

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Off Scaffolding and into the Deep End

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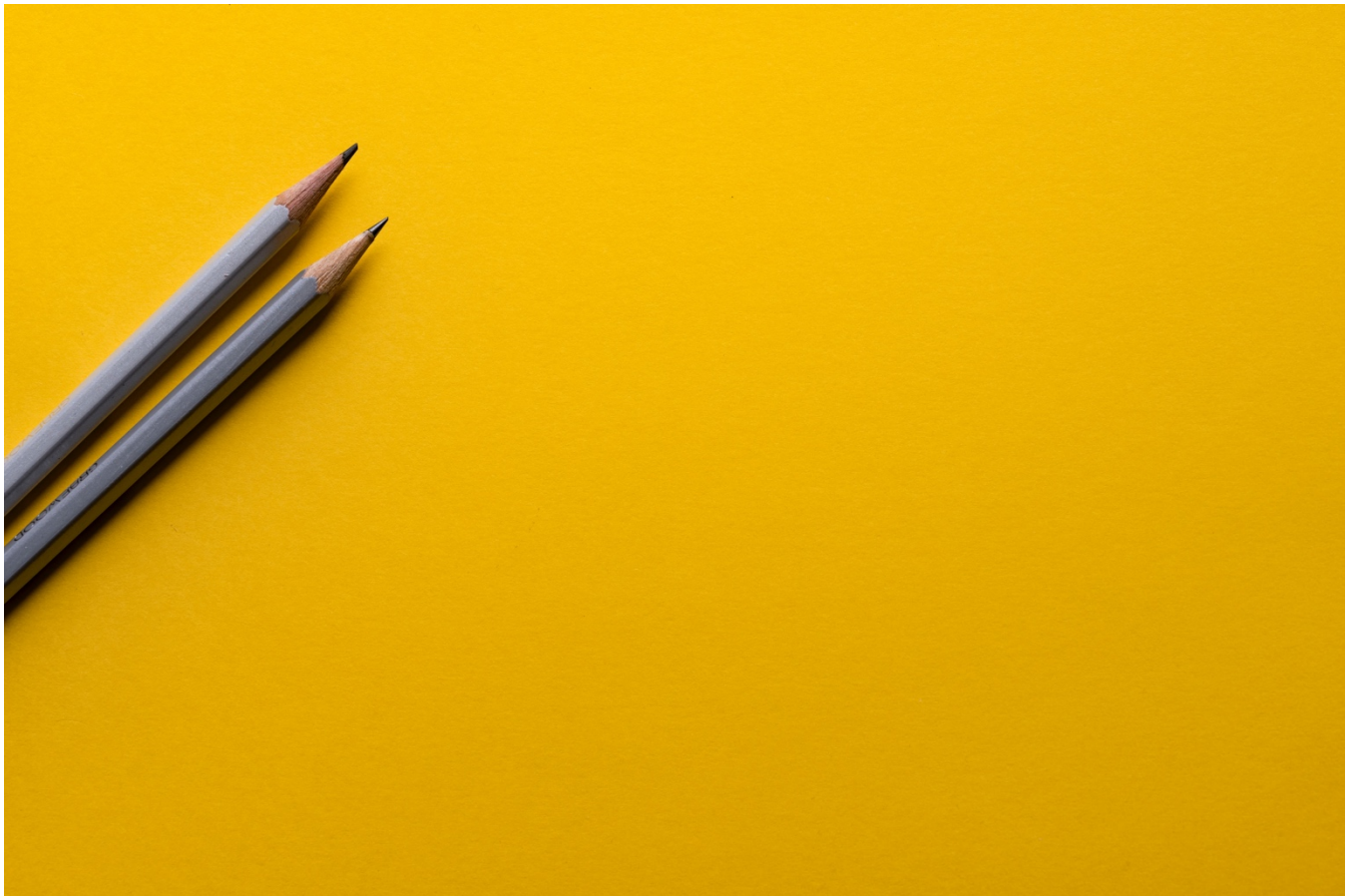


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When I look at a movement that hungers for recognition from the very people who disown us I remember that we are grieving.

