

Construction Zone: Approaching social justice in the classroom
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Prologue

I was asked, “How do you feel about the war in Iraq?” by a student in a class offered during the Spring of 2003.¹ In the days and weeks leading up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, I had been taking time at the beginning of class to give students an opportunity to talk with each other about their concerns, feelings, thoughts, and support. I made it clear at the first of these conversations that I didn’t see this as an invitation to debate, or try to convince anyone of anything. Rather, I saw this as an invitation to relate with one another at a person to person level. I shared with students my belief that respectful, non-violent, and compassionate conversations can help individuals, families, and communities move from polemic contexts to purposeful contexts.

When I was asked this question, I saw an opportunity to genuinely share my thoughts with students, open up my thoughts to student reflections, and make a link to the week’s reading on contextual social work practice.² This is what I said:

I feel horrible about the war. I think you’d be hard pressed to find someone who feels differently. One can feel terrible about people dying—Americans, the British, Iraqis—from a position of “support” or a position of “opposition” to the action itself. I don’t think it’s very meaningful to spend time in conversation about my *feelings* in relation to the war. I don’t think it is a rich discursive space, rife with possibilities for deconstruction, reflection, and action. Rather, I’d be interested in talking about what makes war possible. What does war rely on? What are the relationships between people and people, and people and things, that make war possible? What institutions and structures make war possible? What discourses are essential to war? What kind of power and privilege makes war possible? To me, this is what we should be talking about. Would modern, legal war be possible if we refused to consider violence a legitimate approach to solving disputes, or if we offered every young person in the United States financial support for going to college? Is it relevant that the majority of people killed or wounded, American and Iraqi alike, come from poor or working class families? Might we want to consider that the overwhelming majority of people making military decisions, American and Iraqi alike, are men? Military and political conflicts exist within a context, just—as you learned from this week’s reading—as do individual, family, organizational, and community conflict.

¹ SW104: Introduction to Social Work and Social Work Institutions is a “lower division general education” class. This means it is open to the entire campus community, regardless of year or major. As it satisfies one of the general education area requirements for graduation from the university, it tends to include a large proportion of first year college students and students with a wide range of academic interests.

² In my teaching, this includes practice informed by postmodern, post- or non-structuralist, critical, and social constructionist perspectives (see, for example, Hoffman, 1989; Saleebey, 1997).

Contextual social work practice requires the student, researcher, and/or practitioner to recognize the multiple contexts that influence and are influenced by people's lived experience. Modern liberal theory, however, which has come to dominate much of social policy in western cultures (see "The Declaration of Rights of 1765," "The Declaration of Rights of 1774," and "The Declaration of Independence"), has also come to influence perspectives on therapeutic and educational practice (White, 2001). Thus, modern liberal theory "enshrines the individual's right to the ownership of private property...to improve one's assets, or mine [one's property] in order to capitalize on one's resources" (White, 2001, p. 8). Individual possession of one's own identity is similarly regarded as a personal property issue. Thus, "it became possible for one to cultivate one's properties to improve one's assets, to mine one's properties in order to capitalize on one's resources" (White, 2001, p. 8). In the helping professions this has resulted in a dominant professional discourse that says we are there to "liberate" people from their suffering. That is, we are there to free people from their servitude so they can exploit their inalienable, God-given rights to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and property.

When posed with the question about Iraq I linked "the liberation of the Iraqi people" with the idea that helping someone involves "pulling them out from their problems," "showing people the error of their ways," "offering people solutions to their problems," "breaking through denial," and other metaphors that hijack people's lived experience from them in favor of the naturalistic "rights" they have been too oppressed to excavate and consume.

Liberation therapy assumes that there are those who have access to knowledge that is considered legitimate, and that these very same people are the only ones who can legitimately exercise technologies of power that come along with these privileged knowledges. Liberation therapies are those therapies embedded in an explicit power structure that has one person, the expert professional, liberating another person. This is in contrast to those therapies which invite people to step into their own liberation, to begin seeing themselves as already powerful. *Liberation* therapy is heroic, it uses power to free people from the shackles that bind them. *Liberatory* therapy is humble, it aims to assist people in pursuing their existing preferences for living.

Oppression and liberation in the classroom

Towards the middle of the semester in a class I facilitate that offers students a place to reflect on volunteer work—many students of whom are working with people in social service settings for their first time—a student shared with the class that she was finding it hard to work under the influence of so much oppression. Her volunteer work was spent in an agency that serves individuals and families dealing with homelessness. She said that everyone who came into the building was "oppressed," and that she was feeling hopeless and without energy after encountering so many oppressed people.

To Judy and the rest of the class I offered a different way of thinking about oppression. Rather than seeing oppression as part of someone's identity, that is, equating a person with oppression (the person *is* oppressed), what might become possible if we were to see

oppression as external to the person? If we constructed oppression as something that influences people *and is influenced by people*, would we then have the opportunity to bear witness to people's acts of resistance? How might Judy's level of hope and stores of energy be supported and strengthened were she to spend time discovering the varied ways in which people stand up to, or act courageously in the face of, oppression? Totalizing a person or group's identity as "oppressed" limits possibilities for seeing their power and acts of resistance. When Judy came back the following week, she shared a renewed interest in working with people living in conditions of homelessness.

