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# Democracy & Education

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## Enacting Social Justice Ethically: Individual and Communal Habits

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### Abstract

In response to Hytten's provocative opening of a conversation about an ethics for activist teaching, in this essay I address three interesting contributions that Hytten made. First, I explore the significance of the imagined ethical subject in Hytten's example and in many prior authors' work on ethics in social justice teaching. Expanding the imagined ethical subject (beyond the resistant student with limited experience of difference), which Hytten began to do, is fruitful for additional contexts. Second, I attend to the philosophical basis upon which Hytten rested her ethical theory and suggest some ways that philosophers might follow her critical and pragmatist sensibilities and avoid the meta-ethical limitations of more traditional ethical theory. Third, the essay ends with considerations of potentially a more social ethics, and toward that end, I propose two communal habits implied in Hytten's work—cultivating solidarity and comfort with discomfort—that might complement the four habits Hytten named in her ethics.

### This article is in response to

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**I**N HER ESSAY, Hytten (2015) invites a conversation about ethics in social justice teaching practices. Hytten names several problems with social justice teaching practice and is especially concerned with the ways social justice teaching may contradict its purported aims to promote pluralistic engagement and deep democracy. When educators describe ethical justifications for their teaching practice, they may conflate ethics and moral commitments with social justice work. This is an important philosophical distinction, and while we need not separate them entirely (as Campbell [2008, 2013] has suggested), we need to articulate a relation between them. As Hytten argues, conflating ethics and social justice commitments can lead to self-righteous justification for nonreflective teaching practices and unwarranted

violence against the very students social justice educators wish to prepare to be social justice advocates.

Absent from much of the discourse on social justice pedagogy is engagement with the discourse on the ethics of teaching, and

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only on rare occasions has the discourse on teaching ethics addressed social justice teaching. In some cases, Hytten (2015) finds rather strong arguments against the possibility of reconciliation. Hytten is undaunted by these challenges. After synthesizing these discourses, she names an ethical vision for social justice teaching. She then names virtues and habits that may help establish an engaged ethics for activist teaching. Drawing from critical and pragmatist sensibilities, Hytten argues for three habits: reflective humility, intellectual open-mindedness, and sympathetic attentiveness. She provocatively begins what should be a vital conversation, especially in schools of education but also throughout the education sector.

In this essay response, I take up the provocative invitation and focus on schools of education as specific sites for social justice teaching. I highlight some explicit and implicit philosophical moves in Hytten's (2015) essay, and I consider the implications of the vision and advocacy role that she proposes for social justice teaching and how it relates to educational goals. While acknowledging some constraints related to the critical and pragmatist approaches Hytten takes, I offer additional communal habits—namely cultivating classrooms of solidarity and a comfort with discomfort—that are embedded in her analysis and may complement the habits she has already proposed. I propose these habits to further enact the communal goals of social justice teaching.

### **When It Comes to the Ethics of Teaching, Context Matters**

In education discourse, we are apparently especially concerned with preservice public school teachers, because much of the discourse about social justice pedagogy focuses on this population of students, who might then adopt or adapt social justice pedagogy for their own classrooms. While Hytten (2015) does not explicitly contain her discussion to teacher educators, she seems most interested in teachers of students in teacher preparation and other early professional programs. The student implied by much of her discussion is the one with limited experience and without much exposure to difference. Much attention is paid to the student who resists participation or who derides social justice pedagogy as biased and ideological. Considering the demographic situation in the United States of a largely White and middle-class corps of teacher education candidates, coupled with an increasingly diverse public school population and widespread poverty, the emphasis is understandable. Resistance to a pedagogical form is certainly a problem, and when resistance amounts to refusal to engage with difference, there are legitimate, considerable concerns for the professional preparedness of the student.

From at least two standpoints, however, an emphasis on students who are resistant to engaging with different perspectives may be problematic for an ethics for social justice teaching, and Hytten (2015) hints at these difficulties. From a pedagogical standpoint, if the modal student is one resistant to engaging in a pluralistic setting, students with broader experiences may not have their own learning needs met. From an ethical standpoint, this becomes a concern for equitable treatment—if the primary ethical concern is pushing resistant students too hard, the moral concern

presupposes a particular kind of ethical self: one who must be convinced to act beyond one's own self interest in order to be ethical. A closer look suggests that Hytten is moving away from these problematic limitations of teaching ethics. Much of what she is talking about is geared toward helping the previously nonreflective to become more reflective. At the same time, she is also concerned about students who enact violence in the classroom and who attempt to maintain subjugation of others through microaggressions. She briefly addresses the experiences of marginalized populations of students, and in her other work, there is broader focus to draw from.