- Alok Vaid-Menon

In my role as a first-year teaching mentor for graduate students, I found the new composition teachers to be experiencing a tremendous amount of distress around the idea of teaching texts from authors with marginalized identities. Brought up within a pedagogical framework primarily informed by critical pedagogy and multicultural education, these new teachers wanted to present their students with the work of various marginalized authors, but they struggled (as many of us do) with the attendant complications: How much bibliographic information is needed for students to understand the author's point of view? What happens if one of my students says something offensive? How much extra information do I need to give my students for them to be able to have conversations about race, gender, etc., and do I need to do all of this extra work for each marginalized identity we talk about? My answer – less fully articulated than it is now – is to reframe our expectations for ethical student behavior. No matter how we may try, teachers cannot be responsible for offering privileged students the scaffolding they need to “understand” other humans’ existence.

These questions come out of a multicultural scaffolding model of critical pedagogy. This model imagines that knowledge of an other is required for, and entails, ethical behavior towards that other. In a multicultural framework, critical pedagogy's emphasis on critical consciousness is translated for white, elite, American schools and universities, replacing the goal of liberation of the oppressed self with the goal of cultivating sympathy for the oppressed other. Critical race education scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, in their foundational article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” argue that “At the university level, much of the concern over multicultural education has been over curriculum inclusion [...] multiculturalism came to be viewed as a political philosophy of ‘many cultures’ existing together in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance” (61). The multicultural model of education privileges including subject matter from a diverse (read: non-hegemonic) range of experiences, usually with the goal of promoting coexistence and understanding. While many believe this is the appropriate response to students who are increasingly cut off from the experiences of others, there are some who critique multiculturalism as one more tool of hegemony. Queer pedagogy scholars Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, in their article “Flattening Effects,” emphasize the damaging effects of multiculturalism's forced intelligibility:

Our experiences as multicultural pedagogues for nearly two decades have shown us that the “reconstructed language” often taught—and modeled in curricula and textbooks—is rather bland, emphasizing commonalities that prevent us from perceiving and analyzing critical differences. We call such emphases on “shared

humanity” the *flattening effect*, or the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) erasures of difference that occur when narrating stories of the “other.” (431)

The problem of the multicultural scaffolding model, following Alexander and Rhodes, is that empathy follows from identification and similarity, even as our course materials do their best to narrate difference.

Rather than assuming mastery of multicultural content as the ethical and intellectual goal for our classroom, we might be able to find ways to facilitate learning differently – in ways that acknowledge the importance of our work in introducing privileged students to conversations that our marginalized students have been having for their entire lives, and in ways that also push our marginalized students further into those conversations than they are used to going. However, we cannot do this if we continue to privilege a mastery of content in cases where the content reflects the lived experiences of marginalized people. Instead of attempting to scaffold the lives of marginalized people, we can enact a model of education based in unintelligibility – a model I call deep-end teaching.

Instead of attempting to scaffold the lives of marginalized people, we can enact a model of education based in unintelligibility – a model I call deep-end teaching.

Where the multicultural scaffolding model aims for establishing a shared understanding of marginalized identities, deep-end teaching dismisses the supposed need for common ground. It asks students to establish a certain level of comfort with radical difference. This comfort then bears the possibility of welcoming different experiences into our classroom without the demand that those experiences become legible. Practicing deep-end teaching shows that we trust our students to be good people, to handle topics with sensitivity, curiosity, and intelligence. Furthermore, it allows us to bring more diverse voices into the classroom without tokenizing their diversity, making that the sole focus of their contribution to students learning.

