Respect Differences?

Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education

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Abstract

In social justice education, it is common to establish guidelines for classroom discussions. We examine the limits of these guidelines in achieving the goals of social justice education, arguing that they are not responsive to power relations. Rather than creating a supportive space for dialogue, these guidelines actually can interfere with achieving social justice education goals. We also describe our efforts to engage alternative strategies for responding to power in the social justice classroom.

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Creating a democratic atmosphere in which everyone participates means both putting ourselves forward and including others. To do this we must understand the dynamics rooted in issues of power, and do things which counter them. (Adair & Howell, 2001)

Imagine . . .

You are teaching a required teacher education course on social justice in one of its many forms (e.g., cultural diversity and social justice, multicultural education, or diversity in education). Typical of the teacher education student demographic in the United States and Canada, the majority of your class of 30 is White women who grew up in liberal, middle-class suburban contexts. Only a small percentage of the class represents other identities along lines of race, class, gender, ability, etc.

Knowing that the majority of students are new to discussions of social justice and seeking to create a supportive and democratic space that will encourage participation, you introduce a few standard discussion guidelines:

- *Speak for yourself instead of generalizing—use I statements.*
- *Respect differences—everyone's opinion matters.*
- *Challenge ideas not people.*
- *Stay open and engaged—be responsible for your own learning.*

You ask students if they would like to add any additional guidelines to the list, and they suggest the following:

- *Don't judge.*
- *Assume good intentions.*
- *Don't attack people who disagree with you.*
- *Treat others as you would like to be treated.*
- *Don't take things personally.*
- *Laugh with anyone, but laugh at no one.*

After some discussion and clarification (e.g. "treat others as you would like to be treated" is modified to "treat others as they would like to be treated," and "don't judge" is modified to "hold your judgments lightly"), everyone votes in agreement with the guidelines, and you post them on the wall or course website.

In subsequent weeks, several dynamics familiar to social justice educators begin to manifest. Students in dominant group positions (e.g., male, White, cisgender, able bodied) repeatedly raise a range of objections to scholarly evidence that they have privilege by virtue of their social positions. Further, these students dominate the discussion and continue to use terms and phrases that you have repeatedly explained are problematic (e.g., colored people, Orientals, that's retarded, and that's ghetto). In response, other students are becoming triggered or withdrawn. From week to week, you notice that tensions increase in the classroom. And if you—as the instructor—represent a visibly minoritized group within academia (e.g., female, transgender, person of Color, person with a visible disability), you sense that dominant students are invalidating you in ways they would not invalidate other instructors, and you are struggling to maintain your legitimacy as you try to facilitate these difficult dynamics.

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Questioning the Common Guidelines

We teach courses with a social justice focus, primarily for teachers or those who are becoming teachers in K–12 contexts. In addition to classroom teaching, we consult, conduct research, attend workshops and conferences, and contribute to social justice scholarly literature. From these sessions, research, and the literature, it is clear that building trust through an open, accepting, and safe space is an often taken-for-granted goal in our discipline (as an online search of syllabi will show). For example, almost every social justice–oriented education forum presents guidelines for discussion. These guidelines are either pre-formed and shared with the group, or elicited from the group and posted in the room. Guidelines typically include: Listen respectfully, don't judge, everyone's opinion counts, share the airtime, respect the right of others to disagree, and assume good intentions.

Guidelines are often viewed as fundamental to building the community and creating the democratic climate necessary for discussions of social justice content (Goodman, 2001; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Indeed, so central is the goal of a supportive community that it is presumed that without it, the goals of the discussion cannot be achieved. These guidelines and the norms they engender are also embodied in assignments that invite students to connect personally to readings or other texts (e.g., *What part of the reading did you relate to? What resonated for you? What didn't? Where have you seen these dynamics in your own life? What feelings came up for you as you read?*). This indicates that the sharing of opinions and personal feelings and connections—and the elevation of this sharing through guidelines to respect, validate, and protect them—is a perceived cornerstone of social justice–oriented education.

Having used such guidelines ourselves, we have come to believe that rather than creating an equitable and open space, they actually increase unequal power relations in the classroom. They do so through an embedded assumption that it is possible to create a space that is experienced by all students as respectful, validating, and protective, regardless of their social locations. In recent years we have found it helpful to strategically constrain several of the most familiar community-building guidelines including: sharing opinions, affirming everyone's perspectives, assuring everyone feels heard, eliciting personal connections and feelings about the course material and emotional responses to course texts, co-constructing the curriculum, and sharing airtime. We refer to these familiar guidelines and community-building practices as *common guidelines*. In this essay we critique these common guidelines and explore four interrelated social justice concepts relevant to our critique. These concepts are:

- knowledge construction,
- positionality,
- internalized oppression/internalized dominance, and
- safety.

