

Hold That Thought!

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Abstract

This is a response to Sensoy and DiAngelo's critique of common guidelines used in social justice education and their justification for the use of silencing the voice of systemically privileged students. I expand their argument by posing some questions about the risks of silencing and also suggesting an alternative strategy to the one Sensoy and DiAngelo recommend.

This article is a response to:

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SENSOY AND DIANGELO (2014) provide a compelling critique of the contents of guidelines that are commonly used in social justice pedagogy. They point to the limits (and dangers) of using such guidelines by exposing the disjuncture between the common guidelines' underlying assumption of equality regarding student voice and safety and the goals of social justice education, which take power and social location seriously. Guidelines that express a concern for the voice and safety of *all* students regardless of social location and that grant equal time for *all* perspectives risk sacrificing the educational interests and needs of those who are systemically marginalized. Such guidelines not only ignore power relations in the classroom but may also reify rather than challenge those hierarchies.

I concur with Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) critique of these common guidelines. In particular, their argument about how common guidelines stifle the ability of marginalized instructors to contest the extra resistance they experience as they attempt to "push students past their comfort zones" (p. 5) is extremely insightful. My aim in this response is to offer some clarifying comments and questions and to suggest some further thoughts about the strategies for responding to power in the social justice classroom that the authors recommend.

A first clarifying point: While Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) are focused on common guidelines, it is not guidelines themselves that they reject. In fact, they offer an alternative form of guidelines in their conclusion. They don't critique guidelines because, as some have argued, guidelines, in general, don't work. For example, in a discussion of Weber's guidelines—which require students to

"acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist" and to "agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain"—Gordon (2007, p. 347) claims that guidelines point to a fundamental misunderstanding about imposing conditions on dialogue that lead to pretense rather than to genuine learning. He insists that guidelines be learning goals rather than expectations or prerequisites for discussion. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), in contrast, clearly believe that guidelines can be effective in encouraging dialogue across difference and can facilitate authentic learning.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) are more troubled by the assumptions that ground a particular type of guidelines. Specifically, they expose the pedagogical consequences of assumptions such as the ideology of individualism, which posits persons as unique and detached from any social context and that assume all voices are to

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be respected equally without regard to social location. Not only do such assumptions conceal systemic relations of dominance in the classroom but they reproduce them as well. Most significantly, Sensoy and DiAngelo support the need for silencing dominant voices in the classroom when those voices harm marginalized students by constraining the ability of the marginalized to express their experiences with oppression. As they explain, they have come to deny equal time in the classroom in order to “correct the existing power imbalances by turning down the volume on dominant narratives” (p. 3). Silencing what dominant students can say in the class, the authors recognize, challenges the values and practices that go to the heart of democratic education, but nevertheless they contend that silencing can be justified.

As an illustration of justified silencing, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) describe a situation in which a queer-identified speaker is invited to a class to share experiences with oppression. After the presentation a straight student dismisses what the speaker said by pronouncing that she disagrees with the queer lifestyle and that she deems homosexuality immoral. The instructor of the course not only allows the student to speak and does not intervene but also “thanks her for sharing her perspective” (p. 3). Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that “this is exactly the type of context in which dominant knowledge claims must be silenced” (p. 3).

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) acknowledge that dominant views must be made visible before they can be challenged, but they only permit dominant perspectives to be expressed “in controlled and structured ways” (p. 3). By “controlled and structured,” they mean to include the possibility of silencing a student when necessary, as in the case they describe. The justifications they offer for silencing the dominant student are as follows. First, dominant ideologies are difficult to dislodge and are characteristically arrogantly certain. Second, such narratives tend to hijack the discussion and recenter dominant interests. Finally, to give dominant voices equal time intimates that their perspective is equally valid, and this not only supports systemic ignorance but also ignores how the expression of dominant discourse is a form of microaggression.

