

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## HYPOTHESIS: THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS AFFECTS STUDENTS OF COLOR IN THEIR ABILITY TO LEARN

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As a post-baccalaureate student pursuing a new career path, I became a Workshop leader after having taken a General Chemistry course at The City College of New York (CCNY). In leading a PLTL Chemistry Workshop in the Spring 2005 term, I had the opportunity to observe a group of six students, who each made distinct contributions to the workshop environment as a result of their different learning styles and ethnic backgrounds. In the past, I had taught public elementary school, grades K-5. However, after PLTL training, I realized two things: 1) I would be a peer leader or facilitator, a role that would be different from being an actual teacher; 2) the diversity in the workshop was similar to that which existed in the public elementary school where I taught.

After my experience as a student in General Chemistry, I began to understand that the actual work and diversity of the group made a tremendous difference in my ability to learn the challenging new science material. I attributed this difference to the fact that I felt comfortable being around other students like myself. Understanding my “comfort zone” allowed me to concentrate more readily on the subject matter and thereby, to do exceedingly well in the class. In this article, I will discuss the effect that the socialization process and “marginalization” has had on students of color and their ability to learn in the classroom, by looking at my personal experiences, as well as by obtaining information from students in my workshop. Often, especially in education, groups of “others” find it necessary to assimilate, or integrate, into mainstream society, in order to prosper and survive. Sometimes adapting and also learning well in such a unique environment is a “herculean” task.

The inspiration, or motivation, for my examination of this topic came from my interest in understanding my personal experiences in high school and college where I was often the only student of color in most of my classes. To understand this phenomenon, look at history. Only some fifty years ago, the U.S. government ended school segregation. Blacks and Whites, especially in the U.S. South, could now, by law, attend the same schools. The intent was to provide equal access to a quality education for Blacks, an access which had always given Whites an overall advantage in society. Inherent in this proposition was also the idea that Blacks would need to prove themselves as being just as intelligent and capable as Whites, thereby disproving age-old stereotypes.

Claude M. Steele, a social psychologist and Lucie Stern Professor in the Social Sciences at Stanford University, claims that “when capable black college students fail to perform as well as their white counterparts, the explanation often has less to do with preparation and ability than with the threat of stereotypes about their capacity to succeed” (Steele, 1999). He named this condition “Stereotype Threat.” He noted that “these college students are undervalued in ways that are sometimes subtle and sometimes not”

(Steele, 1999). Steele asks, “How do racial stereotypes, floating and abstract though they might seem, affect concrete things like grades, test scores, and academic identity?”(1999).

Steele continues: “Over the past four decades, African-American students have been more in the spotlight than other American students. This is because they aren’t just college students; they are a cutting-edge in America’s effort to integrate itself in the thirty-five years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act.... these students have borne much of the burden of our national experiment in racial integration. And to a significant degree, the success of the experiment will be determined by their success”(1999).

One might ask, “Is racial integration possible?” For example, in the controversy over affirmative action, as a society, “We have already made the assumption that disadvantages of race can be overcome when lower socioeconomic status is overcome”(Steele, 1999). Steele has noted, however, that, “Beyond class, something racial is depressing the academic performance of African-American students” (1999). In other words, whether the student comes from the African-American middle class or not, “All aspects of underperformance-lower standardized test scores, lower college grades, and lower graduation rates-persist in the group as a whole” (1999).

My peers considered me to be an excellent student during middle school, at an elite private college-preparatory school. Yet, as an example of “stereotype threat” I experienced feelings of being undervalued. I became friends with two African-American females who attended that school since kindergarten. When I arrived in seventh grade they introduced me to everyone and made me feel comfortable in the socialization process. However, their parents became concerned that they were not sufficiently exposed to other students of color and subsequently transferred them to a more diverse specialized public high school. I had the same option of leaving middle school, but stayed on to take advantage of the unique opportunity at the private school and to prove to myself that I could handle the academic challenge of such an elite school. At that point, I was so confident of my social standing with my classmates that I ran for class president in ninth grade, but lost. This loss affected me greatly, and I never truly understood why I did lose. In the first place, my candidacy had been fueled by an all-too-common idea among students of color that we must be at least as good, if not, better than our counterparts, thereby dispelling any existing stereotypes; hence, I must have felt threatened by stereotypes that they had about my race, I felt “stereotype threat.” I thought that maybe the loss had something to do with my race. The reasons have always remained unclear, but what I did know was that for my white classmates, status and dating became of prime importance. I felt the result of having lost the election as a personal attack. I believed that my classmates had chosen the other candidate because he was a White person and had been at the school longer. Since my close friends had transferred to another school, I had little social support and became extremely isolated, stressed, and depressed. I felt “on the outside” of social and academic life and found that, although I would study vigorously, often on my own, I began to receive just average grades. Study groups were not a comfortable option, as I felt “marginalized” and was often the only woman of color present in a class. In addition to experiencing “stereotype threat,” I also felt undervalued.