As philosophers, we might explore in more depth the imagined students who participate in our classrooms. We might also explore our students' habits of mind and the funds of knowledge that students with varied backgrounds might bring to the classroom. An important philosophical question is this: What kind of learning context do we assume? Do we imagine that our classrooms are primarily places where nonreflective students practice being more reflective so that they may become more effective educators in a pluralistic society? Or do we imagine our classrooms as spaces where engagement between and among pluralistic discourses is enacted? I suspect that from her perspective, Hytten (2015) would argue that both of these imagined learning contexts are enacted at various times and are impossible to disentangle.

While the preparation of teachers and other early professionals is an important aspect of schools of education, reducing every philosophical discussion to that specific context runs the risk of drawing us away from the specific contexts of our own classrooms, including classrooms of midcareer professionals seeking higher levels of certification or engaging in scholarly pursuits. The contexts of these graduate-level classrooms bring their own unique challenges. While professional practice often makes these educators more reflective than their more novice counterparts, their experiences and their reflections are quite varied. Often, particular experiences have led them to problematic conclusions about the populations with whom they have worked. A particular ethical challenge in these circumstances is how to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions while respecting them as professionals—avoiding infantilizing them or ignoring their ethical positioning, for instance (Nash, 2002). As these seasoned professionals come into positions of increasing responsibility, the opportunities for them to enact social justice change can be quite profound. While much has been written about the moral agency of teachers over the years, much less attention has focused on the moral agency of school leaders. These leaders are in a position to create conditions in schools where teachers' moral agency may flourish. In these contexts, we may find educators who have given up on innovative practice in favor of what they term to be realistic responses to the conditions under which they operate. Or we may encounter powerful professionals at midcareer who are overconfident in their abilities to engage in equity and social justice work. They may know well how to avoid controversy rather than how to engage it. Future scholars sometimes consider social justice a topic that holds no interest for them or that gets in the way of their pursuit of academic

careers. An ethics for social justice teaching might look different, then, in these different contexts. The social justice educator might not be focused so much on students with limited experiences with differences but instead be challenged to provide opportunities for students on opposite sides of life experiences to think differently about themselves in relation to each other (especially when the students in the class come from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds). A classroom of veteran educators, for instance, may be especially fruitful as a site of enacting deep democracy, if an ethics of mutual and professional respect is cultivated. A common ethical challenge at this level is taking students past polite conversation to a space characterized by deliberation (Piantanida & Garman, 2009), wherein students may productively challenge each other. An ethics for social justice pedagogy in this situation would ground the purposes for establishing conditions of mutual respect. For instance, the instructor may cultivate mutual respect among students by modeling respectful responses to differences of opinion. An ethics might inform an instructor's intervention in a moment of contentious misunderstanding between two students or it may inform an instructor's decision to acknowledge a microaggression. Hytten's (2015) ethics addresses many of the same issues, but in different contexts, one aspect of the ethics may need more emphasis than others. Also, educational goals may be different. Flexible and adaptable ethics for the broad array of students we teach in schools of education would help us clarify our various educational goals in relation to social justice pedagogy and enact those goals with students at various places in their educational journeys.

### **Social Justice Teaching as Ethically Problematic**

Much of the social justice literature that addresses ethics does so to justify, defend, or establish the value of social justice teaching. Hytten (2015) retraces the major arguments and at one point argues the necessity of a social justice position; her main reasons are the pervasiveness of injustice and how important education is in developing a more socially just society. She acknowledges that social justice pedagogy may carry a political bias and counters that such a critique assumes there is a neutral position from which teachers may work. She offers that a neutral position is implausible, and considering the evident social injustices in schools and society, a neutral position is a position that may unintentionally perpetuate injustice. Any pedagogy has political implications, and the challenge is to understand the politics with appropriate sophistication, and philosophical work can deepen our understanding of how politics and ethics interact.

