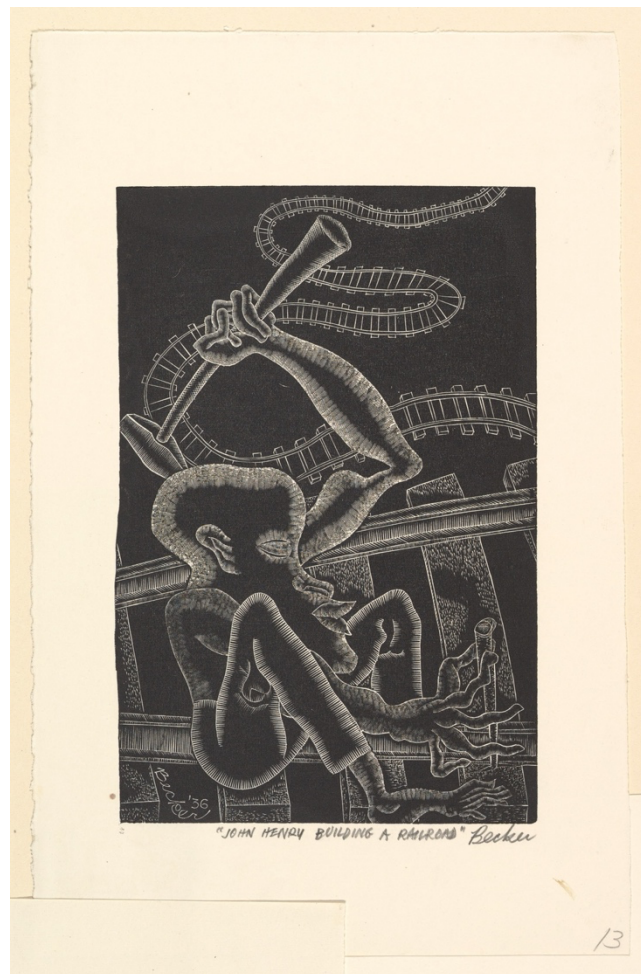


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Developing Classroom Community Agreements to Cultivate a Critically Compassionate Learning Community¹

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JOHN HENRY BUILDING A RAILROAD FRED BECKER AMERICAN PUBLISHED BY WPA 1936. HARRIS BRISBANE DICK FUND, 1940. MET ONLINE.

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. ... Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions... It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice Freedom*

Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on the development of *classroom community agreements*, and how these align with my radical teaching practice and pedagogy. I describe the classroom community agreements activity I engage with my students as a humble example of the radical possibilities of learning through critical thinking, reflexivity, and dialogues grounded in collaboration and community care. When we engage a decolonial feminist approach to re-imagine learning in community, or in relation to one another, we create spaces that are critical, compassionate and community oriented. Thus, I illustrate the process of developing and implementing classroom community agreements with students to demonstrate how safe and brave spaces can coexist to then create what I define as *critically compassionate learning communities*. I purport that what is *radical* about the classroom community agreements activity is that this exercise, which I facilitate on the first and second days of classes, strives to foster collaboration, community care, and mutual learning. Radical, according to Angela Davis (1984), is about “grasping things at the root” (p. 14). In my classes this means building roots to create classroom spaces that are anti-oppressive, humanizing, and flourishing toward relational modes of learning.

As an educator, I facilitate opportunities for students to collaborate in creating our classroom so that it can be and become a critically compassionate learning community. I encourage and guide students to image what affirming or humanizing learning environments can and must be. A critically compassionate learning community is a humanizing and caring space where safety and bravery, along with criticality and compassion, can coexist. Through the classroom community agreements activity I strive to cultivate with my students a learning space that reflects and represents inclusive values and practices aligned with community care. The agreements flow organically, relationally, and experientially from and through our engagement in critical thinking, reflexivity, and dialogues. The agreements are also informed by the experiences or moments where we have felt most encouraged and supported in our learning. That is, spaces where we recognize each other, the complexities of our personhood, positionalities, identities, and process of unlearning/relearning in ways that are aligned with anti-racism and anti-oppressive, decolonial feminisms, and collective radical praxes.

