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A Conversation about Overcoming Barriers to Using Social Justice in the Classroom through Critical Literacy

By Rebecca Maldonado & Allison Wynhoff Olsen

English Education programs have success and buy-in from their students when participants consider why we read literature, how we create diverse and multimodal text sets, and how we develop authentic, engaging writing assignments. And yet, when we theorize how pre-service teachers will create classroom spaces to promote open dialogue about issues related to social justice, pre-service teachers often start to resist. They wonder: Are we allowed to teach about race, class, and gender in a small Montana school or will we get fired? What if we lose control of the classroom and what happens when we are unsure of how to respond to students' reactions to political, social issues?

Such concerns are valid: Early-career, non-tenured teachers are vulnerable and pre-service teachers who are imagining their future schools and students cannot know what people in their school community will value and, thus, don't know if their own values and critical examinations will be met with encouragement or resistance. Navigating our socio-political world is a challenge and the curriculum within English Language Arts seems to be infused with such issues, controversies, and stories. We are a discipline that promotes communication and explorations through various texts, circumstances, places, and time. And as such, if we --teachers and students--are vulnerable and engage in critical conversations (Fecho; Garcia & O'Donnell), we have opportunity to promote a co-existence of multiple perspectives and listening arguments (VanDerHeide & Wynhoff Olsen): arguments that take the multiple perspectives into account as a way to seek understanding, search for differences and commonalities, and potentially argue for a way forward. And yet, the fears are justified and, sometimes, play out.

The reality is that not every day of classroom teaching goes as planned. Becki, an 11th grade English teacher, recalled one of those days when she and her students were working on listening skills and how to respond with astute questions. Becki had chosen three diverse TED Talks: one about police brutality, another about female journalist from Palestine, and the last about a transgender person: "A Powerful Poem About What It Is Like to Be Transgender" (Mokobe). The first two TED talks went over well. The students had great insight and contributions to what the speakers were saying. They even came up with thought-provoking questions to continue the conversations about police brutality and sexism. The third TED talk did not go over so well [see scenario below]. The class did a complete 180 in their responses; however, their responses caught Becki's attention and set her on a journey into figuring out how to change this deep seeded prejudice and bias into a celebration of cultural diversity.

"Miss, she's a girl!" a student blurted out after I [Becki] asked the class the main idea of the guy's TED Talk. As I went to address the student, another student shouted, "Yeah, she can't change from a girl to boy just because she wanted to." The class erupted in jokes and snickers about members of the transgender community. One audacious student even sprang from his desk, cupped his hands over his chest as if they were breasts, strutted around the room batting his eyes, taunting, "Look at me! I'm a girl now."

Horried by my students' behavior, I attempted to regain control of the classroom. I tried explaining to them that out of respect we should call people by the pronouns they prefer to be addressed by. "Just because you call someone a boy doesn't make them a boy" one of my quietest female students proclaimed. Right then it turned into an out of body teaching experience. I was in such disbelief, even my quietest student was making prejudice remarks. I pride myself on having good relationships with my students, good classroom management skills. We talk about diversity issues all the time and never have I ever had a problem like this. This lesson was not supposed to go this way.

Both pre-service teachers' concerns, as well as teaching days like Becki's, serve as keen indicators that we need to make concerted efforts to create a community of teachers, students, and teacher educators who can support one another into and through challenging classroom scenarios. We align with Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen in so doing, as "such work should, as much as possible, be enacted in collaboration with others. Who are the allies [in both school and beyond] that can help advocate for the work you are doing in your classroom? Who can work with you when you fair censure and administrative retaliation?" (70).

As one way to build such a community, Becki and Allison connected through the NCTE ELATE's (English Language Arts Teacher Educators) mentorship program and have since presented together on transforming cultural bias into celebrating cultural diversity. This article reflects on conversations and classroom moments through alternating dialogue writing, inspired by the alternating dialogue chapters in bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*. The conversation is broken down into two main topics: "Control & Vulnerability" and "Critical Literacy & Social Justice."

As teachers, it is important to have strong classroom management skills and maintain control of the classroom, but it must also be balanced out with a willingness to be vulnerable with students to examine topics of social justice, which are often dodged in the English classroom. The conversation of balancing control and vulnerability in the classroom should begin in the pre-service teachers education program. The "Control & Vulnerability" section delves into how Allison's students, pre-service teachers, begin to grapple with how to balance control and vulnerability.

Critical literacy is a tool teachers can use to initiate conversations about topics of social justice; however, before undertaking these conversations with our students, teachers must first analyze their stances on topics of social justice through critical literacy. In the section "Critical Literacy & Social Justice," Allison and Becki ponder how to engage Allison's students in a willingness to use critical literacy as a tool to probe into topic of social justice.