Commentators on the subject have a hard time distinguishing political and ethical components of social justice pedagogy. Operating in this space, Hytten (2015) reframes the debate and makes the philosophical problems more precise. For Hytten, a social justice position by itself does not ethically justify any particular teaching practice enacted by a social justice educator. Hytten is convinced that bias is something that does indeed need to be critiqued, but unlike commentators such as Campbell, the bias she is referring to is not the position itself but the tendency to exercise an impositional stance. For Hytten, bias needs to be critiqued when it

does harm to others and, she implies, if it is counterproductive to the struggle for social justice. Reading across Hytten's article, I name several of her concerns and expand upon them.

First is the chief danger: conflating the moral justification of contending with issues of social justice and the ethics of teaching about it. In the extreme is the danger of grounding one's practice in self-righteous indignation. Philosophically, this could take the form of a justification wherein the end justifies the means. An actor could use the principle of utility (or another consequentialist ethics) to argue that actions are justified if the consequences of the actions serve the greater good (Frankena, 1973). Besides the Kantian objection, wherein individuals are never to be treated as means to an end (e.g., Campbell, 2008, 2013), two additional critiques can be launched against this perspective.

A consequentialist perspective, requiring consideration of supposed ends for the choice of the most morally defensible action, is dependent upon the moral actor to imagine possible outcomes and to predict their likelihood. Following a teleological frame, an advocate for social justice would be expected to have a telos in mind that would ground pedagogical interactions. A Hegelian or Marxian teleology could certainly be imagined to ground pedagogy.

A second kind of critique can be imagined, one based in something like the concept of positionality. We should expect the consequences that one imagines for one's pedagogy to be influenced by positionality, one's social and historical locations (Alcoff, 1988; Milner, 2010). In practice, consequentialist ethics generally suffer from this serious limitation. One's capacity to imagine the responses of others, particularly others with distinctly different positionalities than one's own, is necessarily limited. In resolving an ethical dilemma, it is morally problematic to select the most morally defensible consequences from among the immediately imaginable ones. Consequentialist theory, most compelling when employed retrospectively, is not morally forgiving of the well-intended actor whose actions lead to unpleasant consequences. As such, it is also not terribly helpful to the practicing teacher, who is not likely to embrace the process of continually weighing possible consequences of his or her actions to make ethical decisions to inform teaching practice.

While, as I explain below, Hytten (2015) incorporates what she calls a utopian vision, she is not making a consequentialist argument. Her intended ends draw from a pragmatist moral sensibility that embraces neither Kantian nor consequentialist ethical frames. Since we can expect a pragmatist ethicist to place outcomes under careful scrutiny, it is not surprising that Hytten embraces deep democracy, suggestive of a critical process of moral engagement. Reading Campbell and Hytten in tandem makes it appear that the two authors are writing in different philosophical languages (Nash, 2002). For her part, Campbell was concerned when social justice pedagogy becomes ideological, when teacher educators impose political views upon their students, and when in-service teachers are supposed to adopt and enact the politically partisan views of their instructors when they teach. Campbell saw social justice as at best a distraction to the cultivation of professional teachers. For her, teacher professionalism is itself grounded in the moral

responsibilities of the teacher, and teaching for social justice distracts from what she saw as the more defensible project of cultivating ethical teachers. Campbell can be read as establishing Kantian standards through which the problematics of social justice teaching (as ideally presented, in extreme, or in actual practice—it seems that Campbell has concerns about all three) make it impossible to resolve with a teaching ethics.

While Hytten (2015) is concerned with the project of ethical justification of social justice pedagogy, her substantive contribution moves beyond mere justification to seek an ethics of practice. Following Sockett (2009), she turns to virtues and cultivating habits. Following Valenzuela, she turns to an ethics of caring couched within a culturally responsive sensibility, wherein a educator's intentions toward caring are placed within an interactive, inquiry-oriented engagement with students' needs and interests in caring. Taking these pragmatist and critical influences together, Hytten wants social justice educators to cultivate the habits of reflective humility, open-mindedness, and sympathetic attentiveness.