I do not mean to suggest that using "oppressed" to describe a person or group ought to be banished. Rather, those ways in which people's identities contradict this description ought to be acknowledged as well. Such a construct of oppression, consistent with many contemporary academics and/or activists (see Anderson and Collins, 2001), sees oppression as constantly being remade and as emerging out of lived experience and practice, not as a fixed state of being. There is much hope for individual, familial, community, and cultural liberation within a relational understanding of oppression. This is because oppression cannot ever fully describe a system of relations however oppressive that system of relations is. In analyzing systems of power in the tradition of Michel Foucault, Michael White (2002) suggests, "If systems of power are very rarely ever total in their effects...then examples of opposition to the relations of modern power, or of actions that represent a refusal of its requirements, will be ever present. It is through the analysis of the operations of modern power that this opposition might be rendered more visible and richly known, acknowledged and, under certain circumstances, celebrated" (p. 36).

Oppression is generated and maintained, not lingering from past epochs. It operates through discourse—through the ways of knowing, ways of talking, ways of understanding, ways of describing, and ways of acting manifest at a day-to-day level. Robert Moore (2001) illustrates examples of some of these techniques and technologies of oppression recursively acting in and on the English language through use of color symbolism, as in "black sheep," "black ball," "the pot calling the kettle black," and "white lies" (p. 323). We might note as well the "master-slave" relationship used to describe a photographer's flash and its remote sensor, or the hierarchical structure of computer hardware. I have been driven to writing several letters to the editors of local newspapers in response to "crime" stories that report only the ethnicity of those who are not-white, regardless of their role in the alleged crime.

The dominant approach to education in the United States is liberation pedagogy.³ The instructor serves to liberate the student from her/his naiveté, from the shackles of thoughtlessness that bind her/him to second class status, thereby raising the student up

³ I would like to emphasize that I am using the term "liberation" to mean influenced by liberal theory, as opposed to "liberatory." Liberation pedagogy and education is limited by histories of power and privilege, while "liberatory pedagogy" (Freire, 1970), opens up possibilities for people's use of their pre-existing power. Marilyn French (1986) regards the distinction as "power over," versus "power within," respectively.

from her/his darkness⁴ to harvest the seeds sown by her/his instructor. This is done through the dissemination of knowledge for which “higher education has served as the guardian and gatekeeper” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 155).

My personal commitments lie with a liberatory pedagogy. As with the context of war and the context of social work practice, my goal in teaching is to offer an alternative to taken-for-granted ideas and practices. In the last 4 years of teaching in an institution of higher learning, I have developed specific approaches to framing content, coursework, and community in the classroom. These are works-in-progress.

An inherent power inequality exists in any educational setting that charges one person (instructor) with the responsibility for evaluating others (students). Thus positioned, there is a relational inequality of power that would seem to be present in the vast majority of institutions of higher education. An act of resistance is required within instructor-student relationships if either, or both, parties are committed to deconstructing marginalizing dominant cultural discourses. I am convinced, as are others working for social justice (see Tisdell, 2000), that adhering to a traditional “banking model” (Freire, 1970), or liberal/liberation model (White, 2001), of education serves only to perpetuate structural inequalities in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sex, age, ability, financial situation (class), sexuality, nationality, first-language, and spirituality. These inequalities are not merely discursive, they have real effects in people’s lives. For example, notwithstanding expectations of equality promised by so-called “affirmative action” practices, women and people-of-color continue to be under-represented amongst tenured faculty (Trower and Chait, 2002).⁵

From the first day of class I am inscribed into a role that contradicts the person I want to be in the classroom. While I generally reject the expert role I find myself in, identity is not constructed by one person alone. Identity is constructed as relations between communities of people (Goffman, 1961). I am thus continually required to step out of the identity that is offered to me. Succeeding depends on the willingness of students to join me in opposition. This requires extraordinary skills of trust, criticism, and risk-taking. A traditional university, which I surely teach in, is what Erving Goffman (1961) calls an “instrumental formal organization.” It is “a system of purposely co-ordinated activities designed to produce some over-all explicit ends” (p. 175). The product here is variously understood to be knowledge, grades, self-reflection, a degree, or liberation, depending on one’s perspective.

While I may adopt a goal of having students leave the course with an appreciation for their own and their colleagues lived experience and wisdom, the students with whom I share institutional space are explicitly restrained from such a result in the form of publicly posted grades, “bell curve” grading, and competitive admissions to graduate

⁴ Note the color symbolism *a la* Moore (2001).

⁵ More generally, women have lost ground in relation to men when comparing pay and positions of management (United States General Accounting Office, 2002) and people-of-color continue to earn less in the workplace (California Budget Project, 2003).

schools. Implicitly, restraint comes in the form of conversations around, “How did you do on the test.” Most students in introductory courses at this university live in dormitories on campus and rarely step out into the local community or the wider regional community. I, on the other hand, live in the community, freely travel, go to meetings in other parts of the region, and spend considerable time with my family. In some respects, then, the university approaches Erving Goffman’s “total institution,” and I am locked into an authority role.

