations session, we selected a shorter video segment to watch in advance to decrease the time commitment required for viewing the content. After this, we watched the video for the third session as a group at the

5 The Black Lives Matter LibGuide link is <https://guides.libraries.emory.edu/BlackLivesMatter>.

beginning of the discussion segment. Our willingness to try new approaches led to better and more fulfilling experiences for attendees as more people were able to participate actively in discussion of the media.

We also took the time to review and incorporate the technological feedback we received throughout the event series, which led us to adjust the session format. Initially we locked the online room ten minutes after the start of the discussion to prevent distractions from late joiners, but some frustrated attendees reported they could not rejoin when technical issues caused them to be dropped from the room. We acknowledged this feedback and worked to find a better way to manage the technical challenges while preserving the emotional character of the discussions. At first, one of the facilitators managed the logistics as well, which meant they juggled running a discussion and letting people back into the meeting. This was difficult for that facilitator as it took them out of the headspace of leading an emotional conversation. Assigning a dedicated technology monitor (with no other responsibilities in the session) to handle the joining and manage the breakout-room logistics ended up providing a better experience for all involved and preserved the cohesiveness of the discussion.

We kept in mind that participating in conversations on tense and emotional topics like racism can be overwhelming. Many Americans are already uncomfortable addressing emotions with colleagues, and library workers face additional pressure to maintain a positive, courteous, and professional persona in the workplace (Quinn 2017). There was significant variability in how much

people were willing or in the right headspace to share, and this made facilitating conversations challenging at times. Some attendees just wanted to sit and listen quietly. Others felt defensive or uneasy. At the first Critical Conversations session, an attendee did not want to enter the breakout rooms for further discussion, and they left after the introduction. They shared in a subsequent session that they were uncomfortable with the topic and

had not been ready to share. Other attendees reported that the discussions were a truly emotional experience in addition to being educational, which was exactly what we aimed to accomplish. Attendees participated at their own level and on their own terms. According to the feedback from post-session surveys, this flexibility was an important element which resulted in repeat attendance, active engagement in the discussion, and an interest in more Coffee and Critical Conversations programming.

We noticed that the depth and quality of the conversations depended on the chance composition of the breakout rooms. We elected to split participants randomly into groups rather than assigning them in advance. This resulted in a diversity of perspectives and library roles of the attendees in a room, but it led to variability in the cohesiveness of groups. Some rooms were lively and participants engaged with each other and the facilitator with ease, but other rooms had a mismatch of personalities that created awkward silences. Facilitators prepared as best as they could for discussions, but in some cases the group dynamics proved to be difficult for dialogue.

We encouraged the use of video to allow participants to connect better and emulate an in-person gathering, but not everyone was willing or able to do so. Technical challenges and bandwidth limitations precluded some attendees from using cameras, but others chose to leave theirs off. The intensity of the topics and the global stress of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the fragility that some attendees experienced. Keeping the camera off was an easy way to put a shield up between whatever emotions one may have been feeling and the eyes

“We noticed that the depth and quality of the conversations depended on the chance composition of the breakout rooms.”

of coworkers. We wanted all participants to feel comfortable and respected their choice to have cameras on or off. However, as we had limited experience with online facilitation, missing the shortcut of facial and physical cues sometimes made facilitation challenging. Some of this discomfort improved over time, as facilitators built trust with returning attendees, but we recognized that this is an inherent challenge of virtual discussions. Practice and preparation improved our skill at reading the room even without being able to see our participants.

We anticipated that we might receive pushback from the library community, but no one was hostile or resentful about the topic or its importance. This is likely because the conversations were optional and participants self-selected to attend. Many rooms had strong agreement that racism is an important issue that we are facing, but fewer were able to dig into self-reflection on the implications of their own whiteness. We work in a predominantly white organization, so most of our participants were white, and very few people were willing to be the first white person in a room to admit to their own racial bias lest they face contempt from colleagues. This said, some participants challenged themselves and discussed how they could address their own behaviors at work and in their personal lives.

Despite these obstacles, the Critical Conversations series had many successes, some of which exceeding our expectations. Notably, attendees expressed relief that they were not the only ones grappling with questions about incorporating anti-racism into their daily lives, and others expressed gratitude for the space to talk through power-laden topics. This feedback confirmed that there is demand in the library for critical dialogue and anti-racist programming, and that our intentional approach was successful.

We were also pleased that several attendees returned for multiple sessions. Familiar faces put participants at ease, allowing for continued engagement, and attendees could grow together in a community-supported context. Participants also expanded their own sense of community, as they met colleagues from other Emory libraries. This also allowed the DEI committee to engage and make new connections with staff. Several participants expressed interest in the DEI committee and joined after their experiences in the event series. We also considered it a great success that people communicated across different levels of the library hierarchy.

We encourage our fellow librarians to incorporate anti-racism into their outreach activities, both outside of the organization and within it. We created space where we could engage with each other and allow each of us to progress from being bystanders to active participants in this work. Instead of providing a script for being “not racist,” we strove to inspire participants to be introspective and cultivate empathy in their daily lives. Coffee and Critical Conversations was one small step in our efforts to dismantle the systemic racism in our institutions and workplaces.

References

- Adichie, Chimamanda. 2009. “The Danger of a Single Story.” Filmed 2009 at TEDGlobal. Video, 18:31. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.
- Equal Justice Initiative. 2015. “EJI Confronts America’s History of Racial Inequality.” Filmed 2015. Video, 3:58. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUwmz2QOp9Q>.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole, Mary Elliott, Jazmine Hughes, and Jake Silverstein. 2019. “The 1619 Project.” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019.
- Kellner, Douglas. 2000. “Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogies.” In *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Instituting Education, and the*

- Discourse of Theory, edited by Peter Pericles Trifonas, 196–221. New York: Routledge.
- Kendi, Ibram X. 2019. “How to Be an Anti-Racist.” Filmed 2019 at Aspen Ideas Festival. Video, 17.30.
<https://www.aspenideas.org/sessions/how-to-be-an-antiracist>.
- Proctor & Gamble. 2019. “The Look.” Posted 2019. Video, 1.43.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aC7lbdD1hq0>.
- Quinn, Brian. 2017. “The Potential of Mindfulness in Managing Emotions in Libraries.” In *Emotion in the Library Workplace*, edited by Samantha Hines and Miriam L Matteson, 15–34. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Ramsey, Franchesca. 2014. “5 Tips for Being an Ally.” Posted November 2014. Video, 3.31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg86g-QlM0>.
- Willcox, Gloria. 1982. “The Feeling Wheel: A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy.” *Transactional Analysis Journal* 12, no. 4: 274–276.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/036215378201200411>

Author Details

Paige Crowl, Teaching and Learning Librarian, Oxford College Library:
scrowl@emory.edu

Erica Bruchko, African American Studies and United States History Librarian,
Emory Libraries: berica@emory.edu

Jina DuVernay, Program Director, Engagement and African American
Collections, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library:
jduvernay@aucr.edu

Melissa Hackman, Librarian for African Studies, Sociology, & Development
Studies, Emory Libraries: melissa.joy.hackman@emory.edu

Saira Raza, Business Librarian, Goizueta Business Library:
saira.raza@emory.edu

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Emily Lawson for her invaluable help with editing this article, and Susan A. Vega García, who was a wonderful resource on setting up a successful discussion group. We also want to extend our thanks to our facilitators, which includes the authors, Emily Lawson, Lyndon Batiste, and Chaun Campos. Finally, thank you to all Emory Libraries staff who attended the series and shared their stories with us.