Another example was when an Asian teacher, the only one in the school, used the Bible as the class text in my tenth grade English class. We read Genesis in its entirety as well as other books. He used one particular part of Genesis to justify the inferiority of Black people to the other races. He stated that this inferiority was true based upon a curse that God had put on Ham, who is purported to be the progenitor of the “Black race.” At that time, I was the only Black student in the class, and this statement had a tremendously negative impact on me: Here was a most prominent and popular teacher of my high school justifying, before an entire class of

White students, the theory that the Black race was cursed. The passage he cited was Genesis 9:25, the section in the Bible about Noah and his three sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth. It is a passage which many White supremacists, during the Civil Rights Movement, used to justify this theory of Black racial inferiority and White supremacy. During our discussions, everyone in the class would turn their heads in my direction. In shock, I would say nothing in response. I worked very hard to obtain an “A” in the class. We were reading from the “book of all books,” the Bible. My young mind, at age fifteen, was just as impressionable as my classmates’.

As I learned more about Peer-Led Team Learning as a first-time Peer Leader, I found out about Claude Steele, and others, such as Uri Treisman (1992), who wrote about students of color studying calculus at the University of California, Berkeley. I thought back to the Asian teacher in high school. Maybe he made his original statements because as the only Asian instructor in the entire school, he was extremely insecure about being a minority among all White professors. He may have felt “stereotype-threat” himself, and the need to justify his sole presence by twisting the Bible’s meaning about race, as do many who believe in racial supremacy of one race over another. He may have felt that, by doing so, he would substantiate his position and tenure and convince his peers, as well as his students, that at least he was part of a race that was superior to the Black race. In this way, his peers would more readily accept and respect him as an outstanding teacher. I completed my high school career, always with the above occurrences in mind, and with a strong, heartfelt desire to disprove the theory of racial inferiority or superiority of any race.

After participating in PLTL chemistry workshop at CCNY as a student, and after having received an “A” in the course, I realized what I had been missing all along. The potential of the workshop model to gather a diverse group of students led to my increased social comfort and, thereby a better learning experience for me. I realized that “stereotype threat” had previously sidetracked the task at hand, that of actually learning my subjects in school. Also, studying alone in high school and college, without helpful input from others, was hindering my learning potential. Therefore, I yearned to test my hypothesis in the environment of chemistry workshop.

For my project for the Peer Leader Training class, I interviewed two students regarding their own experiences throughout their academic career, as case studies. My questions were:

- In what environment do you feel you learn the best, or what do you feel is your “comfort zone?”
- Have you ever been the only student of color in a class, whose majority was of White students?
- How did you feel?
- Did you ever think that you did not want to, inadvertently, confirm any negative stereotype that they might have about your race or ethnicity?
- If so, how did this affect your ability to learn in the class?

## Results

The first student, who was a female African-American, stated that she was often the only student of color. She has often not performed well, as a result of isolation and “stereotype threat.” The second student, who was female Hispanic, expressed similar concerns. She often pretended to be White, in order to fit in and be accepted in high school. However, she often received hostile glances from the other White students, which engulfed her thoughts rather than the actual content of her course work. Both students shared that their

“comfort zone” would be one in which there were more diversity in the classroom setting, helping them to feel more comfortable and thereby absorb learning better.

The implications of these findings are that in the “great experiment” of the 1960's, which attempted to desegregate the U.S. school system, there have been some positive as well as some negative results. Cultural sensitivity is key to adapting students to a comfortable learning environment, which means that students’ understanding, and as a result, performance, would be optimal.

From its beginnings, the workshop allowed minority students, who would otherwise study alone, to achieve a higher level of satisfaction in their ability to absorb complex and often completely foreign material. In such a group setting, they can arrive at their maximum learning potential (see also Ramirez, 2001; Rosser, 2001; Roth and Tien, 2000). Poor academic performance and the increased college drop-out rate for minority students must be considered against the backdrop of this idea of “stereotype-threat.” This seems to block or hinder thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, to the extent that a student becomes nervous and no longer concentrates on academics, but on the fear of being viewed negatively, or as a failure.

In Chemistry Workshop, there exists a diverse group of students, who feel quite comfortable in being at CCNY, in this diverse learning environment. Peer-Led Team Learning has awakened a keen spirit in the students, allowing them to express themselves freely and uninhibitedly with other students, thereby guaranteeing them more than satisfactory performance in their course work. Most of the students have acquired a profound love of the subject matter, without the hindrance of others’ perceptions of them, or “stereotype-threat.” PLTL and the workshop model appear to have succeeded, so far, in its intent and original purpose.

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