

Leaning in: A student's guide to engaging constructively with social justice content

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Abstract: As educators who teach social justice education, we often struggle with student resistance to new and challenging critical frameworks. In this essay, we address students directly and offer guidelines for constructive engagement. These guidelines address common barriers such as: lack of intellectual humility, conflating opinions with informed knowledge, relying on anecdotal evidence, inattentiveness to positionality, and valuing grades over comprehension. The essay includes vignettes and examples that illustrate each of these guidelines, as well as a glossary and discussion questions that can be taken up in class.

Keywords: social justice education, learning strategies, student resistance

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The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.

Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

Gloria Anzaldúa (2009, p. 310)

If you are reading this essay, you are likely enrolled in a course that takes a critical stance. By *critical stance* we mean those academic fields (including social justice, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, anti-racist, postcolonial, and feminist approaches) that operate from the perspective that knowledge is socially constructed and that education is a political project embedded within a network of social institutions that reproduce inequality.

In your course, you will be studying key concepts such as *socialization*, *oppression*, *privilege*, and *ideology* and doing coursework that challenges your worldview by suggesting that you may not be as “open-minded” as you may have thought. You are encountering evidence that inequality not only exists, but is deeply structured into society in ways that secure its reproduction. You are also beginning to realize that, contrary to what you have always been taught, categories of difference (such as gender, race, and class) rather than merit alone, *do* matter and contribute significantly to people's experiences and life opportunities.

When confronted with evidence of inequality that challenges our identities and world views, we often respond with resistance; we want to deflect this unsettling information and protect a world view that is more comforting. This is especially true if we believe in justice and see ourselves as living a life that supports it. Forms that resistance takes include silence, withdrawal, immobilizing guilt, feeling overly hopeless or overly hopeful, rejection, anger, sarcasm, and argumentation. These reactions are not surprising because mainstream narratives reinforce the idea that society overall is fair, and that all we need to overcome injustice is to work hard and treat everyone the same. While comforting, these platitudes are woefully out-of-sync with scholarly research about how society is structured. Yet the deeply-held beliefs that inform our emotional responses make studying and teaching from a critical stance very difficult. Further complicating the challenges of facilitating social justice content, many instructors who teach these courses occupy marginalized identities, which adds more complications that we will discuss later in this essay (c.f. Dlamini, 2002; King, 1991; Schick & St. Denis, 2003; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

In addition to being asked to question ideology that is deeply internalized and taken for granted, critical engagement rarely provides concrete solutions. This ambiguity can lead to frustration, for our K–12 schooling (especially in Canada and the United States) has conditioned us to seek clear and unambiguous answers. In other projects we have taken on some of these forms of resistance and provided strategies for responding to them (c.f. DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009, 2010, 2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In this essay, we pull these various strategies together and offer an overall framework for critical

engagement. We draw on research and our years of practice teaching social justice content and share the vignettes and guidelines that have been most effective for our own students. A glossary of key terms used can be found at the end of this essay.

An Open Letter to Students

Courses that address social justice and inequality through a critical lens often challenge mainstream understandings and thus bring to the surface patterns and tensions that other courses do not (Gallavan, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008). We believe that this is due, primarily, to two key reasons:

The first is that many of us are *underprepared to engage in the course content in scholarly ways*. Basic study habits, reading comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary, and critical thinking are often underdeveloped in college students. Ironically, much of this is due to structural inequalities that courses like these try to address. For example, political and economic pressures on schools to focus on standardized testing have resulted in moves away from intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and engagement with ambiguity and towards creating conforming and compliant students who can memorize the “one right answer” to pass the test. Differences in the kinds of schooling we receive and the differential futures they prepare us for (e.g. *to manage* versus *to be managed*) are based on structural inequalities related to our race, class, gender and other social locations. These differentials affect our preparation for college and university-level engagement and are examples of the kind of inequalities that social justice oriented courses address. The ultimate goal of social justice education is to enable us to recognize structural inequalities in ways that prepare us to change them. However, the socio-political context of schooling makes critical engagement challenging for many students, and this challenge is heightened when the topics under study are politically and emotionally charged.

This leads to the second reason that courses that address social justice and inequality bring to the surface patterns and tensions that other courses do not: *most of us have very strong feelings and opinions about the topics examined in social justice courses* (such as racism, sexism, and homophobia). These opinions often surface through claims such as:

“People should be judged by what they do, not the color of their skin”

“I accept people for who they are”

“I see people as individuals”

“It’s focusing on difference that divides us”

“My parents taught me that all people are equal”

“I was always taught to treat everyone the same”

“I’ve been discriminated against so I don’t have any privilege”

“Our generation is more open-minded”

“I have friends from all races and we are all fine with each other”

“I don’t think race and gender make any difference – as long as you work hard”

“It’s White males who are the minority now”

“Women are just as sexist as men”

While these opinions are deeply held and appear to be “common sense” truth (and not mere opinion at all), they are predictable, simplistic, and misinformed, given the large body of research examining social relations. Yet, the relentless repetition of these ideas in the mainstream makes them *seem* true, and allows us to form strongly held opinions without being particularly educated on the issues (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Indeed, where we are members of dominant groups (e.g. if we are men, Whites, cisgender, able-bodied), we will almost certainly have a superficial understanding because that is the primary message made available to us through *mainstream* society. Where we are members of minoritized groups (e.g. if we are women, People of Color, transgender, People with disabilities), we may have a deeper personal understanding of social inequality and how it works, but may not have the scholarly language to discuss it in an academic context.

Further, it is a rare individual who is dominant in all key social groups, or conversely is minoritized in all key social groups. Yet messages that circulate in mainstream society do not prepare most of us to conceptualize or develop the language to discuss our intersecting identities in any depth. Take for example the intersection of race and class and consider a White woman who lives in poverty. While she will face many *class* barriers, she will not face *racism*. Yet a poor White woman—while not facing *racism*—will face barriers related to her gender—*sexism*—that a poor White *man* will not. For example, she will be more likely to be held responsible for the care of her children, she will be more likely to earn less than a man, and she will be more at risk for male violence, all of which increase the burden of poverty. Yet mainstream culture tends to present poverty as if there is a collective and shared experience of “the poor.”