Our argument is that the interests and needs of dominant groups usually drive the common guidelines (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Thus, these guidelines run counter to the goal of interrupting unequal power relations in service of social justice practice. We base our argument on scholarly work in the field as well as years of trial and error in our own struggles to set the most constructive context for social justice education in classrooms that are situated in an inherently inequitable sociopolitical context. Our goals in problematizing the common guidelines are twofold: to explicate how these guidelines function to reproduce dominant relations and to unsettle the discursive authority that they hold.

Critical Social Justice Pedagogy

In mainstream discourse (in contrast to critical discourse), the term *social justice* is often employed loosely, devoid of its political commitments. For example, many who profess to support social justice do not acknowledge that all of us are complicit in systems of oppression and privilege. Indeed, being *for* social justice often seems to function as a disclaimer of any such complicity. Given this, we want to clarify that we define social justice as a recognition that:

- all people are individuals, but we are also members of socially constructed groups;
- society is stratified, and social groups are valued unequally;
- social groups that are valued more highly have greater access to resources and this access is structured into the institutions and cultural norms;
- social injustice is real and exists today;
- relations of unequal power are constantly being enacted at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels;
- we are all socialized to be complicit in these relations;
- those who claim to be for social justice must strategically act from that claim in ways that challenge social injustice; and
- this action requires a commitment to an ongoing and lifelong process.

Anchored by these principles, social justice educators guide students in commitments along at least three fronts (Banks, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Kincheloe, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

First, social justice educators guide students in critical analysis of the presentation of mainstream knowledge as neutral, universal, and objective. For example, many social justice educators engage their students in examinations of various accounts of a given historical event, such as first contact between colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples (school accounts versus news media accounts versus pop culture accounts). The goals of this analysis are to uncover how the meaning given to various historical events always reflects a particular perspective and set of interests, and to understand how knowledge is socially constructed and never neutral or free of the social context that produced or circulates it (Banks, 1996; Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1980/2005).

Second, social justice educators guide students in critical self-reflection of their own socialization into structured relations of oppression and privilege. They may do this through popular social justice exercises such as My Culture Chest, Act Like a Man/Act Like a Woman, and Step Forward/Step Back. These exercises

help identify our placement in a matrix of unequally valued social groups and the messages received through those placements. Educators then ask students to examine how their positions in this matrix inform their action and practice (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Johnson & Blanchard, 2008).

Third, social justice educators guide students in developing the skills with which to see, analyze, and challenge relations of oppression and privilege (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Goodman, 2011). For example, many educators encourage their students to participate in cultural events, work with case studies, and brainstorm strategies for working with youth on social justice action projects in their schools and communities (Nieto & Bode, 2007).

Thus, critical social justice pedagogues develop strategies in their classrooms that are responsive to omitted histories, positionality, and inaction. However, history has taught us that any resistive practice can come to serve the very interests it was developed to oppose (DiAngelo & Allen, 2006). In practice the common guidelines purported to be important to building the kind of classroom climate that can support the commitments discussed above do not address the deeply patterned social and structural dynamics that are brought into the classroom itself. In other words, these guidelines can run counter to social justice pedagogical commitments. For example, *assuming good intentions* only goes so far when White students repeatedly use terms like "colored people." How do you *respect differences* and *affirm everyone's perspectives* when a student of Color claims that racism doesn't affect him? How do you challenge a White student's claim that she didn't get a job or a scholarship because of "reverse" racism or sexism when she is *speaking from her own experience*? Does *everyone's opinion matter* when some people's opinion is that reverse racism is a valid concept? In the following sections, we explicate the limits of the common guidelines in relation to social justice education.

Common Guidelines and Knowledge Construction

One of the key strategies of domination in mainstream society is the normalizing of particular knowledge as universal and applicable to all. Yet critical social justice pedagogues understand that knowledge is rooted in and shaped by specific positions and interests; in other words, knowledge is *socially constructed*. Further, these positions are constituted through relations of power (Banks, 1996; Dyer, 1997; Fiske, 1989; Frankenberg, 1997). Making those specific interests visible is a primary goal of the social justice classroom. To this end, educators work to reveal the values and interests embedded in dominant knowledge claims and to bringing alternative knowledge claims to the fore. Meaning is constructed through the stories we tell and are told; we ascribe value by naming and, just as profoundly, by not naming. In light of this, many social justice educators invite speakers from minoritized groups to share experiences that are typically marginalized in the mainstream classroom.