My first opportunity to practice deep-end teaching was in the fall semester of 2017, when I was teaching a course called *Imagining Social Justice*. In one segment of the course, I taught a relatively unknown chapbook of poetry by Alok Vaid-Menon, a trans nonbinary Indian-American poet. Their work challenges homonationalism and systemic violence against queer bodies; they do this by exploring the complex relationship between pain, generosity, and systemic violence – or, on seeing the good in a world that is willing to destroy you in order to make sense of itself. I spent the same amount of time on biographical details as I would any other author, including the pronouns that they use, but I didn't offer the students supplementary texts on nonbinary identity. Vaid-Menon's work focuses heavily on people's ability to connect with one another without/before understanding, and it felt like a powerful enactment of their philosophy to ask students to work with their poetry without

the solidness of an academic-theoretical framework based in supplemental queer theory texts.

A large part of Vaid-Menon's emotional and pedagogical labor is devoted to daily interaction in public with strangers. These interactions are not explicitly solicited, but Vaid-Menon dresses in bright, genderfuck attire on the streets of New York City, resulting in abrupt, sometimes dangerous interactions that unsettle strangers' understandings of gender without the scaffolding process of a gender theory class. As one can imagine, these interactions often inflict a great deal of pain on Vaid-Menon. However, conventional trans "visibility" is equally unappealing to them. In one of their poems, they ask "what would it mean to have people say 'i'm here' instead of 'you're fabulous?' what would it mean to no longer have to be fabulous to survive?" In another, they link typical affirmations of trans identity to typical transphobic comments:

there are hundreds of photos of me circulating in text threads and web forums across the world. "look at this souvenir i found in new york" "look at this thing today i saw at the mall" "#me" "#same" "#mybf" "#tearemoji" "#wtf" "#goals" what i have learned is that it is only socially permissible to identify with me online. there is a type of loneliness that comes from everyone staring at you but no one seeing you. every time someone takes a photo of me i want to give them a hug to remind them that i am real. but the moment a meme becomes a person, the screen cracks and there is violence. (7-8)

Even on tour, they cannot be sure to what extent their audience will be able to make sense of their identity. Vaid-Menon assumes that if audience members have come to their poetry reading without a thorough understanding of the gender theory that would attempt to explain nonbinary identities, their confusion will not be a barrier to empathy and compassion. Yet Vaid-Menon is unflinchingly empathetic towards the world.

Sometimes I wish "the world" staged a Q&A with "us." I would raise my hand and ask it: "WHO BROKE YOUR HEART?" I would listen. Tell it:

"I AM SORRY." (27)

Part of the impetus for my tossing students into the deep end with regard to Vaid-Menon's identity was a course goal that asked my students not to be paralyzed by the typical attitude towards social justice issues. I didn't want my students thinking that if they tried to hold a conversation without expertise in the subject that they would be at risk of causing grievous harm. I found that we were able to mitigate harm quite well in the classroom, and that students' fear of causing harm was actually often cited as one of the contributing factors to not doing the right thing in a given situation. This coincided with one of the course goals for the class, taking action in uncertainty. This course goal reads:

Students will be able to let go of the rigidity of certainty and open themselves to engaging topics with inquisitiveness, even those topics they feel strongly about. They will understand the difference between spacious knowledge and claims of certainty. Most

importantly, students will engage social action within this framework of inquisitiveness, while not allowing their lack of certainty to debilitate their social justice efforts.

The decision to encourage action in uncertainty was also a political one. My course was designed to emphasize solidarity action rather than expertise-driven conceptions of social justice. Students came into the course with one or two causes that they were passionate about, but they soon realized they were all working towards similar goals, even if they were using different terms or specialized language. This allowed students passionate about net neutrality to collaborate with students passionate about indigenous Mexican rights without either student being an expert in (or even necessarily aware of) what the other passionately valued. It also worked to counteract some of the cultural hesitation with regards to having these emotionally charged conversations. I find that this reluctance to talk openly about race, gender, and other social issues often comes from a place of genuine caring, of not wanting to say the wrong thing, not wanting to hurt someone. But ultimately, we know that silence on these issues is part of the problem, so it is up to us to get our students to a point where they feel confident enough in their own ethics and basic intelligence that they can find that balance of confidence and humility that will enable them to join conversations where they may not already have expertise.