The purpose of the agreements is to foster experiential learning opportunities where we can cultivate supportive student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships or

interactions where we can reflect, dialogue, and connect. The agreements activity as invitation to educators—a gentle “call in” to practice collectively envisioning the classroom with our students. How I engage students to imagine what they desire classroom interactions to be is fundamental to building a critically compassionate learning community in the university. The process, however, must begin with a shared understanding of our intentions and commitments to mutual learning.

In this essay I describe *why* classroom community agreements are necessary, *how* these were developed, and *what* were some outcomes from our process and practice of upholding the agreements. In particular, I offer examples of how the agreements helped students work through moments of “productive tension” that led to critical thinking and humanizing recognitions of diverse lived experiences or points of view. First, I briefly outline some of the activities we engage on the first and second days of class to develop the agreements. Then, I describe our process of naming, defining, and implementing these agreements, followed by the practice of applying or sustaining these in moments of tension. Conflict in the classroom is understood as valuable, productive, and even a necessary form of tension that can help students broaden and deepen their critical reflexivity and understanding of a topic, as well as develop humility and appreciation for a view or perspective different from their own. I frame as “productive tension” any conflict that is often necessary for critical thinking and collaboration. The agreements, unlike typical “rules” or “standards” for classroom dialogue that often re-inscribe power dynamics, are arrived at collectively and modified as a class over the course of our time together. Finally, I close with reflections on the outcomes of developing and practicing our classroom community agreements for supporting students’ critically thinking about social issues.

Student Reflections on Safe and Brave Spaces

Our classroom community agreements co-development process begins early in the quarter. We start by deconstructing what a college classroom is or feels like for some students, and who or what a professor looks like (Fernández, 2023) via critically reflexive dialogues that I facilitate. Critically reflexive dialogues are characterized by a process and practice of introspection, specifically being or becoming aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions as these surface via reflections and dialogues that involve actively listening to others, whilst speaking from one’s own subjective experiences (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018; Silva, Fernández, & Nguyen, 2022). I guide students through variations of the following questions: *If you are comfortable participating, I invite you to close your eyes. Now, imagine a classroom or physical space that has felt affirming and humanizing for you. What does this space look like? What practices have led you to experience challenges and/or belonging or affirmation in that space, or in the classroom?* I invite students to imagine, visualize, or draw from their memories or lived experiences an image or scenario of an affirming space or an inclusive classroom experience, and to describe how it felt. This initial activity

helps us tune into our lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge that can support mutual learning and a sense of community. Once students engage in this activity, specifically their visualizations of an inclusive or humanizing classroom, I assign students writing prompts.

Before the second day of class, students are encouraged to come prepared to class with a written reflection in response to the assigned readings: Arao and Clemens (2013) *From safe spaces to brave spaces*, and Leonardo and Porter (201) *Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue*. The critically reflexive dialogues we engage are in and of themselves an exercise for how classroom conversations, and even conflict, will be facilitated, engaged, or resolved. The written reflections help us generate our agreements as we proceed to discuss these in relation to our experiential knowledge of how classroom spaces have felt, what students hope to experience, and how we can create a critically compassionate learning community that is supportive of diverse lived experiences and worldviews. As a class, for example, students collectively and relationally share what they learned or engaged in the readings and written reflections. Students discuss in small and large group discussion what surfaced for them and why, and how what they imagined was reflected or not in the readings, their past and present learning experiences. To further our dialogues, I pose variations of the following questions as part of our class discussion: *What is a safe space? What is a brave space? What do you envision a critically compassionate learning community to be and feel like?*

In sharing with each other what we mean by safe, brave, and critical spaces, we co-develop classroom community agreements that are grounded in a commitment to mutual critical learning toward fostering what I describe as a critically compassionate learning community. Thus, students will often offer compelling reflections on what our agreements could be and why these are important. I offer a few quotes from students' writings:

It is important to be more mindful of all groups and foster deeper conversations that allow all involved to growth. I want to try to incorporate this into my life by striving toward creating spaces that can be brave and safe, or supportive of our growth and care for each other.

