

Scrutiny Instead of Silence

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Abstract

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) argue for alternative behavioral guidelines than those currently being used in many social justice courses. Their alternative is to silence or constrain privileged voices so that marginalized voices have ample space to be heard and taken seriously. This raises the concern that silencing any group of persons runs too great a risk of alienating them to the point where their mistrust of the “other” is exacerbated rather than assuaged. This response suggests that, instead of silencing or even constraining privileged voices in the classroom, we may want to move toward developing in students the attitude that all claims and assertions, especially those that society often accepts as true without question, must undergo critical scrutiny. If we can teach students that a well-informed belief is one that is continually subject to critical analysis, and we can guide them in developing and understanding that our social positionality leads us to favor certain views and perspectives over others due, in large part, to the inequity in our social structures, perhaps we can open our students’ minds to the value and worth of marginalized claims and views.

This article is a response to:

Sensoy, Ö. and DiAngelo, R. (2014). Respect differences? Challenging the common guidelines in social justice education. *Democracy & Education*, 22(2), Article 1. Available online at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/1/>

SENSOY AND DIANGELO (2014) argue that the behavioral guidelines used in many social justice courses to help ensure fairness and equality of opportunity in classroom discussions actually help maintain unjust power relations that privilege the dominant and silence the oppressed. Their examples illustrate how such guidelines can have the opposite effect they intended. While I sympathize and agree with much of what the authors claim, I have some concerns. Instead of silencing or even constraining privileged voices in the classroom, we may want to move toward developing in students the attitude that all beliefs and assertions, especially those that society often accepts as true without question, must be backed up with good reasons, evidence, and arguments.

According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), the commonly used classroom guidelines in social justice courses “increase unequal power relations in the classroom” rather than create “an equitable and open classroom space” (p. 2). In their experience as social justice educators, they

have found it helpful to strategically constrain several of the most commonsense 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. (p. 2).

They claim that those who enjoy privilege in mainstream society by having their voices heard and beliefs count more than the marginalized ought not to enjoy such privilege in their classrooms. Instead, their dominant perspectives and claims ought to be limited. Just how limited, we are not told. But we can assume that it is enough to allow those who are typically silenced to express their beliefs and discuss their experiences in a space where their comments will be heard.

In their paper, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) provide an example where a student told an invited panel member that she did

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not appreciate being asked to accept homosexuality because she believes such a “lifestyle” to be immoral (p. 3). Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that allowing such comments “reinforce problematic discursive effects by legitimizing the idea that the conversation is equalizing only when it also includes dominant voices” (p. 3). Advocating that all views be given a voice is not, however, just an attempt at “fairness” (p. 3), as Sensoy and DiAngelo claim. Rather, it can be an attempt at developing “critical spaces” (Giroux, 1983) that teach students to deliberate critically about beliefs often held as unquestionably true without considering the arguments and evidence against such beliefs.

Restricting dominant views is risky. While it certainly has its benefits, as explicated by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), it legitimizes the practice of teachers deciding which perspectives, ideologies, and attitudes to allow in class and which to silence. This sounds too much like teachers of more mainstream courses silencing marginalized voices or privileging the views of the dominant voices in society. Both are cases in which the teacher controls the political debate in the classroom and helps shape the attitudes and perspectives taken in class discussions. Neither allows students the opportunity to, or teaches them to, effectively address sensitive and controversial issues, nor do they help students work through the very real ignorance, bias, and discrimination that exists in their beliefs about themselves and others. In my experience as a high school teacher, when people such as White, successful students, who are accustomed to having their assertions taken seriously in class, are ignored or made to feel their beliefs are morally suspect, they quickly learn to play by the rules of the teacher. As one student told me, they learn to say in class that all White men are bad and women and natives are good so that they can get a good grade. When privileged voices are silenced in class, those students who enjoy such privilege in society may not, as Sensoy and DiAngelo hope, come to see that their views ought to be altered. Rather, they may learn that they ought to wait to express their views outside of the class where the vast majority in society will support them.

