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Social Justice in the Classroom

Understanding the Implications of Interlocking Oppressions

Becky Ropers-Huilman

Trying to promote social justice challenges us educators to search for and overcome the complex effects that oppressive systems can have on teaching and learning. Because concerned educators necessarily pay attention to injustice, they quickly realize that oppressions are interlocking, inherently connected, and are continuously altering each other's effects.

Two incidents in classes I have recently taught illuminate the nature of, and possibilities for, practices that promote social justice in college classrooms.

I teach in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Counseling at Louisiana State University. The students I work with most closely are preparing to be leaders in higher education settings. For the most part, they are currently higher education administrators, or hope to be in the future. Some have counseling, business, or nursing backgrounds; others have experience in K–12 settings.

The majority of the students come from the Louisiana-Mississippi region. Many have lived there for their entire lives and are not preparing for a national or international job search after completing their degrees, although there are notable exceptions. Instead, they want to consider how advanced study could help them improve their current work or enhance their promotion opportunities in their current institutions or elsewhere in the region.

I believe that teaching and learning exist always in a context, and they depend on that context for knowing both “what works” and what will produce harmful effects. Certainly, not all classes will deal in the same ways with the issues discussed here.

Being Locked in—and out of—the Birdcage

Marilyn Frye (1983) defines oppression as being “caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility” (2). Using the metaphor of a birdcage, Frye suggests that we all have disappointments, hurts, and barriers that impede the attainment of our ambitions. For certain groups, though, those barriers are a trap, making it virtually impossible for them to function outside of the trap.

Conversely, those who are outside the birdcage are restricted also—they are locked out of that location. Their options are greater, yet they cannot “know” the location, or the experience of being locked inside.

As educators, we are hampered by the tools of oppression. Prejudice and fears about sexuality, race, sexual orientation, disability, and class influence our teaching. Because they are embedded in our society, these forces may inadvertently limit potential teacher-student-subject relationships, even if we are actively working to counteract their effects.

Our practices are shaped through the options that we think are available. Through the oppressions that we enact and ignore, we identify what is “normal” in our society and, simultaneously, maintain the excluded positions of those who are outside that norm. For example, if we notice only gender discrimination, we might fail to see the ways that women have different educational and life experiences related to other identities, such as their race, class, and sexuality. We might unintentionally study white, middle-class, heterosexual women and portray that study as representative of all women. In doing so, we construct teaching and learning environments that are more—or less—successful for different groups of people.

Yet doing the “right thing” in trying to combat oppression in our classrooms is not a simple process. There are no easy steps to follow that will ensure our sensitivity as educators to the ever-changing groups of students with whom we work. In the following scenarios, I discuss two class situations in which I struggled to understand and act “appropriately” when interlocking oppressions changed opportunities for learning, growth, and a “just” education.

At the end of the article, I suggest some practices that educators may wish to implement to help us be more sensi-

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tive to the various cultures and people in our classrooms.

**Choosing Acceptable Oppressions:**

**Scenario 1**

An entry from my teaching journal follows:

Today we had a conversation about sexuality based on Patrick Love's (1997) article on how to change the culture of religiously affiliated institutions to be more open toward gays and lesbians. I had asked people to choose which of the assigned articles they would like to talk about in small groups, and three people chose Love's. When I saw the configuration, I was both pleasantly surprised and yet uneasy. Of the three people, one (Craig) is a strong advocate for "alternative lifestyles," while another (Christine) is strongly opposed to homosexuality as being against God's word.

Christine is a black woman. She is gradually understanding the ways in which she is oppressed (citing examples that she hadn't previously termed oppression, because they were just "normal") and was taking action in her personal life based on those new understandings.

Craig is a white man. He had said in class that "race didn't matter" when he and his buddies hung out. He also is rather reserved in his statements about how gender might influence educational interactions.

Because I firmly believe that sexuality is an issue that educational leaders must deal with, I required that people at least read Love's article. I tried to compare this type of oppression with other types of oppression, articulating how all of the facets of our identities are intertwined. We ended without resolution. On the feedback that I asked students to give me after each class, Christine wrote a very short entry (uncharacteristic for her) and avoided what I saw as the main topic of the discussion. She (again uncharacteristically) also signed her name at the top as: Mrs. Christine Smith, almost as if to indicate that she was in a "normal" heterosexual relationship.

**Analysis**

In what ways did these educational interactions foster socially just education, both in the situation described, and in the future? In what ways did they prepare people who were ready to work for social justice in their lives as educators?

