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Limiting Student Speech: A Narrow Path Toward Success

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Abstract

In this response, Minnick asserts that unequal representation of students' voices, an idea presented in Sensoy and DiAngelo's "Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education," presents multiple negative classroom implications. Foremost, Minnick argues that Sensoy and DiAngelo's lack of clarity regarding when a teacher should limit student speech (either before the student begins to talk or midcomment) has a large effect on the success of their strategy. Second, Sensoy and DiAngelo's discussion strategy may result in the targeting of minority students and the judging of students. These concerns are driven by considerations of how teachers' relationships with students influence their ability to effectively limit and enable student speech.

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/>

GRAPPLING WITH AND responding to power imbalances in classrooms, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) argued that educators should put constraints on who speaks in classroom discussions. In their paper, Sensoy and DiAngelo asserted that teachers must constrain their desires to allow all students to share their perspectives in order to establish a truly equal representation of student views. Without this constraint, Sensoy and DiAngelo worried that if dominant students speak freely, the resulting conversation would neglect minority experiences and not give minority students the equal representation they deserve in classroom discussion. For example, "the interests and needs of dominant groups usually drive the guidelines intended to ensure support," (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014, p. 2). This perspective provided the framework for the remainder of Sensoy and DiAngelo's writing—arguing that through seemingly unequal allowance of student speech,

educators provide voice to minority students, thus creating a more equalized discussion.

I initially supported the fundamental position Sensoy and DiAngelo presented. I share their aims to create a balanced classroom environment where all students' narratives are given voice, and I easily sympathized with and supported the authors' stance on limiting dominant students' speech. Despite this initial agreement, I note several complications in their argument, including: the lack of clarity regarding when to silence students, potential negative implications of silencing, and the need to more wholly address the concept of intersectionality. In an effort to

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address these complications, I have identified and expanded on these areas of concern and suggest that an alternative, guided discussion, would be far more beneficial to the classroom and students than the more passive act of silencing.

Enacting the Strategy When to Silence?

The first action a teacher will take before using Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) strategy is to identify which students can and cannot speak. Sensoy and DiAngelo's article, however, is unclear about how this process occurs. Should a teacher silence a student before she or he begins to speak, or is this done after the student starts to share her or his thoughts? The guidance Sensoy and DiAngelo provided stated that students should be silenced when their perspective is "uninformed or unexamined" (p. 4), they "repeatedly raise a range of objections to which they have privilege" (p. 1), they "continue to use terms and phrases that you have repeatedly explained are problematic" (p. 1), or they offer comments that cause others from minority groups to become "triggered or withdrawn" (p. 1).

With this limited framework to guide teachers as they silence students, the teacher may be unclear if she or he should silence students before they speak or midcomment. Presumably, the teacher may begin to use a mixture of both silencing before speech as well as before students have fully finished. Since choosing when to silence is the first step in Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) strategy, it is important to explore the ways silencing will be enacted within the classroom.

Time: Time is likely to act as a major factor when a teacher chooses to silence students. For example, if a class discussion is pressed for time, the teacher may choose to limit student speech before students talk. Alternatively, if there is more discussion time available, the teacher may only opt to silence students after they begin to speak. Time predominantly serves as a benign indicator of when teachers may silence students and is likely already in use within the classroom.

Harmful Labels: Regardless of a teacher's initial silencing choices (either before or after students speak), a teacher may begin to notice patterns of consistently silencing some students before they speak, while allowing others to begin their comments before they choose to silence. Over time, it is possible that these patterns will evolve into habits, placing definitive labels onto students that the teacher uses to make future choices on whether or not the student will be allowed to speak. In such situations, students who find themselves in the "continuously silenced" category may be unable to demonstrate that they can, in fact, contribute to conversations, because they are deprived of the opportunity to speak. This method results in a strict binary view of the classroom discussion: those who are given opportunities to speak and those who are restricted to mandated listening.

Reinforced Labels: This factor differs significantly from the above issue in that on select days, some students may continuously display aggression or contribute hurtful comments to the conversation. Rather than let such a situation dominate a discussion, it may be helpful to note this student's attitude and silence the

student before she or he speaks for the remainder of the current discussion or school day. Here, silencing—especially silencing before speech—serves as a useful tool for monitoring conversation content and shielding other students from their classmate's potentially upsetting comments.

Past Decisions: As teachers spend increased amounts of time in the classroom, they may believe that their past experiences have enabled them to use the "silence before speech" method without its potential negative implications. Since a teacher may have first practiced the that method, at a certain point in the year or even their teaching career, she or he may falsely assume that since they practiced this time-consuming effort, they are now qualified to skip it in exchange for the silencing before speech method. This inaccurate assumption may result in the silencing of students with highly relevant discussion points to share as well as the overlooking of the concept of intersectionality (explored later).