Students are posed with a significant challenge in the face of this project, as constructing a different identity for the instructor necessitates constructing a different identity for the student. Free from technologies that maintain the “depository” character of students (Freire, 1970), many students find it difficult to re-position themselves in relation to the instructor, to each other, and to learning in general (Farber, 1969). Michel Foucault (1980) notes that this form of self-surveillance is the instrument by which “modern power” operates. Selections from Michael White’s (2002, p. 44) table distinguishing modern power from traditional power highlight the hurdles I, and other educators who are committed to transforming the institutional landscape of education, must overcome to offer an alternative classroom experience.

Traditional Power

Establishes social control through a system of institutionalized moral judgment that is exercised by appointed representatives of the state and of institutions of the state.

Is developed and implemented from the top down.

People are mostly on the outside of and find themselves the subjects of.

Acts predominantly on a populous and on defined groups of people.

Acts to oppress, repress, limit, prohibit, impose and to coerce.

Employs a technology of power characterized by symbols of influence - including pomp, ceremony, public punishment, and awe inspiring edifices - and mechanisms of surveillance and structures for the policing of peoples.

Modern Power

Establishes social control through a system of normalizing judgment that is exercised by people in the evaluation of their own and each others’ lives.

Is developed and refined at the local level of culture.

People actively participate with in the fashioning of their own and each others’ lives according to the constructed norms of contemporary culture.

Acts to disperse a populous by allocating each person a specific location in relation to contemporary norms about life and identity, so contributing to the cellularization / individualization of life.

Recruits people into the surveillance and the policing of their own and each others’ lives.

Employs a technology of power that is characterized by continuums of normality/abnormality, tables of performance, scales for the rating of human expression, formulae for the ranking of persons in relation to each other, and specific procedures of assessment and evaluation that makes possible the insertion of people’s lives into these continuums, tables, scales and ranking systems.

While it may be argued that the university as a whole operates under the influence of traditional power, instructors enjoy a certain level of pedagogical freedom to resist such influences in the classroom. Students, however, remain subjects of systems of modern power. We need not have a taskmaster in the classroom to maintain students powerless role. Personal, familial, institutional, and cultural experiences are enough to keep students in check.

Goals

Having centered myself squarely within the *liberation* pedagogy resistance, I have devised specific strategies for re-creating possibilities available to students who participate in one of my classes. Since I am privileged to enjoy (rather than deserving) a position of power within the classroom before the semester ever begins, it is up to me to establish a course structure that allows for the most liberating experiences, thus setting up a *liberatory* pedagogy. From then on, students and I struggle together to resist the normalizing effects of larger educational discourses to which we are all subject, or what Jennifer Gore (1993) refers to as “institutionalized pedagogy as regulation.”

There are five areas in which I endeavor to respond to issues of structural inequality and diversity or, as I think of it, social justice in the educational setting: instructional content; crafting of assignments; engagement over attendance; fair grading; and classroom community relationships.

To effectively craft these strategies, I have needed to render visible the intentions and purposes that inform my reflections. As such, the following four questions generate a formative and summative evaluation of my teaching, and are made explicit throughout courses I teach and in the respective syllabi:

- How do I invite people to come to class because they want to come to class?
- How do I invite people to do the reading for class because they think the reading will contribute to their education and to their life?
- How do I invite people to complete assignments for class because they feel that the assignments will support their academic and personal development?
- How do I do these things without enlisting the influence of power, control, and fear of what will happen if they don't do these things?

Content

For the last three academic years, I have been the social work faculty member who teaches our introductory course. This has offered me the opportunity to start most social work students' academic career off with an exploration of power and privilege. For those students who do not pursue social work as a discipline, the reflections of power and privilege might contribute to other academic, professional, or personal experiences.

By the second week of class, students are reading Peggy McIntosh's (1988) article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies.” For many students, this is the first time they have read the work of someone who has enjoyed cultural power and privilege and who names that power and privilege.

Social work is a field dominated by women.⁶ As such, the majority of students in social work classes are women. I have found that women are able to relate to Peggy McIntosh's article because it is written by a woman. Thus, many European-American female students can make the connection between gender discrimination and race/ethnic discrimination.

However, when I began using Peggy McIntosh's article, I found that some men in the class were not able to consider race/ethnic discrimination *or* gender discrimination. The amount of time allotted for one class period, and the considerable amount of course material I cover in a semester, made it difficult for me to explore these men's experiences fully.⁷ Elizabeth Tisdell (2000) notes the influence another person who is positioned similarly can have in shifting an entrenched perspective. I endeavor to harness this influence as much as possible through social work, as noted above, is a discipline with low male enrollment.⁸ Perhaps, I wondered, reading an article by a man exposing men's power and privilege might make a difference?