– White, cisgender woman, first year student

I recently heard from a fellow student that they don't want everyone to feel comfortable or have a guarantee of comfort. And I grappled with this. ... The concept of "challenge by choice" is an attempt to address this, yet I wonder if the depths of how the unfamiliar defines a brave space rather than just the choice to challenge was considered. The problem may not be that people do not wish to engage, that being brave is not a matter of speaking, but rather the act of challenging the unfamiliar.

– Asian American, cisgender man, first year student

We are all our own person, coming from our own different backgrounds, but that does not mean that we should treat others differently. As more and more of us begin to learn how to have conversations on difficult topics and re-connect, it is my hope that we can foster brave spaces that are also safe so that we can do better for ourselves and by others. I'm inspired to reflect on my own humanity, and identities to help me create spaces that are inclusive of all people.

– Latinx, cisgender woman, third year student

The idea of a brave space has resonated with me that I have adapted it into many other aspects of my life. It has made me reflect on every safe space that I am a part of and led me to question whether or not these spaces are encouraging critical consciousness.

– White, cisgender woman, first year student

Learning perspectives that I have likely not encountered previously will challenge me. However it is important to me that I am open to learning from these experiences as this will lead me to a path of personal growth and learning. I'm willing to see things in a new way.

– White, cisgender man, fourth year student

We reflect, discuss, and describe qualities of safe, brave, and critical spaces to articulate how we wish to experience the classroom environment in ways that can support mutual critical learning.

Through critically reflexive dialogues students begin to connect what they imagined or visualized as inclusive classrooms with what they wrote in relation to the assigned articles, then to the classroom community agreements we are co-developing. Together, students and I are encouraged to reflect on how we felt about that which we imagined or envisioned, and what practices, actions, dynamics, or characteristics of a classroom space could lead students to feel included, affirmed, and supported in their learning. Through small and large group discussions students share their thoughts, and we begin to generate a list of reflections that serve as the foundation to guide us into an understanding of what could support our learning. All students have an opportunity to contribute to creating our classroom community agreements.

Developing Our Classroom Community Agreements

Our conversations on safe, brave, and critically compassionate classrooms draw from writings by Arao and Clemens (2013), who reference the work of Holley and Steiner (2005) on safe and brave spaces. Although safe spaces purport the illusion [purport to offer security . . . ? give the illusion of security ...?] of security or absence of harm, brave spaces invite a degree of audacity to embrace difference, uncertainty, and conflict, which is necessary for critical consciousness development. Thus, a safe space is "an environment in which students are willing and able to

participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues” (p. 49). A brave space, on the other hand, invites “courageous conversations about race” (Singleton & Linton, 2005; Sparks, 2002), or other difficult topics that often require the courage to challenge assumptions or hegemonic discourses.

As we reflect and dialogue, we develop an understanding of the differences between safe and brave spaces. Students’ comments are written on the whiteboard for all to respond to, expand upon, and/or challenge. Some of the comments students have offered include the following:

Different students, based on their positionalities and lived experiences, will experience safe and brave spaces differently at varied moments. Student experiences in such spaces are constantly changing.

- South Asian American, cisgender woman, second year student

Safety might not be best for difficult topics. We need to be open to discomfort to make progress.

- White, cisgender woman, third year student-athlete

Brave spaces call for courage and a way to help all people interact with each other authentically when engaging in difficult conversations.

- Latinx, cisgender man, second year student

In order to confront issues of social injustice we must recognize how power and privilege influence race relations in the U.S. – and how, as the article highlights: *this country is never safe for people of color.*

- African American, cisgender man, fourth year student-athlete

The distinctions made between safe and brave spaces, and the importance of fostering a hybrid of qualities in both for cultivating critical spaces for dialogue, reflection, and growth, can help us proceed onto describing the classroom environment that we, as a class, want to experience. Our critically reflexive dialogues focus on classroom environments we have experienced as caring or nourishing of our learning. In this way, we envision what our co-learning experiences could be.