A remaining question is the philosophical place of her discussion of utopia. Throughout, Hytten (2015) names various value positions for social justice advocates. She argues for the value of pluralism and advocates transparency of values. She advocates for a vision of the world: "Diversity is prized, every student is valued, information is critiqued, and resources are distributed fairly" (p. 3). While the values are agreeable, it is important to note that not everyone will understand what it means to value them, and as with any list of values, it is vital for dialogue among members of a community to determine what happens when various values come into conflict with each other. That is precisely the point for Hytten. Her vision for social justice is largely a living, practicing ethics—grounded in mutual respect and mutual engagement.

It makes sense that a philosophical argument grounded in pragmatist ethics would call upon a broad vision of advocacy. Valuing pluralism, for instance, could imply valuing varied visions and utopian ideals. For instance, any institution with multiple people committed to social justice will find their visions can come into ready conflict. Social justice visions need not only be expressed and enacted but also be made objects of inquiry. Within a pragmatist frame, creating the pedagogy enacts competing values in a social world through arrangements that embrace difference.

To go along with the pragmatist meta-ethics, in a particular institutional context, it would make sense for the vision of advocacy to have an end-in-view. If the educational goal of social justice pedagogy is the creation of a more socially just world, fairly serious work needs to be done to figure out educational goals that are reasonable to accomplish within the confines of a higher education classroom. An institution might have a vision for social justice pedagogy that takes on an urban focus, for instance, mobilizing inquiry, pedagogy, and services that take the geographic context of urbanity seriously and centrally. The end-in-view could be more sophisticated knowledge and broader collaboration among multiple constituencies in order to build toward larger aims of equitable experiences for children in urban settings. In another

context, the vision might be a focus on serving the needs and interests of children and adults of color, mobilizing those same efforts around culturally relevant and sustaining educational practices.

### **How Social Is a Social Justice Teaching Ethics?**

A second philosophical concern implied in Hytten's (2015) essay is how to balance an individual ethics with an institutional ethics and a larger social ethics. The teaching ethics discourse is largely individualistic and in that sense conventional in its application of ethical theory, owing to the traditions that the authors work in. Hytten has this to say about it: "What is sometimes lacking is critical reflection on the context in which teachers work, and the larger mission of schooling" (p. 6). Ethical frames that treat moral action solely as the province of the individual are of limited use in the face of structurally based social problems and power relations that work through actors without them being aware of it.

This individual/social concern comes out in Hytten's (2015) engagement with Campbell's arguments about the dangers associated with teachers' moral agency that may become political activism. In her work on teacher professionalism, Campbell (2008, 2013) protected the role of the teacher as a moral agent and kept it separate from the political. This type of argument de-emphasizes the power that the teacher as moral agent may operate in promoting the social order or the ways in which education policy may change the power relations operating in schools (Biesta, 2004; Gunzenhauser, 2012). By separating ethics from politics, Campbell did not anticipate the ways in which power more generally intersects with ethics. For instance, the argument does not anticipate that political action may become necessary in order to defend or conserve the teacher's place as a moral agent and moral actor.

Hytten (2015) is not likewise constrained. She works against a tendency of philosophers to slice ethics away from other philosophical concerns. The social justice classroom Hytten envisions is a site where deep democracy is enacted, and we get the sense that the process is a great deal of work. We could devote more discussion about the collaborative and collective nature of that work, which would help round out the ethics she imagines. Specifically, we may help teachers connect their ethical predispositions to sensitivity to collective action—starting with the individualized ethics and providing frameworks for educators to develop social ethics and plans for collective action.

Collective action may be a more reasonable and effective outcome, compared to the critical perspectives expressed in the social justice literature. As an empirical counterexample to Campbell's concern, Hytten (2015) makes use of the systematic study by Cochran-Smith and her colleagues (2009) of student teachers educated in a social justice education program at Boston College. Rather than developing politically ideological teachers, the program fostered culturally sensitive and largely ethical teachers with a clear sense of service to and interest in the students with which they work. In this program at least, the students exhibited the kinds of moral positions that Campbell described as desirable in teachers without the sets of macro political commitments that might be expected. Perhaps the commitment to practice

is of greater value than the specific macro political commitments, in addition to providing evidence that indoctrination does not appear to be the effect.

### Enacting a Social Ethics

Hytten (2015) draws from Sockett's (2009) argument of three virtues of teacher practice—character, intellect, and care—to name three accompanying habits that would contribute to a social justice teaching ethics. These three areas encourage space for dialogue about ethics in social justice teaching. I summarize these here and suggest two additional habits to round out Hytten's ethics for social justice teaching.