Alternating Dialogue

Control & Vulnerability

Becki: I believe your students bring up valid points and concerns. How to regain control of the classroom and responding to students' reactions to issues I do not feel were ever addressed in my graduate program in Oklahoma. Teaching is my second career. Before I started teaching, I was a corporate manager for 13 years. I hired, fired, and trained people for a living. I also have two children; one of whom is classified as having an emotional disorder and has an IEP. I was already used to being in charge and dealing with behavioral problems in a positive manner. Even as a young girl, I was outspoken. I try to put myself in the shoes of a young adult with limited experience being asked to address students about social justice issues. It has to be absolutely frightening, especially taking into consideration parent factors, school climate, and the surrounding community culture.

Allison: I understand my students' hesitations, and I am grateful that they value having critical conversations in the classroom. I also know that issues/texts I am able to raise and use within university classes comes with the privilege of teaching learners over the age of 18, most of whom are not returning home to their parents' homes that evening. I am under less surveillance than a secondary English teacher, particularly less than those who teach in rural and remote areas across Montana. Thereby, topics and conversations I navigate in my classroom typically remain within those of us in class, in context; they do not reach out into family homes over the dinner table, out of context and perhaps, startling. I am also working within the socio-political moment when universities and professors are accused of promoting liberal agendas. With regard to both, I have taught for 20 years and am comfortable with vulnerability in a way that my pre-service teachers simply aren't.

Critical Literacy & Social Justice

Allison: What I find interesting is that my students feel more comfortable talking about critical literacy than social justice. When I give them readings about social justice--both theoretical and empirical--tensions rise. In our early conversations, my students attribute critical literacy to the use and application of critical perspectives or lenses; thus, there seems to be a safety for them within the literacy framework. The notion of social justice, however, vacillates between a way of being or a way of acceptance, and then crossing over into socio-political stances and actions that make many of them uncomfortable.

Becki: As I listen to you, the article that comes to mind is "Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices." The authors break critical literacy "into four dimensions, "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (Lewison, Flint, and Sluys, 382). One part about this article I really enjoyed is the researchers categorized the teachers in the workshop into three categories: (1) newcomer, who had "a vague idea about critical literacy" (384), (2) novice, who "had read more than the newcomers and understood critical literacy to be reading texts with a critical eye; considering multiple viewpoints; and having class discussions or projects related to race, class, power, gender, language, and social justice." (385), and (3) experienced, who had "sophisticated visions of critical theory and practices" (385). I mentor teachers, and as a future teacher educator, breaking down critical literacy into dimensions and placing their experience levels into categories helped me better identify, where the teachers are who I mentor, and meet them where they are at in their journey towards becoming social justice warriors.

Allison: The majority of my students are white-identified, monolingual speakers from the Midwest and Western regions of the United States. Depending on my course, I assign Peggy McIntosh's *Unpacking the invisible knapsack* reading or simply use a few of her examples (e.g. flesh-colored band-aids) to guide my students into conversations of race and privilege/persecution. Each year, I have a group of students who resist *white privilege* as a construct and as an issue to raise in their classrooms. Vocally and in writing, students express, "I'm so sick of talking about race. Why does everything have to be about race?" or "I wasn't here then. I didn't malign others. Why do I have to apologize?" And more broadly, "Is this what social justice is? I thought I was all about social justice and equity, but if I am expected to ask my students to question and articulate everything, I do not support this. When can I just teach?"

Becki: An interesting finding of the article by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys is that “All of the teachers reported how difficult it was to know how to respond when they overheard disparaging remarks made by students to peers” (391); although, I do have to admit, the blanketed concept of “just teaching” is a common theme in pre-service and current teachers where I teach in Oklahoma. When I try to engage with educators about what it means to “just teach,” no real answer is ever really given. I too identify as white. Yes, race is a large and important part of social justice. The one thing I love about social justice is there are so many more aspects to social justice than just race. Maybe they don’t get the race thing yet, which I will admit that is a difficult one for white people to understand because we have never had to endure the same type of oppression or had our culture stripped away just because of our skin color like people of color have experienced. That’s okay because there are about 28 other categories of prejudice, bias, and discrimination that come into play in society. I believe as white educators, who cannot yet grasp the race inequality dynamic, engage and grow in other areas of social justice and start identifying other inequalities the race inequality dynamic will start becoming more obvious to them, resulting in them growing and understanding more about how race affects our students and society. Critical theory and social justice are about understanding power structures and how to deconstruct power structures to provide equity for our students, so they have an opportunity to achieve their goals and dreams the same as everyone else.

Is it worth it?

The curriculum for English Language Arts is infused with conflict, humanity, stories, and perspectives. While this can make the discipline rich and engaging, it can also challenge teachers, causing them to wonder if a conversation or text is worth the risk of classroom chaos. It is in these moments that we encourage teachers also to consider their opportunity to help students develop empathy for others and manage their own complex navigations of today’s socio-political climate. This will look different across our classrooms. For Allison’s students, we may focus on developing mini-lessons and activities to offer both pre-service teachers and their students exposure before suggesting a long-term commitment or lengthy text. In Becki’s class, it may be more direct attention to using the names and pronouns people wish to be called. In someone else’s classroom, it may be bringing in a text that amplifies voices that have otherwise been silenced. Regardless, motion toward tension--with a willingness to work through it--provides moments for growth and an honoring of diversity.

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