1. Respect yourself & this focus group/interview space
2. Don't judge others
3. Listen with an open mind (e.g., show you care and have compassion for others)
4. Speak using "I" statements (e.g., I feel that..., I don't like it when...)
5. Don't share other people's stories
6. Be present by actively listening to others (e.g., make sure your phones are on silent)
7. Make space for others to participate
8. One mic - one person talks at a time
9. Challenge by choice (e.g., you can participate and share to the extent that you're comfortable)
10. Confidentiality & privacy (e.g., what is shared here, stay here)

FIGURE 1. CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS, FALL 2015

I have facilitated and led several activities toward the development of inclusive spaces for learning and solidarity. Yet, as an educator I am most intentional of ensuring that each class has an opportunity, and an experience, to co-create their unique set of agreements as a class, whilst recognizing that these may change over time. Featured in Figure 1, for example, are classroom community agreements created in my first quarter at Claradise University² in fall 2015.

Every quarter our agreements evolve, and often have expanded to include community care. Figure 2 shows another iteration of changes to our agreements to meet students’ needs.

The agreements, along with their meaning, intention, and application have varied from class to class. Yet what remains consistent is that the agreements are created with a genuine sense of care that animates relational learning via criticality and compassion. Together, we develop classroom community agreements that help foster our process of unlearning/relearning and relationality.

1. Respect yourself & our learning community
2. Agree to disagree
3. Come with an open mind – and heart
4. Step up & Step back
5. Suspend judgements and assumptions
6. Engage in Critical Reflexivity
7. Challenge by choice

FIGURE 2. CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS, FALL 2021

Engaging Our Community Agreements in Moments of Tension

Over the years that I have facilitated the development of classroom community agreements I have observed recurring themes in what we produce. Through critically reflexive dialogues, journaling, and small and large group discussions, variations of classroom community agreements are developed that help cultivate critically compassionate learning communities. One of the most immediate student impulses when creating our agreements is to name common ground rules, like respect and agree to disagree. When asked to think further about what these rules or expectations mean, students often come to a consensus that these are premised on a structure to maintain comfort or privilege tied to power at the expense of decolonial critical inquiry and collaboration. Most conceptualizations of respect are aligned with civility; yet, in relation to our agreements students view respect as more expansive. Respect as civility is noted as important, yet too limiting of a conceptualization in relation to caring and honoring the self, others, and our humanity. Thus, the addition of respect yourself and our learning community helps students recognize that while we are individuals, we are also part of a collective that is or must be critical *and* compassionate to facilitate meaningful learning in community.

Because most students strive to participate and contribute to learning with integrity and dignity, they are often very genuine about asking for help or recognizing that they may struggle with certain topics yet are open to being brave or courageous in their sharing. One student, for example, stated that “taking responsibility for my own learning process requires taking a risk and even being uncomfortable or brave.” Similarly, another student noted that “respect is premised on civility”—and “if disagreements surface, maintaining respect can be challenging, but we must respect each other so we can learn.” Rather than proposing an agreement of respect that is decontextualized or implicit of accountability, students often reframed the agreement to affirm their commitment to mutual learning via perspective taking, as Figure 3 illustrates.

Community Agreements ↕

As an anti-oppressive decolonial feminist educator, it is important for me that we establish a set of “ground rules” or what I prefer to call “Community Agreements” for how we will engage with one another in reviewing, learning and discussing the course content. Below is a list of Community Agreements for our online class.

- **Respect yourself & our learning community** (respect your process and the subjectivities of others)
- **Suspend judgments & assumptions** (try to withhold judgments or biases about others and their opinions, be mindful of how you ask, or word, comments and questions)
- **Listen with compassion** (hear people out, don't judge or assume ignorant comments are made out of malice or hate, but rather see them as learning opportunities for all involved)
- **Engage with an open mind and heart** (all people have different lived experiences, however we are all deserving of respect and dignity, therefore please approach all discussions and on-line learning engagements with critical compassion -- call people “in” to a conversation)
- **Reflexivity** (engage in conscious self-awareness, be mindful about your emotions and though process as you are feeling and experiencing them -- discern the source of your thought and subjective experience)
- **Perspective taking** (try to consider where the other person might be coming from, walking in another person's shoes)
- **Step up & step back** (facilitate opportunities for others who have not spoken up to also join in the conversation, this means you stepping back so others can step forward, step up)
- **Challenge ideas -- not people**
- **Challenge by choice** (you have a right to participate to the extent that you want and are comfortable, you can challenge your discomfort to the degree that you are willing -- however, given the on-line structure of this course your on-line/virtual participation is imperative!)
- **Confidentiality/Privacy** (strive to maintain the stories and experiences shared by others to yourself or within our learning community, online learning environment; stories shared that compromise your safety/health and that of other student(s) will have to be addressed accordingly through OSL)

