Chapter 8
Read**ing Smart Stuff Together and Whistling Vivaldi**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Elon University sponsored successful reading and discussion groups about psychologist Claude Steele’s book, Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do. The book describes the many ways that “stereotype threat” negatively impacts people who are anxious about confirming stereotypes with an identity group to which they belong. It also provides research-based strategies for reducing the impact of stereotype threat. This chapter describes why the reading groups worked, how they were run, and the evidence for their impact on the institution. The discussion group model could be replicated by other organizations.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Sponsoring a book discussion may not sound like a radical or innovative strategy for helping members of a diverse organization successfully work together, but it can prove to have a powerful and lasting impact. As Brookfield and Preskill (2005) assert in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, “Building connections, both personal and intellectual, is at the heart of discussion” (p. 28). Ideas come alive when we explore them in speech. Abstract arguments grab our attention when spoken by a peer. Brookfield and Preskill say that effective discussions have four purposes: helping participants reach a more critically informed understanding of a topic, enhancing participants’ self-awareness and capacity for self-critique, fostering an appreciation for diversity of opinion, and acting as a catalyst for to help people take informed action in the world. To them, discussion implies “a process of giving and taking, speaking and listening, describing and witnessing – all of which help expand horizons and foster mutual understanding” (3-4). These goals were precisely what we aimed for with our discussion groups of psychologist Claude Steele’s book, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*.

At Elon University, our faculty development center, called the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL), regularly invites faculty and staff employees to participate in reading groups. These groups usually end up with 6-12
participants. But when we sponsored multi-part discussions of *Whistling Vivaldi*, 163 members of the faculty and staff voluntarily showed up, an amazing and unprecedented response. Participants found the book meaningful both personally and professionally and gave high ratings to the discussions. “Wow,” said one person on a feedback form, “so many people reading this could make a real difference on our campus” (Festle, 2012a). What explains our record-breaking participation and the positive response? Materials from participants – generated both during the discussion sessions and in post-session evaluations – show that it was due to choosing the right book at the right time while using a smart approach to facilitating the discussions. The goal of this chapter is to describe why the reading groups worked, how we ran them, and the impact they had on our university. In addition to satisfying the participants, the groups achieved our larger goal of helping our community members understand the psychological phenomenon known as “stereotype threat” and consider some ways to lessen its impact. Because stereotype threat creates anxiety and impairs people’s effectiveness, other organizations – educational institutions, businesses, nonprofits, faith communities, teams, and clubs – likely could benefit from using the same approach.

**WHY IT WAS “THE RIGHT TIME”**

The popularity of our reading groups was partly due to the fact that the timing was right for *Whistling Vivaldi* at our institution. Elon University is a selective comprehensive liberal arts university of about 6000 students that has always placed a high value on community and civility. For many years its mission has been to foster respect for human differences and help students integrate learning across disciplines so they become global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good. Learning about stereotype threat clearly fits those goals, but in addition, Elon had recently adopted a new strategic plan to guide its priorities for the next decade. The new plan, known as “The Elon Commitment,” included as a top priority making “an unprecedented commitment to diversity and global engagement” (Elon University, 2009).

After adoption of the plan, discussions ensued all over campus about how to translate the goal into action. Although there was certainly room for improvement in the “global engagement” piece, Elon has already been honored for efforts related to campus internationalization (Anderson, 2007). That was partly because of curricular and other initiatives; among other things, first-year student takes a frequently eye-opening interdisciplinary Global Experience course, 72% of students study abroad, and faculty and staff members are offered numerous exchange and educational opportunities. Plans ensued for expanding and deepening international education, but many felt the more urgent needs were to help students, faculty, and staff learn more about diversity in their “within their own backyard” – in the U.S., in the region in which the university is located, and on our own campus. In particular, a central focus became insuring that every person on our campus, of whatever race, ethnicity, national origin, spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc., felt they were valued and equal members of the community. Elon undergraduate students are primarily young (93% are 24 years old or younger) and enrolled full-time. Many of them hail from the eastern seaboard of the United States, but there are students from 47 states and the District of Columbia and 49 different nations. About 16% identify as belonging to racial or ethnic minorities (about 6% African American, 5% Hispanic, 2% multi-racial, 2% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2% are non-resident aliens). Over half (59%) are female; and although the majority are Christian, about 6% are Jewish and over 20% say they have no religious affiliation (Elon University, 2013). The numbers of students with disabilities and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender
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