Overall, I worry that teachers will not consider that the time at which they choose to silence students may have a significant impact of its own on classroom conversation. If teachers treat such a choice as a simple decision having minimal impact, they may not be aware of the way they are immediately and significantly effecting the resulting discussion. In an effort to make such impacts clear, in the following section I explore the dangers of silencing as a whole from both a "before speech" and a "midcomment" perspective.

The Dangers of Silencing Before Speech: Identifying Who can Speak Aiming for Equality

One of the first steps a teacher will take after making the decision to silence before speech is deciding who can and cannot contribute to the conversation. Keeping in mind that the goal of Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) strategy is an equalized conversation, a teacher choosing to silence before speech may limit conversation to only students appearing to be from other cultures. The teacher presumably will make such decisions based on students' external characteristics, such as skin color, facial characteristics, hair, accents, etc. The teacher's potentially quick judgments and stereotypes may easily exclude students who were born in the United States yet whose families migrated to the country, as well as any students who externally fit the stereotyped appearance of a United States citizen yet who were partially raised outside of the United States. These omitted students experience mandated listening as the teacher silences their speech despite the interesting contributions they could have made to the dialogue. One of my peers, for example, spent her elementary through high school schooling in Jordan. Externally, she appears to have the same perspective of a White, middle-class college student. In reality, she has a unique outlook because she spent the majority of her life abroad.

Relying on these superficial factors to determine which students belong to a minority group simply reinforces stereotypes. If I use such tactics to identify minority students in my own future classroom, my students may simply witness an adult stereotyping others and may interpret such actions as being acceptable.

Implications for Minority Students

Beyond limiting potentially positive participation from dominant culture students, there are other possible problems. For example, once a teacher completes the task of silencing students, the resulting classroom conversation may rest predominantly on minority students. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) explained in their article, “The majority of your class of 30 is White” (p. 1) and “only a small percentage of the class represents other identities” (p. 1). The way Sensoy and DiAngelo framed their writing implied that once the majority of the class is silenced, there will only be a few minority students left to cultivate the class discussion. The minority students then serve as singular speakers for multitudes of individuals. As a result, there is the potential for these minority students to become withdrawn and feel targeted by the discussion. In a discussion setting where minority students lead conversation, silenced classmates may also wrongly assume that what a minority student shares is true for the entirety of that student’s culture, race, or sexual orientation. Although a wide variety of minority experiences and perspectives are shared in such a discussion, rather than achieving a discussion of many minority experiences, this dialogue solely reflects the perspectives of the students who speak. Unless teachers intervene, students may interpret a minority peer’s experience as being reflective of the minority student’s entire group. This situation should be avoided to ensure that students do not view minority groups as single entities of persons, but rather a complex net of individuals.

In order for minority experiences to not be extrapolated to reflect on minority communities as a whole, I suggest striving to include a wide variety of minority perspectives rather than limiting the conversation to the minimal minority groups included in the classroom. This event could take the form of a guest speaker coming into class or pursuing literature reflective of diverse minority experiences. Alternatively, the teacher could consistently remind students that their classroom discussion shares specific student perspectives rather than speaking for groups as a whole. If a teacher is to overlook this situation, minority students may feel as if they are valued solely for their status and experiences. It is presumable that Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) would agree with this point, considering that their goal is to create a more equalized narrative, yet their current argument creates the opportunity for minority students to feel targeted if the teacher does not address the situation appropriately. For this reason, teachers must take the necessary steps to prevent a minority student’s unique experiences from being interpreted as a reflection on the minority group as a whole.

Addressing Intersectionality

As teachers may continue to silence students before they speak, another tool they may use to determine which students can contribute is their personal knowledge of the student’s intersectionality and positionality. On the topic of intersectionality and positionality, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) wrote, “The concept of positionality is an assertion that all knowledge is partial knowledge and arises from a web of specific cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and social positions” (p. 5) and that a student’s being “is intimately connected to that person’s socialization into a matrix of

group locations (including race, class, gender, and sexuality)” (p. 5). While *intersectionality* refers to the simultaneous occupation of both oppressed and privileged positions, *positionality* describes that what one understands and experiences in society is based on where one stands in comparison to others (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Keeping these definitions in mind, the authors clearly showed that they have given thought to the students being members of overlapping statuses of dominant and minority groups. Despite this conscientious acknowledgement of intersectionality and positionality, however, it is important to note that the teacher’s acquired knowledge about a student’s positionality is limited to what students share with their instructors. For example, a teacher’s knowledge of a student’s intersectionality may include an understanding of where the students were raised, their genders, the dynamics of their families, race, and a few of the students’ experiences. Even as a teacher learns about aspects of a student’s intersectionality through daily interaction, there are still some aspects of a student’s identity (such as sexuality and class) that the student may not openly share with the teacher.