FIGURE 3. CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS, SPRING 2022

When striving to foster a critical consciousness within a critically compassionate learning community, an agreement of agree to disagree, which can be associated with conflict, can also be recognized as valuable, productive, or even necessary because it can lead to critically thinking and engagement in actions aligned with social change and transformative justice.

The conflict, or “productive tensions,” that may surface with a difficult topic, must not be defused, however. Instead, it can be directed or guided to help students better understand an issue, and elucidate different viewpoints among us. In fact, topics considered through various viewpoints can support the process of mutual learning through iterative cycles of reflection and dialogue, thus leading to deeper critical thinking. A student described this process of disagreement as a form of “necessary discomfort,” sharing that “by troubling, deconstructing and rethinking issues from a critical, intersectional and sociopolitical standpoint we can reach a deeper analysis that sees issues from an intersectional lens.” Rather than being avoided, disagreements that are discomforting can often lead to developing a critical consciousness, which is imperative of collaboration and solidarity as well. If troubling discourses went unchallenged, as is often the case in safe spaces, the critical learning that is characteristic of brave and critically compassionate spaces would not be possible.

In my classes it is common for some students to embrace disagreement because they see experiences as valuable opportunities for gaining new or nuanced insights. To offer an example of “productive tension” that served as an important classroom moment for critical learning, I offer a fieldnote of a dialogue between two students in my *Introduction to Latinx Studies* course in spring of 2022. The fieldnote highlights *how* the agreements are enacted by students, and *why* developing these with students is a valuable strategy to support critical consciousness.

It was the beginning of the fall quarter, and an uncertain return to teaching in person following almost two years teaching remotely or in a hybrid modality given the context of the pandemic. Students were thrilled to return to the classroom and engage in meaningful learning, dialogues, and community building with their peers. Fall quarter also coincided with Latinx heritage month, and there were several activities and events to be planned for the month of September and part of October. Among one of these [Among these? One of these?] was the 7th Latin American Speaker Series, which I was organizing as a campus wide event. As I announced the details and themes of the event, and connected it to our recent discussion on the role of U.S. foreign economic policies and military or political interventions in Latin America, one student, Carlos,³ remarked that Latin American immigrants who flee their countries of origin do so in pursuit of human rights and freedoms, and he offered his experience on the violence that ensued in Guatemala in the 1980s. he wanted to underscore that while the U.S. is and can be an oppressive country, and even unwelcoming of immigrants, some people seek refuge and asylum in the U.S. because their home country has been pillaged by violence and a total violation of human rights often by people in positions of leadership or power who are not “American,” but rather from their home country. Another student, Leo, a second generation Mexican American, who identified as Chicanx, expressed disagreement with the students, noting and citing a passage from Gonzalez’s reading: “the U.S. economic and political domination over Latin America has always been –and continues to be–the underlying reason for the massive Latino presence here. Quite simply, our vast Latino population is the unintended harvest of the U.S. empire (xvii).” With this remark the student wanted to underscore that while these human rights violations in Latin American are taking place, these are a direct result from U.S. involvement in Latin American politics – from military training and funding to neoliberal economic policies that widen the inequities between the rich and poor. The student offered examples from Mexico and El Salvador. Both of these students were anchoring their thoughts in their lived experiences and understandings of themselves as recent migrants (Guatemalan student), or as children of immigrants with ties to Latin America (Chicanx student). There seemed to be discomfort in both of them sharing their differing viewpoints as there was some hesitation or pausing as they spoke, perhaps signaling their mindfulness to what they would say, and how they would say it. Students were seated across the classroom from each other, and as they responded to one another they turned around to see themselves as if they were conversing. The pausing in between their dialogue, the ways in which they turned their bodies to face each other, and the ease and slowness in the

