




## Beyond Diversity and Inclusion: Creating a Social Justice Agenda in the Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

A social justice classroom agenda relies on the ability of educators to create a space free from microaggressions that can be strengthened through an approach of cultural humility. Utilizing Bonnycastle's social justice continuum, this article explores how to create a classroom grounded in social equality and guided by social work values to foster participation from students across all social identities.

### KEYWORDS

Social justice; social identity; diversity; microaggression; brave space

### Background

Universities across the United States have been facing major challenges with how to address institutional cultures that tolerate racism and microaggressions, especially in the classroom. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). These incidents recently have received widespread national attention, culminating in the resignation of the University of Missouri president Tim Wolfe, the Claremont McKenna dean of students Mary Spellman, and Ithaca College president Tom Rochon (Casler, 2015; McKenna, 2015), along with other high-profile administrative and faculty departures across the country. Students have vehemently demanded that universities address racial injustice and other forms of discrimination on campus, yet administrators and faculty today often struggle with how best to tackle this systemic issue.

Colin Bonnycastle (2011) described social justice as a process of “striving towards the goal of social equality” (p. 270). In this model, social justice falls along a continuum between social oppression and social equality. As social work educators, our Code of Ethics asks us to create classroom climates that foster social justice and inclusion (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). The social justice practiced in the classroom, however, often is what Bonnycastle labeled a “thin version” rather than a “thick version” of social

justice. He examined five prominent relational aspects of social justice—relation to distributive justice, relation to identity, relation to human rights, relation to social welfare, and relation to political ideology—along the continuum. All relational aspects contain a subcategory depicting a thin, middle, or thick version of social justice. Subcategories closest to the social oppression pole are considered thin, whereas those closest to social equality pole are considered thick. Each of these five relational aspects may serve as its own lens through which social justice can be examined (see [Table 1](#)). Because microaggressions in the classroom are rooted in social identities, the primary focus of this article is the category of relation to identity in the relational illustrative model (Bonnycastle, 2011).

Relation to identity encompasses nonmaterialist injustices that stem from social identities, such as race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, and ability. A thin version of social justice in the classroom commonly provides lip service to this relational aspect of social justice, and thus no genuine commitment ensues. For example, ground rules may specify that dialogue is encouraged in class. When a White professor, however, singles out a Black student to explain affirmative action to the class, the student may feel targeted. If the professor has not set up a classroom in which frank dialogue can easily occur, the student may not feel that she can address the microaggression that just occurred. A thick version of social justice, however, can create a robust classroom dynamic with the potential to shift and to transform student and faculty learning by providing a space in which microaggressions and all other forms of oppression do not go unaddressed.

This shift may inspire a lifelong dedication to social justice education among both instructors and students. For example, a cisgender professor may refer to a transgender (or genderqueer) student by using the wrong pronoun. When the student explains to the professor that she has used the incorrect pronoun, the professor can use this moment as a learning opportunity for the entire class about how to create a welcoming and inclusive

**Table 1.** The Relational Illustrative Model.

	Social justice continuum		
	Thin version	Middle version	Thick version
Relation to distributive justice	Basic equality	Equal opportunity	Equality of conditions
Relation to identity	Citizenship rights and obligations	Redistribution and cultural recognition	Redistribution, recognition, and representation
Relation to human rights	Negative rights (civil and political)	Positive rights (economic and social)	Solidarity rights (global rights and indigenism)
Relation to social welfare	Residual welfare and charity regime	Social minimum welfare state regime	Structural transformation regime
Relation to political ideology	Neoliberalism and neoconservatism	Social liberalism	Reconstructed socialism

Source. Bonnycastle (2011).

space. By fostering a thick version of social justice in the classroom, social work faculty can take the lead in helping to combat institutionally based racial injustice as well as other forms of oppression.

### **Cultural humility**

Cultural humility is a process in which people use humility to engage in lifelong learning through self-reflection and self-critique (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Approaching social justice through a lens of understanding personal and social identities, rather than strictly competence, has the potential for a more meaningful and critical experience in the classroom. This approach requires faculty to engage in a process of self-awareness, to commit to learning, and to recognize power relationships (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). By utilizing tools for consciously developing dialogues in the classroom around social justice, faculty can avoid creating barriers between themselves and students through engaging in self-reflection, giving up the “expert” role, and being open to learning about every student’s unique experience. Cultural humility in a classroom can allow faculty to create a space that allows a thick version of social justice to exist.

