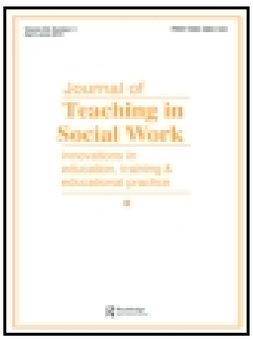

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Safe Space Oddity: Revisiting Critical Pedagogy

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Inspired by an incident in a social work graduate classroom in which she was a teaching assistant, the author reflects on her commitment to constructivist teaching methods, critical theory, and critical pedagogy. Exploring the educational utility of notions such as public space and safe space, the author employs this personal experience to examine the roles played by ideology and concertive control in (re)creating societal power imbalances—with surprising results. Finally, rather than attempting to avoid inherent classroom tensions through rhetoric ("safe space") or repeatedly finding herself shocked and ill-prepared for the inevitable facilitation of emotional topics teaching requires, the author posits that the role of the educator may be to maintain these tensions while embracing a "pedagogy of discomfort" (M. Boler, 1999).

KEYWORDS safe space, classroom dynamics, critical pedagogy, concertive control, critical theory

QUERYING IMPERIALISM: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

During the winter semester in 2005, I was a teacher's assistant for a graduate course dedicated to the examination and integration of social work and social welfare theory, research, and practice as they pertained to community and organizational endeavors. Due to recent changes within the social work faculty curriculum, January 2005 was the last time

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this required course was to be offered. This resulted in 43 registered participants, and because of the large number of students I was assigned to help the professor with grading and administrative tasks.

The course was a Master's of Social Work graduation requirement for the faculty's policy, organization, and communities program stream. Through assigned readings, seminar-style discussions, and guest lectures, the course was devoted to the exploration of three interrelated themes: social justice and human rights, social justice activism at the community level, and addressing racism and discrimination.

At midterm, a guest speaker and scholar in education, feminism, and antiracism delivered a lecture entitled "Applying a Critical Integrative Anti-Racism Perspective to Education Post 9/11 and Anti-Racist Feminist Praxis." She spoke eloquently and at length about her experiences as a researcher, teacher, community organizer, and parent.

At one point in her presentation, the guest lecturer noted that the way in which one chooses to construct research queries and projects invariably prescribes which data are considered valid, thus influencing which interventions are deemed appropriate. By way of example, she mentioned that, despite seemingly more pressing issues in Afghanistan, Mavis Leno, a prominent American feminist and international activist, had been focusing too much attention on "freeing" Afghani women from the burka (see Williams, 2001). This clothing preoccupation obscured more critical Afghani concerns and was thus, in the guest lecturer's opinion, evidence of Ms. Leno's and other implicated feminists' "cultural imperialism."

A white, middle-aged, student and self-described feminist in the class, who will hereinafter be known as Anne, asked the guest lecturer about her use of the word "imperialism" in relation to the feminist movement (Anonymous, 2005, p. 2).[1] Instead of addressing the question directly, the presenter opened the floor to discussion by asking the students present to respond. What ensued was a "chorus of protest from other students" (Anonymous, 2005, p. 2). According to Anne,

> Some obscured what I was attempting to say by lecturing me about racism; others spoke with passion and obviously from a place of pain. My utterances were misunderstood, and I assume that I was considered racially insensitive. I felt silenced. (Anonymous, 2005, p. 2)

This student felt silenced and I felt confused. Though engaged, through the classroom dynamic, in a communal exploration of the presented course materials, she and her colleagues were having very different and personal experiences. I thought it had been going so well. What happened?

FAIN'S PUBLIC SPACE(S): FREEING THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM

Stephen Fain's architectural discussion of school as public space offers that "what happens in public space constitutes reality," through the creation and recreation of multiple, simultaneous individual experiences that define and redefine collective space (Fain, 2004, p. 10). I believe his notions can find a theoretical correlate in a discussion of the figurative classroom as public space.

According to Fain, despite the fluidity inherent in the constant morphing of these myriad individualized experiences, public space is not lacking in structure nor is it open to all merely because of its public nature: while "these spaces are free and open … access is governed by convention" (Fain, 2004, p. 10).