The last semester I taught the introductory course I included Bob Pease's (1997) article "Becoming Profeminist: From the Personal to the Political." I did not encounter the same level of resistance to these power-deposing ideas when this reading was included. This might be attributed to the nature of "profeminism" in contrast to ideas that are variously called the "men's movement," "men's liberation," or "men's rights" (Pease, 1997). Bob Pease suggests that there are very real hegemonic limitations in describing men as *feminists*, as that is a description appropriate for women. In keeping with earlier notions of oppression and liberation in this paper, women have accessed their own power through the ideas and actions referred to as feminism. Social and cultural changes that have taken place due to feminism are because of the work of women, not because men have relinquished power, conceded to women, or appreciated the error of their ways. Men can join in the feminist effort as partners, stressing "the importance of men working together with women in a struggle to transform hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal relations of dominance" (Pease, 1997, p. xii). They can focus on men's role in the subjugation of women, as in pornography, family violence, and gender discrimination. Within profeminism, men's role is to support women in their feminism through changing how men treat women, children, and other men. In profeminism, men work for change not only to render women's experience and knowledge visible, but because oppression of women limits men's opportunities to be men in non-marginalizing ways. Bob Pease (1997) notes that men committed to profeminism do so "to enrich their own lives in the context of addressing gender injustice" (p. xii). Said another way, the notions of

⁶ Seventy-nine percent of social work practitioners are women (NASW, 2003). Of interest, however, is the inequity in salary, where median salary for men is \$10,900 more than for women (NASW, 2003).

⁷ Lee Mun Wah's documentary of men speaking with each other about racism, *The Color of Fear* (StirFry Productions), is shown in an advanced social work course, so I choose not to show it in the introductory course.

⁸ The Council on Social Work Education, the accrediting body for social work degree programs, requires restrictions on non-social work major enrollment in social work courses.

oppression and liberation maintained in this paper support the words of Lilla Watson,⁹ “If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together.”

In addition to power/privilege in relation to race, ethnicity, and gender, we also discuss other contexts, such as sex, finances, sexuality, ability, age, spiritual beliefs, and first-language. A question that came up one semester in relation to power and privilege was why do I think power/privilege related to class seems so much easier to talk about than race or gender. I wondered aloud whether it might have to do with time. I invited students to consider how long the non-wealthy have rallied together against the wealthy compared to how long people of color have been recognized as targets of discrimination, or women? How might hundreds, even thousands of years of class struggle influence the discourse differently than 50, or 30 years of recognition?

A difficult concept for many students to grasp, indeed, something that I struggled with in my life, is recognizing that race is a social construction *and* it is something that has real effects in people’s lives. This may seem like a contradiction, that I am contending race is both real and not-real. What I am supporting here is the notion that “race” is a social construction that has made possible the continued marginalization of people of color (Anderson and Collins, 2001). From the perspective of specific characteristics, descriptions, and ways of understanding what it means to be human (e.g., evolutionary, zoological, genetic, or biological) it might be said that “we are all the same.” This commonality between people who are differently categorized, or made into “kinds” (Minnich, 1990), is certainly useful in efforts to form inclusive relationships and communities. However, from a political, social, and cultural standpoint, we are not all the same. We can deconstruct race as an instrument of discrimination, but we must also recognize that the experience of race is very real for people of color in a culture that is dominated by the perspectives of “white” people. For example, Peggy McIntosh (1988) offers a compelling list of discriminatory contexts related to housing, shopping, conversation, education, and more.

Likewise, masculinity and femininity are social constructs, but they have real effects on how men and women experience their lives. Many students are astonished to learn about Carol Gilligan’s (1982) insights into the male-dominated human development perspectives. The power of discussions on power/privilege is that they allow everyone, oppressed and oppressor alike, to experience their lives in more preferred ways. When male students are invited to reject the notion that “men do not express emotions,” they can come to question why it is that *certain* emotions are considered legitimate for men to express, and why *specific manifestations* of those emotions are allowed. They can re-connect with other emotions and non-violent expressions of emotion (McLean, Carey, White, 1996). Women, too, can come to see men as much more than dominant discourses of masculinity allow.

⁹ Lilla Watson’s name often goes uncited in reference to this quote, only “an aboriginal activist” or something along those lines is noted.

Central to the unfolding of the introductory social work class is the concept of discourse. I propose to students that there are dominant cultural discourses and there are alternatives to these dominant discourses. Elizabeth Minnich (1990) refers to these ideas as “the boundaries and definitions of knowledge and...what has counted as knowledge” and “knowledge that resists the dominant culture,” or “fugitive knowledge” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 156).

It is crucial here to emphasize the non-dual, dichotomous, binary, or polar nature of “dominant” and “alternative” discourse. A thought, idea, belief, feeling, action, etc., will always be informed by aspects of both prevailing, privileged, or dominant discourse *as well as* that discourse which is marginalized, or “alternative” discourse. There are certain perspectives that are taken-for-granted in western cultures, and there are those that offer an alternative to those perspectives. This is the distinction highlighted in the dominant/alternative relationship, not one of continua, good and bad, right and wrong, liberal and conservative, or traditional and progressive.

While many discourses exist that have real effects in people’s lives, the discursive space I highlight revolves around various ways of thinking about people, the world, and people’s relationship to the world. This includes dominant and alternative discourses in relation to:

Individual/Community – Do we believe things have discreet boundaries that separate them from one another, or do we believe that things only exist in relationship to other things?

Objective/Subjective – Do we believe that a person can understand the world separate from her/his own life experience?

Mechanistic/Systemic – Do we believe that things are composed of essential parts that can be isolated and studied, and that the behavior of the whole can be understood by understanding the role and function of these parts, or do we believe that we can only make sense of apparently essential elements as part of larger systems?

