

# Critical Discomfort and Deep Engagement Needed for Transformation

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## Abstract

This essay seeks to engage the discussion about how to successfully conduct social justice and critical pedagogy classes for teacher candidates. Because the identity and consciousness of teachers is such a crucial factor in equity education, teacher-educators seek to challenge and transform hegemonic assumptions. The essay seeks to engage some of the main points of Sensoy and DiAngelo and to extend the conversation to other considerations and issues that arise in the work to develop educators committed to equity and justice.

## 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/>

*Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free – he has set himself free – for higher dreams, for greater privileges.*

—James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*

**S**ENSOY AND DIANGELO'S essay, "Respect Differences?" (2014) is a critical challenge that is right on time for teacher-educators. Key to teacher preparation is courses that go by various names, from Urban Education to Teaching for Social Justice, from Multicultural Education to Diversity in Education. These courses are supposed to take preservice teachers who are either middle class, or have at least learned how to adopt middle class discourse and knowledge, and prepare them to understand students from working class and colonized communities, and to think about successful teaching.

My own experience has put me into these discussions for many years, though they have occurred in an area that is severely undertheorized. I have taught at urban high schools in Oakland and Berkeley, in UC Berkeley undergraduate education courses to

math and science majors planning to go into teaching, for graduate and undergraduate courses on diversity and social justice at the University of San Francisco, and in literacy equity classes at Mills College. In addition I am a product of the social movements of the '60s and '70s, which continue to color my perspective. Finally, I am a White, upper-middle-class straight man—which represents a problem but also an opportunity to intervene in useful ways.

Practices that are often accepted as common sense in structuring discussions on diversity and social justice often undermine their stated purposes. The common sense of such practices is to create a "safe space" where everyone's viewpoint is honored and

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motives are not impugned. The problem with these guidelines, as Sensoy and DiAngelo point out, is that equal is not necessarily fair in situations of unequal power. Allowing racist or homophobic claims, as well as valorizing unreflective personal memories, often leads classes off track and indeed creates the conditions for a pretty thorough undermining of social justice goals.

In our own practice in the Urban Education and Social Justice cohort at the University of San Francisco, noted critical educator Camangian regularly leads the class through a reflection on the safe-space narrative. It is important, he argues, to replace *safe space* with *critical discomfort*, to allow contradictions and tensions to drive the discussion forward rather than smoothing them over. This is, then, a discussion that is probably happening in many such courses.

I welcome this development, but perhaps it is only the beginning of the kind of reflection we should be doing on social justice classes. Once we have agreed on this point, what more is there to say? What are further considerations in designing and executing a social justice project in teacher education that will deepen our work? The excellent concrete suggestions at the end of Sensoy and DiAngelo's piece—powerful skills, guidelines, and silence breakers/question starters—represent a practice of leaning into, not shying away from, difficult conversations.

I suggest a few more provocations as a framing for further discussion and a push toward constructing teacher education processes that are truly transformative:

- The authors point to the problem of the assertion of authority in the last paragraph. I think this is an issue that needs to trouble our thinking from the beginning. We are, after all, in academic spaces that valorize obscure research publishing and titles such as PhDs, and it is problematic to advocate for a rethinking of school purposes and structures while using the authority of these structures to drive home our point. I think particularly of Rofes and his critique of progressive teachers patrolling against homophobic behavior instead of empowering students to protect themselves.

By failing to understand the ways in which unethical uses of authority and power serve to acculturate young people into nonconsensual rituals of dominance and submission and to socialize them into pecking-order systems, we remain blind to the betrayal of our youth. When addressing anti-gay remarks in the classroom, we demand that teachers intervene and punish; hence we strengthen in a Foucaultian sense the very same system of surveillance, regulation, judgment, castigation, and correction that consistently imposes adult authority on children and youth. (Rofes, 2005, p. 18)

Too many radical teachers reproduce a pedagogy of authority, teach with a leftist version of banking education. This is something we should be aware of and work against. If we want our new teachers to develop constructivist and experiential learning, we have to model and practice it ourselves.

- Whiteness and White privilege, like heteronormativity, is a structure of oppression that should be an important locus of

inquiry in social justice education. For our students, we have sometimes found it necessary to pull White students aside, sometimes with a White professor (me), to deal with their own positionality, or at least to process and struggle and examine together. This not only allows deeper struggle but relieves those in marginalized communities of the responsibility to be as “native informants and unpaid sherpas” (Thompson, 2004, p. 388). This is not simply about reducing the burden on people of color as much as it is about putting responsibility on White people to sort out our issues with people with whom we identify, can make mistakes, and work on understandings of solidarity. This is necessary space for crossracial solidarity work as we move forward.

