

MODULE 1

SOCIAL POSITION



"I was saying something about Aboriginal history, and another Aboriginal person who is full-blooded...there's always that debate, you're not really Native if you have White in you...He told me that I had really no right to be talking about things because I wasn't really Native and I hadn't really experienced anything because I get all this White privilege because I look like a pretty young White girl, and it's not fair for me to say anything because I haven't really experienced racism like he has."
(IVT: 5,44)

Before proceeding through the module, please watch IVT: 5,44 and 5,45.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

As a facilitator, it is crucial to understand who you are and what your social location is, and how your social location is perceived by others. Acknowledging your social position defines the parameters of your experience and the specificity of your position in a discussion. Clarifying social positions can help many conflicts that happen in discussions of politically and culturally sensitive material. When you state your social position, you define the scope of your ability and authority to speak to certain social, cultural, and historical experiences for students and others. It can assist to minimize conflicts that are based on assumptions of authority or expertise in relation to the subject matter being discussed. By acknowledging your social position, you model a way of entering into discussions of politically and culturally sensitive material for others, who may feel that they do not have a right to speak, or that they don't have anything to contribute to such a discussion.

For instance, students have discussed being in a Aboriginal-focused class where the instructor, a non-Aboriginal man, did not discuss how he entered his field of study, and how his background informed his research, his curriculum, and how he teaches Aboriginal content as a non-Aboriginal person. By not stating his position in relation to his field of study or the course content, students looked to him as an "expert" on Aboriginal subject matter and did not question his authority to speak freely about Aboriginal

issues. He would frequently be asked to speak about specific Aboriginal cultures and histories that he did not have the experience or knowledge to answer. In order to respond to students' inquiries, he would call on Aboriginal students in the class to answer those questions, not recognizing that their own social positions did not necessarily qualify them to respond; in fact, because he did not perceive or respect the specificity of those students' social positions, he created an alienating classroom environment for students.

By contrast, other students discussed an instructor teaching a course with an Aboriginal focus who consistently discussed her social position in relation to the course curriculum in terms of how she approached readings and interpretations of the material, and what limitations her social position placed on her engagement. By acknowledging her social position, she took responsibility for her perspective of Aboriginal issues, and modeled for students a way of engage with the course material in a way that encouraged critical and in-depth discussions. For example, she would discuss experiencing "white guilt" when she began learning about the history of colonization in Canada and it's impact on Aboriginal peoples. However, her critical self-awareness about her social position allowed her to interrogate what "white guilt" is and how it functions. She would question who benefits from white guilt, and would ask ironically if Aboriginal people benefit from white guilt, or if white guilt only serves the person feeling it. She would note that while experiencing white guilt is a common reaction to learning about the history of Aboriginal people, it is a limit to a person's ability to engage with the issues in a meaningful way that does justice to the material being discussed. In this way, she created an environment where students could move beyond the limits of white guilt in order to engage with the course content with the critical attention that it deserves.

In 5,44, this student discusses an incident where she was challenged by another Aboriginal student about her authority to speak about discrimination towards Aboriginal people because of the privilege she experiences as a result of having whiter skin. In this situation, a contributing factor to the conflict between herself and another Aboriginal student was predicated on how he perceived her social position based on the social realities of privilege that comes with having lighter skin. This is not to say that she has not experienced discrimination in her life, or that she is in a position to speak to a certain Aboriginal reality. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the ways in which color functions socially and it's relationship to a person's social position, and one way that it functions acutely is in a person's experience of discrimination. In this situation, the discussion around Aboriginal issues was shut down because the discussion had not been initiated with an acknowledgement of a person's skin color and how that affects his or her social position. This situation illustrates how important it is for instructors to articulate the significance of social positions when discussing culturally sensitive material, since the ways that instructors and students engage with course material - and with each other - is based on the specificity of their social realities.

WORKSHOP MATERIALS

WORKSHOP PLAYLIST

1. IVT: 5,44
2. IVT: 5,45

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What about this situation that was problematic for this student? (To revisit this clip, go to IVT: 5,44).
2. What was the basis of the other student's challenge to this student?
 - a. Why does he bring up skin color? Gender? Physical attractiveness?
 - b. Both students come from Aboriginal heritages and experiences. What is the basis of the conflict here? Why does skin color matter?
3. How is each person's identity used to engage in discussions of Aboriginal material?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Consider the outcome of this situation for both students. As an instructor, if you had been in the classroom or a part of this discussion, how would you address this situation? What is the relevance of this situation to the class as a whole? Discuss techniques that you would engage the class as a whole in the issues that are raised here.