



Decentering Power: Arguing for a Mandatory Undergraduate Course that Teaches Anti-Oppressive Allyship

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue for a mandatory undergraduate course that covers an overview and analysis of systems and structures of power that exist today and teaches students to practice anti-oppressive actions (such as anti-racism and anti-sexism). I present the need for this course given that the American education system has failed in imparting critical thinking, empathy, and anti-oppressive teachings to its students. Hence, I argue, especially in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, that a mandatory undergraduate course of this kind is necessary. To make this argument, I utilize four different premises. My first premise claims that there is a need for anti-oppressive education given injustices in educational institutions across the U.S., and research that has statistically proven the prevalence of sexist and racist oppressive behaviors on campuses. My second premise claims that the classroom must be the primary site of this teaching. I employ the use of Vygotsky's theory of social learning to explain why this site of learning is not only optimal and necessary to encouraging behavioral changes, but also in terms of efficacy of learning. The third premise investigates how the current education system has failed and continues to do so in terms of providing anti-oppressive education. This section employs the use of various research and accounts of educational failures in terms of anti-oppressive teachings. Lastly, the final premise asserts that a solution to the problems highlighted here is possible. I present this solution as the proposed mandatory undergraduate course. I also expand on the topics and overview of the proposed course and engage with feminist transformative pedagogical theory and practices that may be used to teach it. I conclude that a mandatory course that teaches anti-oppressive work is necessary for a just and equitable society.

Keywords: feminist pedagogy, feminist transformative teaching, transformative education, philosophy of education

Introduction

I wanted to begin this paper philosophically, with a poetically written introduction that highlights the necessity of progressive pedagogical practices. Instead, I begin this paper with my disappointment as a woman of color (WOC) in a predominantly white institution and predominantly white field of Philosophy. Since I joined a graduate philosophy program at a primarily white institution, I have faced countless microaggressions, sexist remarks, and racist comments. As such, I have felt disillusioned because I always thought higher education was supposed to make us better not just academically, but also as individuals. One thing I was quick



to notice was a lack of willingness to engage in anti-oppressive action or activism. Despite the discourse Black Lives Matter had started in 2020, institutions like mine were unable or unwilling to engage in anti-racist work on a curricular or classroom level. They felt either that the first amendment made it so that it was not their burden, or they denied that a problem existed (Burke 174). The former claim, I feel, is problematic because education is inherently political (which I will argue in the next sections of my paper) and must prepare students to become progressive individuals that fight oppression. The latter is simply untrue and denotes a deliberate and malicious dismissal of the pain and suffering of minorities and oppressed groups everywhere.

I feel no shame in beginning an academic paper this way because I believe that transgressing the boundaries of academia, especially those that make it exclusionary and devoid of emotion, is a part of my activism. The fact that I must make this claim in the introduction of my paper speaks to the very issues I have highlighted in this paragraph and the culture of justification within academia.¹ As a homage to bell hooks, whose work I use extensively in my arguments, I take inspiration from her style of writing that combines the academic and analytic with the emotional and experiential.

In this paper, I argue for a mandatory undergraduate course that covers an overview and analysis of systems and structures of power that exist today and teaches students to practice antioppressive actions (such as anti-racism and anti-sexism). To make this argument, I utilize four different premises in the paper that I present as questions. My first premise, and therefore the first section of my paper, focuses on the need for anti-oppressive education. My second premise and section is that this education must be provided in the classroom setting I use Vygotsky's theory of social learning to make this argument. Next, the third section of the paper argues why the current educational system fails to provide this education. Lastly, the final section of my paper concludes that a mandatory course that teaches anti-oppressive work is necessary for a just and equitable society.

Why do we need anti-oppressive education?

Following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, millions of people across the world rallied in solidarity to demand an end to racism, police brutality, and systems of oppression. Following these protests and riots, the conversation turned from police and governmental policies to policies within institutions of education. Some campuses and some of their departments chose not to issue any statements at all while others issued statements without actually taking proactive measures to reduce racism and sexism on their campuses.

Meredith Kolodner interviewed students in different universities across the US to find out what they thought about their universities and the way they were responding to racial injustices.

She found that 'white students still go unpunished for racial taunts and insults...despite endless commissions and study groups, the monuments of Confederate and pro-segregation leaders remain lodged on their campuses' (1). Essentially, universities are committed to nothing more than performative action when it comes to reducing racial inequalities on campus. Other reports have also found that racism against minorities and people of color has increased in the past few years despite universities saying that they are committed to making their campuses safe and

¹ For more on cultures of justification within academia, see Kristie Dotson's paper titled 'How is this paper philosophy?'



equitable (Murugesu 1). Furthermore, research also suggests that students and faculty alike perpetuate microaggressions and racist behavior, and this creates a hostile environment for people of color (Agbaire 70). Racism, sexism, and oppressive policies are a part of all institutions and continue to negatively affect people of color while benefiting whites (D'Andrea and Daniels 170). This is why anti-oppressive education is necessary.