- As we speak of Whiteness, it's a weakness of our struggles today that we have pretty much given up a main demand of the Civil Rights Movement—that access to the resources of the privileged schools should be available to those from oppressed communities. We can work at the shamefully poor McClymonds High School in Oakland and never raise the demand for access to the elite Piedmont High School just four miles away. This is not a position of ideological integrationism. But it is a challenge to our acceptance of the apartheid borders in U.S. society. Moreover, often the most “down” young White teachers, those who want to dedicate their lives to the struggle against racism, want to teach at the schools like McClymonds. Why? Is racism at McClymonds? Racism and its structures are coming from elite communities. SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) long ago called for White organizers to leave the Black communities and “go back to do work in the White communities, where our problems are coming from.” That was not just a tactic for the moment. It was the articulation of a principle about liberation and how to do solidarity. This does not mean that no White teachers should work in inner cities, but it does challenge our typical practices.
- Most people go into teaching thinking that they will help kids. No one begins the process saying, “I'm looking forward to failing 30% of my kids,” or, “I can't wait to implement my suspension plan.” Generally they want success, though how they understand success often changes as they think more deeply about education today. The problem, of course, is that students of privilege generally see oppressed communities as deficits, stereotype poor families as dysfunctional, and pathologize poverty. They see the teaching project as a matter of charity, to uplift the unfortunate, to make them more like us, since, after all, we are wonderful. An important line of education in social justice classes is to move student attitudes from *charity* to *solidarity*. The latter implies respect for oppressed communities, recognition of their leadership, and a practice of supporting their struggles and even joining the oppressed to struggle against injustice alongside them.
- White student teachers come from a lifetime of socialization that suggests that our privilege is deserved because of our clever inventions and brains, coupled with a curious sense of victimhood. The common sense of dominant society, the hegemonic thinking, supports all of this and blames the actual

victims of this domination. When I taught science and math undergrads at UC Berkeley, I recognized that all the students had gotten this far by making it through this “master narrative” filter. White students, of course, but also African American, Chicano-Latino, and immigrant students too—some from very poor high schools. It was crucial that they go back and examine their lives—not uncritically and not to valorize their experiences—in order to understand what they had lost, what they had given up in conforming to the narrow standards of success. If a student had dutifully taken all the AP courses to make it to UC Berkeley and gotten through the freshman year culling process by keeping her head down and doing what she was told, she then had to ask, what about the other 31 students in her math class? What happened to them? How would she reach them?

- The incorporation of a practice of critical discomfort is a matter of letting the debate happen and sharpening it when serious differences arise. This includes the right of the teacher or students of color to challenge and call out White privilege and to challenge racist or queer-hating remarks. But I would caution against simply silencing reactionary utterances, against simply saying, “That’s out of line—we’re moving on.” I disagree with the argument that “dominant knowledge claims must be silenced” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014, p. 3). My disagreement is not because I think reactionary talk is wonderful and should have the floor. But the goal of the class is not simply to “win” the argument in the moment; it is not even to make one’s guest speaker feel more comfortable. It is to challenge future teachers—who will be with thousands of students in their careers—to go through important changes, to unsettle the “common sense” (which includes pathologizing poverty, deficit theories, false meritocratic thinking). Refusal to know may protect power, but silence protects privilege. White people are adept at going silent in spaces that challenge us. Indeed, the general approach of privileged people in the presence of the oppressed is to avoid saying something that will be offensive. They take this approach not to change thinking or change views, just not to get caught out. Indeed, this is the origination of the common response to criticism, “I’m sorry if what I said offended you.” Instead of looking to where it came from, that comment simply says, “I should not have said the wrong thing, and the problem is yours, for being offended. To silence a student who has made a racist or queer-hating remark has not really hurt that student; it has just taught that person to lay low until he or she gets out of this class, gets through this semester. So we must find ways to engage, challenge, and see struggles through without simply cutting off debate.
- I understand that some of these points may be influenced by the context of the San Francisco Bay Area’s liberal climate. Certainly the critical space in a classroom may be quite different in different parts of the country, different institutions. But even in a place like this, we need to learn to engage in dialogue with preservice teachers who feel like they are down but who actually subvert solidarity because of their particular

contradictions. Just as with K–12 education, the task is defined and is different with each unique classroom and its dynamics.