Uncertainty's Role in Good Thinking/Writing

Student-writers have been trained to play their strong hand, to make what they can of a text and to ignore what challenges them, what produces nuance, what is difficult (Bartholomae "Stop Making Sense" 267). A cohesive and well supported argument is valued higher than a paper folding in on itself because it's struggling to come to terms with the complexity of a topic. Students do not like to admit that they do not fully know a subject; they are terrified of mistakes, as we all are (Elbow 5). This is especially the case in the context of volatile topics, topics that could potentially offend others. This rhetorical gesture, admitting limited knowledge, is not one that is frequently rewarded within the educational apparatus. As such, it is much more likely that the student has been encouraged to take a particular position in an argumentative paper, to ignore or counterobstacles to that argument, and to investigate/research a topic until they are able to tie everything neatly together, not until their argument unravels, though this unraveling may actually be where they learn the most.

Deep-end teaching asks teachers to prioritize teaching this rhetorical humility without embarrassment. When we reward well-constructed, simplistic papers over messy, entangled ones, we are inviting students to ignore the inherent complexity of reality. Surely there are some teachers reading who would say that there is no way they could conceive of privileging simplistic, formulaic papers like the ones I have described, but to these teachers I ask how often they have written "where is your thesis statement" or

"I'm not sure what point you're trying to make" on a student's work. We teach students that to be unable to make sense of this inherent complexity is embarrassing, that the proper rhetorical move is to pretend to be able to make sense of this world.

When they finally realize the impossibility of wrangling the complexity of reality, students trained in an ethical system that privileges knowledge can enact a type of self-deprecation. However, even though they doubt their abilities, students are able to empathize and take action based on that empathy. One of my students exhibited just this type of action in an interview after our Imagining Social Justice course. In one part of the interview, the student recalls getting into an argument with a romantic partner outside of class about the need to respect nonbinary people's use of they/them pronouns, yet the student still felt self-conscious about having "enough information" to handle nonbinary identity with care:

I still don't have a lot of information on that subject [nonbinary gender identity] and I don't know what causes someone to be like 'I'm not a guy I'm a girl, or I'm not a girl I'm a guy, or I'm both,' I don't know how that happens. And I don't want to speak on something that I know nothing about. And also if I'm knowing nothing about it and I'm just saying things it's probably really ignorant to someone who knows a lot about it or has experienced that kind of thing, and I also don't want to diminish their experience by talking on something like that - to try to act like I'm an expert. (Anonymous Student A)

The student had "enough information" to call out transphobic comments by a romantic partner, yet the student remains anxious when discussing the topic, cautious not to say anything that could be taken as offensive. In the student's interview, the student prioritizes gathering information as a way to behave ethically, even when the student is clearly making ethical decisions within this framework of "knowing nothing about it."

Multicultural pedagogy can make students paranoid about their ability to master knowledge of a subject position that they don't occupy. This mastery begins to look like a noble goal rather than an act of colonizing arrogance. The above student, certainly not the only one, positions ethical action as secondary to mastery of volatile social justice subject matter. The unachievable goal of full knowledge of the other is taken to be requisite to speaking or writing ethically. It's no wonder students are hesitant to talk in our classes when we invite discussions of race, gender, etc. Without inhabiting these subject positions, they believe that they do not have the requisite knowledge to act ethically. Rather than offering the generosity to forgive herself for only having partial knowledge of nonbinary experience, the student interviewed becomes stuck in a mode of self-deprecation that vastly underestimates her ability to be kind and considerate to nonbinary individuals.

The multicultural scaffolding model presents knowledge as prerequisite for ethical action. Because ethicality is so closely aligned to knowledge in this model, those who do not feel comfortable adopting a presentation of mastery risk not

feeling "authorized" to behave ethically. They may begin to mistrust their ability to behave ethically at all (especially given the economic and cultural barriers to institutionalized knowledge), resulting in confusion, or worse, a self-identification against ethical behavior altogether.