### **Implications**

Learning about ways in which diversity and inclusion are being implemented in the classroom, and strategies for creating an antioppressive classroom climate (Kumashiro, 2000), has implications for enhancing our vision and ability to fulfill a mission of social justice and social change. A social justice classroom agenda can allow faculty to expand an understanding of social issues and to contextualize these issues as our students interact with other clients with multiple, intersecting social identities. Humility in this process calls for faculty to acknowledge their own limitations and approach the classroom with openness and respect (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015). This perspective can work to remove barriers that interfere with genuine dialogue and understanding. If we want to make change that supports better outcomes for students and their clients, as well as creates more social and economic justice, faculty must develop a social justice agenda in the classroom. The following recommendations provide practical and tangible methods for creating a classroom climate compatible with a social justice agenda (Miller & Garran, 2017, Chapter 12).

### **Recommendations**

The focus of this article is to provide tangible, realistic strategies that social work faculty can employ in order to create a thick version of social justice

within the classroom. These strategies are by no means exhaustive but rather create a foundation on which future dialogue and research can build. Because social justice is a process as well as an end goal, faculty are encouraged to continually update and edit these recommendations in order to create classroom spaces that truly allow for “full and equal participation of all [students]” (Bell, 2013, p. 21).

### ***Name cards with gender pronouns***

On the 1st day of class, one can create a name card specifying gender pronouns (specifically omitting the term “preferred,” as for many gender-nonconforming students these pronouns are not “preferred” but simply the pronouns they use). For example, a male-identified student might write that he uses “masculine pronouns” or the pronouns “him/his/he.” When students in the class share their names and pronouns they can avoid being mislabeled from the 1st day (Spade, 2011). However, students are not required to share their pronouns, if they do not wish to, in order to avoid “outing” a fellow student. Each week, for the entirety of the semester, students should wear these name tags, which also may help the instructor take attendance by picking up the name tags at the end of class each week. The name tags also will assist students in learning one another’s names. Knowing students’ names in the class aids social justice in the classroom, because when difficult conversations arise, students already will have begun to build relationships with other students through the power of acknowledging one another by name. Respect and acceptance in the classroom often originate from something as simple as knowing someone’s name (Dale Carnegie Training, 2008) and gender pronoun.

### ***Group guidelines***

Creating group guidelines becomes an art form. Such guidelines set the tone for the semester and communicate the type of classroom space in which the students and faculty member will be engaging in discussion. If not carefully constructed, these guidelines can often prioritize students with dominant social identities at the expense of those with minoritized identities. For example, creating group guidelines that keep the comfort of only White students in mind will perpetuate White fragility (a state in which even minimal levels of racial stress feel intolerable to White people, often making them feel defensive). A discussion on White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) is beyond the scope of this article but is useful to understand. Next are some critical suggestions for creating group guidelines, and one can see Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) for additional discussion of this concept.

### ***Dialogue, not debate***

Within the classroom, this principle is one of the most important (it can also be called *seek to understand*). The instructor asks students to define what a debate is. They typically respond that it involves one person proving the other person wrong, or themselves to be right. Of course, this is a zero sum game. During election years, the instructor can refer students to the political debates seen on television and social media and discuss how the candidates often are not actually trying to have meaningful conversations and promote stimulating dialogue but rather just to prove their opponent to be wrong at all costs.

Once a class discusses what a dialogue is, class members can talk about the importance of actually understanding another person's viewpoints and opinions. Discussion about humility is part of trying to understand an opinion that may be vastly different from one's own. The instructor will emphasize how a person has no obligation to agree with another person's opinion but has a responsibility to understand that opinion. Students begin to comprehend that if they authentically engage in dialogue, they may actually learn more about their own opinions and acquire the skills to strengthen them. The class concludes this discussion by talking about the scarcity of models within our communities for what a thoughtful dialogue looks like. A discussion of how—if Congress were to authentically engage in dialogues—the country might actually achieve more progress than it often does can then take place. The class can close with a commitment to strive to create an environment in the classroom that encourages and fosters authentic dialogue.

### ***Using "I" statements as a class accountability tool***

As part of creating dialogue in the classroom, it is important not to allow students to merely make broad or sweeping statements such as "Everyone knows that . . ." "When you hear that . . ." or "As part of this group, we feel . . ." From the first day of class, setting the tone and establishing the contract that everyone may speak from personal experience promotes a classroom that holds one another accountable. When students make generalizing statements, it is often helpful to ask questions such as "Who feels that way?" Students may appear confused at first but eventually will start to follow this guideline and will help to create a space in which generalizations are not part of the classroom norms.