Without practice and study beyond what we absorb in our daily living, we are ill prepared to understand social group injustices. Therefore, our perspectives on issues like poverty and social inequality are necessarily lacking—and especially so if we ourselves are not poor. These perspectives include the idea that if we don’t *believe in* things such as social inequality, then we don’t *participate in* them. Mainstream culture prevents us from understanding a central tenet of social justice education: society is structured in ways that make us all complicit in systems of inequality; *there is no neutral ground*. Thus an effective critical social justice course will unsettle mainstream perspectives and institutional discourses, challenge our views about ourselves, what we think we know about society, how it works, and our place in it.

Unfortunately, when we are new to the examination of social relations, we only know one way to respond to ideas studied in the course: “If the professor is saying that I participate in systems of injustice (such as racism), s/he is saying that I am a bad person (a racist).” Later, we should come to understand that this is *not* what our professors are saying, and that binary ways of conceptualizing these issues (good/bad, racist/not-racist) are part of what prevents us from seeing them.

In sum, the combination of under-developed academic skills brought to difficult theoretical concepts and highly charged political content that is absent of complex analysis in mainstream culture, all of which is embedded within an institutional context that is structured to reproduce inequality, make these courses very challenging for most of us. Yet basing our knowledge on such sources as personal opinions, self-concepts, anecdotal evidence, hearsay, intuition, family teachings, popular platitudes, limited

relationships, personal experiences, exceptions, and mainstream media is insufficient for understanding and responding constructively to social injustice.

Therefore, to maximize our learning of social justice content, we offer the following guidelines:

1. Strive for intellectual humility.
2. Recognize the difference between opinions and informed knowledge.
3. Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader societal patterns.
4. Notice your own defensive reactions, and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge.
5. Recognize how your own social *positionality* (such as your race, class, gender, sexuality, ability-status) informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course.

In what follows, we explain these guidelines in more depth and how they can help you engage constructively with social justice content.

A Story: The Question of Planets

Imagine: You are in a course that fulfills a university science requirement. The professor holds a Ph.D. in Astronomy. He has written several books, is widely published in academic journals, and has a national reputation in his field. The course objectives include defining terms used in modern Astronomy and exposure to the practices, methodology, and concepts of the discipline. The professor is reviewing the assigned readings, which present the most established theories in the field. He overviews the scientific community's discussion of the number of planets and states that based on the criteria for what constitutes a planet, only 8 planets are officially recognized in our solar system.

One of the students raises his hand and insists that there are actually 9 planets because that is what he learned in school. He has seen many books with pictures of the planets, and there are always 9. As further evidence, he recites the mnemonic he learned to pass all his science tests: "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas." He states that he had map of the sky in his bedroom as a child and it showed 9 planets. Further, he says, his parents taught him that there were 9 planets and many of his friends also agree that there are 9. He spent his childhood camping out and looking up at the sky and identifying constellations, so he has experience in astronomy. The professor tries to explain to the student that to engage with the planet controversy one must first demonstrate understanding of the criteria for what constitutes a planet, but he is cut off by the student, who declares, "Well, that's your opinion. My opinion is that there are 9."

The professor tries once more to explain that what he presents in regard to the number of planets is not his opinion, but knowledge based on the scholarly community's established criteria for what defines a planet. Although at one time astronomers believed that Pluto qualified as a planet, as with all disciplines, their knowledge evolved. With the discovery of new information and further study they now understand that Pluto doesn't meet the criteria of a planet, in large part due to its shape. This is not an opinion, the professor repeats, but Astronomical theories that have resulted from ongoing research and study. The student replies, "I don't care if Pluto is square, diamond-shaped, or shaped like a banana, it's a planet, and there are 9 planets."

How likely is it that the majority of the class thinks our hypothetical astronomy student is raising a credible point? Would the class admire him for standing up to the professor and expressing the same understanding they had (and were too hesitant to bring up)? Even if his peers did share his view, that would not make his argument valid. It is more likely that he would be seen as having some academic challenges, as somewhat immature, and perhaps even disrespectful. It may even be assumed that he might have trouble passing the class.

Guideline 1: Strive for Intellectual Humility

Our hypothetical student is representative of many of students we encounter; he has not done the readings or has trouble understanding what he's read; he has limited knowledge but is resistant to increasing it; he clings to the same opinions he came into the course with; and he is overly-confident about his position. Scholars have referred to these patterns as a form of *willful ignorance* (Baker, 1990; deCastell, 1993, 2004; Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Schick, 2000). In our experience, students who have trouble understanding what they read seldom re-read, read more slowly, use a dictionary to look up new words, or ask their professors to explain difficult passages. Standardized testing and the punishment and reward system of grades are major contributors to these habits, as they have created a school culture that rewards conformity and single, correct answers over intellectual curiosity and risk-taking. Yet critical social justice education demands a different kind of engagement than most of us have been prepared for in our previous schooling.

Another challenge to intellectual humility is that many of us see social science content as “soft science” and therefore *value-laden* and *subjective*. On the other hand, the natural sciences such as astronomy are seen as “hard science” and therefore *value-neutral* and *objective*. Because of the presumed neutrality of the natural sciences, we are unlikely to argue with astronomy findings until we have some mastery in the field—knowing that we might not fully understand the concepts and theories presented. We are more likely to focus on gaining a basic understanding and not on whether we agree or disagree. If we perform poorly on tests, we might feel frustrated with the professor or material as being “too hard,” but still recognize our own lack of knowledge as the primary cause of the poor performance. Yet in the study of the social sciences—and particularly when the topic is social inequality—the behavior of our imaginary astronomy student is not unusual. In fact, it is common for students to argue with professors prior to achieving mastery of the concepts and theories presented. Furthermore, students frequently cite anecdotal evidence to support their arguments and dismiss course content prior to engaging with the research. And unfortunately, students who “disagree with” social justice content *are* often taken seriously by classmates—even seen as a kind of hero for speaking up to the professor. Seeing the study of social inequality as a form of subjective scholarship, they put it on par with their own personal opinions and often dismiss it out of hand.