In writing, students might shy away from topics that ask them to behave ethically without intimate knowledge of an other's experience. Writing prompts that engage the experiences of others begin to look like minefields. How can one avoid saying something offensive while writing about someone else's experience? The challenge seems insurmountable when you add the conventional essay instruction - construct an argument, act like you know best, don't show your vulnerabilities. At the scale of the classroom, this self-deprecation translates to stilted conversation. As the student above says about the students in the class, "we're just all trying really hard not to be dicks."

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Within a multicultural scaffolding model, a professor's invitation for students to speak on volatile subjects without mastery at best looks like the professor is unaware of the damage someone's ignorance can cause; at worst, it looks like we have set an elaborate ideological trap. This is an entirely sensible position for students working from a position where knowledge is required for ethical behavior. The most ethical classroom participation for a student who is unfamiliar with the intimate lived experience related to the course's subject matter, according to the multicultural scaffolding model, is to try to absorb as much knowledge as possible. There is a sense that one is not capable of ethical action without mastering the other's subject position. Yet the students know that they will be forced to act at some point, either by being called on in class or in a written assignment. It may be that students' fear of "political correctness" on campuses is nothing more than a fundamental doubt about their own ability to engage with others ethically.

As my student expresses in the quotation above, "I also don't want to diminish their experience by talking on something like that - to try to act like I'm an expert." Amassing and implementing knowledge is supposedly how one behaves ethically, yet to act like an expert rather than situating expertise in another figure in the classroom with more expertise (even if this person is only imagined) is to "diminish their experience." Even after our class, authority is not centered in the student's own knowledge but in the hypothetical "someone who knows a lot about it or has experienced that kind of thing." Thus, students may never

feel comfortable speaking about others in this model, no matter how much scaffolding we provide.

One deep-end teaching technique that has helped my students overcome some of this paranoia of mastery is a knowledge-gap exercise adopted from *Teaching Queer* by Stacey Waite. She offers an activity that attempts to circumvent students' desire for exhaustive knowledge of a subject. She uses it as a preparatory activity for research paper writing, but it was easily adapted to a standalone classroom activity. She asks her students to list 25 things they do not know about a topic and 25 things they cannot know about it. In Waite's words, the assignment "asks you to begin by recording the limits of your own knowledge and experience. [...] It asks you to acknowledge that all knowledge is partial knowledge, and to begin your project with a full examination of what you have failed to know, uncover, or see about this subject" (69-70). The primary purpose of the assignment in Waite's classroom is to show students that the starting points for many of their argumentative essays were not informed by the students' actual knowledge or a broad range of experiences, but for my purposes the writing project served as a means of catharsis for the students. The assignment asked them to admit to what they did not know and, more importantly, assumes that this was true of all of them. Additionally, it asks students to acknowledge that there is much important information they will never have access to, and that we were going to have a conversation anyway.

Dave Bartholomae gives us a perspective on interpretation that can help us better understand the multicultural scaffolding model. According to him, the act of interpretation itself "begins with an act of aggression" ("Wanderings" 89). Sometimes we think that students valuing a text sounds like a lively classroom, everyone working through their own interpretations, eagerly discussing their half-formed ideas with one another. Bartholomae suggests that the silence before interpretation "could be said to be an act of respect," and that interpretation is "an attempt to speak before one is authorized to speak, and it begins with a misreading – a recomposition of a text that can never be the text itself speaking" (89). This is a helpful balm to the extrovert-panic that some of us experience in a silent classroom. Yet, this perspective, that interpretation is violence, brings a great deal of anxiety to those of us who are used to coursework that incorporates the practice.

Instead of taking for granted the violence of interpretation—of knowledge construction that is necessarily incomplete, blunt, simplistic, and thus violent—we can incorporate interpretation into our deep-end teaching. The interviewed student could be taken as an example to be celebrated rather than as a failure of subject mastery. The student intuitively/affectively understood the romantic partner's insult to nonbinary existence and did something about it, even without having enough of a mastery of the topic that the student could articulate the precise reason the insult was insulting. From the frame of deep-end teaching, "correct" interpretation becomes less important – we need not capture exactly what an author means to say, nor should we pretend that we can. By now, this is well-worn pedagogical advice, yet many writers still operate from an

ethics that privileges this type of knowledge-hunting, so that we may be authorized (not just institutionally but ethically) to speak about the experiences of others.