Reductionist/Holistic – Do we conceive of things as a metaphorical onion, in which the layers can be “peeled away” to isolate the core, or are we willing to accept that what we are presented with is the “real” thing?

Structural/Non-structural – Do we believe that there is a “deep structure” to phenomena that organizes its behavior and can only be revealed through proper distillation, or do we make sense of phenomenal behavior experientially?

Medical/Ecological – Do we understand problems in terms of diagnostic categories that relate to functionality, or do we recognize that problems are part of a larger context that includes one’s individual experience; one’s family; one’s peer group; one’s work and/or schooling; one’s community; one’s preferred cultural identity; the economic, political, and legal system within which one lives; one’s physical environment; and the dominant discourses that operate in one’s life.

Deficit/Strength – Do we define situations in terms of what is lacking, what has gone wrong, and what is pathological, or do we believe that positive qualities, dreams, skills, achievements, and abilities are more helpful factors in facilitating change?

In class, I speak of therapeutic models as being like maps (indeed, I think this metaphor can be applied to many ways of understanding the world). No map is equivalent to the territory it describes. A map is a depiction, a way of representing the territory. It is not the territory itself. However, different maps will construct the territory in different ways. A map might highlight watersheds, roads, fault lines, etc. Each representation limits other possibilities. Moreover, and this is the point that I want to stress, there are biases contained in maps. If the mapmaker is prejudiced against Burlington, the details corresponding to the territory of Burlington may be marginalized in some way. Or if they work for Ben and Jerry's, we might find certain details emphasized and others left out. This will have real effects for those using the map. The "maps" used to describe and navigate human development and problems encountered in life will support dominant discourses and, perhaps, offer alternatives. If the maps we choose to use support dominant discourses that maintain current power structures, then we are perpetuating structural inequality.

Assignments

Class assignments in a socially just course should contribute to a student's experience *qua* person as well as her/his experience *qua* student (Greene, 1998); they should be "engaged assignments." With this in mind, I have designed assignments that invite students to excavate their own wisdom, beliefs, values, thoughts, and actions in relation to universals about human behavior, human development, and social policy. I also ask students to reflect on the limitations and possibilities that come along with their ways of thinking about and being in the world. Each assignment requires students to consider the "issues of diversity" inherent in the context of the assignment.¹⁰ For example, in one of the introductory social work course assignments, students read representative articles from five significant contemporary therapeutic models (psychoanalytic, behavioral, systemic, humanistic, critical). They offer written responses to several questions in relation to the reading. The last question they respond to is,

"Does the approach you just read about seem to make room for diversity in relation to race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality, finances, ability, age, etc.? How?

In other words do the ideas in the article contribute to inclusion or exclusion of the experiences of people who are marginalized by dominant cultural discourses and practices?"

Virtually every assignment in each of my classes ends with a similar reflexive question. My intention in designing assignments this way is to move away from what Freire (1970)

¹⁰ I list these as differential experiences in relation to "race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality, finances, ability, age, etc."

calls the “banking model” of traditional education which assumes the existence of a validated, legitimated, body of knowledge that students must incorporate at the expense of the knowledge they have gained from non-dominant cultural experiences. It is sometimes difficult for students to believe me when I tell them—in class, in the syllabus, and on distributed descriptions of assignments—that I want to know what *they* think, feel, and are doing. This is more than critical analysis, it requires what Elizabeth Tisdell (2000) refers to a “the transformation of the heart” (p. 160).

Assignments designed around meaning rather than truth cannot be graded according to an objective, evaluative assessment. I have adopted a “unit” based grading system for all assignments and for the class as a whole (see “Grading” below). Instead of earning letter grades for assignments, students earn a certain number of “units” for the assignment.¹¹ The total “units” in a course total 100, and student grades are determined by their total number of “units.” This way they can keep track of how they are doing throughout the semester.

Because I teach courses in Social Work, and not English, I let students know that grammar, punctuation, and spelling will not detract from the number of “units” I think best reflects the assignment they’ve turned in. However, those aspects of their writing may limit my ability to understand what it is they are trying to convey, and *that* can have an effect on “units.” I see this as another element of a socially just curriculum. Not all students have had the same opportunities for learning, writing, speaking, and reading English. I will not perpetuate injustice in relation to one’s first language, but I will assist students with becoming more proficient in their writing by meeting with them individually or referring them to helpful local resources. It is up to them to decide if they will take up my suggestions.

The closest thing to a “test” in my introductory course revolves around the book *Savage Inequalities*, by Jonathon Kozol (1991).¹² About a month before the course ends, students are to have read the entire book. In class that week, they write responses to some questions based on the book. Earlier in the semester, I offer students a list of ideas and events they will come across that they might want to pay attention to while reading, as the questions they will be responding to are drawn from the list. I also invite students to let me know of any other ideas or events that should be included on the list for students to keep track of in their reading. The specific questions students respond to in class are not known to them before class. However, to facilitate discourse about alternative experiences in relation to the book and the situations of living depicted in the book, I invite students to gather together in small groups and talk about the questions before writing their responses when the questions are revealed. Thus, they are encouraged to work together before responding to the assignment questions, rather than engaging in solitary writing.