Imagine you have been invited to a course on diversity as one of several queer-identified speakers representing a range of positionalities within that social identity. Along with the rest of the panel, you provide students with information, statistics, and research. You also share your experiences with oppression (transphobia, homophobia, parental rejection, school bullying, etc.). At the end of the presentation, the instructor asks the class for insights, connections, and/or questions. A student raises her hand and is called upon. She states that she disagrees with your lifestyle choice and believes it is immoral. She goes on to say that she should not be asked to accept homosexuality. The instructor allows her to finish and thanks her for sharing her perspective, then moves on to the next comment. You leave feeling very upset and angry—you did not volunteer your time and expose yourself only to be subjected to oppressive dominant narratives and microaggressions you already experience on a daily basis. You feel frustrated with the instructor for allowing that to happen.

In our view, this is exactly the type of context in which dominant knowledge claims must be silenced. The social justice classroom, because its goals include revealing and understanding marginalized voices and perspectives, is a rare setting. But when—in service to "fairness"—instructors give equal time to dominant narratives, we reinforce problematic discursive effects by legitimizing the idea that the conversation is equalizing only when it also includes dominant voices. This is why we have come to deny equal time to all narratives in our classrooms. Our intentions in doing so are to correct the existing power imbalances by turning down the volume on dominant narratives. To make space for dominant narratives in order to be "fair" assumes that these imbalances don't *already* exist or that equality of airtime is all that is needed to correct them. Because of this, we believe that restricting dominant narratives is actually *more* equalizing.

Making space for marginalized perspectives is also a strategy to make visible the dominant narratives that are unmarked (Kincheloe, 2008; Loewen, 1995). When nondominant perspectives are amplified (as is often the strategy in the social justice classroom), student demands to hear "the other side" obscure the reality that we get the other side in everyday mainstream media and schooling, unmarked and thus positioned as universal and neutral (Applebaum, 2009).

If the instructor is a woman of Color and/or identifies as queer, there are additional layers of complexity and power relations at play in this scenario. For these reasons the common guidelines or other efforts defined as fairness and equality are not sufficiently constructive strategies. We believe that the socially just pedagogical move would be to stop the student from subjecting your guests (and other LGBTQ-identified people in the class) to this microaggression in the first place.

Efforts to make space for all views are often rooted in the desire for teachers to create an "open" dialogue that makes room for nondominant points of view and allows students to "unpack" or politicize their perspectives (Boler, 2004; Saunders & Kardia, 2013). Given this, an educator may ask, "But isn't it important to raise these issues in the classroom so that we can work through them and dispel these problematic ideologies?" While we agree that it is important to surface these perspectives so that they may be critically reflected upon, we do so only in controlled and structured ways (we offer an example of this strategy in the next section). We

see at least three problems, in addition to those we have discussed above, related to openly raising these views in this context:

First, most students—regardless of their social identities—enter our classrooms attached to dominant ideologies (e.g., society is free from racism or sexism, the only thing preventing people from success is their lack of hard work, etc.). This attachment is extremely difficult to dislodge. Because of this, from the very first class session we work to unsettle the invisibility and authority of dominant ideologies. Thus, it is not likely that the student making homophobic comments can be moved without substantial and ongoing engagement, which the above scenario does not allow for.

Second, these narratives can have the effect of hijacking the discussion. For example, were the instructor in this case to carve out time in that moment to challenge the student's claim, it would give it more airtime and hence more authority in the limited class period. Further, this homophobic and heteronormative comment is likely to trigger other comments, both of support and of rebuttal, which now have the effect of setting the agenda for the rest of the discussion time and further subjecting the panel (and any LGBTQ people in the class) to a debate on the morality of their lives.

Allowing the student to finish her erroneous claims (erroneous because they are not supported by social justice scholarship) has an equally problematic impact. In our view, the best way to handle this situation (based on our own trial and error) would be to halt the student as soon as what she is saying becomes clear ("I'm going to stop you there. This is an opportunity to hear the panelists' perspectives, so let's move on to another insight or question.")

Third, the common norm that *everyone's opinion matters* actually stands in the way of addressing the microaggression of the student's comments. The closest common norm for handling this moment might be to *challenge ideas not people*, but this norm does not help us once the microaggression has already occurred.