Why does this education need to be within a classroom setting?

A classroom setting is a social setting, in which peers learn from their teacher and from each other. I argue that this education should be disseminated within a classroom setting because it is most effective. To make this argument, I employ the use of Vygotsky's theory of social learning.

According to Vygotsky, all learning occurs in social settings and situations. Educational institutions and classrooms are examples of such social settings. He posits that a student's social experiences shape the way they think about and interpret the world around them (Jaramillo 140).

The group, according to Vygotsky, is vital in the learning process because 'individual cognition occurs in a social situation' (142). This theory of learning is one of the foundations of a constructivist view of education on which my argument relies.

Vygotsky argues that a teacher is a facilitator of learning, especially because experiential learning in a social setting is extremely important. Teachers must 'foster learning among students that combines internal and external experiences' (Jaramillo 143). No matter how difficult the concepts may be, according to Vygotsky, teachers can teach students concepts that are slightly above their knowledge and skill level, which helps to motivate these students to excel beyond them.

Vygotsky also argues that 'the mind extends beyond the skin and is inseparably joined with other minds' (cited in Jaramillo 144). This means that our cognitive functions as students are inextricably linked with those around us. Learning can happen anywhere as long as there is a social setting. However, a classroom setting is optimal for learning because it allows 'teachers and more competent peers to guide a student's social and cultural experiences' (Jaramillo 144). Furthermore, peers also have an impact on learning because they help each other to construct meaning. This, he believed, happened because 'peers arrive at a common understanding by socially negotiating meaning via problem-solving activities' (145).

In a classroom setting where racism, slavery, oppression, and harmful systems of power are discussed and taught, students may be able to generate a mutually created understanding that shapes their perception of the world. The classroom setting bears immense power on social and academic learning and is a powerful tool in anti-oppressive action and education. According to bell hooks, 'the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy' (12).

How is the current educational system failing in providing this education?

Surveys have found that American students do not recognize that the history they are taught in schools is misrepresented. According to a report published by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2018, only eight percent of high school seniors were able to identify slavery as being a central cause of the Civil War (1). In these schools, teachers claimed that they were quite comfortable teaching about slavery but when questioned about it their responses revealed unease.



Furthermore, over fifty-eight percent of the teachers surveyed expressed disappointment in the textbooks they had to teach because they found them inadequate.

Apart from this, there is no federally mandated curriculum that teaches the history of slavery, and state-mandated curricula are uncommon. Hence, students in K-12 education learn about the history of slavery in different ways, most of which are inadequate (National Museum of African American History and Culture Smithsonian Institution 5). When slavery, multiculturalism, and American history is taught in schools, white teachers often teach it, and white administrators and school boards decide the curriculum. According to research conducted by Sadhana Bery, this can 'reproduce the ontologies, epistemologies, and practices of white supremacy' (334). Due to the authority given to teachers in terms of teaching this material, teachers also sometimes assign activities or homework that is subtly or overtly discriminatory (French-Folsom and Rolfson 17-18). This is something that causes more harm than good because these students, who are unaware of the history of racism and structures that continue to uphold racism in the country, go on to higher education institutions in which they either experience or create a culture of discrimination (Swalwell and Pellegrino 82).

The problem of oppressive education is not exclusive to schools. It is also prevalent in universities. bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress*, argues that

'if we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom' (29).

This is evident from the many instances of racism and sexism documented against minorities on campuses, and the rise of hate crimes and general intolerance. Burke argues that 'two factors perpetuate racism and inequality— one is our internal dimensions and the other is the institutional structures, such as in higher education' (177). These structures within higher education that perpetuate racism are exactly what we must counter by creating a course that allows students to recognize and fight against systems of oppressive power. As evinced by the above research, the education system from K-12 to higher education in the US does not equip students with the skills to engage in anti-oppressive work. Instead, it churns out students that replicate oppressive behaviours.

Students in higher education institutions regularly face racist, sexist, homophobic, and oppressive behaviours on part of teachers and peers (Harwood 1246). Research also shows that such environments may cause severely detrimental harm to students of colour, especially black students, in terms of their mental health (Green 1-2). This creates an unsafe environment for students belonging to minority groups and does not correct oppressive behaviours and actions of students who are harm-doers in these cases.

How do we solve this problem?

I have discussed that anti-oppressive education is needed because racism, sexism, and other forms of oppressive behaviours permeate our educational institutions. I have argued, using

Vygotsky's theory of social learning, that this anti-oppressive education must be done through a classroom setting because it is the most efficient social setting in which these concepts can be learnt. Following this, I have shown how the current education system within the US is failing at providing this form of education. In this section of my paper, I will argue that a mandatory undergraduate course that teaches anti-oppressive action is necessary to solve this problem.