¹¹ “Units” seem less competitive than “points.”

¹² While describing the context of *Savage Inequalities* in relation to social work is beyond my intention in this paper, I hope it will suffice to say that the text offers many students their clearest picture of the structural and institutional components of inequality, discrimination, and marginalization.

I have no attachment to any of the assignments I have used. There are some that I have decided to discontinue based on student reflections, some I have added, and some I have augmented. If assignments are not meaningful and relevant for students, they have no place in my courses.

Attendance

In my first semester of teaching, I employed a “positive reinforcement” model to class attendance. Students generated 1 “point” for each class they came to. This amounted to 15% of their grade for the class (the class met weekly, for 15 weeks). My second semester teaching I continued this “positive reinforcement” model, but encountered its limitations. There were three times as many students and three times as many class dates this time around. I had to keep track of a large number of students and make the “point” value of each class worth very little in order to keep the “participation/attendance” portion of the course grade reasonable. I also started to wonder whether a “positive reinforcement” model fit in with my values and commitments. I want people to come to class because they want to come to class, because they feel like coming to class is enriching for their lives, not because of concerns about their grade.

The following semester I shifted the “attendance policy” to read as follows:

You are allowed, but not encouraged, to miss 4 classes without talking to me prior to class. After that, if you don’t tell me why you will be absent, you lose 5 points for every class you miss. If you come to class more than 10 minutes late after the 3rd week of class begins, you will also lose 5 points...but please still come to class even if you are running late. Why is this, you ask? In social work it is very important to form a community of peers. This can only happen when people regularly come together for a common purpose. In this case, the common purpose is to learn about and examine social work.

This still required me to keep track of everyone and evaluate whether people had “legitimate” reasons for not coming to class. Uncomfortable in this role, I moved to:

I recognize that some students sometimes ask themselves if they really want to go to class on any particular day, and go through a series of cost/benefit analyses to make a decision. In doing that analysis, please take into consideration that there are certain classes that are whole unto themselves, while there are those that connect together with other classes in this particular course or in courses throughout your social work education. I am not saying this to encourage absences, by any means. I am merely acknowledging different approaches to learning and suggesting that you give careful thought to which classes you miss because many classes are essential to developing a comprehensive social work education.

I have yet to develop an “attendance policy” that feels completely comfortable to me. In the most recent semester, I collapsed attendance into overall “participation,” increased the percentage of a student’s grade represented by participation, and noted the following:

Staying current with the reading demonstrates class participation, as does sharing your thoughts, ideas, feelings, questions, and concerns in class.

In the end, I believe student attendance is more a factor of course meaningfulness than concern over a grade.

This begs the question, how does one invite a meaningful experience in the classroom? I have found Jerome Bruner’s (1962) ideas around *landscapes of action* and *landscapes of consciousness* to be helpful for engaging students in meaning-making. The assignments and class activities that I’ve described thus far invite students to listen to new ideas, talk with each other about specific issues, perform certain tasks, and investigate areas of particular interest. These can all be understood as *things students do*. Indeed, doing things is a hallmark of instructional learning. Bruner suggests, however, that meaningfulness requires a second element. In his analyses of narrative structure (1962, 1986), Bruner suggested that a truly *moving* narrative¹³—one in which an audience steps into the story and with which the audience actively participates—not only tells of each character’s actions, it shares character’s reflections, intentions, hopes, dreams, regrets, and sorrows in relation to what has happened. This second landscape, the “landscape of consciousness” (also referred to as the “landscape of identity”) distinguishes an engaging encounter from a dry listing of events and allows for the making of meaning.

Were I to think of my work as “telling people the way things really are” and construct my course with lectures, readings, activities, and assignments that strengthen students’ abilities to remember the elements of such a perspective, I don’t believe they would leave the course very moved...and they probably wouldn’t come to class very often. Rather, I join students in their explorations of landscapes of consciousness: what have they come to believe about themselves, each other, and the world in which they live; how will their new understandings influence their lives and their relationships; what might now become possible for them? I do so with what Michael White (2000) refers to as “an appreciation of the poststructuralist sentiment of contributing to options for people to become ‘other than who they were’ at the outset...rather than according to a structuralist sentiment that would determine this as a context for people to become ‘more truly who they really are’” (pp. 75-76).

¹³ Michael White (2000) notes that the classical notion of “katharsis” is “to engage in practices that have the effect of transporting people elsewhere, and frequently into territories of life and identity in which they would have never predicted they would find themselves” (p. 76). It is interesting to contrast this with popular notions of intense emotional flooding in relation to traumatic events as catharsis.

Grading

While many of my colleagues, past and present, would prefer to teach without the influence of grades (see Farber, 1969), most of us do not have the opportunity as of yet to forgo this element of modernist education. How then might we engage with grading in a way that subverts structural inequalities inherent in the liberal model of education and support an egalitarian, socially just agenda? Three options have influenced my work thus far. First, base grades on the meaningfulness of work rather than on an evaluative, objective standard. Second, allow students to grade themselves. Third, offer reflections on students' work with an option for them to make revisions.