While we may be able to point to another common norm—*assume good intentions*—to cope with this comment, it is the impact of our actions that are most relevant in these moments. All too often claims of good intentions (or their converse, claims to have meant no offense) allow members of dominant groups to avoid responsibility for our transgressions. In the example above, if assuming good intentions is the rationale for not intervening, the homophobic voice is privileged above the minoritized voices of the panelists. While both "sides" are allowed a say through common norms such as *everyone's opinion counts* and *assume good intentions*, there is institutional weight, a history of violence, the ongoing threat of violence, and the denial of social rights behind the dominant narrative, making the impact of that "side's" voice very different.

Student efforts at the reinscription of dominant knowledge claims within the context of social justice education call forth two other related discourses: First is the discourse of uninformed certainty—a kind of *willful ignorance* or refusal to know. deCastell (2004) has described this not knowing as a "right to be ignorant and the right to speak ignorantly" (p. 55). Resistance to the presentation of alternative knowledges is often embedded in the demand for further, better, and more "neutral" evidence. Dei,

Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) state, "There is usually little expression of humility in such 'knowledges' and, as a result, the power to 'know' often mutes the recognition that there is also power in not knowing" (p. xi). If new knowledge does not support existing knowledge, students often respond in one of several ways. They may:

- invalidate the evidence based on ideological grounds or personal anecdotal evidence (such as the student to the queer-identified panel described above);
- invalidate the messenger of that evidence (the instructor, the author, the presenters) as having a biased or special interest or simply being a bad teacher ("He is so mean" or "She doesn't let anyone talk who doesn't agree with her");
- call for better or more data, expressing doubt at the small amount of evidence or isolated case presented ("This book is old. The dropout rate for Aboriginal students must be less today because there's so many programs to support them.");
- defend one another ("I thought Bob was really putting himself out there by sharing his belief that gender roles are natural."); or
- frame push-back as a personal assault ("You're attacking me!").

These responses are not simply the result of a lack of enough information or critical thinking skills; they are specific discursive moves that function to counter the challenge to institutionalized relations of power. Affirming everyone's perspective as equally valid supports the strategy for not-knowing (deCastell, 1993, 2004; Schick, 2000). Everyone's perspective is not equally valid when some are uninformed, unexamined, or uphold existing power inequities.

The second discourse that is called forth in the social justice classroom is the language of experience. The discourses of *personal experience* and *speaking from experience* have figured prominently in a number of educational practices oriented toward social justice (Chor, Fleck, Fan, Joseph, & Lyter, 2003). These emerge in common norms via a guideline to personalize knowledge, wherein students are asked to speak for themselves and from their own experiences. This guideline is meant to prevent students from universalizing their perspectives via platitudes such as "Everybody knows that . . ." or "We should all just . . ." and to encourage awareness of positionality and the social locations from which they each speak. Although encouraging the use of experience was developed as a critical practice to undermine elite expertise (Schlegel, 2002) and to situate claims within the matrix of group identity positions in which they are located, the discourse of personal experience also can function to protect dominant voices (DiAngelo & Allen, 2006). This protection is accomplished by positing dominant participants' perspectives as the product of a discrete individual (outside of group socialization), rather than as the product of multidimensional social interactions. The individual is then responded to as a private mind in the Cartesian sense.

Allen and Cloyes (2005) identify the assumptions underpinning the discourse of personal voice. These assumptions are:

(a) only the individual has access to hir[1] own mind, and (b) s/he cannot be mistaken about what is going on in hir own mind (or, at least, there is no way to verify what occurs in someone else's mind). These assumptions function to make experience a kind of sacred text and to close experience-based claims from interrogation; how could one possibly question the personal experiences of others? The discourse of personal experience has particularly significant consequences for dialogues in which the stated goals are to gain understanding of minoritized perspectives and to interrogate one's own privileges and complicity in upholding oppressions of others. The claim of personal experience removes the political dimensions and preserves conventional arrangements (Levine-Rasky, 2000). Similarly, the *right to my opinion* discourse (e.g., "I have the right to think and say what I want, and you don't have the right to challenge what I think and say") is another strategy that closes off "personal" experiences and perspectives. While the guideline to speak for oneself may be intended to prevent dominant groups from negating the perspectives of minoritized, in effect, it often protects dominant perspectives from critical analysis.