tone of their voice signaled for me that perhaps they were engaging in critical reflexivity and perspective taking. Students had a choice to respond or remain silent, yet our community agreement of challenge by choice allowed them to share, and subsequently listen to one another in what I perceived as a sense of openness. I observed the dialogue unfold, watching and listening as the students held their own. I also noticed how some of the other students in the class wrote notes, while others fixed their gaze to the ceiling or the students speaking thereby engaging in a form of witnessing. I then invited us as a class to introspectively engage with their peers’ dialogue, and how what was shared could offer us a nuanced perspective of their points of view.

Disagreements, differing viewpoints, and even challenging comments, were most often noted by students as invitations to “see from another side,” and to listen with compassion, specifically to hold back or pause before immediately responding. In that moment of pause students could engage in critical reflexivity that is introspective thinking or processing what information to share, and how it will be shared. Some students, as described, even took notes before speaking. As a class we tried to suspend any judgments or assumptions by allowing for moments of pause, silence, and note-taking or free-writing. Some of the class discussions that led to a degree of “productive tension” were not viewed negatively by students, but rather as an “aha” moment. These were important and meaningful learning opportunities that, as students noted in their end of quarter reflection paper, were necessary for them to be/become “woke.” Students described these moments as valuable in helping them feel, reflect, and process their thoughts before considering other agreements such as stepping in or stepping back, or challenge by choice, and opening their hearts and minds as form of respecting themselves, their peers, and our classroom space.

The fieldnote example that I provided draws from an interaction in my *Introduction to Latinx Studies* course, which is an undergraduate course that fulfills the diversity requirement that all students are expected to take in order to graduate. As a result it is a highly sought out course that often brings non-social sciences majors from Engineering, Computer Science, and Math together with students majoring in the humanities or social sciences. Key readings and multimodal content are assigned ranging from articles to book chapters, blogs, poetry, and digital media, such as podcasts and documentaries. Two guiding texts that inform the content and structure of the course are Lisa Garcia Bedolla’s *Latino Politics* (2014) and Juan Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2011). We engage, review, reflect, and discuss a variety of topics, starting with a sociohistorical comparative analysis of U.S. history, specifically settler colonialism, imperialism, structural violence, and the lived experiences of indigenous, mestizo, and Afro-mestizo/Afro-Latinx communities in the Americas. The course follows a quarter system which consists of ten weeks. Each week is aligned with a particular set of interconnected topics, such as citizenship at the intersections of race and gender, migrant labor, immigration, education, civil rights movements, activism and contemporary Latinx struggles, among these economic equity, racial justice, health and intergenerational wellbeing.

Immigration is a topic that often raises or surfaces among students the most discomfort or “productive tension.” Because of the complexities of understanding the U.S. immigration system, and the polarization of immigration debates and potential solutions that circulate public discourse, especially in the media, students often engaged the topic with a degree of hesitation and even anxiety. Immigration is a sensitive and dividing topic to discuss because it inevitably surfaces familial histories and lived experiences, whilst troubling U.S. narratives associated with the American Dream, meritocracy, and the pursuit of freedom. However, as most students from communities of color will express, actualizing the American Dream is an illusion for many, and one that immigrant communities and Latinx in particular may often live in struggle to achieve.

The classroom community agreements nevertheless help us anchor in a mutual understanding and shared value that while we may have our unique immigrant experiences, or story, and personal or political point of view, the histories of settler colonialism, imperialism, and racialization that shaped U.S. immigration patterns continue to inform present day conditions. Although agreeing to disagree can leave problematic oppressive beliefs or discourses unquestioned or intact, it can also help students understand that their views will be heard and respectfully challenged. Offering a more unique perspective on this agreement, a student shared that agreeing to disagree “can foreclose opportunities for developing a consciousness about injustice and its impact on communities, so rather than agreeing to disagree we must agree that there is no place for injustice, and we all deserve to be respected and treated with dignity.” Variations of this comment were often stated and expressed by students of color and/or of marginalized genders who felt misrepresented or othered on campus.