In the summer of 2002 I decided to step out onto a curricular limb and try letting students grade themselves, with my final consent. On the first day of class I invited the class as a whole to develop a grading structure. I told them that grades are traditionally assigned by instructors relative to class participation, understanding of course readings, evaluation of course assignments, and attendance. They were free to use these as guidelines or come up with another grading system. The results of this conversation were formalized and are included as Attachment 1.

While popular beliefs around self-grading (or, in another context, self-punishment) might have suggested that students would assign themselves lower grades than I would have assigned, my findings were more complex than this. Namely, about one third of students gave themselves grades that fit with my thinking, about a third graded themselves higher than I would have, and about a third graded themselves lower than I would have. Specifically, however, it appeared to me that students of color and students with a diagnosed disability (e.g., learning, mental, developmental, or physical) graded themselves lower than I would have graded them. This posed a significant dilemma for me. If I go along with students' self-assessments, I am perpetuating marginalization of certain students. I designed the self-grading such that I could offer a different grade to students and they could choose to go along with my grade, make changes to their assignment, or meet with me to negotiate the difference. These choices did not, however, leave sufficient room to address *structural* inequalities in students' lived experience.

The following semester I framed the self-grading in the syllabus like this:

For each assignment you turn in you will attach a cover sheet (approximately ½ to 1, single-spaced page), within which you will reflect on your experience of the assignment. What was helpful about it? What wasn't so helpful about it? How might engaging in the process of this assignment influence your perspective on social work practice? How many points (0-100) would you expect to receive on this assignment?

- I will let you know whether I agree with you or if I have a different perspective. If I am feeling differently than you are, I will probably ask you to give further consideration to certain areas of the assignment.

- Final grades for the course will be determined by the average-weighted number of points (points for assignment x percentage of grade) according to the following table...

The above seemed to move things closer to my original intentions. Students who I would characterize as having experienced—and still experiencing—marginalization still graded themselves lower than I would have, though not in as great a number. The guidelines for the cover sheet may have helped students to consider their grade in terms of meaningfulness of the assignment rather than evaluating themselves as a student. Two new dilemmas appeared, though. First, many students offered rather vague reflections in relation to the above questions. Second, I made the cover sheet mandatory, thus bringing back the element of coercion that I desperately wanted to avoid.

As a response to the sum total of dilemmas I have encountered in my endeavor to achieve a socially just system of grading, I have devised the “Grade Self-Assessment” document (Attachment 2). Students now have the *option* of grading themselves. If they choose to grade themselves, they need to complete the Grade Self-Assessment. The structure of the Grade Self-Assessment allows for a more rich description of why a student is evaluating herself/himself as they are. The questions are meant to generate meaningfulness, which reflects my intentions throughout the course. With the revised Grade Self-Assessment, I am increasing self-consistency in my design of students’ overall class experience. The new Grade Self-Assessment was designed to achieve what Clifford Geertz (1973) would likely call a “thick description” of the assignment and grade.

Previously, with no guidelines on how to grade one’s self, students offered a very basic picture of their experience of the assignment, or a “thin” description—one that lacks depth, richness, and vividness. I do not consider this to be reflective of students’ lack of things to say. Within the confines of traditional pedagogy, students may experience restraints to fully exploring their response to the question, “Tell me why you think you should get the grade you have assigned.” Thus, in order to open this up, I have come up with questions that allow for a thick description. Clifford Geertz (1986) says, “We all have very much more [experience] than we know what to do with, and if we fail to put it into some graspable form...the fault must lie in a lack of means, not of substance” (p. 373). My request that students grade themselves, isolated from a structure or guidelines on how to do so, left students without a sufficient means to generate a response meaningful *for them* and *to me*. More explicit questions made possible a scaffolding for which they could build a thick description of their experience of the respective assignment.

I have found to my surprise that many fewer students have chosen to grade themselves than I would have predicted. My thinking around this is that it could be related to how meaningful the course is to students. In other words, perhaps they don’t really care what grade they get. While this could be a good thing, since I want to support students’ interest in learning free from the institution of grades, I fear that it might come from a lack of connection to the course itself. I find myself struggling with two related issues. First, is this kind of self-grading a legitimate approach to employ in a university? Am I putting

students or myself at risk of some sort of negative consequence if administrators “discover” what I am doing? Second, how can I continue to have the “final say” without stepping into the role of an absolute authority? I let students know that if I disagree with their grade I will let them know what I think needs to happen for them to get the grade they assigned. However, only a few students have chosen to make revisions.

Classroom community relationships

On the first day of class I let students know that I firmly believe in people taking care of themselves. It doesn't matter to me if people yawn when I am talking, if they eat during class, burp, sneeze, fart, or if they sleep.¹⁴ When the building facilities allow it, I have been requesting that students move their desks around so we can sit in a circle. This certainly strikes me as preferable to rows of students facing nobody but me. However, the tendency is for students to organize themselves into a horseshoe around me, leaving me essentially isolated. They can interact with each other better, but I am still offered a privileged position. Following Jerry Farber (1969) I have recently begun to invite students to position themselves wherever they feel most comfortable.