Common Guidelines and Positionality

Understanding the concept of positionality is a specific dimension of understanding knowledge as socially constructed. In social justice practice, the concept of positionality is an assertion that all knowledge is partial knowledge and arises from a web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and social positions (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991, 1998; Kincheloe, 2008; Luke & Gore, 1992). Thus, who a person is (as knower) is intimately connected to that person's socialization into a matrix of group locations (including race, class, gender, and sexuality). As such, practicing seeing knowledge through the concept of positionality is a key pedagogical goal in the social justice classroom.

Consider the following examples of the complexity of positionality:

INSTRUCTOR POSITIONALITY

Many instructors who teach social justice content have minoritized group identities that they tend to name and acknowledge and thus face challenges not faced in other contexts (Acosta, Moore, Perry, & Edwards, 2005). For example, an Asian female teaching biology will likely be viewed as more legitimate than an Asian female teaching social justice. While the biology teacher will still experience dynamics of racism and sexism, she will likely not be seen as fundamentally biased or personally invested in her content area if it is (thought to be) objective science (a dominant knowledge paradigm). Conversely, a White male teaching biology or social justice, because of his positionality, will not have the same challenges related to how students read his identity in either context. In the social justice class, even though he is teaching a nondominant knowledge paradigm, his dominant group identities (as a White male, especially if he is cisgender) will be read by most students as not biased but instead as objective and legitimate. Therefore the

strategies these two instructors take must account for how their bodies are read in the social justice classroom.

In our work we are often asked whether an instructor's positionality matters, given that that person has ultimate authority in the classroom. In thinking about instructor authority, there is a helpful distinction between *rank* and *status* (Nieto et al., 2010). Rank refers to social membership, which is not temporary and impacts all aspects of one's life (examples of rank include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability). Status refers to a temporary position/job and is contextual. For example, research shows that women and people of Color in positions of leadership are scrutinized more closely and judged more harshly than White men (Elsass & Graves, 1997; Green, 2003). Further, people of Color are often assumed to be the recipients of special programs rather than to have earned their positions and are often perceived as being biased, having special interests, and/or being troublemakers (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Calliste, 1996; Pierce, 2003). In the context of schooling, female professors and professors of Color often receive lower evaluations, impacting their tenure process and ultimately their wages and job security (Huston, 2012; Merritt, 2008). The common guidelines do not allow all instructors to take actions that are responsive to the interplay of rank and status in instructor positionality because they push instructors to affirm all perspectives as equally valid. In so doing, they don't provide minoritized instructors the structure and control they need to counter (rather than affirm) the extra resistance they receive as they push students past their comfort zones.

STUDENT POSITIONALITY

The majority of higher education students are White and middle class, and the vast majority of teacher education students are White and middle class (Picower, 2009). This means that most educators are teaching a relatively homogeneous population with a specific racial, gender, and class positionality. When the social justice course is a required one as opposed to an elective, there are key implications for positionality. For those students with firsthand experiences with marginality via their race, class, sexuality, ability, or other positionalities, the course can be transformative in providing a language and framework through which to make sense of their lived experiences. As such, providing the time to reflect, to practice applying the concepts, and to grapple with the impact is an important part of the process. Simultaneously, for students in dominant positions, they may experience deep paradigm shifts in encountering concepts such as *privilege* and *internalized dominance* for the first time. They too need time to settle into the ideological, psychological, and emotional challenges occurring in a dual space of awakening. Because of these dynamics, the instructor in the social justice classroom bears additional layers of responsibility that are unique to teaching this content (Gallavan, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008) and as such is obligated to anticipate and be responsive to the inevitable disruption of traditional power relations and shifting paradigms that will occur. Developing the skill to dialogue across differences that are not directly addressed in other educational spaces is a central commitment of the social justice classroom.

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1   We use the terms "hir" and "s/he" in order to be inclusive and challenge normative gender binaries.

Yet, the common guidelines do not take into account the different positionalities of students in relation to one another. Consider an assignment one of us (DiAngelo) uses in an education program that is 97% White as a concrete example of both positionality and why we do not affirm the free sharing of perspectives and experiences. On the first day of the semester students are asked to write anonymous reflections on the following questions (adapted from course materials developed by Hidalgo, 2007):

Discuss what it means to be part of your particular racial group(s):

- How racially diverse was your neighborhood(s) growing up?
- What messages have you received about race from your family, friends, schools, and neighborhoods about race?
- How has your race(s) shaped your life?

The following responses (reproduced in their entirety) are representative, both in content and in length. These students are in their third and fourth years of post-secondary education and will be going on to be teachers:

My first neighborhood, racially, was pretty (not meaning nice) diverse. These being apartments, you could find different races. My second neighborhood, where I live now, is not very racially diverse. Messages? Not really any. Impact? I don't know.