Yet, Sensoy and DiAngelo’s (2014) claims cannot be so easily dismissed. By opening the debate of whether same-sex relationships ought to be given equal rights and privileges in society as heterosexual relationships, we risk putting the worth of gays, lesbians, homosexuals, and bisexuals into question. Similarly, if we allow debate on women’s equality to men, we risk putting women’s worth into question. No student should be put into the position of having to defend worth as a human being. Doing so not only has significant moral concerns but epistemic ones as well. Students who are presumed inferior until they can prove otherwise are not given an equal voice in class; their comments are not taken as seriously or as “true” as those offered by privileged students.

As liberal democratic and critical theorists argue, schools often mirror structural inequalities found in society that unfairly privilege some voices over others (Fletcher, 2000, pp. 50–57). Allowing such comments that question the worth of people in class would appear to *further entrench* this unjust privileging. In short, if we encourage or even consent to having our students question, for example, women’s worth, we may help perpetuate the unjust

silencing of women’s voices and thus help to maintain their oppression in schools and society.

However, taking questions about a person’s worth out of the domain of school discussions does not permit sexist, racist, homophobic, and otherwise prejudiced views to be challenged. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) admit, critics of their views may ask whether it is sometimes “important to surface these perspectives so that they may be critically reflected upon” (p. 3). The authors’ answer is threefold. First, they claim that marginalized voices need to be given priority and sometimes exclusivity in order to help “dislodge” (p. 4) the often unquestioned and pervasive dominant, mainstream views. Second, because marginalized voices are typically ignored and perceived as unworthy, privileged voices “can have the effect of hijacking the discussion” (p. 4). Third, “institutional weight” (p. 4) goes to the privileged views and thus they can, even if unintentionally, silence the voices of the underprivileged.

While I agree that deeply embedded, structural bias significantly and unfairly favors dominant ideologies, I wonder if instead of trying to be “fair” to all views, teachers should clearly name the issue of unjust power hierarchies that exist in society and are mirrored in schools. Granted, such naming comes with its own difficulties as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) point out (p. 3). However, it seems to be less problematic than silencing a cultural group’s voices.

What is needed, it seems, is a way to allow students to engage in inquiry about, say, sex equality *without* putting women in the position of having to defend their worth as human beings. It may be helpful to note at this point that the question “Are women equal in worth to men?” presupposes that men’s worth is unquestioned but women’s worth is very much up for debate. Asking “Are women and men equal?” however, does not make any such presuppositions. If we permit students to talk about sexism, gender oppression, and the worth of people, we do not necessarily put women’s worth into question. Indeed, women’s studies courses engage students in such conversations every day. Inquiring into beliefs about men’s superiority over women, if done skillfully, does not have to cause the further entrenchment of women’s oppression. Educators must be sure to set up class discussions in such a way that students can deliberate over the equality between women and men *without* starting from the assumption that women’s worth is disputable. In any dialectic inquiry about sex equality, teachers need to ensure that their female students’ contributions are considered as valuable as the contributions made by the male students. The *skillful* handling of classroom conversations about equality (whether it be sex, race, etc.) does not unduly jeopardize the value and worth of any student’s contributions to the class discussion.

Unless we provide space for such claims to be critiqued in the light of rational inquiry, there is little hope such beliefs will be alterable even when there is adequate evidence against them. Although the thought of people holding such views that question the worth of people is repugnant to many, they are views that, unfortunately, millions of people hold as true. Refusing to allow students to voice their doubts about, say, the equality of women, may teach them that such doubts are unwanted and undesirable *in a particular classroom*. It does not, however, teach them that their

beliefs are wrong. Airing oppressive beliefs in the open space of the classroom, not in the interest of fairness but with the purpose of teaching students to critically assess the worth of all claims, may help diminish oppressive beliefs.