When students ask generalized questions, it is also useful to help them rephrase the question as an "I statement." For example, a student asked, "Why would social workers be Republicans?" This statement was quite general and did not allow for a genuine dialogue. When asked to rephrase the statement, to help the class understand what the student wanted to know, the student was able to state her concern: "I am curious as to how social work

values can align with conservative values.” This rephrasing of the question modeled into an “I statement” then allowed for a rich dialogue to take place.

### ***Move in, move out (as well as paying attention to language)***

Some students are accustomed to dominating conversations, whereas others are comfortable not participating at all. To create a thick version of social justice the class needs “full and equal participation from everyone” (Bell, 2013, p. 21). The concept of “equal” participation, however, may look different based on social identities present in the classroom (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). For example, White students may be quiet during a conversation about race and thereby inadvertently perpetuate racism through their silence. The instructor can appropriately ask those students to “move in” and participate in the conversation. When a student is dominating the conversation, the instructor can ask this student to “move out.” (Part of the ground rules may also state that everyone in the class speak at least one time during each class session.) By paying attention to the dynamics of who is speaking, “air time” can become more equitable in the classroom.

The terms “move in” and “move out” are used to avoid the more ableist language of “step in” and “step out.” Although the ground rule could be labeled something else, such as “monitor your participation” or “share the air time,” using “move in” and “move out” helps students intentionally think about their language and creates a guideline around language use. When other common problematic terms surface, such as “Pow Wow,” “blind spot,” “guys” (referring to everyone in the class as a “guy”), “American” (to refer to the United States rather than North America), and “crazy,” the guideline of “move in, move out” has already created a norm around language use in the classroom.

### ***Calling in***

Students are often wary when it comes to speaking about social justice topics in class for fear of being “called out,” meaning that their opinions (or questions) will be judged and evaluated negatively by others. Greater learning is likely to take place, and the conversation can actively shift to a more honest dialogue when this fear is dispelled. Rather than having students call one another out, the class can “call in.” Calling in creates a norm of critical engagement with the class material while developing a sense of intellectual and emotional humility in the setting. For example, the instructor or a student may call in a student for using the term “gipped” (meaning cheating someone out of money). The instructor can tell the student that the use of the term is often considered offensive toward Gypsy or Roma people but that the student probably did not know the background of the word being used. When the class begins to learn how to call in, a profound shift in the tone of the conversation can often be felt (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014).

### **Brave space**

Pertaining to ground rules, the idea of a “safe space” often enters the conversation. The question to ask, of course, is “Safe for whom?” One of the major critiques about the term “safe space” is that it often caters to students with dominant social identities at the expense of students with historically marginalized identities. By shifting the language, and creating a guideline for the group around brave spaces, the tone of the learning process can be transformed and shifted to one that takes the burden off the group to cater to students with dominant identities. Asking students why we are using certain terminology also can create an environment in which students begin to use a critical lens when thinking about and discussing social justice and diversity issues (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

### **Modeling vulnerability and humility**

When asking students to engage in social justice and diversity conversations, it is essential that the instructor model vulnerability and humility. If instructors are uncomfortable in doing so, they should not ask the students to participate in the exercise. One way to address a discomfort is to ask students to complete an activity called an “identity wheel” on the 1st day of class so they can better understand their own social identities. The class then shares these wheels in pairs. Before the students fill out their wheels, the instructors model for them what their own wheel looks like by revealing their religion, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and age. If instructors were to ask students to engage in this activity without actively participating themselves, they would be perpetuating a thin version of social justice in the classroom that leans toward social oppression rather than social equality (Bonnycastle, 2011). When instructors demonstrate cultural humility regarding their own social identities, they communicate to students that they also will be participating in “an ongoing, courageous, and honest process of self-critique and self-awareness” (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 120). This modeling on the 1st day of class will help set a tone with respect to the responsibility everyone has to strive toward vulnerability and humility when exploring diversity and social justice.