Although I agree that the expression of dominant voices has these effects, a second clarifying point or question arises: Is silencing the only or the most appropriate response that the instructor could have made? Boler (2004) similarly justifies the option of silencing dominant voices in the social justice classroom. She proposes what she refers to as “affirmative action pedagogy” that “seeks to ensure that we bear witness to marginalized voices in our classroom, *even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices* [emphasis added]” (p. 4). Like Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), Boler (2004) rejects the notion that that democratic dialogue entails treating all voices as equal because not all voices carry the same weight and “some voices are foreclosed before even speaking” (p. 11). Yet the emphasis that Boler puts on “challenging oneself and one’s student to analyze critically any statement made in a classroom, especially those which are rooted in dominant views that subordinate on the basis of race, gender, and class” (p. 4) allows her to also find a place in social justice education for a “let all speech fly” approach. In this latter approach,

all students are made accountable for their speech in the sense that any ignorant expression that is rooted in privilege will be challenged. Perhaps it is not that the instructor in Sensoy and DiAngelo’s example failed to *silence* the dominant student’s voice. Rather, what might have been problematic was that the instructor seemed reluctant to *challenge* the dominant perspective.

No doubt there are some situations in which silencing a student is appropriate. Yet there are also some consequences of silencing dominant voices that require consideration. Mayo (2004), for instance, contends that regulating words (and silencing) instead of addressing underlying attitudes and practices may harm marginalized groups in the long run. On the one hand, silencing certain words may have the effect of bolstering the attitudes behind those discursive practices and remove them from critical discussion. Silencing may similarly protect privilege rather than challenge it. Case and Hemmings (2005) describe how White students often use silence as a distancing strategy to avoid having to consider their complicity in racism. Such students often explain that they are silent because “they don’t want to offend” but, according to Case and Hemmings, this discursive strategy functions to protect White innocence and contributes to students’ disengagement with the reading material and classroom discussions. Silencing systemically privileged students in the classroom may risk reinforcing the privilege they have to remain silent and encourage their ability to avoid the discomfort that is necessary to learn about their complicity in social injustice.

On the other hand, silencing can lead students to use certain words out of political correctness and in other ways that protect their innocence. As Mayo (2004) suggests, silencing certain words can encourage practices of civility that “enable dominant people to protect their own property interest in the source of their dominance” (p. 35). In other words, silencing may indeed result in dominant-group members ceasing to use offensive words but allow them to appear to be sensitive (and thus not culpable for inequalities) without a fuller understanding of why these words are problematic in the first place.

Mayo (2004) further interrogates the exclusive focus on the individual perpetrator at the possible cost of ignoring and keeping intact the institutional and systemic injustice that subjects repeat. For a variety of reasons including their understanding of responsibility (Applebaum, 2012), it is important to help dominant students understand that while they do not inaugurate injustice, they are complicit in perpetuating it. While dominant-group members should be held accountable for their words, targeting the utterance and the person may leave the power of regulatory norms unaffected. Silencing may also usurp the agency of the marginalized by depriving them of an opportunity to talk back and speak for themselves.

De Castell (2004) critically examines the value of dialogue across difference, more broadly, by drawing attention to the focus on voice and silence. Such a focus treats the symptom rather than the cause of injustice. De Castell interrogates the confidence educators put in the “talking cure” and suggests that we “unwittingly suspend critical insight” (p. 54) into structures of power and normative violence when we center attention on the individual

who is not the source of ignorance and hostility. Rather than focusing on voice and silence, de Castell advocates that social justice educators should be first and foremost concerned with countering ignorance.

Educators, however, are not always equipped with the necessary skills to facilitate the difficult dialogues that challenge ignorance and therefore may be hesitant and unclear about challenging their dominant students. And if they are systemically privileged, they may either be ignorant themselves or fear the conflict that challenge provokes. De Castell (2004) notes that educators may frequently “clutch at the First Amendment as a justification for not doing what they ought to do, and saying what they ought to say” (p. 55).

To expand upon this point, Jones (2004) has demonstrated that the desire for dialogue can function to make White students feel better about themselves by constituting them as “good whites” who want to learn about diversity. The desire for the voice of the Other, Jones explains, is parasitic on the needs and interests of the dominant group and does not benefit students of color about whom White students claim to be learning. The educator who could have silenced the dominant student’s utterances in order to give voice to the marginalized in the case that Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) depict might be expressing a personal desire for redemption and reassurance of exceptionality. When she silences students for their dominant perspective, Johnson (2008), for example, wonders with remarkable frankness whether it is her own wounding that she is trying to prevent rather than those of her students (p. 235). Educators must turn the critical reflective gaze on themselves and ask how they also benefit from silencing dominant-group members. Does silencing function to avoid conflict, confrontation, and discomfort?