In academia (including the social and natural sciences), in order for an argument to be considered legitimate (such as how many planets there are, and whether or not structural racism exists), it must stand up to scrutiny by others who are specialists in the field. This scrutiny is called *peer review*. Peer review is the process by which theories and the research they are based on are examined by other scholars in the field who question,

refine, expand, challenge, and complicate the arguments, expanding the collective knowledge base of the field. Just as the astronomy professor's teachings are more than his "personal opinions," social justice professors' teachings are more than their personal opinions. Both instructors are presenting ideas and theories that have undergone peer review. The overall evidence, theories, arguments, and analysis presented in class are rooted in the peer review process.

Most of us—especially when in introductory critical social justice courses—have seldom previously encountered—much less understood enough to “disagree with” —the scholars we read. Although some of us may bring important first-hand experiences to the issues (such as being a member of a particular *minoritized* group under study), we too can benefit from grappling with any theoretical framework before debating it. For the beginner, grappling with the concepts is the first step. To facilitate doing so, practice the following:

- Read the assigned material carefully. Look up vocabulary words and terminology that are new to you. Accept that you may need to read all or part of the material more than once. Consider reading passages out loud or taking notes of key points as you read. Practice using new terms in class.
- If there are terms or concepts you are still unsure about, raise them in class. It is likely that you are not alone in your confusion. Assume that your instructors appreciate questions that demonstrate engagement and curiosity, rather than apathy and silence that make it difficult to assess student needs.
- Strive to see the connections to ideas and concepts already studied. This will help with your recall, critical thinking, and ability to see the “big picture.”
- Focus on *understanding* rather than *agreement*. Consider whether “I disagree” may actually mean “I don’t understand,” and if so, work on understanding. *Remember, understanding a concept does not require you to agree with it.*
- Practice posing questions. Because most students have been socialized to care more about getting the answers right and less about comprehension, we may fear that asking questions might reveal that we don’t know the answers. Thus, we may make bold statements that lack intellectual humility. These statements could be more usefully framed as questions.
- Be patient and willing to grapple with new and difficult ideas. “Grappling with” ideas means to receive, reflect upon, practice articulating, and seek deeper understanding; grappling is not debate or rejection. The goal is to move us beyond the mere sharing of opinions and toward more informed engagement.

One place where grappling often falls short is in small-group work. For most instructors, the goal of small-group work is for students to spend time thinking through difficult ideas with others in order to deepen understanding and share insights. In addition to the specific prompts and questions that the instructor has given, all of the following could be taken up in small-group work:

- Asking clarifying questions of each other
- Making connections to other readings
- Identifying key concepts and defining terms
- Generating examples that illustrate the concepts under study

- Identifying patterns
- Developing questions
- Questioning relationships between concepts
- Discussing the implications for your own life and work
- Practicing articulating the ideas introduced in the course in order to clarify and increase your comfort discussing them with others
- Identifying and discussing challenging passages

Yet instructors often encounter small groups who are merely reinforcing their previous opinions, have moved on to engage in off-topic social banter, or are sitting in silence, checking email or texting because they are “finished” discussing the topic at hand. From an academic perspective, a small group should never be “done” talking about any topic they are given. Scholars have spent their careers developing these concepts, and a limited number of class minutes is not adequate to finish working through and understanding them. If you find yourself at a standstill, work through the bulleted list above, or ask your instructor for some prompts and check in about how you are doing in your comprehension.

Guideline 2: Everyone has an Opinion. Opinions are not the Same as Informed Knowledge

One of the biggest challenges to attaining Guideline 1—intellectual humility—is the emphasis placed in mainstream culture on the value of opinion. Mainstream culture has normalized the idea that because everyone has an opinion, all opinions are equally valid. For example, local news and radio shows regularly invite callers to share their opinions about questions ranging from “Do you think so-and-so is guilty?” to “Should immigration be restricted?” Reality shows invite us to vote on the best singer or dancer, implying that our opinions are equal to the opinions of professional dancers, singers, choreographers, and producers. While we *might* have an informed opinion, our response certainly does not depend on one. Thus we can easily be fooled into confusing *opinion* (which everyone has) with *informed knowledge* (which few have without on-going practice and study).

Because of this socialization, many of us unwittingly bring the expectation for opinion-sharing into the academic classroom. However, in academia, *opinion is the weakest form of intellectual engagement*. When our comprehension is low and critical thinking skills underdeveloped, expressing our opinion is the easiest response. All of us hold opinions on a topic before we enter a course (as our astronomy student did), and these opinions don’t require us to understand the issues or engage with the course readings at all. Therefore, expressing these opinions simply rehearses what we already think and doesn’t require us to expand, question, or go beneath our ideas. If we aren’t interested in reading what we have been assigned, or do not understand what we have read, the easiest thing to do is to point to a passage in the text and give a personal response to it (e.g., “I loved it when the author said that men dominate because it reminded me of an experience I had...”), or use it to reject the reading out of hand (e.g., “The author said White people have privilege. I totally disagree with that because I know someone who didn’t get a job because he was White!”).

When we make academic claims based on *anecdotal evidence* with regard to the concepts studied—for example claiming, “Now there is reverse racism”—we are in

effect expressing an opinion that is not supported by scholarly evidence. We would not use opinion in astronomy class and believe it unlikely that a student arguing that she or he disagrees with Stephen Hawking on a matter of astronomy would have her or his position taken seriously, much less feel free to make such a claim to begin with. Yet in the social justice classroom, scholars such as Peggy McIntosh, Michel Foucault, and Beverly Tatum are regularly “disagreed with” well before comprehension of their work is mastered. Consider how our astronomy student’s understanding of planets—as well as his understanding of science as an ever-evolving field—could deepen if he was able to engage with current theories about what constitutes a planet. Unfortunately, our hypothetical student’s attachment to his previously held beliefs precludes this possibility.

Because of these tendencies, professors who teach from a critical social justice stance sometimes “shut down” opinion-sharing. However, curtailing the sharing of opinions in class is often perceived as breaking a social rule: “I have the right to my opinion and denying me that right is unfair.” Of course we have a right to our opinions. But our academic goals are not to simply share our pre-existing opinions; our goals are to engage with scholarly evidence and develop the theoretical tools with which to gain a more complex understanding of social phenomena. Yet let us be clear—we *do* want students to offer opinions in order to *reflect on and examine* them; opening one’s opinions to examination is not the same as simply sharing them.