To illustrate another moment of “productive tension” that ultimately helped students engage in critical thinking and solidarity around a local social issue in San José, I offer a reflection of a recent conversation that unfolded among three students who were dialoguing [about?] whether the removal of historic Chicax murals was warranted:

Shortly after sharing a video of news media coverage on the historic *Mural de la Raza* being painted over in the East Side, Sonia, one of the few white ethnic studies majors and a local of San Jose [first sentence in paragraph uses San José] raised in proximity to where the mural was removed, voiced her anger and frustration with gentrification that was displacing and impacting the Chicax and Latinx communities. Andy, who seemed less disturbed by the erasure of the mural compared to Sonia, and several other students, among them Ana from Boyle Heights (Los Angeles), stated that if the property was purchased the owner had a right to do with the building as they wished. Ana immediately spoke up to underscore how such events of sociocultural and historic erasure would not happen in wealthier neighborhoods where communities are often asked and consulted rather than being ignored and silenced. Sonia announced that while the mural had been erased there were several others in the area, and that local communities and grassroots organizations were mobilizing themselves to be a part of the decision making process with what happens to

community art. Ana restated Sonia’s point: “Chicax art is community art, it is art for us and by us.” Andy’s face flushed, seeming a bit embarrassed; he suggested that perhaps the removal of a mural could lead to new ones being made. Ana attempted to interrupt Andy; however Sonia intervened gently waving her hand to then express “let him finish.” There was a very brief moment of silence which I held as important for us to review some of what was just expressed. Andy spoke slowly and thoughtfully about what he intended to convey, which I then paraphrased. I offered an interpretation of Andy’s comment that underscored that while an important mural was erased, a new one could be made that could bring people together, the newcomers and the more established families. Sonia, who had been jotting some notes in her journal looked up, nodding in approval of what was paraphrased and shared that the goal was to create “community art, with the impacted communities having a seat at the table.” In this way, she was affirming the interpretation I offered, to which Andy replied with a “For sure, I understand now.” Both Andy and Sonia seemed to have arrived at a common understanding: people should come together to create community art for and by the community. There was a softness in Sonia’s comment, and this seemed to create more space for Ana to follow up and share that “We want to be seen and heard.” Andy nodding in agreement, taking a more related embodied posture in his seat, while both Sonia and Ana looked at each other signaling with their looks and gestures a validation noted through a reciprocal smile.

The agreements help students pause, reflect, and discern *what* they want to share and *how* to share. Specifically, they facilitate students’ awareness of their needs and capacities as listeners, speakers, and learners. Reflexivity as mindfulness was noted in the pauses, affirmations, gestures, and journaling some students engaged in to help them process what was being shared. In their end-of-quarter reflection paper some students noted these as important practices that helped them learn with an openness of heart and mind. For example, in her reflection paper Sonia explained that reflexivity is about “having the curiosity to learn with others through wonder.” Similarly, Andy expressed that reflexivity is “listening without judgement, being active and present with others.” Consistent with their remarks, other students defined critical reflexivity as “being present” and “here and now.” Although varied and unique interpretations of critical reflexivity were offered by students, the process of introspection, active listening, and mindfulness were foundational to learning in accordance with our community agreements.

Our classroom community agreements serve our vision of a humanizing decolonial feminist education. Thus, when there is conflict, or one or more of the agreements has been misunderstood or overlooked, we approach this through a process that involves sharing, reflecting, and discussing *why* and *how* one or more agreements may not be supporting our learning. We also identify the harm and wounding that was done, along with the impact and its implications on the person or people so that reparation and healing can begin. Reparation is understood as the restoration of a caring,

respectful, and collaborative relationship. Naming any form of transgression or harm is an important first step toward ensuring accountability, and that proper actions will follow, such as an apology that is intentional and active. The response must involve a sincere acknowledgement of the problem, and there must be accountability and relational responsibility to ensure a healthy and healing relationship is possible. The agreements are therefore always framed as a work in progress. We agree to revisit our agreements and revise them at any point in the quarter. Together we assess and adjust these as needed. In particular, we amend our agreements when one or some of these are inadequate to our learning process, and when they limit our opportunities for personal and relational development, critical consciousness, and collaboration as a critically compassionate learning community.