Multicultural Scaffolding's Origrinary Point, The Privileged Student

Any model of scaffolding requires that you make assumptions about your students' prior knowledge. In many ways, this can be a useful tool for learning, but one place that scaffolding fails is when making assumptions about how much your students know about race, gender, and other types of knowledge that can come from lived experience. In these cases, I find that any attempts to scaffold these ideas result in surface-level discussions, where the conversation can be derailed by any student questioning foundational premises like "oppression exists" or "nonbinary people are real." One of my deep-end teaching practices is to preempt these questions with a set of community agreements adapted from the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA). Some of these are content-oriented, while others provide guidelines for how we interact with texts and with one another. From the outset of the class, students know that there is ample room for questions and curiosity, but they also know that we will be refining our ability to differentiate discussion questions that take our classroom community deeper into thought from questions that students should investigate on their own or with me during office hours.

Even with these community agreements, many teachers would be wary about introducing nonbinary identity into a course that is not explicitly about gender and has no gender studies prerequisite. I certainly was. Often, we are told to scaffold everything we teach, even the experiences of others. We must start with white straight male experience, the conventional wisdom goes, because that will be the most relatable to our students. Then we may branch out, add on a queer lens or a racial lens once we have established students' understanding of a topic through the supposedly neutral framework that they are used to. How can we prevent the normalizing impulse to imagine our students as privileged (especially when most of them are), and our pedagogies as primarily concerned with reception by those privileged audiences?

Even in teaching a course with social justice in the title, I was still afraid that I was going too out of the box, that my students would rebel or that they would not be able to handle nonbinary identity with care and intelligence. I thought I might need to make the content more relatable. It is this type of thinking that keeps our syllabi filled with privileged canonical pieces, even when we devote our final unit of the semester to ways that marginalized people have complicated the topics we are discussing.

Teachers can feel beholden to the well-worn advice to "meet students where they are." However, in all of the conversations that I have had about teaching about marginalized identities in composition classrooms, the student we are "meeting" is invariably imagined as the most privileged student possible. Our scaffolding is oriented towards these privileged students – we work hard to catch

them up to students who may have lived the marginalization that is now appearing in our course materials. However, especially in these types of conversations where nonmarginalized students do not have life experience to draw from, this means that we ask our marginalized students to perform some of this remedial education. Or we ask them to sit patiently, to wait until they get to the most advanced special topics courses before they will find colleagues who will be able to match their lived experience with the “adequate scaffolding” to talk meaningfully about race, gender, etc.

Where the project of multicultural education is ostensibly to introduce all types of students to all types of different experiences, in practice, marginalized students have always needed to maintain a double consciousness to understand both marginalized and privileged experiences, while multicultural pedagogies disproportionately function to make marginalized experiences palatable for privileged students.

Speaking to this problem, a special issue of *Radical Teacher* from 2011 interrogates the “special guest” model of presenting trans topics. Situated within a critique of multiculturalist education, the authors discuss the theoretical and practical violences that occur as a result of a multicultural model of trans identity in the classroom. Within the context of the “special guest” special issue, Erica Rand explains that in a multiculturalist model of difference, trans people in the classroom are exhibited to discuss the singular topic of transness, not generally brought into the classroom as complex individuals. “One ironic effect of the ‘special guest’ phenomenon,” she says, “is that special-guest status based on oppression can obscure the other reasons that the presence of special guests might well be solicited, preventing them from being seen as authors, artists, thinkers, writers, creative beings, theorists, [etc.]” (42). This result of the special guest phenomenon is noted in Marilyn Preston’s article from the issue as well, as she notes that “students often also express that they ‘feel bad’ for transpeople having to ‘survive’ in this world, and how ‘brave’ transfolk must be to exist” (52). Students are so used to engaging with difference by recognizing the (very real) identity-based oppressions that are taught through a multiculturalist lens that they are not trained (or don’t think that teachers want to hear) ways of engaging with the special-guest other than in gestures of pity.