These parts of a student’s identity have weight on the appropriateness of silencing students before they speak because each aspect directly influences the student’s worldview. If teachers limit students before they begin to speak, and if they are unaware of the multitude of complex factors contributing to a student’s perspective, the teacher may neglect the concept of intersectionality and remain under the impression that he or she made an “informed choice” in silencing the student before he or she spoke. For example, imagine that a class is discussing race in 1960s United States history. Consider that one student in the class is White, a dominant race, but perhaps he is bisexual, a minority sexuality. Based on a judgment about his race, the teacher may view him as someone who should not—or cannot—lend valid discussion points to the dialogue, yet the teacher may remain unaware of his sexuality. Viewing the student solely through his perceived racial identity and omitting his minority sexual identity, the teacher misses the opportunity for the student to connect racial debates in the ’60s to the current gay rights movement, as the student himself has experienced isolation and judgment from his peers and can connect this experience to that of racial prejudice. Unfortunately, this connection is lost if the teacher does not allow the student to speak.

In this example, the student is unable to lend a new dimension to the conversation and may experience future unwillingness to participate in classroom dialogue. If this process repeats itself within the classroom, educators will continuously lose the opportunity to hear students’ unique perspectives. Without hearing these perspectives, students listening to classroom conversation may miss important connections between historic events, literary readings, and other classroom activities.

Ignoring intersectionality may lead students to the conclusion that certain aspects of their identity weigh more heavily than others. A White lower-class student attempting to comment on a discussion of income disparity, for example, could be silenced because his teacher assumes simply because of his race that he is well-off and is a member of the middle class, and that student may

not openly share the economic aspect of his identity. When his teacher silences him, he may interpret this as evidence that his race is of higher importance than his class, and he may fail in the future to see his own intersectionality.

Here, it is increasingly important that teachers opt to give students discussion time before constricting their speech in order to acknowledge students' complex identities and broad positional-ity. If a teacher limits speech prior to hearing students' comments, even if the teacher is under the impression that she is familiar with a student's intersectionality, the following conversation could be impacted negatively. In situations where potentially "hidden" aspects of a student's identity could lend a helpful perspective to the conversation, teachers need to be sure to allow students the opportunity to share their comment before determining whether or not to silence the contribution to conversation.

Silencing Midcomment: The Safer Alternative

The alternative time to silence students, if a teacher refuses to silence before speech, is midcomment. If a teacher chooses to enact this strategy, he or she could choose to do so for a variety of reasons, including because a student was saying something hurtful, the comment was off topic, or the comment was uninformed. Because of the versatile nature of silencing during speech, I will focus my attention on the three main reasons: hurtful comments, off-topic discussion, or uninformed statements.

Foremost, it must be noted that when a teacher chooses to silence a student while the student is making a hurtful, rude, or otherwise insensitive comment, this act of silencing is benign in its intentions and serves to contribute to a more appropriate discussion environment. In fact, as mentioned earlier, once an outburst such as this occurs, the teacher may mentally label the student as "disruptive" for the remainder of the discussion time and may then choose to silence the student before speech in an effort to preserve a safe discussion setting for other classmates.

The second potential reason for midcomment silencing is one Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) directly stated: that the student's perspective is uninformed or unexamined. If a student makes an uninformed statement and is silenced, the student's response could be hesitancy to contribute to future discussions or even disinterest in what made the comment uninformed. Rather than silencing, the teacher could helpfully redirect the student to a research opportunity so that that person may develop a more informed perspective. If the perspective is unexamined, the student could be asked questions that would prompt the student to defend their answer. The student's outlook may evolve as they are confronted with formative questions, resulting in an examined outlook. In each of these examples, uninformed and unexamined comments do pose a threat to discussion, yet I worry that silencing is not the best tool with which to create an equalized environment.

The last potential reason for midcomment silencing is that the student's comment is off topic. Here, there is an immediate flaw in the teacher's logic: The teacher may interpret the student's comment as being off topic when the student actually simply is struggling to put connection into words. For example, a student

may attempt to discuss that his or her aunt lives with the student's family because the aunt recently immigrated to the United States. The student may provide unnecessary background information, making a potentially quick statement on immigration and non-nuclear family structures into a much longer seemingly off-topic story about her or his family and house—maybe even including a few details about the neighborhood or the color of the front door. Here, it is easy to interpret the student's story as off topic and, in turn, silence the student before he finishes speaking. If the teacher chooses to silence the student, time is certainly saved, but the class may lose the important realization that classmates' families are composed of different people, races, and sexualities.