My neighborhood was not racially diverse at all growing up. Maybe freshman year of college was when diversity appeared, yet still very small. I am not sure [how race shapes my life]; I am White, and I feel like I am constantly hearing racial slurs or people using the race card, that it just makes me thankful for who I am, and don't have to deal with that.

My neighborhood wasn't very diverse at all, mostly White, middle class. From my parents and schools, I have been taught to be tolerant of other races and to accept others for their differences.

My neighborhood wasn't diverse at all. In my school of 500-plus students there was only a handful of non-White students. My family hasn't sent me messages on race. I guess my schools have sent the message that the non-White students have behavioral problems. Overall, race doesn't mean that much to me or my life.

These answers are not an anomaly; most White people live, love, worship, study, play, and work in racial segregation. This typical insistence that race doesn't matter comes from White students sitting in a virtually all-White classroom, who grew up in primarily White neighborhoods and attended primarily White schools, who were and are currently being taught by a virtually all-White faculty (including us). Given this starting point, these students do not have the skills yet to understand their racial positionality or to articulate a critical racial perspective (DiAngelo, 2012a).

Nothing in mainstream society supports students to enter our classrooms with the ability to think critically about these issues, so their opinions are necessarily reflective of dominant paradigms. Given that the majority of our students are from dominant groups in key identities, their opinions, perspectives, and personal connections—taken at face value—are not constructive, as they only reinforce oppressive narratives. This is one reason why we restrict free sharing and affirmations of everyone's perspectives as equally valid. While we recognize that it is important to raise these perspectives (as this assignment does), we find it much more effective to do so in controlled ways. We then return to them after we have laid enough groundwork, via study of key concepts and literature, and begin to apply a critical analysis.

GUIDELINES AND INTERNALIZED DOMINANCE AND INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

People practice *internalized dominance* when they internalize and act out (often unintentionally) the constant messages circulating in the culture that they and their group are superior to whichever group is minoritized in relation to theirs and that they are entitled to their higher position. Conversely, those who exhibit *internalized oppression* believe and act out (often unintentionally) the constant messages circulating in the culture that they and their group are inferior to whichever group is dominant in relation to theirs and that they are deserving of their lower position (Freire, 1970; Frye, 1983; Sue, 2003).

As social justice educators may well understand, much of oppression is invisible to and denied by those who benefit from it; a room that seems perfectly comfortable to dominant group members may not feel that way to minoritized group members. For example, given Whiteness as the status quo, the more comfortable a space is for White people (often articulated as a "safe" space), the more likely it is to be harmful to people of Color. Dominant group members are necessarily deeply invested materially, psychically, socially, and politically as the producers and beneficiaries of particular forms of privilege, and the system depends on our denial of these investments. Thus—and especially for the well-intended—the very behaviors we believe are supportive (and make us feel comfortable and "good") are likely to be the behaviors that are so toxic to minoritized groups; our identities as moral people rest on not seeing our own oppressive patterns. In other words, dominant group members work hard not to see our privilege, which is a key way we keep it protected and intact. As noted earlier, willful ignorance is a dynamic of internalized dominance; for those in dominant groups, the refusal to know protects power.

Conversely, there are several key reasons why members of a minoritized group may at times choose silence in a class discussion including: (a) responding to resistance or hostility expressed (consciously or not) by dominant participants; (b) feeling a lack of trust based on well-founded experience that they will be penalized for challenging dominant perspectives; (c) feeling hopeless in the face of dominant denial; (d) risking vulnerability by sharing their experiences and perspectives and then being met with silence, argumentation, or rationalization, all of which function as forms of invalidation; (e) being outnumbered by those in the dominant group and not seeing any allies; or (f) being acutely aware of the power differentials and choosing to protect themselves in the face of inevitable hurt (Nailah, 2009). Given these and other dynamics, there are costs to minoritized students for speaking to their positionality. A lifetime of schooling that has denied

acknowledging the significance of positionality and built on a collective history of denial is difficult to counter in a single course. The dynamics of internalized oppression, layered with the personal knowledge of minoritized groups, can also function to uphold the dominant framework the course is seeking to unsettle (Acosta et al., 2005).