The special issue also highlights the ways in which transness is most often used to illuminate the experiences or improve the status of cisgender students, and it argues forcefully that this should not be seen as a victory. Rand invokes Priya Kandaswamy to say that “requirements and teaching about multiculturalism and diversity often direct [or are directed towards] white, privileged students heading for careers in business where such knowledge is now considered an asset” (42). “Diversity is a commodity,” states Diana Courvert, “a mother lode of ‘new facts’ that provide value to normalized students. The focus is on how the marginalized can serve the needs of the normative student” (27). Kate Drabinski also implements this critique, highlighting trans issues in women’s studies classrooms and departments as “never central in their own right and always interesting only

insofar as they illuminate more clearly ‘women’s’ issues” (10).

If we are beholden to the practice of multicultural scaffolding, our classrooms will never be able to center our marginalized students. Mary Bryson and Suzanne De Castell show the disproportionate control hegemonic discourses have in our classrooms in their reflections on a co-taught special-topics “lesbian studies” course in their women’s studies program. Even in these special topics courses, it’s quite likely that there will still be hegemonic resistance to foundational premises that function as scaffolding for these more in-depth conversations. Bryson and De Castell recount one particularly difficult student in their course:

This student showed us the disproportionate power of one. For as long as only one student ‘held the line’ [...], all our discourses, all our actions, were permeated, were threaded through with the continuous and inescapable subtext of white heterosexual dominance, the backdrop against which everything else in these institutions happens. (And how unlike this is the ‘invisibility’ of one lesbian or gay man in these same settings). (294)

In a sense, there is no solution to this dominance of one in integrated spaces; marginalized communities in the academy will always be subject to the fact that discussions of race must be tailored towards white students, that discussions of gender must be tailored towards cisgender male students. At least this is the case under a model of multicultural scaffolding. Deep-end teaching, on the other hand, allows us the freedom to let the classroom be unintelligible to our privileged students, and for this not to be seen as a failing on either their part or ours.

Ethical Instruction

Students expect us to give them the tools to predict what is most ethical in a situation. I can almost hear your students’ exasperated response to difficult discussions: “just tell me what I’m supposed to say.” I certainly hear it in my classrooms. This stems from an understanding of ethical discourse practices as static, universal, and rules-based. We teach our students the “rule” (transfer the practice to them), and then they happily cling to the rule, not taking up the real agency involved in trying to determine, situation by situation, what would be the most compassionate action. Furthermore, they avoid the discomfort of knowing this deliberation is never going to guarantee the right decision. Truly ethical discourse practices are always contingent, malleable, and able to help our students (and teachers) more quickly adapt to unforeseen dilemmas in discourse.

The belief that ethical behavior requires education is primarily a feature of Hobbesian ethics, which has translated into America’s particularly pessimistic neoliberalism. Rather than believing that all humans are ethical beings from birth, a Hobbesian view suggests that we must reeducate ourselves and each other from our base, unethical nature towards a more civilized, ethical existence. We assume that education produces more ethical subjects, at least in the case of critical pedagogy and social justice topics. Take, for

instance, the common refrain of “educate yourself” as one of the first steps to becoming an ally for a community to which you don’t belong.

A multicultural scaffolding model privileges the privileged – those with access to education about topics are assumed to be better equipped for ethical decision making than those without this knowledge. Mastery of multicultural, social justice subjects makes one appear to be sharper, more ethical. People who know specialized terms like “whitewashing” and “queerbaiting” are taken to be more ethical than those who don’t. Multicultural scaffolding also assumes that by teaching these terms as modes of critical engagement with a text, we are fostering a more ethical student body. Multicultural scaffolding inherently reinforces the coupling of knowledge/prosperity/goodness on one side of the binary and ignorance/deficiency/evil on the other side.