Why Silence at All?

As the number of complications with silencing—both before speech and midcomment—began to arise, I questioned why educators should silence students at all. Eventually, this questioning led to me ask how students would learn how to engage in socially just discussions if they are unable to speak during class. Seemingly predicting this reaction, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) wrote that although "it is important to surface these perspectives so that they may be critically reflected upon, we do so only in controlled and structured ways" (p. 3). Essentially, Sensoy and DiAngelo shared the perspective that if teachers give students class time to explain why they limited their speech, they are taking away from the discussion at hand and only "give it more airtime and hence more legitimacy in the limited class period" (p. 4). Although I am overwhelmingly supportive of classroom discussion as a means of creating an equalized classroom environment, I acknowledge that Sensoy and DiAngelo's silencing method is acceptable in instances where further whole-class discussion of a student's comment makes it appear legitimate in the eyes of the rest of the class. Like Sensoy and DiAngelo, I agree that either further discussion or student reflection on the comment should be completed outside of a whole-class discussion setting, as the goal is for the student to come to a more appropriate, informed, and examined interpretation of classroom curriculum. As this reflection process evolves, however, teachers should understand that they must gradually plan to reintegrate these students into classroom discussions. This reintegration process could take the form of the teacher having a successful one-on-one discussion with the student in which he or she does not make any inappropriate comments and then moving to a whole-class discussion to see if the student is truly prepared for the responsibility of making significant appropriate contributions to classroom dialogue.

Aside from considering the occasional students who act out with inappropriate comments, however, I return to the original question: Why silence at all? Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) adamantly referred to "the skill to dialogue across differences" (p. 5) as an objective that "is a central commitment of the social justice classroom" (p. 6). When classroom discussions are subject to silencing, students may be in danger of completing a social justice course without developing conversational skills to discuss matters such as race, class, sexuality, and differing ability levels. This situation is in direct opposition to Sensoy and DiAngelo's assertion

that the skill to dialogue is an overarching goal of social justice classrooms.

Instead of silencing students to gain a more equalized classroom narrative, I propose that an equalized classroom could also result from a class discussion about the diverse student experiences themselves. For example, rather than silence dominant narratives, a teacher could have students each tell about her and his experiences, and then the class could analyze the unique responses. The teacher could then direct student attention to the fact that the majority of the class may not know about particular experiences from select minority students. The following discussion would then, naturally, gravitate toward these minority students' experiences. Of course, it is possible that dominant students may wish to speak and make connections to their own experiences, yet these comments may result in an unexpected twist, connection, or new topic of discussion for the classroom to explore. In contrast to simply forcing students to silence their perspectives, a teacher who actively guides conversation has a direct grasp on where the conversation should go.

At this point it is important to discuss strategies teachers can use to "guide" conversation without simply silencing the students. I offer the tool of asking questions as the most direct conversation shaper. When a student begins to offer an off-topic comment, the teacher could patiently wait until the student finishes his or her statement, to prevent a quick judgment and incorrect assumption that the student needs to be guided. Once the student finishes speaking, the teacher could ask the student what it was about the experience that the student specifically connected to the minority perspective. If the student was, in fact, simply sharing an off-topic comment, the teacher could take it as an opportunity to remind the class to be working on their discussion strategies and act as members of the community, being responsible with their dialogue contributions. Later on, the teacher may want to thank a student for a particularly insightful connection that did not require any guidance; that way other students may begin to recognize what comments they should share with the community and what comments they may want to save for another time.

By helping students to practice responsible discussion participation, a teacher invests initial time into potentially developing dialogue skills that could benefit the student in an array of courses and classroom settings. This approach, however, demands that the teacher is well trained in social justice practices applied to education and is able to successfully lead such conversations. Without a well-trained teacher, this approach fails to create an equalized classroom environment.

The Teacher's Role

In order to determine which educators are equipped to handle such discussions, one must first consider the teacher's training in matters of social justice issues. Such training greatly reduces the chance that the teacher holds an uninformed or unexamined perspective, both of which would greatly limit the teacher's ability to form an equalizing discussion. Although training in social justice matters is a basic characteristic for a teacher who is able to generate such discussions, the teacher's experience with privilege is another feature that demands equal attention.