In order to move beyond the level of previously-held opinions, practice the following:

- Reflect on your reasons for pursuing higher education. Many students would say they are going to university or college in order to secure a good career. However, your longevity and success in that career will depend on your critical thinking skills and the depth and breadth of your general knowledge base. How might allowing your worldview to be stretched and challenged actually serve your future career interests?
- Recognize that you do not have to agree with what you are studying in order to learn from it. Let go of the idea that you must agree with a perspective you are studying in order for it to be valid or “worth learning.”
- Practice posing open-ended questions rather than closed questions that invite yes/no responses or debate. Closed questions often begin with “Should” or “Do you agree” (e.g., “Should schools ban soda machines?” or “Do you agree that opportunity is not equal?”). The limitation of these questions is that the debate format does not leave much room for examining grey areas—the space between an either/or, yes/no frameworks. Closed questions can also be answered with an easy yes or no which prevents a nuanced engagement with complex issues.
- Practice developing quality questions. For example, using John Taylor Gatto’s “Seven Lesson Schoolteacher” (1992), strong questions could include: “Consider Gatto’s argument that all teachers teach the 7 lessons. On a continuum from ‘Yes absolutely’ on one end, to ‘No absolutely not’ on the other, position yourself in relation to his argument. Explain why you have positioned yourself there.” Use phrases such as, “Under what conditions...” and “To what extent...”; For example, “*Under what conditions* might we avoid teaching Gatto’s lessons?” “*To what extent* does the school curriculum influence teacher autonomy?” Use the course readings to support your position. Questions connected to texts should require familiarity with the text to answer. For example, “Identify two of Gatto’s

7 lessons and find examples you have seen in schools.” If someone can respond to the question without ever having read the text, it is not a strong question. Questions may also ask people to *re-imagine*. For example, “Using the readings, design the ideal classroom. Describe the guidelines for student engagement in this ideal classroom. How would the curriculum and pedagogical activities be organized? How would you assess your goals?”

Guideline 3: Let go of Anecdotal Evidence and Instead Examine Patterns

Anecdotal evidence is evidence drawn from hearsay or only personal experience, and thus anecdotal evidence is superficial, limited to personal interpretation, and not generalizable. For example, many of us have heard something similar to, “My cousin tried to get a job, but they hired an unqualified Black guy instead because they had to fill a quota.” Because mainstream education and media seldom teaches us how social inequality works, most of the evidence we rely on to understand issues of social justice is anecdotal.

But the goals of college and university classes are to expand one’s ability to make sense of everyday events, issues, and incidences. In other words, to offer new and more complex sense-making systems. One of the more important academic skills we can develop is the ability to apply a new sense-making framework to something we currently make sense of using another framework.

To illustrate this concept of *frameworks*, imagine that you have pain in your leg and go to your doctor. Your doctor would likely examine your leg, feel the bones and muscles, and perhaps take X-rays to identify the source of the pain. If, however, you went to an alternative (from a Western perspective) medical practitioner, such as a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), she might have a completely different way of examining your body and identifying the source of the pain. She may begin by looking at your tongue and examining other parts of your body. A chiropractor might not examine your leg at all, but instead begin work on your spine.

If we are taking a course studying how humans understand the body and conceptualize healing, then we are less interested in which practitioner is “right” and which is “wrong” in their approach to identifying the source of your pain. We are more interested in the various frameworks each practitioner uses, the scholarly community that informs the ideas that practitioner draws on, and what each framework offers us in terms of understanding how the body works and how humans conceptualize illness and healing. Just as the TCM doctor offers a new way of understanding how your body works, the critical social justice framework offers us a new way of understanding how society works.

Another popular approach many of us take when we encounter a new and unfamiliar framework, is to focus on one or two exceptions in order to disprove the framework under study. For example, when reading scholarship describing racism as structural, we may cite sensational examples such as Barack Obama as proof that “anyone can make it.” We may also use personal stories to “prove” that structural oppression doesn’t exist (or has now “reversed” direction), such as in the story above about the cousin who didn’t get a job and believes this is because the company had to fill a racial quota. Although it is a common White myth that people of Color must be (unfairly) hired over Whites, it is false and problematic for at least three reasons. First,

it's misinformed because hiring quotas are actually illegal. Affirmative Action in the United States or Employment Equity in Canada are not hiring requirements programs, but a system of *goals for the hiring of qualified people who are underrepresented in a given field*. Second, all of the evidence demonstrates that people of Color are *discriminated against* in hiring, not preferred (Alexander, 2010; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Dechief & Oreopoulos, 2012). Third, the story above rests on an embedded racist assumption that the only reason a person of Color *could* have been hired over the cousin is because of a quota and not because the person of Color was in fact more qualified, or equally qualified but brought a needed perspective that the cousin did not.

Focusing on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences prevents us from seeing the overall, societal patterns. While there are always exceptions to the rule, exceptions also *illustrate* the rule. Yes, people from oppressed groups occasionally rise to the top in dominant society. But the historical, measurable, and predictable evidence is that this is an atypical occurrence. If we focus exclusively on those exceptional occurrences, we miss the larger structural patterns. Focusing on the exceptions also precludes a more nuanced analysis of the role these exceptions play in the system overall.