Another dimension of the dynamics of internalized dominance and internalized oppression is the *right to speak* discourse. This is the unspoken assumption underlying norms that encourage and affirm everyone's voice that all voices have been granted the right to speak and be heard equally in dominant society. However, as Boler (2004) notes, all speech is not free or equal, for institutionalized inequities in power ensure that not all voices carry the same weight. Given that inequity in weight, she asks, "If all speech is not free, then in what sense can one claim that freedom of speech is a working constitutional right?" (p. 3) Yet the right to speak discourse—which is a central feature of the presumed democratic classroom—assumes that the only reason some voices are not heard is that some students are exercising their rights by choosing not to speak (Applebaum, 2003; Chinnery, 2008; Li, 2004).

When dominant and minoritized groups come together, the pattern is that dominant group members will speak first and most often and will set the agenda where their dominant identities are salient. Yet this pattern is contextual—for example, Whites who typically dominate discussions often choose silence when the topic is racism. Or, dominant group members may take up a lot of intellectual space but leave the emotional (or self-reflective) work to minoritized group members. Thus, minoritized group members often experience dominant group silence, regardless of what drives it, as hostile (DiAngelo, 2012b; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Silence from minoritized group members can be an act of resistance, but silence from dominant group members can function as a power move and needs to be interrogated. These are examples of the complexities inherent in facilitating discussions across dominant and minoritized positionalities, and guidelines that seek to equalize the weight of all voices or ensure everyone's comfort are not adequate for navigating those complexities.

Guidelines and Safety

In the social justice classroom, many educators try to not only establish a democratic space, but also a "safe" space. According to Adams, Bell, and Griffin's (1997) well-known sourcebook for teaching social justice education, "Establishing a safe environment in which students can discuss ideas, share feelings and experiences, and challenge themselves and each other to reevaluate opinions and beliefs is one of the primary facilitation responsibilities" (p. 283). Similarly, in Beverly Tatum's classic article (1992), "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism," she explains, "Many students are reassured by the climate of safety that is created by these guidelines and find comfort in the nonblaming assumptions I outline for the class" (p. 4). In approaches that are similarly informed by an anti-oppressive social justice framework (e.g., feminist pedagogy), there is also an embedded assumption that instructors should create a caring as well as safe environment (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

As a response to the expectation that safety be a prerequisite for social justice discussions, some scholars have problematized the very definition of safety and questioned the premise that these spaces can or should be safe to begin with. For example, in the context of cross-racial dialogues that are explicitly about race and racism, what feels safe for Whites is presumed to feel safe for people of Color. Yet for many students and instructors of Color, the classroom is a hostile space virtually all of the time, and especially so when the topic is race.

The dominant perception that social justice discussions are dangerous pressures facilitators to respond with discussion guidelines. Thus, the history of extensive, brutal, and explicit physical violence perpetrated by dominant groups against minoritized group members—slavery, lynching, genocide, internment, forced sterilization, and medical experimentation, to mention a few—is trivialized through dominant group claims of a lack of safety when in the rare situation of merely *talking about* relations of power between themselves and minoritized groups. The expectation of safety for dominant group members can be a symbolic form of violence toward minoritized groups, intensifying the real violence—physical, as well as structural and discursive—that they already bear in society at large.

For minoritized groups the social justice classroom has the potential to be one of the few environments in which they can feel somewhat protected, given their numbers and/or support of the instructor. While the feelings may be real for dominant group members struggling with a sense of safety, it may be useful to consider what safety means from a position of social, cultural, historical, and institutional power. Scholars have raised questions about whether, for example, antiracism education that does not perpetuate discursive violence toward students of Color is even possible in cross-racial settings (c.f. Chinnery, 2008; Crozier & Davies, 2008; Jones, 1999, 2001; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Their argument is that such spaces ultimately foreground the needs of White students and position students of Color as "native informants and unpaid sherpas" (Thompson, 2004, p. 388), guiding White students into a racial awakening. This is why we do not believe that common guidelines intended to ensure a generalized safe space are a realistic goal at all, nor can they ever be a prerequisite for a democratic outcome. In practice, the expectation that safety can be created in the social justice classroom through universalized procedural guidelines is always about the dominant group's safety.

Conclusion: Beyond the Common Guidelines

The capacity to recognize the need for and engage in social justice activism is part of what it means to participate in a healthy democracy. Preparing students for active participation in a democratic society requires the development of specific skills. To this end, educators must guide students in:

- engaging constructively with alternative perspectives,
- thinking critically,
- grappling with multiple perspectives,
- building stamina for engaging with new and challenging ideas,

- engaging with research,
- raising critical questions,
- tolerating ambiguity,
- recognizing the power relations embedded in positionality, and
- valuing collaboration over competition.