It is clear to me that talking, reading, and/or writing when someone in the class is sharing an idea is disrespectful. I haven't yet figured out how to enlist entire classes in supporting this commitment, however. I recognize that this is *my* value and not necessarily a global one. In the future, I think I will make it clear at the beginning of the semester that showing respect by forgoing other tasks when someone is talking (me, another student, or a video) is one of my expectations. If people oppose this expectation, we can talk about it and I'm willing to suspend my expectation.

I believe students learn through discourse and reflection. As much as possible—and I am continually looking for ways to do more of it—class time is spent in conversation. This is contrary to many students' educational experience, where learning happens either through transmission of knowledge (the “banking” model [Freire, 1970]), or through debate (sometimes framed as “Socratic” teaching). Over the years I have discovered that some students are uncomfortable participating in large group discussions. Thus, I invite students to gather together in small groups for conversation before we come together as a large group.

The large group format is vulnerable to conflict. In the interest of teaching—moreover, in the interest of teaching social work—I see it as my responsibility to create a context in which students express their thoughts, feelings, and values without diminishing the thoughts, feelings, and values of their colleagues. Discursive education and deconstruction of dominant discourse requires abandoning “right and wrong” positions

¹⁴ I figure their bodies are telling themselves something really important if they are falling asleep in class. Part of my job is to make things sufficiently interesting that they do not want to fall asleep. Clearly, if a student continually sleeps in class I will talk to them about it, as it might indicate that they are not taking good care of themselves in other contexts of their lives. Moreover, frequent sleeping in class will restrict their ability to participate, which is part of their grade.

and stepping into accountability models. That is, it requires people—students and instructor alike—to assess the *real effects* of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, actions, values, and theories. The goal then, is for students to leave class with an appreciation for alternatives to their taken-for-granted perspectives. This appreciation involves understanding the role and meaningfulness of these alternatives in other people’s lives. When we step away from universals, or “disembodied knowledge” (Foucault, 1980), we can address issues of diversity, inequality, discrimination, and marginalization without falling victim to shame, blame, and guilt.

Reflection

Social justice is a relational state between people and their institutions. As such, strategies to achieve social justice will always be works-in-progress. I consider my approaches to social justice in the classroom as ways of supporting alternatives to dominant cultural discourses and practices that have privileged certain ways of being in the world and marginalized others. As someone who has benefited greatly by this privileging and marginalizing, I am ultimately accountable to those communities of people who have experienced their limiting effects. Yet, as noted by Elizabeth Tisdell (2000), “[D]espite best attempts to do otherwise...power relations are sometimes also reproduced” (p. 149).

I continue to struggle with speaking up, leading, and remaining silent. When I hear a comment that clearly represents the body of knowledge and experience of someone who enjoys certain privileges related to issues of diversity (such as gender, finances, or ethnicity) when and how should I speak up? Since power and privilege masquerades so well as liberalism, it sometimes presents as invisible. When do I unmask it? Ubiquitous as marginalization is, I run the risk of alienating my students¹⁵ if I confront them with the implications of their comments every time I hear something that I experience as insensitive. If I remain silent, I am perpetuating the status quo. As a social work practitioner I have clearly developed ways of engaging with people that allow them to reflect on their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings, and actions without contributing to blame, shame, or guilt. However, I sometimes find it difficult to maintain a subjunctive¹⁶ stance in the classroom in the face of outright racist speech. Perhaps this, too, is a continual work in progress.

I need to incorporate more “getting to know you” exercises in my classes. Learning about marginalization is clearly relevant to those who experience discrimination and those who wittingly or unwittingly support it. However, interpersonal contact is necessary to bring about cultural transformation. Students’ lived experience is one of the best sources of

¹⁵ While I am writing about the classroom context, I struggle with these questions in many other settings, such as with colleagues, in community meetings, with the media, and with my family.

¹⁶ The subjunctive tense prefaces actions with “What if...,” “Perhaps...,” “What might be the case if...,” “I wonder what...,” and “Suppose...”

knowledge to be shared. When students take the time to bear witness to each other's stories of living, social justice becomes possible.

I wonder, as do others (see Tisdell, 2000), if effective social justice can ever be achieved in an institutional setting that has historically contributed to injustice and continues to pose obstacles to achieving equality in relation to grades, support services, cost, and curricular diversity. As such, I consider myself *approaching* social justice in the classroom rather than *realizing* it.

Attachment 1

On the last day of class, Thursday, August 8, you will submit a one page (or so) description of the grade you believe best evaluates:

1. Your participation in the class (i.e., what you put into the class and what you got out of the class).
2. Your assignments.

I will provide a written response to the two assignments handed in before the last day of class to assist you with #2.

If you'd prefer that I give you a sense for the "grade" I think best fits your work on the assignments, please inform me of that when you submit the assignments.

Any significant concerns on your or my part may be resolved by meeting outside of class.

--Ronnie

Attachment 2

In order to make the process of grading yourself more meaningful, please respond to the following questions that require you to thoughtfully reflect on your experience of the assignment:

What did you find helpful about doing this assignment?

What didn't seem so useful about this assignment?

What went really well for you in relation to this assignment?

What got in the way of this assignment being more meaningful for you?

How might engaging in the process of this assignment influence your perspective on social work practice?

How many "units" would you expect to receive on this assignment? Check the syllabus to find out how many "units" it is worth.

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