The following questions offer a constructive way to engage with the course content and support Guideline 3:

- How can using a critical framework expand my understanding of this phenomena? For example, let's say you are White and have spent time abroad. You have enjoyed the food and cultures of places such as China, Mexico, or Morocco, but have also felt discriminated against (ignored, stereotyped, made fun of) because you are White and from the US or Canada. Why, you might wonder, aren't the locals more open to you when you are being so open to them—maybe even learning a bit of their language? You offer this anecdote as an example that illustrates that everyone is racist in some ways. Now imagine that you are grappling with a new framework to make sense of your experience. You are studying key concepts such as *whiteness*, *globalization*, and *hegemony*. How can using this framework help you contextualize your experience within larger macro-dynamics?
- Am I able to identify the larger group patterns at play in any individual example? In other words, if my best friend lives with a disability, how can my friendship provide me with a view into the broader patterns of external, structural, internal, and additudinal barriers faced by persons with disabilities? I may assume that I am outside of ablesim because I am open to this friendship when others are not. Yet how can considering overall patterns help me recognize how my friendship is situated in relation to broader social dynamics—dynamics that intentions and individual practices alone cannot overcome?
- Do I recognize that when I claim that my friend's disability is not an issue in our friendship, that I am sharing my own limited perspective, because my experiences are interpreted from my positionality as someone who is considered able-bodied? What might the risks be for my friend to disagree with me or try to give me feedback on unaware ableist assumptions I may be making? Do I have the skills to respond to this feedback without defensiveness and denial? Using another example, we often hear heterosexual students make claims such as, "There was one gay guy in our school and no one had an issue with him." Yet we can assume

that that “one gay guy” has a very different story. Indeed, when we have students in our classes from minoritized groups, they invariably tell us of the misery of high school and all of the unconscious attitudes and behaviors from the dominant group that they had to endure. Our anecdotes are not universal, they are from a particular perspective; they will necessarily be filtered through our blind spots and on their own are not sufficient evidence.

Guideline 4: Use Your Reactions as Entry Points for Gaining Deeper Self-Knowledge

Because social justice courses directly address emotionally and politically charged issues, they can be upsetting. For many of us, this is the first time we have experienced a sustained examination of inequality—especially where we are in dominant groups. Further, much of what is presented is counter to everything we have previously been taught. In addition, these courses typically ask us to connect ourselves personally to the issues under study, triggering patterns of resistance such as those previously discussed. For those of us who have experienced inequality in key dimensions of our lives, it can be painful to see the explicit resistance and hostility of classmates.

Although the frameworks used in these courses do not claim that people in dominant groups are “bad,” many of us hear it that way because our current sense-making framework says that participation in inequality is something that only bad people do. Until we have a critical social justice framework—which requires a whole new paradigm of sense making—we often find it difficult to remain open, especially if we are a member of a dominant group under study. Defensiveness, cognitive dissonance, and even feelings of guilt, shame, and grief are not uncommon. In some ways, these kinds of feelings indicate movement and change, and although unpleasant, they are not necessarily problematic. The key to whether these feelings play a constructive or destructive role lies in what we do with them. We can, of course, use them as “proof” that the class content and approach is “wrong” and reject all that we are being taught. But there is no growth for us in this reaction. Rather than allow these emotions to block our growth, we can use them as entry points into greater self-knowledge, and content knowledge.

Conversely, where we belong to minoritized groups, these courses can surface emotions for different reasons. Feelings such as anger, frustration, shame, grief, and that we are under a spotlight are common and can also get in the way of our academic development. However, the analysis, evidence, and conceptual language offered by social justice education can provide the tools with which to challenge the relations of oppression that lead to these feelings. Indeed, the evidence and analysis presented should reveal that the challenges you have faced are not due to your own individual shortcomings but are in large-part the product of socially organized, structural barriers. As such, these barriers can be identified and acted against. In this way, rather than increase a sense of hopelessness and immobilization, courses such as this have the potential to empower.

Returning to our astronomy student, we can see that upon receiving information that challenged his worldview, he was unable to use his emotional reactions constructively. Instead, he categorically rejected the information, ending with a somewhat nonsensical claim that Pluto was still a planet, even if it was shaped like a banana. This is the equivalent to claiming that “I treat people the same regardless of

whether they are ‘red, yellow, green, purple, polka-dotted, or zebra-striped.’” Simplistic platitudes often surface when we are faced with evidence that fundamentally challenges our worldviews. For example, the evidence that racism not only exists, but is systemic and implicates everyone is a difficult idea for many of us. But popular platitudes such as “I don’t care if you’re purple” are problematic for at least two reasons: First, colorblindness is not actually possible—we *do in fact* see race and it *does have* social meaning and consequences; second, people do not come in these colors so claims about green, purple and polka-dotted people renders race ridiculous and trivializes the realities of racism.

Social justice content can trigger strong reactions, but these reactions can be constructive if we use them as entry points to deeper self-awareness, rather than as exit points from further engagement.

Practice the following approaches to the course content in support of Guideline 4:

- How does considering the course content or an author’s analysis challenge or expand the way I see the world?
- How have I been shaped by the issues the author is addressing? For example, if the author is talking about the experiences of the poor and I was raised middle class, what does their perspective help me see about what it means to have been raised middle class?
- What about my life in relation to my race/class/gender might make it difficult for me to see or validate this new perspective?
- What do my reactions reveal about what I perceive is at risk were I to accept this information?
- If I were to accept this information as valid, what might be ethically required of me?

Guideline 5: Recognize how Your Social Position Informs Your Reactions to Your Instructor and Those Whose Work you Study in the Course

Positionality is the concept that our perspectives are based on our positions within society. Positionality recognizes that where you stand in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand. For example, if I am considered an able-bodied person, my position in a society that devalues people with disabilities limits my understanding of the barriers people with disabilities face. I simply won’t “see” these barriers, in large part because I don’t have to—society is structured to accommodate the way I use my body.

Guideline 5 addresses the perception that the content of the class is subjective, value-based, and political, while the content of mainstream courses is objective, value-neutral, and unpartisan. We discussed this perception under Guideline 3 as it relates to common views on the social sciences. Here, we want to consider this perception using the lens of positionality, and as it relates to the instructors of these courses. Because instructors of critical social justice content are more likely to *name* their positionality and encourage students to do the same, they are often seen as more biased. Mainstream courses rarely if ever name the positionality of the texts they study (for example, the idea that Columbus *discovered* America is from the colonizer’s perspective, but certainly not from the perspective of Indigenous peoples). Unfortunately, because acknowledging

one's positionality is a rare occurrence in mainstream courses, doing so reinforces students' perceptions of mainstream courses as *objective* and critical social justice courses as *subjective*. Yet all knowledge is taught from a particular perspective; the power of dominant knowledge depends in large part on its presentation as neutral and universal (Kincheloe, 2008).