I am not implying that Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) intend or are unaware of these consequences but rather caution that their arguments could be easily used by others in this way and, thus, the consequences of silencing must also be seriously considered. Moreover, the role of discourse might also be emphasized more consistently. Clearly Sensoy and DiAngelo understand how discourse functions to sustain systemic injustice. Their analysis of discourse in this essay and elsewhere (2012) demonstrates a concern with how power works through language and refusing to use language. They acknowledge the myriad ways that dominant denials of racism are camouflaged behind “good intentions,” “common sense,” “personal experience,” and a request for evidence.

So it was surprising to read some of their recommended strategies that might themselves promote discursive forms of denial. For example, do some of the Silence Breakers/Question Starters that are intended to encourage a way of leaning into difficult content fall into discursive traps. When a student is encouraged to utter “I’m really nervous” or “from my experience” or “I’m afraid I may offend,” these may support distancing strategies that function as confession, taking back the center and protecting White innocence. Bingham (2002) urges social justice educators to teach students how to take account of language as discourse as well as language as representation so that students can appreciate how it is not always a matter of the

substance of what they say or the intentions behind their words but instead what their utterances do.

Finally, I would like to offer one small classroom strategy that I have found helpful and that I believe is suggested in a quote from Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014). They write:

While we recognize that it is important to raise these perspectives . . . we find it much more effective to do so in controlled ways. *We then return to them after we have laid enough groundwork*, via study of key concepts and literature, and begin to apply a critical analysis [emphasis added]. (p. 6)

I too have found that just talking things out often keeps the status quo intact. If ignorance is the problem, then our students need tools that can help them listen and understand. Instead of silencing in the way that Sensoy and DiAngelo advocate, I suggest we tell students, “Hold that thought!” (If I say just “HTT,” my students know what I mean.)

For example, on the first day of class a White student recently asked (really, announced), “Dr. A., isn’t affirmative action a form of reverse discrimination?” I understand this more as a discursive strategy and a form of White talk (Hyttén & Warren, 2003; McIntyre, 1997). The student, however, does not yet have the tools to understand this. I emphatically said no, but I asked the student to HTT. When such questions are shared, I ask the student to present that question later in the term, or I make sure it is part of the curriculum when the students have the tools to engage in discussion around this question. In this way, rather than silence the student, I defer consideration of the comment without supporting what the student espouses and, in fact, vehemently rejecting it. Moreover, even at this point, I explicitly indicate that the comment will be critically addressed when the class has been exposed to the relevant tools that can help make such a discussion constructive.

And by tools, I am referring to understanding, among other things, the dangers of the ideology of colorblindness; the difference between defining racism as only about prejudice and defining racism as a system of privilege and oppression; the subtle ways that White privilege can authorize the ability to be ignorant, arrogant, and dismissive—what McIntosh (1997) refers to as “negative white privilege”; as well as how White talk and distancing strategies protect White innocence. Additionally, I employ videos and ethnographic research to help students analyze from a third-person perspective how discourse works to support and safeguard systems of privilege and oppression from critique. I require them to write reflective journals on how these discursive strategies may be circulating in our classroom—that is, how they may themselves be endorsing their ignorance and their ability to dismiss what students of color are trying to say. An advantage of this approach is that it provides me with a useful (although never completely reliable) way to discern systemically privileged students who are willing to engage and those who obstinately cling to their ignorance.

Does “Hold that thought!” avoid some of the consequences of silencing? I am not certain and invite feedback on this suggested pedagogical strategy. Social justice pedagogy is always challenging, and as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) note, “any resistive practice can

come to serve the very interests it was developed to oppose” (p. 3). I thank Sensoy and DiAngelo for their valuable contributions to the conversation and for keeping the discussion on social justice pedagogy ongoing.

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