Without these skills, we are ill equipped to cultivate a just and democratic society. Further, the kind of space required to develop these skills often appears counter to commonsense notions of democracy. Because schools are among the most powerful institutions wherein social stratification is reproduced, they are also where it must be challenged. To do this, we must be willing to interrogate our notions of what fairness, safety, and participation look like.

As we have argued, social justice educators are facilitating deeply complex issues and dynamics. These dynamics are not purely theoretical—they are occurring in every moment in and out of the classroom, and social justice action depends on recognition of them. We won't always make the right call in all moments for all students, but using the common guidelines as a starting point, we have found the following less-orthodox adaptations to be more constructive to our goals:

- Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.
- Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.
- Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader group-level patterns.
- Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
- Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course.
- Differentiate between safety and comfort. Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth.
- Identify where your learning edge is and push it. For example, whenever you think, *I already know this,* ask yourself, *How can I take this deeper?* Or, *How am I applying in practice what I already know?*

We design controlled opportunities for students to practice articulating a social justice framework (vocabulary and concepts) that moves them into humility, openness, and analysis rather than certainty, rebuttal, or refusal. For example, in addition to the guidelines above, we offer a list of Silence Breakers (adapted from course materials codeveloped by DiAngelo and Anika Nailah, 2013). These are intended to: recognize and respond to unequal power relations in the room, help manage patterns of internalized dominance and internalized oppression, and guide open and humble entry into the conversation (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010).

We also regularly ask students to turn their claims into the form of questions by offering Question Starters. For example, turn the claim, "We had a student with a disability in my school, and no one treated her differently" into a question, "We had a student with a disability in my school—what kind of privileges did I have that she didn't?" The intended effect of this is to engender a stance of humility, develop critical thinking skills, interrogate what students think they know, identify dynamics of oppression and privilege, and continually seek out new information.

The following are discussion starters that accomplish these multiple goals and operationalize the guidelines above. As may be noted, many of these are intertwined:

- I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable to say [X], but . . .
- From my experience/perspective as [identity], . . .
- I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let me know if I do, but . . .
- It feels risky to say [X], but . . .
- I'm not sure if this will make any sense, but . . .
- I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did . . .
- It seems like some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
- Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?
- This is what I understand you to be saying: . . . . Is that accurate?
- I've been wondering about how we are using [term] in this discussion . . .
- I have always heard that [X]. What are your thoughts on that?
- The author is arguing that only [e.g., men can be sexist]. Can you help me understand that?
- Is [X] a good example of what the author was saying?
- How would you respond to [X] from a social justice framework?
- I am having a "yeah, but" moment. Can you help me work through it?
- Given the reality of inequitable power, would it be better if . . . ?
- How does [X] effect relationships between [Y] and [Z]?
- What is another example of [X]?
- This perspective is new to me, but I'm wondering if it is accurate to say that . . . ?

Again, our goals are not to create fixed, rote formulae for engaging with the materials via these limited prompts. Rather, these prompts are strategies to help students *lean into* rather than *away from* difficult content. Leaning into a social justice framework does not require agreement or disagreement; it is simply—but powerfully—a way to practice critical engagement.

We share the goals of our social justice–oriented colleagues to create supportive, engaging, and transformative classrooms, and we do give guidelines in service of these goals. The development of our particular approach is adapted from those who have gone before us, as well as from our own struggles as educators who often have felt ineffective and unable to respond constructively to power relations in the classroom. We have found our guidelines to be

helpful responses not only to the challenges of student positionality but to our own regarding dynamics of rank and status. For example, when we need to interrupt dominant power moves, these guidelines offer us the backup to take unpopular measures that often appear unfair to dominant groups and thus elicit push-back.

All instructors channel their authority, but only some pedagogical strategies are read as authoritarian. Similarly, all curricula are political, but only social justice curricula tends to be marked as such. As instructors, we are embedded in and facilitate complex relations of power in the classroom, and we want to address that power in intentional, strategic, and critical ways. We do acknowledge the "master's tools" dilemma (Lorde, 1984) inherent in the academic setting related to social justice education efforts. An academic course whose primary goal is to challenge social stratification is not without irony. As instructors, we recognize that our courses are ensconced within an institution whose default effect is the reproduction of inequality. In many ways we are a part of the very system we seek to challenge. Still, we stand in solidarity with others who choose to work within the constraints of academia in order to equip the elite that it produces with perspectives and tools that might ultimately challenge social inequality.

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