Perhaps an answer to providing marginalized voices in the classroom an equitable role in class discussions is to teach students that all beliefs ought to be subject to rational scrutiny. Paul (2002) provides one theoretical framework in which teachers can formulate methods of engaging students in critical discussions of what more liberal and progressive thinkers often see as racist, sexist, and homophobic thinking. Paul claims that *critical* thinkers are not characterized by the beliefs they hold but rather by *how* they hold their beliefs. For Paul, to achieve confidence in our beliefs, we must be ever open to re-assessing the epistemic worth of our beliefs from various perspectives and worldviews and in light of all available evidence and arguments. Indeed, he recommends that we seek out and consider the *best* objection to our views.

Misak, a Peircean scholar, also offers a framework in which educators can help ensure that oppressive beliefs and comments are critically examined in classes, a worthy goal in social justice courses. She agrees with Peirce's dictum, *Let nothing stand in the way of inquiry*. According to Misak (2004), people must hold beliefs open to the experiences of *all* people. If people hold their beliefs in such a way, then they are genuinely interested in arriving at beliefs that would meet with all relevant experiences at the hypothetical end of inquiry. Aiming to get the right answer, the answer that we would not doubt at the end of the day, means not excluding anyone's experiences that speak to a given belief. As Misak (2000) notes, "the open-endedness of inquiry and the commitment to taking other perspectives seriously must be preserved if we are to have any hope of reaching beliefs which really do account for all experiences and argument" (p. 97). Refusing to allow students to discuss particular assertions implies that such assertions cannot be reasoned about and implies that there may be some infallible source of truth somehow beyond them that can easily be thought to be the text, the teacher, or the state—probably whoever has the power to insist on them learning such beliefs as truths. It risks undermining students' capacities to engage in open-minded and critically deliberative inquiry. Thus, although there are some issues that need to be handled with great skill and care, to cultivate critically deliberative thinking and to help students who hold harmful views about others challenge their thinking in a real and meaningful way, educators should permit and even encourage students to be open to inquiry.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) are correct in being skeptical of the guidelines that require all beliefs an equal amount of time and worth. Such guidelines support not only deeply entrenched, unjust social positioning but also supports lazy thinking. If students are able to state their views without having the responsibility of defending them with what they learn to be good evidence, reasons, and arguments, we risk teaching them that a subjective approach to thinking is an adequate form of critical inquiry, that one opinion is as good as another, and that assertions do not have to be critically examined by reason, introspection, or mindful open reflection.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) admit that "engaging constructively with alternative perspectives, thinking critically, . . . raising

critical questions . . . [and] recognizing the power relations embedded in positionality" (p. 7–8) are important components of educating for social justice. Yet they argue that such capacities are not developed using current teaching guidelines that give equal time and value to all beliefs because privileged views will continue to be privileged and will, in effect, silence voices too often silent. Instead of following the guideline of equal time to all views, perhaps we should follow what they themselves advocate toward the end of their article. Teach students to: "Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas . . . [and] recognize how your own social positionality . . . informs your perspectives" (p. 8). These guidelines seem to afford all students, even those who are privileged, a voice while requiring them to critically examine not only the reasons for their beliefs but where the beliefs come from, what assumptions are associated with them, and how they may be altered in the face of an open-minded analysis of opposing evidence.

While I agree with both the goals and the concerns Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) discuss in their article, I believe we can find an alternative to silencing or constraining privileged voices, one that meets our common goal of raising awareness of structural inequity and working against oppression. Having critical thinking or critically deliberative inquiry as our goal in social justice courses with the pragmatic conception of knowledge as beliefs that meet with all experiences, broadly construed, at the hypothetical end of inquiry, we may not have to constrain any voices but require all students to adopt the habit of engaging in analysis and open-minded scrutiny of their beliefs, assumptions, positionality, and biases. If we can teach students that a well-informed belief is one that is continually subject to modification based on new and conflicting evidence, and if we are careful to help them understand that we all carry biases that unjustly favor certain views and perspectives over others due, in large part, to the inequity in our social structures, perhaps we can not only open their minds to the value and worth of marginalized claims and views but teach them to value certain ways of holding beliefs over stubbornly clinging to unexamined assumptions and views. Silencing any group of students runs too great a risk of alienating them. And constraining the voice of the privileged seems to risk alienating the privileged to the point where their mistrust of oppressed groups is exacerbated rather than assuaged.

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