In this incident, issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious conviction all came into play. As a black woman, Christine came from a position that has been historically oppressed, yet that location did not prevent her from purposefully attempting to limit the opportunities of others, even going so far as to assert that lesbians and gays were not even women or men. She used her identity as a Christian person to justify that position.

As a white man, Craig came from a position that has historically controlled social power and resources, yet his advocacy for those having different sexual orientations in some ways served to complicate that position. And what of my position as a white woman feminist teacher? How was I to construct a socially just classroom, one that respected the identities and perspectives of all, without negating Christine's or Craig's views—especially when they were diametrically opposed?

One effect of this experience was that because two radically different views were not just introduced, but were passionately embraced, other class members were put in a position of articulating their views more clearly. For example, one student wrote:

I think tonight we saw some societal and epistemological racism demonstrated in some comments... The concept of "opposite race" also implies only a two race society and [the comment that] someone's sexual orientation made them somehow not male or female were shocking statements to me in a classroom at this level. Am I naïve?

Another student wrote:

I was really bothered by the notion of a black woman's prejudice against the gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals and I wonder at why it would bother me. Just because she is a black woman, she has to be free of prejudice? And yet, there are such blatantly obvious similarities between the rhetoric used by anti-black, anti-immigrant, and now anti-gay cultures. All are discussed in terms of "animalness" or in terms of the danger of contamination. But would stating the similarities somehow offend and even reduce the importance of the "black" plight?

The incident described pushed other students to realize how their assumption—that all persons from traditionally oppressed groups would act against all types of oppression—was not true in this case. As we see from their statements above, they struggled both to reframe their understandings and to consider how the multiple oppressions that we deal with daily affect each other.

Perhaps this experience was so electric because we broached a topic rarely discussed in college classrooms: sexuality. I am finding that, in many contexts, merely assigning readings including a discussion of sexuality is deemed to be radical. In my assertion that social justice includes a consideration of life choices that are typically considered to be outside the norm, I am often in the minority.

In my efforts to enforce/encourage education for social justice, I insist that the students I work with wrestle with the assumptions of normative sexuality that pervade our society. As college teachers, we have a responsibility to note those who have been classified as "abnormal" and to understand how we can put their perspectives and histories into the collage of knowledge that we are constructing.

Although our contexts often offer rationales for why it is inappropriate to discuss sexuality in our classrooms, I assert that when we support oppression in any form, we widen the distance between potential teachers and learners, and social justice retreats elsewhere. One more bar is added to the bird cage. Spurred on by these assertions, though, I wonder: Is there ever a time when we can be certain of the effects of our pedagogical choices?

**Contradictory Effects of Empowerment**

**Scenario 2**

Here is another entry from my teaching journal:

Class didn't go as well as I had hoped and I'm still confused about how to reconcile the clamoring positions the situation provoked. An African American man, I'll call him Tony, was very vocal in challenging the positions put forth in the assigned reading, which happened to be my book entitled, Feminist Teaching in Theory and Practice.
I had known Tony from previous classes, and he was quite talented at schmoozing with me. I liked him, and didn’t mind his playful, yet seemingly authentic, concerns about feminism, women’s studies, and the effects of oppression.

At one point, Shariba, a white woman in the class, turned to him and said, “I think your problem is that you just can’t empathize with anyone besides yourself.” As she went on, I sensed agreement from other class members, but bubbling anger from Tony. I interjected to remind the class, and Shariba, that a feminist teacher in my study had talked specifically about challenging ideas, but not challenging people. Shariba didn’t say another word for the entire class, and made a quick exit after class before I could talk with her.

After each session, I asked students to respond to some questions about that day.

In Table 1, I list those questions and Shariba’s and Tony’s responses.

### Analysis

For whom, and in what ways, did that educational experience have reverberations? For me, it illustrated the complexities of working toward social justice in our classrooms. Impostion is always at play, and our practices are never “innocent” (Flax 1991). In this case, as I attempted to enact practices that would persuade people to embrace diversity in its many forms, I also risked silencing diversity. As Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) remind us, “Interactive feminist classroom pedagogies sometimes result in the not surprising reproduction, within hypothetically democratic classrooms, of dominance and marginalization” (36).