Reflective humility is a habit for social justice educators to cultivate in themselves and in their students. Reflective humility builds character, an approach to ethics that Hytten (2015) embraces tentatively, considering her discomfort with the conservative nature of the character education discourse. For Hytten, reflective humility includes dialogue with diverse others. Social justice educators are encouraged to own their defensiveness and frustration. They should be open to challenges to their convictions, and they should engage in active listening. Educators should model convictions expressed with openness to difference and other beliefs.

Dewey appears in Hytten's (2015) essay when she addresses the habit of open-mindedness. While she does not go in this particular direction, Hytten's argument calls to mind psychological perspectives on prejudice. We are not as likely to challenge ourselves, she argues, when we see something new. The social justice classroom that Hytten imagines is one in which participants learn from each other and the instructor is learning from the perspectives of students as well. Further directions that could be explored here include Garrison's (1996) discussion of listening. We might also explore more explicitly developmental perspectives that may enable the social justice instructors to appreciate the psychological experience of their students, especially undergraduate students.

Hytten (2015) advocates a form of caring ethics reminiscent of Noddings (1984), played out in culturally responsive form in the work of Valenzuela (1999), with sympathetic attentiveness, wherein caring is offered by the one-caring and received and acknowledged by the cared-for. Sympathetic attentiveness demands the educator attempt to understand with generosity the views of others, especially when these views are different from the educator's own. The instructor as the one-caring is nonjudgmental and nonaccusatory, there is recognition of human unfinishedness (Freire, 1970/1990), and the instructor operates under the assumption that others' moral judgments are based upon good intentions (Nash, 2002). Sympathetic attentiveness is a richly educational habit and one that could be developed conceptually in varied ethical frames.

Taken together, these habits go a long way toward ethically grounding the social justice classroom. Some complementary practices could be cultivated to address the aspects of collective action that Hytten (2015) values in her vision of social justice pedagogy. In the language of virtues and habits, we might refer to these additional contributors, described here as solidarity and comfort with discomfort, as communal habits. These habits and

habits like them inform both teaching ethics and teaching practices and are largely implied in Hytten's article.

Moving beyond individualistic ethical frames, a social justice educator may work to build solidarity among students in the classroom. If the emphasis in the classroom is largely on the majority-culture student without much experience of difference, then attending to social justice can place individual students in opposition to others. An individual ethics may actually encourage the opposition. In light of that possibility, some kind of ethics of solidarity might provide a counteracting force. Solidarity can be placed in contrast to consensus. Solidarity implies not that everyone is in agreement on an idea or belief but that various people agree on an action that will be undertaken (and reflected upon) together (Welch, 2000). For instance, teacher education students in a field experience course might agree to all work together to learn from each other's experiences encountering children of varied backgrounds in their classrooms. Additionally, to build solidarity through material interaction, they might agree to work together on a service-learning project. Solidarity can also emerge more modestly through the creation of a communal space. Hytten (2015) characterizes just such a communal space within the values and vision she names for the classroom.

Hytten (2015) notes that the communal space of the social justice classroom need not be guaranteed to be "safe" to the extent that no one is challenged to think differently. Leading students into discomfort is challenging, and as Hytten notes, some social justice pedagogues argue that crisis is an essential prerequisite for learning. While the reliance on stage theory and the necessity of psychological crisis can certainly be overdone and can lead to unnecessarily standardizing the development trajectories of students, it is problematic to assume that keeping everyone safe and comfortable in the classroom will lead to such important educational goals as learning from difference. Clarity on educational goals certainly helps in this case; for example, in teacher preparation programs, students may express discomfort with participating in field experiences in areas of their communities in which they have little experience. That discomfort is not something that the social justice educator can control, but neither should it be ignored. It should instead be acknowledged and engaged. Instructors, in other words, need to cultivate a comfort with discomfort and develop practices that make discomfort productive.

Hytten's (2015) essay is provocative and productive of meaningful philosophical conversation about the ethics of social justice teaching. Arguing from critical and pragmatist sensibilities, she suggests vital habits to nurture our character, intellect, and caring. Additional attention to cultivating communal habits, I argue, would extend her project in meaningful and consistent ways.

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