- In designing social justice teacher education, we need to take a critical look at a common framing in radical politics in the U.S. today, identity politics. I don’t mean the broad attacks on any issues of particular oppression, as Gitlin has done. For I think anticolonial struggles, queer liberation struggles, as well as working class struggles are key to a democratic and equitable future. But I do think that the practice of simply naming one’s oppression(s), which is the basic outline for radical education in many undergraduate programs, never challenges people to organize mass action—or to do much of anything. While postmodernism has brought some important tools of criticism, it was also honed by French intellectuals who were disappointed with the failures of the 68 struggles and searching for a new way to explain the world. They zeroed in on individual identity, individual agency, and individual positioning as the keys to radical politics. They despaired of, or neglected, the possibility of mass class organizing and action. And too often in our social justice discourse, students learn that it is enough to speak of their position, as if this conversation were the end of the process. But social justice pedagogy must challenge us to make a difference through practice. This could be community organizing, it could be actions with Occupy or other campaigns, or it could be work in schools. The focus of the class cannot be on just ourselves. We have to look outward, to our practice with the youth, with the communities.
- Critical educators like Duncan-Andrade and Perry and Szalavitz have done a great service in exposing the ways that young people in our cities suffer deep trauma, a trauma that is ongoing and debilitating. While this discussion sheds new light on the costs of oppression and the challenges of urban teaching, it is often taken up by young teachers in a problematic way. Too often these students frame trauma as an individual, psychological problem. There is no action in the formula—only healing, with the possibility of action at another time. Duncan-Andrade does not speak of trauma in this dead-end way, but certainly many student teachers discuss it this way, and it becomes a kind of progressive deficit theory. In real social justice struggles, the oppressed suffer and organize resistance. The Vietnamese, under American bombs and napalm attacks, did not talk about healing their trauma; they engaged in defeating the invaders. They had the other element that Duncan-Andrade talks about, but which is too often left out of the discussion: critical hope. Critical hope and action in the world, praxis, is central to authentic teaching and learning.
- Rather than teach social justice classes from theoretical pieces on critical race theory and queer theory, it is often more generative to develop a curriculum that forwards an understanding of social ethics. The curriculum nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves, for example, helps students acquire a language of social ethics and then apply it to various historical and current cases. This year the cases I used were the U.S.-Mexican Border, the criminalization of youth, and the South

African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While there are some things in the Facing History cycle that I modify (for example, their examples of racist or queer-hating attacks are often presented as the result of bad individuals instead of with an institutional analysis), it is an approach that takes classes very deep into social issues. With a firm foundation in this language and discourse, it is possible to then introduce more theoretical underpinnings for this perspective.

- In any social justice teacher education project, we must pay attention to the purposes of education. Besides the reproductive purpose of re-creating class and colonial boundaries, U.S. schooling seeks to identify and elevate a few exceptions, W. E. B. DuBois's Talented Tenth, to the middle class. A thorough analysis allows us to envision more fundamental directions in the always-contentious areas of curriculum. Since there is not any room for the masses of oppressed students to integrate into the economy as it is, we need to encourage creativity and critical thinking in students so they can imagine ways to transform the economy in the interest of their communities. Some of this work may not even happen in a social justice course but might belong in courses with names such as Learning & Teaching and Curriculum & Instruction. Here, students can examine the epistemology that underlies disciplines, and they can work on the social, cultural, and gendered contexts that make real learning possible. Such sources as Hardaway (1991) and Ngũgĩ (1986) help us challenge the taken-for-granted in curriculum and pedagogy.

It is still the case that sometimes we encounter a teacher candidate who is just wrong for the profession, who we know will damage thousands of young people in his or her career. It is our responsibility to act as a gatekeeper in this moment and too often teacher education programs are not set up to move out those who are just going to be terrible teachers. In fact, future bad teachers may well pass all their classes and the state-mandated performance

assessments with flying colors. We must correct this problem. As in law, as in medicine, in teacher education there must be some kind of review and approval process. In addition, we need to do a better job at the point of admissions of understanding the perspectives and challenges the candidates have. They don't have to be all the way on board to start our programs—after all, filling that gap is what our teaching is for—but we can certainly deny admissions to those who express hostility to communities and an intention to simply fail students.

The enormous responsibility of inducting students into teaching challenges us to create transformative experiences for students. Social justice teaching is not simply political teaching. Every teacher carries a point of view, a political analysis, whether it endorses or challenges the structures of oppression. The journey to become a teacher is a journey of transforming the self. Preservice teachers who come in with a deficit lens, with the common sense of a neoliberal narrative, with imagined rescue missions, must be disabused of these false and oppressive ideas. Through experiential learning, through deep and honest struggle, and through work in communities and schools, most of these young people can come out with a commitment to equity and justice.

## Notes

1. For an interesting discussion of this, see Eagleton (2004).

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