In the example above, I attempted to promote a “free” and “open” discussion about feminist teaching, encouraging disagreement to diminish the power imbalances between teacher/author and students. I believe that sexism and racism exist, and that we educators have a special responsibility to confront them by using the institutional power in our role to identify and counteract the effects of oppressive acts. As Michael Eric Dyson (1998) suggests, those who have “made it” in higher education need to act as Trojan horses, working to take down barriers to bring others into those privileged environments with them.

As teachers, we should review our practices for both their potentially liberating and oppressive effects. I try to teach that in my classes. And I hope that our discussions about our actions having unintended effects on learning enable students to see the contradictions in the idea that oppressions are separate. For example, is there a contradiction in theory, ideology, and action if I am anti-racist, but sexist? Are some oppressions inherent—and even seen as useful—in educational environments, while others are harmful and immoral?

My actions in the incident with Shariba and Tony were not free from this quandary. Feminist teaching tries to be aware of gender dynamics and, particularly, to ensure that women’s stories are not erased or silenced. Shariba’s comment, then, that I silenced her because she silenced someone else is very troubling. Was I again acting as part of the conditioning of women to “be nice,” meaning, “don’t confront others or assert yourselves too much”? On the other hand, was I overly protective of Tony because he was African American? Shariba seemed to think that Tony’s words were keeping us from hearing about others’ experiences and needs. In her responses after class to my questions, she acknowledged her silencing of another student. But in my attempts to use power to broaden the class dynamic, and include Tony in particular, I silenced her.

It is becoming poignantly clear to me that when I use power to empower students or shift the conversation, I cannot anticipate the results—often both positive and negative on a variety of measures. Further, when I attempt to care for others, I need to be aware that my caring is, indeed, always implicated by how I read the identity characteristics of students and of myself, and how they are reading me and each other. Classrooms are cultures within cultures, where both local and societal dynamics intermingle and influence possibilities for teaching and learning.

### Strategies for Teachers

Kathleen Martinale (1997), in writing about the challenges of “Queering pedagogy” asserted that, “It takes intellectual, political, and emo-

### Table 1.—Students’ Written Reactions to an Intense Class Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Shariba</th>
<th>Tony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What were the power relations in this class?</td>
<td>In the discussion, all the power was with the instructor—stopping the line of discussion and switching to another line.</td>
<td>Varied from student to student. Instructor was very relaxed and standoffish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the dynamics of speech and silence in this class?</td>
<td>I silenced another student by my remarks and was in turn silenced by the teacher.</td>
<td>Speech represented knowledge or strong viewpoints. Silence [indicated] fear or disagreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways was today’s teaching and learning effective for you? In what ways was it comfortable for you?</td>
<td>Effective in that this class allowed me to express some feelings that I had held in for a while.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways was today’s teaching and learning ineffective for you? In what ways was it discomforting for you?</td>
<td>I was extremely uncomfortable at being told I could not have a voice or opinion toward sexist and racist remarks from another student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tional courage to withstand and work through the trauma that predictably results whenever the smooth operation of the normal/pathological binary is questioned and interrupted” (70).

And bell hooks (1994) adds that in teaching for freedom, we must realize that:

We are all subjects in history. . . . By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification and that is so necessary in a culture of domination.” (139)

Overcoming oppression by teaching for social justice is disruptive—and many scholars and teachers have acknowledged that it is not easy. Yet there are possibilities for moving toward social justice in our classrooms.

What strategies can college teachers use to identify and shift the effects of interlocking oppressions in our classrooms? One option is to look to the five principles of social justice education that Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin (1997) have constructed. These principles urge educators to:

1. Balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process;
2. Acknowledge and support the personal (the individual student’s experience) while illuminating the systemic (the interactions among social groups);
3. Attend to social relations within the classroom;
4. Utilize reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning;
5. Value awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes of the learning process (42–43).

How, then, do we college teachers enact these broad guidelines?

One specific way to enact them includes asking students to silently identify themselves as being on various sides of the binaries commonly associated with the “isms.” In one activity that I have used, I ask students to brainstorm all the identities that are typically associated with being oppressed or being an oppressor. Typically, the dichotomous terms that students suggest include “man/woman,” “old/young,” “black/white,” “disabled/non-disabled,” “student/teacher,” “gay/straight.” Although there is always ambiguity in the resulting discussion about oppressive relations, we are all able to see that we have many identities that together (with many others) shape our relationships with oppression and with each other.

Further, we discover that we all have some relation with oppression, and we might be able to learn from our experiences. Adrienne Rich (1995) wrote, “Oppression is not the mother of virtue; oppression can warp, undermine, turn us into haters of ourselves. But it can also turn us into realists, who neither hate ourselves nor assume we are merely innocent and unaccountable victims” (xxxv). We learn that oppression takes on many forms and has many effects.

