

## **Making Space, Taking Time, Sharing Power**

**By Hugo Mahabir**

One of the early readings I came across through the National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum is *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, by Patricia Williams (1992), a law professor and cultural theorist who documents her thinking about race, democracy, and law in a series of autobiographical essays published in 1992. In one of her essays, Williams describes an argument she and her sister had as children on a family driving trip regarding the color of the road ahead of them. Through her story, Williams describes what it means to have two divergent points of view, and yet have them both be valid.

As Williams tells it:

One summer when I was about six, my family drove to Maine. The highway was very straight and hot and shimmered darkly in the sun. My sister and I sat in the back seat of the Studebaker and argued about what color the road was. I said black. My sister said purple. After I had harangued her into admitting that it was indeed black, my father gently pointed out that my sister still saw it as purple.

I was unimpressed with the relevance of that at the time; but with the passage of years, and much more observation, I have come to see endless highways as slightly more purple than black.

My sister and I will probably argue about the hue of life's roads forever. But the lesson I learned from listening to her wild perceptions is that it really is possible to see things – even the most concrete things – simultaneously yet differently; and that seeing simultaneously yet differently is more easily done by two people than one, but that one person can get the hang of it with lots of time and effort.

The household I grew up in was a place where things were either right or wrong with very little room for ambiguity or variance, even less for multiplicity and plurality. Life was singular, facts were facts, and truth and knowledge could be ascertained with unequivocal certainty, as long as one could prove one's point or argue from evidence. The problem was that, despite this premise of objectivity, subjectivity and experience always came into it. Never was it validated for me as a child that truth is multiple – not relative, but plural – based on the experiences and standpoints of the people making the truth claims. The adults around me believed in the authority of knowledge that gave one's perceptions and assumptions about the world their validity and legitimacy. In this world, there was no room for difference. The aim was to argue your point, to the death it seemed, if necessary, in order to stake your claim to the truth. As a result, my people argued about just about everything, making it impossible to give birth to fledgling thoughts, feelings, or intuitions that didn't conform to the received opinion or fall in line with the most persuasive (read: silencing) argument.

It was in the SEED Project that I began to understand that what I had always believed and sensed as a child was true: that there is more than one answer to a question, that there are many sides to a story, and that there is always more than meets the eye. With its insistence on the basic truth of

experience and the existence of multiple perspectives, many voices, and plural ways of knowing, the SEED Project leaves open the field of knowing, allowing a room of SEED participants to speak the truth of their own experience, while at the same time listening, deeply listening, to the truth of the experience of others.

Going-around-the-circle in a SEED seminar changes the balance of power within the group. In this exercise, everyone in the circle has authority and a claim to knowledge, not just those onto whom authority has been projected by the systems of an oppressive society, whether through racism, sexism, classism, or ableism. To be in a SEED circle is to be in more authentic relation to oneself and to others without the free reign of internalized authority or internalized subordination over-privileging some and under-privileging others.

In the SEED circle, everyone has time enough to speak, but not unlimited time, nor is anyone asked or expected to comment on or respond to what others testify to, nor expected to have the answers to the questions posed. Simply put, it's not about being right, but about being in right relation to others. This is an ethic and a practice that the SEED Project teaches as a fundamental part of becoming multiculturally literate and self-aware.

Changing the balance of power, or more accurately, sharing the power, is one of the most transformative processes to which a SEED seminar gives rise in the course of being in reflective dialogue with others over time. During the time spent in a SEED seminar, there is an intrinsic justice that comes to bear that we seldom experience in the world at large. Once experienced, however, it can be practiced, both in the classroom and in the workplace.

Through participation in the SEED Project over many years, my pedagogy and practice as a teacher and administrator were radically transformed, making my classroom more democratic and inclusive of all voices and ways of learning, and making my leadership dependent on “being a body in the body of the world,” as Leroy Moore has put it. Through the epistemological rebalancing that the SEED seminar process cultivates, teachers can translate this ethic into classroom practice, where there is a way of being “right” about discrete areas of knowledge without being oppressive, since the aim is not to be right to the exclusion of others, but “right” for the development of all.