In order to understand the concept of knowledge as never purely objective, neutral, and outside of human interests, it is important to distinguish between discoverable "laws" of the natural world (such as the law of gravity), and "knowledge," which is socially constructed. By *socially constructed*, we mean that all knowledge understood by humans is framed by the ideologies, language, beliefs, and customs of human societies. Even the field of science is subjective (the study of which is known as *the sociology of scientific knowledge*). For example, consider scientific research and how and when it is conducted. Which subjects are funded and which are not (the moon's atmosphere, nuclear power, atmospheric pollution, or stem cells)? Who finances various types of research (private corporations, non-profits, or the government)? Who is invested in the results of the research (for-profit pharmaceutical companies, the military, or non-profit organizations)? How do these investments drive what is studied and how? How will the research findings be used? Who has access to the benefits of the research? As you can see, these are not neutral questions—they are political, and they frame the way in which knowledge is created, advanced, and circulated. Because of this, knowledge is never value-neutral.

To illustrate the concept of knowledge as socially constructed and thus never outside of human values and subjectivity, consider an example of a tree – a seemingly neutral object whose existence is simply a physical fact that can be observed. Yet notice that how we *see* the tree is connected to our meaning-making frameworks (and thus is not neutral at all). First, consider our perceptions of its *size*. A tree that looks big to someone who grew up on the East Coast might not look big to someone who grew up on the West Coast.

Next, consider our perceptions of its *meaning* or *purpose*; these will be shaped by our perspectives and interests. For example, an environmentalist might see a limited resource. A member of the Coast Salish nation might see a sacred symbol of life. A logger or a farmer might see employment. A scientist might see a specimen to be dissected and studied. Further, while it may appear that the logger and the farmer have shared interests, in fact their interests are opposite; the logger would see employment only if the tree is cut down, while the farmer would see employment only if the tree is not cut down. Now let's add the layer of *political power*. Who owns the tree? Who has "the right" to cut it down and profit from it? Would the logger, tribal member, environmentalist and scientist all agree on this matter of ownership? Whose interests are served by the concept that nature can be owned at all? And who's in the position to impose this concept on others? Who takes the idea of ownership for granted, and who doesn't? What kind of resources, institutions, and larger interests are behind each of these individuals and how do they influence whose interests will prevail?

Finally, how are these interests informed by the specific time and place in which they occur? In other words, what is considered "valid" scientific research today (from a Western perspective) is not the same as what was considered valid in the past. So while a tree may be an objective, factual, and "real" object that exists independently of humans,

our understanding of—and thus our interaction with it—cannot be separated from the cultural context we are currently embedded in. In other words, humans can only make meaning of the tree from the cultural frameworks into which they have been socialized. And so it goes for history, physics, and all fields studied in academia. Knowledge is always culturally informed and thus cannot be value-neutral.

Many educators use the metaphor of a fish in water to capture the all-encompassing dimensions of culture. A fish is born into water and so simply experiences the water as one with itself; a fish has no way of knowing that it is actually separate from the water. And although the fish *is* separate, it still cannot survive without water. In the same way that a fish cannot live without water, we cannot make sense of the world without the meaning-making system that our culture provides. Yet this system is hard to see because we have always been “swimming” within it; we just take for granted that what we see is real, rather than a particular perception of reality. For these reasons, social justice educators name our positionality (the currents and waters we swim in) in order to make the socially constructed nature of knowledge visible and to challenge the claim that any knowledge is neutral. Yet ironically, that naming is often used to reinforce the idea that social justice content and those who present it as driven by personal agendas and special interests, and thus less legitimate.

Because instructors who teach critical social justice courses often belong to minoritized groups, and because they name these groups, they are often perceived as having a personal bias. In other words, they are viewed as if they only teach these courses because they are “minorities” and have an “axe to grind.” Because the instructors are seen as simply pushing their personal agendas, students often feel more comfortable to explicitly disagree with the curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, this challenge further illustrates how unimaginable our example of the astronomy student is. The instructor in our scenario is most likely a White male, as is the vast majority of higher education faculty (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2009). White males overall hold more social authority and are seen as more objective, and thus students are less likely to argue with them (Rudman & Kiliansky, 2000). In other words, the positionality of the White male professor usually remains unnamed. That, along with the presumed neutral content of a subject like astronomy, means students respond to this instructor and the course as though they were value-neutral. In contrast, because the positionality of a woman of Colour professor, teaching a social justice course is named, both she and the course are presumed to be value-driven.

Ultimately, one or two courses in our academic career are not enough to “brainwash” us or deny us the ability to think freely. In fact, the opposite is true: The more depth, perspective, and complexity we can bring to bear on how we and others view and understand the world, the clearer, more nuanced, and ultimately freer our thinking can become. Returning to our astronomy student, it isn’t necessary for his positionality to align with the instructors in order for him to consider the framework the instructor is using.

The following practices support Guideline 5:

- Identify your social positionality and stay attentive to how it informs your response to the course context (e.g., your race, class, gender). What “blind spots” might you have as a result of your social groups? In other words, what are the things you can and can’t see based on the social positions you hold or don’t hold?

- Recognize the perspective embedded in all texts (such as textbooks, newspaper articles, and TV news), especially those that don't explicitly name them. Are the ideas presented as if they have no perspective and apply universally to all people, regardless of social positionality? If so, practice seeking out and considering alternative perspectives informed by a range of positionalities.
- As you study the content of your course, it is important for you to continuously consider the interplay between your positionality and that of your instructor. If the instructor represents perspectives and/or experience with key minoritized groups (women, People of Color, persons with disabilities, gay, lesbian, or trans people), you could welcome the opportunity to hear perspectives seldom represented in mainstream education. Support the course for the opportunity it offers, rather than undermining it because the concepts are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or difficult.

Grading

Grading in a course whose primary goal is to challenge *social stratification* is not without its irony. Activist and scholar Audre Lorde (1984) captures this irony when she states that, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” By this she means that in using the tools of the system we are more likely to uphold that system than to challenge it. As instructors, we recognize that by grading, we are upholding an institutional system that ranks students hierarchically, and such rankings are part of the very systems we seek to challenge. Still, many of us choose to work within the system, despite its constraints, in order to challenge the system. The traditional grading system is one of those constraints we must work with.