One of these additional characteristics is the teacher's own experience with privilege—whether this be the teacher's privileged history or the personal struggle with the absence of privilege in his or her life. For example, if the teacher is a Black female who is from an upper-class family, she may let her circumstances affect her approach to class curriculum. If the class enters a discussion about the lack of opportunity for economic development for freed slaves in the 1860s, the teacher may not spend significant classroom time emphasizing that even freed slaves were unable to gain financial independence easily, subjected to renting land from White families and living in houses similar to their housing situation as slaves. Such situations made it difficult for the freed slaves to earn enough money to change their financial status. In this scenario, the teacher's economic background influences her discussion-guiding choices and can make her feel as if such hardships of the past have no influence on present-day Black United States citizens. On the other hand, if the teacher is a Black female from a lower-class family, she may spend greater time on this issue, since she may feel a direct connection to the struggle of the freed slaves. In either situation, the teacher's privilege plays a unique role on class discussion, and each teacher's class develops a distinctly different outlook on the situation.

Ideally, the teacher's privilege would not influence the class at all, yet this aim is highly idealistic—it is difficult to sift one's own experiences through the lens of privilege. Even so, bringing privilege to attention demands that the teacher consider what role his or her privilege plays in the classroom, and once aware of the matter, the teacher can, with hope, be more critical of his or her own discussion. For example, the second teacher in the earlier example may note that her lack of economic privilege is influencing her decision to devote large amounts of class time to certain class discussions and then can evaluate whether or not this has a positive or negative effect on her class. Similarly, the first teacher may choose to spend a bit more time on the concept and have her students discuss the impact of delayed economic development for freed slaves. In both situations, the teacher adjusted her approach to class curriculum once she considered the role privilege played in her initial approach.

Furthermore, a teacher equipped to handle discussions of justice, power, and oppression will ideally display continued interest in the matter. Such interest may be expressed through personal reading, current classroom structure, courses taken to update teaching licensure, formation of school support groups for social justice educators, or leading student organizations aiming to give voice to social justice issues. These qualities, although not absolutely necessary, serve as strong indicators for educators who are fully committed to forming a social justice-based classroom and who can effectively lead equalizing class discussions.

Lastly, the teacher's discussion skills as a whole (despite any formal training on social justice issues, the role of their privilege, etc.) play an important role in forming an effective discussion. Understanding that not all teachers may have adequate discussion skills, I suggest that teachers strive to implement Socratic dialogue in their classroom conversations. Using such a strategy, the teacher simply serves as a discussion guider rather than an "all-knowing"

discussion leader whom students may aim to please with specific answers. In contrast, Socratic dialogue demands that the teacher simply asks questions that further the discussion at appropriate times (for example, when the teacher wants the class to delve deeper into a certain idea or when the teacher wants the student to further examine their viewpoint). With the teacher as a discussion guider, the class is free to voice their concerns and express their opinions in a loosely formatted environment, yet one that encourages everyone's participation. That said, this discussion format does rely on students themselves to serve as active conversation participants, so it is important that the teacher's formal social justice training has set the stage for an accepting environment long before the teacher chooses to enact Socratic dialogue.

Essentially, the teacher is the foundation for building a successful discussion, and the position must be taken seriously. Although it may be impractical to hire only the educators who meet such guidelines, if a school is committed to social justice, then it will take such guidelines seriously and require that its staff has completed social justice training and has been instructed to view their experiences critically while considering the role of privilege, at the very least. On a smaller scale, individual teachers committed to equalizing classroom discussions can also hold themselves accountable for such criteria. From either approach, on a schoolwide scale or individual scale, the teacher's role is important to consider when determining how successful a discussion based approach will be.

Conclusion

As a whole, Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) article presented a unique outlook on how limiting dominant narratives could

potentially create a more equalizing classroom environment, yet I question the actual success of such a practice. There are multiple underlying factors to consider if one chooses to limit student speech, such as avoiding targeting minority students and addressing intersectionality and positionality. Underlying the entirety of these complications is the decision teachers must make to silence students either before they begin to speak or after the students begin to share their comment. Furthermore, having an equalizing discussion relies on the teacher's acknowledgement of the role of privilege in their life, the teacher's experience with social justice curriculum, and the teacher's ability to lead discussions as a whole.

Overall, silencing midcomment appears as the safer alternative when compared to silencing before speech, yet I worry silencing students is a passive way for a teacher to create an equalized discussion. When an equalized discussion could also successfully derive from a teacher guiding classroom dialogue, I argue that it is more beneficial to students—and far less dangerous—for a teacher to pursue guided discussion rather than silencing students. A Socratic dialogue-based discussion is a practice that ensures students have the opportunity to learn how to appropriately discuss social justice topics, a point that I value as an educator and believe is a necessary skill for students to develop.

References

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