When discussing Vaid-Menon, many students expressed surprise that the material was so relatable. But this claim of reliability allowed for some misrecognition of experience. Various men in the class discussed the difficulties of being gendered male and various women discussed the difficulties of being gendered female, though conversation about nonbinary identities was limited. I take this to be a result of multicultural pedagogy’s suggestion that the way to empathize with others is to identify with their experience. In a multicultural model, lack of identification signals a lack of empathy. In our culture, it is conventional to express empathy with statements like “I know just how you feel,” or “I can imagine how hard this must be.” However, the more important work seems to be getting students to admit that they may not be able to achieve total mastery of the content, they may not be able to identify with the author, and that they should not let that stop them from engaging with the author’s work on its own terms.

Deep-end teaching is about becoming comfortable not knowing – not knowing the details of a situation or whether there is a “correct” course of action (situations are rarely that simple).

Deep-end teaching is about becoming comfortable not knowing – not knowing the details of a situation or whether there is a “correct” course of action (situations are rarely that simple). We are always working from a limited knowledge. While we strive in good faith to understand a situation, that understanding is not the foundation of our ethical decisions, and so we are not shaken or paralyzed when we realize there is more we do not know.

Another deep-end teaching technique I incorporate into my classrooms is dyad conversation practice. It’s a practice around listening; it’s particularly listening without trying to fix anything. There is a certain type of empathetic listening we are more familiar with: we try to see things from the speaker’s point of view, we try to fit their experiences into our own understanding of the world. This is the model of empathy that asks you to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes without acknowledging that you have different size

feet. Dyads help students practice listening in a different way - allowing space for complexity and confusion, listening without trying to categorize or assimilate what you’re hearing into existing schemas, listening in a nonconceptual way.

In the first session, I invite students to get into pairs and simply make eye contact for a few minutes. (I use the language of invitation because I am very clear with my students that they do not need to do any of the activities I offer. If a student prefers not to do an activity, we work together to find other ways that they can participate in the lesson.) Students often feel a little uncomfortable – we can become somewhat self-conscious when we’re sharing connection with others, especially nonverbal connection. Eventually, though, students settle into the experience of connecting with that person, bearing witness. In this activity, done in the first week, students get familiar sharing intimacy and connection with strangers.

After the initial silent dyad, most other dyads involve taking turns speaking and listening. I ask a question and one partner has some time to respond to the question uninterrupted, then I ring a bell and the second partner has the same amount of time to respond to the same question. After, we discuss as a class, only occasionally allowing students the time to respond individually to their partner. There is an expectation that the listener will want to respond to something or to take the conversation in a different direction based on a thread of connection they have identified with their partner. This is how most conversation happens. The instruction is to let go of that itch for identification and to practice connection across difference. The structure of the activity prevents this impulse to build on similarities. At the beginning of a semester, the responses are typically superficial, but as the class begins to trust one another more, the responses become quite heartfelt, in part because there is an understanding that the speaker does not need to tailor their speech in order to elicit a certain conversational response from their partner.

Related to the goal of fostering empathy across difference, I will sometimes ask students questions that challenge them to recall the pervasiveness of difference even among friends. A question that I enjoy posing to a class who has formed close bonds over the course of the term is “What’s something that your classmates will never understand about you, even if you tried your best to explain it to them?”

As we learn from the work of Karen Barad (among many other insightful teachers), everything in the universe is always already intimately connected. But that doesn’t mean we know anything about it. If we are brave enough to acknowledge the reality that there will always be undetermined, unknown, and unknowable subjects to interact with, that there will always be mistakes made from ignorance, we cannot possibly advocate for an ethics based on knowledge of the other as is so often the model of multicultural liberalism in our classrooms. Rather, we must adopt an ethical practice that privileges unintelligibility. Deep-end teaching reorients our classroom’s approach to empathy. We acquiesce that we might not know someone’s reality as intimately as they do. We adopt humility in the

face of even what we think is certain. Furthermore, we understand this ignorance not to be a barrier to compassion but a fundamental condition of self and societal reflection and care.

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