> [When] considering free space, we must consider the structural dimensions that create the limits or boundaries, of the spaces in which the masses find themselves… When we think of the spaces in which students and teachers meet, we think of school. And, when we think of school as a space that should be a free and open public space, we realize that school is constructed space… [When] free space exists in schools, we understand that this free space exists intentionally rather than accidentally or by chance. (Fain, 2004, p. 11)

Within the public space (classroom) created on that March afternoon, some students felt offended and others felt silenced. Fain's contentions permit one to offer that these emotions were engendered, in part, by each participant's expectations of what should and should not transpire within the construction that is educational space. While Fain's theory may help contextualize the role of students' conceptions of classroom convention and their colleagues' contributions toward the creation of the university classroom's public space reality, it cannot address the best methods for management of these perceptions.

SAFE SPACE AS CHIMERA

Most students anticipate that the classroom is not a space in which they should necessarily feel hurt, alienated, silenced, or misunderstood, but the conventions which construct classroom space can and do contribute to these emotional responses (Anonymous, 2005, p. 1–3). Boostrom (1998) offers that, sometimes, such expectations and resultant sentiments can even be unintended consequences of the educational metaphor of "safe space." The assertion that classroom space should be safe has, in his opinion, resulted in the misleading notion that it should also be free of stress and discomfort.

The creation of safe space is invoked as a goal toward which educators should strive. But while the classroom may be seen as a place where students should find "protection from psychological harm," there is little consensus on how this is best achieved within the social work classroom (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). Thus, the metaphor is "not a way of doing teaching: [but…] is a way of talking about teaching" (Boostrom, 1998, p. 397).

According to Boostrom, the safe space metaphor contends that in an increasingly pluralistic world, we are all physically and psychically isolated. The metaphor holds that this isolation is reduced when we express our diverse individualities in spaces in which we feel free to do so. By extension, when students freely express their individuality, they thrive.

For Boostrom, safe space is not about teaching technique. It is merely one way of thinking about the educational endeavor, and thus it is subject to critique as a method that fosters students' lack of critical rigor by encouraging the idea that classrooms and learning should be stress-free. As each student builds their own classroom reality and aids in the construction of the public (educational) space, conventions such as the safe space metaphor can serve to redefine the collective space and proscribe acceptable forms of expression.

SAFE SPACE ODDITY: SAME METAPHOR, DIFFERENT MEANINGS

An important finding in Holley and Steiner's research (2005) was that students of color felt that the "inclusion of cultural content was important to the creation of safe space," while their white colleagues did not rate the importance of this issue as highly (p. 60). Unlike other classroom and facilitator characteristics, White and non-White students felt differently about the relative importance of cultural content in achieving a safe educational space.

This being said, I question whether students in the Holley and Steiner (2005) study could be held to be describing the same phenomenon when talking about safe space. This catch-all term can thus be seen as operating differently for different students and, ironically, the very processes of discomfort that it is meant to abate may be exacerbated by the expectations these varying formulations necessarily entail. It is, therefore, not surprising that the guest lecturer's presentation led to increased emotionality amongst the students. Classroom discussion of social, cultural, and racial diversity can often lead to discomfort and emotional upset and strain student interactions (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Tatum, 1992; Van Soest, 1994). Unfortunately, the safe space educational metaphor offers no real or consistent safeguard.

Even if one accepts that the safe space metaphor does not offer an educational method, but merely a way of thinking about the university

classroom, one should question another premise at the heart of the concept: "What happens when students' individualized self-expressions do not appear to be contributing to their growth? What if student expressions expose ideologies that impede the growth of other students? What, if anything, can and should an instructor do if one student's education risk is another's traumatic event?"

QUERYING IMPERIALISM: A TEACHING PERSPECTIVE

This particular incident, in a social work graduate classroom, has led me to question my commitment to constructivist teaching methods, critical theory and critical pedagogy–not because I do not personally identify with their moral positions, but because the ideological stances with which they are usually associated can and, I would argue, did operate in undemocratic and perhaps even oppressive ways on that March afternoon. My resultant unease has led me to ask some additional questions: "How does one best orchestrate the numerous individual notions which contribute to the construction of the classroom as public space so that they work in concert? Do critical theory and critical pedagogy promise more than they can currently deliver?"