Concluding Reflections on Critically Compassionate Learning

As an educator I position myself as a *student of my students* from whom I learn. Together we form a classroom that is critical *and* compassionate. As the two examples shared demonstrate, the agreements guide our practice and intentions to share what we know, to challenge what we think we know or do not know, and to humble ourselves to the complexities of sharing knowledge and understanding grounded in a critical consciousness of the inner workings of power. To engage with issues that position students at seemingly opposite sides of misunderstandings, or which surface implicit biases and prejudices about race, gender, power, and other topics, is an important purpose of the classroom community agreements. As principles toward fostering collaboration in learning, as well as a community of care, the agreements hold potential for creating safe and brave spaces that over time become critically compassionate spaces. The agreements can help foster spaces where students feel brave enough to be vulnerable, yet safe to trust that they will gain insights about themselves, grow in the process, and build community with their peers. Indeed, the process of mutual learning must be embraced and understood as fluid, evolving, iterative, and ongoing. We are capable of learning with and from each other when we are anchored in principles that we are most willing to practice and sustain.

The community agreements activity, along with the agreements themselves, are my attempt at putting into practice my pedagogical principles, whilst creating a decolonial classroom experience with students. What I have offered in this essay is a reflection on our process and the outcomes of the agreements. However, the agreements are not meant to ensure that the classroom is always a safe and/or brave and/or critical space equally for all students. Instead what must remain true or consistent is our commitment to care for each other, and to see, hear, and learn *from* and *with* each other. Thus, we approach and practice the agreements not as classroom standards or ground rules but as principles. When enacted, these help us put into practice what bell hooks (1994) names as an education for freedom, and the heart to humanize our learning.

Developing a critical consciousness—and the heart to meet others where they are, and to accompany them in mutual learning—is at the core of an anti-racist, feminist, socialist, and decolonial form of learning. Our classroom community agreements activity therefore invites us, students and teachers, to engage mindfully in critically reflexive dialogues about the practices that will help us learn in wholesome and humanizing ways. We are constantly evolving, just as our agreements are. Teaching is an ongoing decolonial praxis that, as bell hooks (1994) underscored, requires and necessitates that we “open our minds and hearts ... so that we can create new visions.” As educators we do far more than teach; we support the leadership and development of citizens of competence, consciousness, and compassion. By cultivating a critically compassionate learning community in the classroom I am making a contribution to re-imagining a society where our humanity and interdependence are affirmed, and where shared values can guide us toward transformative justice. To build a more just, equitable, and sustainable world it is necessary that we foster critically compassionate learning spaces where we see each other as a community of learners, and where students can be brave enough to share and feel seen, heard, and affirmed beyond the mere label of a safe space.

Notes

1. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Jesica Siham Fernández at jsfernandez@scu.edu, Ethnic Studies Department, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053 (USA). The author thanks *Radical Teacher* Editors and the anonymous Reviewers for their feedback and comments as these significantly contributed to the development of this essay.
2. I use Claradise University as a pseudonym for the institution wherein these activities and experiences unfolded to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the students. Claradise University is a Jesuit private institution located in the Silicon Valley (California, USA). Although its social justice mission toward serving communities on the margins distinguishes Claradise University from other institutions in the Greater Bay Area, the institution does not reflect the demographics of the region; it is disproportionately attended by students who are upper- to middle-class and white. Recently, however, there are efforts to recruit and retain more students, faculty, and staff of color, and to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that can support Latinx, African American, low-income, first-generation college students, undocumented students, and students of marginalized genders of intersecting identities.
3. All student names are pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the students. Teaching reflections and fieldnotes are excerpts from my pedagogical journaling entries, which I maintain to reflect, improve, and revise my teaching and pedagogy at the end of the quarter and academic year.

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