Mainstream schooling places a tremendous emphasis on grades, and the prevalence of high-stakes testing has only intensified this emphasis. Grades convey powerful ideas about our presumed intellectual abilities and these ideas influence what education we will have access to (through tracking into “gifted” or “special” programs and ability grouping). We are placed into academic tracks as early as 1st grade and these tracks have very real consequences for the kinds of careers we will have access to later in life (Oakes, 1985). Thus an understandable but regrettable outcome of tracking based on grades in K–12 schooling is that we may care more about the grades we receive than about the knowledge we gain.

The focus on grades often shapes our very identities and sense of self-worth, further complicating the dynamics of grading. This identity is often reinforced outside of schools as we earn praise or punishment from our families based on our grades. While some of us who have not been successful within this system come to feel fortunate just to earn a C, those of us who have generally been successful by the measure of grades often feel *entitled* to As. It is not uncommon for these students to claim, “I am an A student!” Students with such an identity may feel frustrated—even personally slighted—when receiving grades that challenge this identity.

Although we as instructors are aware of the complexities and contradictions of grading, we are also deeply invested in student comprehension of the course concepts. The grading system is one of the primary tools we must use to both measure and communicate our assessment of this comprehension. We encourage students to keep the following in mind when considering the dynamics of grading:

In Order to Grade Comprehension, Instructors Must see Demonstration of Comprehension

Whether in assignments or in class participation and discussion, we must *demonstrate* understanding. Comprehension can be demonstrated in written, verbal, and active forms (such as presentations and projects).

Assessing our comprehension verbally is generally done through class discussions and question and answer sessions. However, assessing comprehension verbally can be challenging for instructors if we don't speak up in class. For example, how many times have you witnessed your instructor posing a question to the whole class only to be met by silence? Looking out into a room full of students, most of whom are not responding, instructors are left to assume that these students cannot answer the question. Students sometimes say later that they did not respond because the answer was "so obvious" that it did not require a response. Yet how can our instructors know that we understand if we do not respond when questions are posed in class, even if the answers to those questions seem obvious?

Another common explanation for silence is that someone has already said what we were thinking. Yet from an instructor's perspective, it is fine to repeat (or better yet, to build on) an idea that another student has already stated. No two people will say it exactly alike, and it is important to practice articulating these concepts in your own words in order to develop your critical social justice literacy. Any statement can be expanded, deepened, or in other ways supported. At the minimum, if students repeat what others have said, instructors can gain a sense of how many students are thinking similarly, or struggling with understanding key ideas. This is valuable information for instructors in terms of assessing the collective understanding of the group as well as the comprehension levels of individual students. For these reasons, we encourage students to give some kind of verbal response when asked questions in class, even if it is to say that one does not know, is not sure, or only has a partial answer.

In regard to demonstrating understanding in written work, we evaluate this work by assessing how well written, organized, and clear it is, and how well the submitted work meets the goals of the assignment. The work should (at minimum) be proofread for errors, use academic language, avoid colloquialisms, conform to a standard style of citation, use inclusive language, and stay within the guidelines of the assignment description. These are all *baseline* indicators of the degree of student achievement in a written assignment. Perceptive integration of course readings and lectures in a student's own words, relevant use of examples, and insightful connections can transform an adequately written assignment into an excellent (or "A") assignment. These criteria are usually communicated to students in either the course syllabus or assignment description. Thus in order to most accurately grade comprehension we must see evidence of comprehension in both verbal participation and written work.

Effort is Not the Same as Understanding

When students are worried about their grades or are making a case for the grade they believe they should receive, they often claim that they "worked really hard." These students feel that they should be rewarded for that hard work with an A. The reason this argument rarely makes much headway with instructors is because we are grading student *demonstration of understanding* of content, not the perceived degree of effort expended to achieve it.

Consider this story as analogy: I am taking swimming lessons. My goal is to compete in an upcoming match. I see myself as putting in a lot of effort by making the time to show up for practice, following my coach's instructions, and swimming the number of laps I am assigned. My coach, however, *expects* that I will show up and complete my practice sessions; thus, s/he is focused on other things such as how I hold my body while swimming, my breathing pattern, hip and shoulder movements, smoothness of stroke, and speed. In the end, my coach will determine whether I am ready to compete. This determination will be made based on my demonstrated ability that I am ready, regardless of the degree of effort it takes me to reach that point, and certainly not on the mere fact that I showed up for my lessons and got in the pool.

In a similar way, we are grading students on the degree of demonstrated understanding of studied concepts and not on perceptions of effort, especially because what we as instructors see as effort and what a student sees as effort are often not the same. For some students, showing up to class, listening, and handing in assignments are viewed as evidence of effort. For instructors, this level of effort qualifies as the *minimum* expectation for all student. Still, we are not grading on how "hard" a student works but on the *outcome* of that work.

The following are common (yet not relevant) student rationales for why they should get a grade higher than what was earned:

- "I worked really hard."
- "I am an A student."
- "I came to all the classes."
- "I listened."
- "I spent hours doing the readings."
- "I talked in class discussions."
- "I handed in all my assignments."
- "I have never thought about these things before."
- "I'm really interested in these issues."
- "I've had other courses like this one so I already know all this."
- "I have to get a good grade or I will have to drop out."
- "I have been going through a lot of personal issues this semester."
- "I learned so much in this class."

Student rationales such as these are familiar to many instructors, and we understand that they are driven by real anxieties about grades. However, we urge our students to challenge this anxiety because it thwarts the process of authentic learning.

A final note on grading: Students often believe that the reason they received a poor grade was because the instructor didn't like something they said in class, or because they disagreed with the instructor. Every institution has an appeal process for students who feel they have not been graded fairly by an instructor. This makes it very difficult to lower a student's grade just because of something they said. While classroom assessments have some degree of subjectivity, an instructor has to be able to account for a grade they gave in terms of guidelines for the assignment, as well as in terms that are clear to a mediating third party. Because of this accountability, an instructor's grading criteria are usually clearly stated in the syllabus or on assignment sheets.

Conclusion

Many college and university courses provide opportunities that are rare in any other dimension of life: critical engagement with new ideas; the opportunity to hear and consider multiple perspectives; the expansion of one's capacity to understand and talk about complex social issues; guidance in the examination of our identities, socialization, and meaning-making frameworks; and the tools to build a more just society.