### **Including content structured around intersectionality**

The concept of intersectionality is crucial for creating a classroom based on social justice principles. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term *intersectionality* when describing Black feminism and the intersectional experience of being both Black and a woman. The idea that Crenshaw developed is that the experience of being both Black and a woman is more



powerful than merely the sum of these two social identities. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) helped the term gain popularity by replacing the term *Black feminism* with the concept of intersectionality. Bringing this intersectional lens to the classroom can help students understand the sheer complexity of social identities. For example, in a social welfare policy class students might read an article about the Trail of Tears (the forced removal of Native Americans) from a feminist perspective. They may then begin to understand historically how the intersection of race and gender has played out within this critical piece of history. Other examples of intersectional approaches within the arena of social policy might include the following: examining race, class, and citizenship as defined in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; understanding class, gender, ability status, and race within food policy; and learning about the impact of religion, class, race, and gender within LGBT specific policy issues. Incorporating a lens of intersectionality throughout all readings and discussion can aid in promoting social equality as a norm.

### **Understanding how students' social identities impact the learning environment**

When creating classroom policies or grading, student social identities must be considered in order to create a thick version of social justice. A thin version of social justice assumes that everyone learns the same way, but a thick version actually takes student social identities into account. The following suggestions may help create the path toward a thicker version of social justice.

#### ***Electronic devices***

As distracting as electronic devices (cell phones, tablets, laptops, etc.) may be in the classroom, having a blanket rule that students may not use these devices can easily disadvantage a student who may need to use one because of a documented learning disability. Engaging in a conversation with the class, while setting the ground rules, about expectations and exceptions on electronic devices is a better way to create social justice in the classroom than creating an uncomfortable environment for a student who actually needs this support. Having a prior conversation with students who need these devices (before covering ground rules) may also be beneficial so the student will know that the instructor is creating an environment focused on principles of social justice.

#### ***Grading***

As the world globalizes, many students now study in a country in which the language of instruction is not their first language. Faculty should understand this reality. If an instructor knows that a student's first language is not the



language in which the class is taught, the instructor has a responsibility to grade with this knowledge in mind. When an international student makes the same grammatical mistake as a domestic student, such errors should be considered with the context of social identities. By understanding that not everyone comes with the same background and abilities, the instructor can grade assignments based on improvement rather than an approach that simply looks at grading rubrics without regard to the context of students' social identities. Faculty may also choose to grade assignments without looking at the student's name so that they do not consciously or unconsciously allow bias to enter the grading process.

Students may also write at different levels due to abilities outside of their control. For example, one student may have grown up in the United States with access to top-performing schools, whereas another may have lived in a neighborhood that had a failing school system. Rather than telling the student to go to the writing center for help or discrediting the student's writing ability, the instructor has a responsibility to understand why the student is having trouble. This empathy can help the student know how to utilize any available resources the university may offer rather than simply placing full responsibility on a student.

### ***Textbooks***

Professors often assign several textbooks in a classroom without regard to cost. Some students already are working several jobs just to be able to afford to take classes. Instructors need to be aware of how costly textbooks can be and assign only the ones that will actually be used in class, or allow older editions of books to be purchased.

### ***Managing multiple demands***

Students have multiple demands placed on them beyond their status as a student. They may include child care, elder care, community obligations, and part-time employment. Everyone's situation is circumstantial, so having a reasonable late assignment policy can be critical in order to honor these multiple social realities and identities. By having a firm but compassionate policy, students will understand that they need to take their class responsibilities seriously. They can also then allow themselves to be and feel present in a classroom space with all of the burdens that may accompany their social identities.

### ***Self care***

Allowing for self-care is vital. Some students may work all day and not have a minute to breathe between work and school. Beginning the class by allotting

a few minutes for students to get settled and prepare to enter the space is critical. Some students may not even have time to eat between work and school. Allowing students to eat in class, neatly and respectfully, can be critical for their learning. Many students may also not be getting enough sleep. For example, a hardworking student might sometimes fall asleep in class. Other students would look at her and wait to see how the instructor will respond. Rather than chastise her, the instructor might state “[Dawn] is doing some self care right now,” demonstrating compassion to the class for Dawn’s situation, and then moving back to the topic at hand.

## Conclusion

Creating a classroom climate based on principles of social justice is central to our core professional values of social justice, dignity and worth of a person, and the importance of human relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). The preceding recommendations, although not exhaustive, may help transform classrooms into an antioppressive arena for learning (Kumashiro, 2000) and moving the classroom toward a thick version of social justice. This intentional social justice space will help faculty minimize microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) that frequently occur in settings. Creating safe and respectful space will also develop a “color brave” rather than “color blind” classroom (Hobson, 2014). Demonstrating faculty humility via such an agenda can empower and inspire students to expand the tenor of the classroom to a broader social policy level that will move society closer to a thick version of social justice.

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