In class, we try to make explicit our meanings of the terms we have generated and to consider how some of us are uncomfortable with the choices the class has constructed. We see that each class member is, in effect, both an oppressor and an oppressed person, depending on which identity category and context we consider. Often, I attempt to guide students to reframe the binary associations that we have suggested—perhaps to better see how privilege relates to the existence of oppression.

In other words, I ask students to consider how their very definition of themselves relies on those who are different from them. That is not meant to draw undue attention to the differences between persons with other identities or cultural backgrounds. Rather, it is to show how all of us are more complex than we first appear and, further, how each of us is similar to and different from those who are our opposites.

Audre Lorde (1984) writes: “I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself” (147). And Peter McLaren (1997) suggests that critical knowing involves an understanding that, “We begin speaking for ourselves only when we step outside of ourselves—only by becoming other. It is in recognizing ourselves in the suffering of others that we become ourselves” (174). When we relate directly to the other, I think we are forced to confront how our teaching practices are rooted in our own cultural backgrounds. Then we have the possibility for transformation based on what we learn from others.

A Caveat—Other Disciplines

I believe a caveat is in order here. I do not think that all teachers in all classes must spend one of their class sessions discussing the students’ relationship to oppression. In many cases, it would be neither feasible nor a good use of class time. I have found it useful when my classes focus specifically on some aspect of race, gender, social justice, or oppression.

In other courses, I believe that I have three main responsibilities as a social justice educator. First, the class content must reflect a variety of perspectives on a given topic. That condition could easily relate to other disciplines. In a physics class, it might mean ensuring that the examples chosen use women and men of different cultures, distilling the often unspoken notion that only white men “do math and science.” In a sociology class, it could mean incorporating critiques of the standard texts used to understand a given social phenomenon or explain a certain group behavior. Further, historical works could be analyzed for how they constructed social problems through the eyes of their authors, followed by examining how the analysis might be changed with different authors.

Second, I believe that I have the responsibility to be clear in my pedagogical expectations. I learned from my research on feminist teaching (Ropers-Huilman 1998) that one way to counteract oppression and, “even the playing ground” for students is for teachers to be absolutely clear about their expectations. Examples of this might mean stating plainly that students come to class on time, type the papers they hand in, or make sure to cite the sources used in their work.

For many teachers who have been steeped in academic tradition, that might seem simplistic. Still, we must realize that, for some students, we are teaching not only the class content—chemistry, history, kinesiology—but also an academic culture that rewards certain behaviors while punishing others. Clarity demands that teachers be aware of their own implicit and explicit expectations for student performance. In my view, this detailed direction does not limit possibilities for
teaching and learning. It merely establishes the same rules for everyone so that people who choose to challenge or deviate from those rules know that they are doing so.

The third responsibility I have as a social justice educator is to be attentive to how students experience the teaching and learning that I am attempting to construct, not just at the end of the term, but continually. That is, I need to listen. In my classes, I ask students to write about the day’s session and the course in general at the end of each meeting. Although sometimes I have specific questions for them, often I ask that they just tell me what they’re thinking.

Through students’ writing, I learn about how some class members’ interpretations varied from others’, and I can plan the next session to acknowledge their multiple realities and experiences. Further, the writing provides a forum for questions that students were uncomfortable asking in class and a safe place to express any lingering anxiety about our discussion.

In addition, through requiring regular responses, I hope to show that I do not have all of the answers, nor can I be aware of the many ways that oppression may be blocking our work together. Students’ perspectives are vital to working on social justice in the classroom. Although we are all drawing on different experiences in our explorations, the writing suggests that we might be allies in our work toward better education.

At the end of the term, students often thank me for this kind of communication, and I have never been disappointed with the way the exercise works in class.

Previous work on feminist teaching (Ropers-Huilman 1998) guided me into a reconsideration of the profound opportunities and responsibilities that we have as teachers. We have to acknowledge that power shifts in classrooms are not sought by all. Equity, fairness, and preservation of respectful dialogue are not qualities that are easily defined or superimposed on diverse classrooms.

That leaves a distinct and difficult tension, which many of us have undoubtedly experienced. But within the tension lie agency, ambiguity, and opportunity. Although far from comfortable, that tension reminds me that we are never free from the multiple and interlocking oppressions that shape our classrooms—and our lives.

REFERENCES