Unfortunately, the focus on grades minimizes these opportunities.

We find that students who let go of their attachment to grades and put their energy into sincerely grappling with the content tend to do well. Worrying about grades detracts from the ability to focus on content and can become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The following reflection questions may be useful in lessening this attachment:

- Am I willing to consider that I may not be qualified to assess my performance in a course, especially one in which new concepts are being introduced?
- Do I expect an A in all of my courses, and if so, why? Is it because I have always received As, or is it because I have demonstrated mastery of course concepts?
- When I ask my instructor, "How am I doing?" am I asking them to provide me with valuable feedback about what my performance conveys about my comprehension and how it might be improved, or am I asking them to tell me what grade I will receive?

We sincerely hope that our students find our courses valuable in terms of the knowledge and insight gained. It has been our experience that this is most likely achieved when we focus more on mastery of content than on the final grade.

General Reflection Questions to maximize learning of social justice content

1. If I wasn't worried about my grade, how would my engagement in this class shift?
2. Which of the various guidelines detailed in this essay are the most challenging to me, and why? How can I meet these challenges?
3. What degree of responsibility am I willing to take for getting the most out of this course (e.g., coming to class prepared and having completed the reading, engaging in large-group discussions, not dominating discussions, asking questions for clarity, speaking respectfully in class, and using academic rather than colloquial discourse)?
4. What degree of responsibility am I willing to take to support my peers in getting the most from this course (e.g., engaging in discussions, not dominating discussions, listening respectfully when others speak, taking the small-group discussions seriously, coming to class prepared and having completed the reading)?
5. Many students think about higher education solely as a stepping-stone to employment, and thus the only knowledge that is worthwhile is knowledge they see as directly connected to getting a job. We ask you to consider what other kinds of skills higher education can provide, and how these skills are also connected to future employment. If you think beyond a strictly vocational approach, what skills do citizens in a global democracy need? How are these skills also important to any future work you do?

Vocabulary List

Anecdotal Evidence: Evidence that is based on personal stories and single, isolated or non-representative examples—e.g. "I know a guy that...and that proves that..."

Cisgender: Persons whose gender identity matches their biologically defined sex; their identity aligns with the sex category assigned to them at birth (male or female).

Dominant Group: The group at the top of the social hierarchy. In any relationship between groups that define each other (men/women, able-bodied/person with disability), the dominant group is the group that is valued more highly (avoid referring to the minoritized group as “non” dominant group, e.g. “non-White”). Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged. Dominant groups have greater access to the resources of society and benefit from the existence of the inequality.

Framework: A fundamental theory, paradigm, or thought pattern through which we make meaning of a given phenomena; a particular way of seeing and knowing.

Globalization: The process by which corporations and other large enterprises exert international influence. In exerting this influence, they channel resources away from local communities and usually erode local industry, culture, environment, and identity.

Hegemony: The imposition of dominant group ideology onto everyone in society. Hegemony makes it difficult to escape or to resist “believing in” this dominant ideology, thus social control is achieved through conditioning rather than physical force or intimidation.

Ideology: The big, shared ideas of a society that are reinforced throughout all of the institutions and thus are very hard to question or avoid believing. These ideas include the stories, myths, representations, explanations, definitions, and rationalizations that are used to justify inequality in the society. Individualism and Meritocracy are examples of ideology.

Intersectionality: The term used to refer to the reality that we occupy multiple social groups. Some of these groups are dominant in society and some are not. For example, one may be minoritized as a female but privileged as White; minoritized as a person with a disability but privileged as male; and so on. Thus, while all persons with disabilities suffer under ableism, they will have a different experience interacting with dominant society based on whether they are male or female, White or a person of Color—e.g. a person of Color with a disability will *also* be dealing with racism, while a White person with a disability will not.

Mainstream Society: The dominant framework for making sense of society that is circulated across all institutions and that all members are exposed to. The dominant framework includes everyday films, TV shows, advertisements, public school curriculum, holidays and the stories, myths, representations, explanations, definitions, theories, and historical perspectives that are used to rationalize and hide inequality.

Minoritized Group: A social group that is devalued in society and given less access to resources. This devaluing encompasses how the group is represented, what degree of

access to resources it is granted, and how the unequal access is rationalized. Traditionally, a group in this position has been referred to as the minority group. However, this language has been replaced with the term minoritized in order to capture the active dynamics that create the lower status in society, and also to signal that a group's status is not necessarily related to how many or few of them there are in the population at large.

Objective: Perceiving something as factual and not informed by social or cultural interpretations; a universal truth outside of any particular framework. Thus, a person or position that is seen as objective is seen as having the ability to transcend social or cultural frameworks and analyze without bias or self-interest.

Peer Review: The evaluation of scholarly work—often done anonymously to ensure fairness—by peers with expertise in the same field in order to maintain or enhance the excellence of the work in that field and to advance knowledge.

Platitude: a trite, simplistic, and meaningless statement, often presented as if it were significant and original, e.g. “*I didn't own slaves*” or “*People just need to take personal responsibility.*”

Positionality: The recognition that where you stand in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand about yourself and others.

Social Stratification: The concept that social groups are relationally positioned and ranked into a hierarchy of unequal value (e.g. people without disabilities are seen as more valuable than people with disabilities). This ranking is used to justify the unequal distribution of resources among social groups.

Subjective: An individual's personal perspective, feelings, beliefs, interests, or experience, as opposed to those made from a source considered independent, unbiased, universal, and objective. A person or position that is considered subjective is assumed to be biased and/or self-interested, while a person considered to be objective is seen as unbiased and outside of any cultural influences.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity does not match the sex category assigned at birth (male or female); they may feel themselves to be neither like a woman or a man, that they are a combination of both genders, or that their gender is opposite to their sex. A transgender person can appear to others to partially, occasionally, or entirely perform their gender in a way that does not conform to traditional gender roles.

Whiteness: The academic term used to capture the all-encompassing dimensions of White privilege, dominance, and assumed superiority in society. These dimensions include: ideological, institutional, social, cultural, historical, political, and interpersonal.

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