I will first briefly explain the structure and content of this course. Then I will argue for a transformative pedagogical praxis that is necessary for it to succeed. To do so, I employ the use of bell hooks' pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress* and *Teaching Community*.

Content of the course

This course will cover an overview of different structures of power that exist within our society. It will cover a historical analysis of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. Following this, the course will encourage students to engage with literature on racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-racist theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. The course will actively advocate for practicing anti-oppressive values and will encourage students to reflect on their own biases that may translate to harm creating actions inside and outside the classroom.

Furthermore, the course will encourage students to critically examine privilege; especially white privilege because it is important for our anti-oppressive struggles (hooks 43). This is done in order to encourage all students to contribute to classroom discussions about the theorization of race and race privilege. This will also reduce the risk of people of colour becoming native informants in the classroom in all discussions of race. Mandating this course lessens the emotional labour people of colour may be asked to perform when they are requested to 'educate' those who have privilege outside the classroom. The key is to encourage students to engage with the content and topics, and to analyse 'traditional conceptions of power, authority, and knowledge production' (Iverson 185). Due to the fact that learning is a social process, and because optimal learning happens when students engage in social exchange, the classroom must be a space that facilitates this (Bondy 133).

Lastly, this course's content may vary based on who teaches it and what their individual pedagogical practices are. Transformative pedagogy and engaged pedagogy are not set rubrics that instructors must follow. They are a culmination of experiences that share practices and their outcomes. The course will use a restorative approach that stresses upon shared or shareable knowledge rather than what is "already" knowable. This approach shows that a set model of practice is not necessary and general principles may be sufficient (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 1112). Hence, a general outline of what this course *must* include and what it *must* teach is enough for teachers to modify their curriculum based on what their institutions need the most.

Transformative pedagogy

Existing pedagogical practices are inadequate and do not teach students to listen and learn from one another. This is one of many reasons hooks uses to argue for a transformative pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress*. bell hooks begins by explaining the reason and origin of her pedagogy. She states:

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies... Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. (10)

Her pedagogy is her tool to make education 'the practice of freedom' (12). This is the kind of education necessary to create an equitable and just society and it begins with the mandatory course that I propose.



hooks posits that teachers must believe in the intellectual and spiritual growth of their students, and by doing so they can teach in a way that allows everyone to learn (13). She also links her pedagogy that aims to make education the practice of freedom with Thich Nhat Hanh's argument that awareness in education must happen alongside practice

(14). This relates strongly to Vygotsky's theory of social learning that stresses the importance of experiential learning that allows students to practice what they learn.

In *Teaching Community*, hooks argues that the classroom in the university setting is, in fact, the 'real world'. She disagrees with the assumptions that university settings are not exposing students to the real world. She argues that a democratic educator breaks away from this assumption and 're-envision(s) schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life' (41). This can empower students and teachers. The empowerment that comes as a result of this teaching is linked to resistance because it allows students and teachers alike to engage in critical discourse and action that resists dominant narratives of oppression. Chandra Mohanty writes that this resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning

(190)

This engaged pedagogy has the power to be transformative, and transformative pedagogy is meant to make the classroom democratic so that it encourages all students to contribute (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* 39). As such, our experience of theorizing becomes linked to our practice (61). This pedagogical practice when combined with a course that teaches students to be actively anti-oppressive can help students become contributors towards a more just society.

There are often concerns raised about anti-racist and anti-oppressive education.

The fear that raises these concerns stems from the idea that education is now being made political and that students are being indoctrinated. For the former claim, hooks argues that education has always been political and that neutral education is not possible (37). She further argues that 'racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins' (83). Hence, students who belong to minority groups face their oppression inside and outside of the classroom. For the latter, hooks shares her experience of progressive educators in her book *Teaching Community* and says that [p]rogressive professors did not need to indoctrinate students and teach them that they should oppose domination. Students came to these positions via their own capacity to think critically and assess the world they live in. Progressive educators discussing issues of imperialism, race, gender, class, and sexuality heightened everyone's awareness of the importance of these concerns (even those individuals who did not agree with our perspective). That awareness has created the conditions for concrete change... (8)

As evidenced by hooks' experience of progressive professors, for us to create these conditions for concrete change we must discuss the issues that plague our society. As I have previously argued, current curricula are inadequate and do not expose students to these issues in a manner that encourages critical thinking and dialogue. These issues are rarely covered in class, taught improperly, or completely skirted over. This, as is evidenced by research and statistical data, can result in an increase in oppression and hate crimes faced by students. Hence,



using transformative pedagogy that hooks theorizes and combining it with the structure of a mandatory course that teaches students to become anti-oppressive allies, I conclude that this mandatory course is a necessity of our time, especially in the university setting.

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