PRAXIS MAKES PERFECT: CRITICAL THEORY IN THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM

Critical theory is "committed to examining how we construct everyday realities and to questioning many of our taken-for-granted assumptions about them" (Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 286). According to the authors, the emancipatory potential of critical theory's integration into the classroom lies, in part, in the opportunity to deconstruct previously unquestioned "truths". Despite their management classroom focus, the authors' discussion of critical theory is apt for the social work education endeavor because critical theory requires, by definition, "an unequivocal commitment to fundamental change" (Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 286). This notion of critical theory as it pertains to critical pedagogy is in keeping with my personal views regarding university education, in general and social work practice and education, in particular.

Once again, this is not to imply that a successful classroom experience is free of conflict or debate. On the contrary, my view of a rich university experience is one of a continual dialectical process characterized by challenge(s), be they from the course materials, facilitators and/or classmates (MacKeracher, 1996). However, this midterm incident has shaken my previous certainty regarding how students and educators can and should

seek to challenge each other and exposed my past positions as steeped in ideology that had heretofore gone unacknowledged.

IT TAKES TWO: IDEOLOGY AND CONCERTIVE CONTROL IN THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM

Prasad and Caproni (1997) offer that ideology is comprised of the "elements of a shared worldview that, although providing order and meaning for societal members also prevent individuals from living fulfilling lives by masking social contradictions, creating false expectations and thus limiting societal possibilities and human potential" (p. 287). The authors maintain that dominant ideologies can impede our abilities to regard life circumstances creatively. Coupled with the concept of concertive control, this notion may help to understand what happened in this social work classroom. Barker (1997) explains:

> [Concertive control] grows out of a substantial consensus about values, high-level co-ordination, and a degree of self-management by members or workers in an organization…it can [result] in a form of control more powerful, less apparent, and more difficult to resist than that of the former bureaucracy (p. 408)

Barker (1997) further maintains that concertive control within an organization requires (a) consolidation and value consensus, (b) emergence of normative rules, and (c) stabilization and formalization of rules.

Were accepted social work ideologies and concertive control working together to proscribe Anne's learning? I remember that the discussion which followed her query made me feel uncomfortable–not because I necessarily disagreed with the responses expressed, but because some of her fellow students seemed indignant that the question had even been asked. It might be offered that in questioning the invited presenter about imperialism, this student was seen as subverting already consolidated normative rules about appropriate classroom expression by White graduate students with regard to issues of ethnicity.

SPEAK UP. I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER YOUR HISTORY!

In social work faculties it is common at the start of the semester for students and facilitators to agree to treat each other respectfully and to seek to ensure that they not express themselves in racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, etc., ways. As a Black woman, I had always felt that, despite these classroom agreements, socially marginalized students were more cognizant of a different set of pervasive societal rules. Despite what may be agreed to at

the start of the term, I believed that for these students, a wider project of norm consolidation and formalization than that insinuated by Barker (1997) had already taken place. Thus "different" students were embodied (intentional pun) in the very ideologies (read "–isms") that Prasad and Caproni and others seem to imply and can be unpacked and cast off at will. Our communities, histories, and experiences continued to tell us that there are behaviors and expectations that construct marginalized peoples as gay or lesbian, poor, Black, Muslim, Hispanic, non-Anglophone, differently-abled, etc. Thus, despite the classroom norm exercises, I felt that these ideologies continued to affect what marginalized students, in particular, said, and more insidiously, what they were ultimately heard to be saying.

Thus, despite their early classroom commitments, students, through the very act of (public) participation, are thrust into roles that are only partially of their own creation. What I had not fully considered was that marginalized students are not the only classroom participants subject to hegemonic characterization. Despite their perceived positions of privilege, "dominant culture" (in this case, read White) students may be cast into roles they never chose nor wanted to assume. Just as I felt that society told marginalized students who they were (and by extension what they could say), on that afternoon, I began to wonder if the very process of value consolidation that is fundamental to social work education had become another structure through which concertive control operated to differentially prescribe and proscribe this White, middle-aged, middle-class student's learning.

Students engaged in the learning environment come with their particular and collective histories. Thus, every class participant arrives with individualized personal experiences, understanding of his or her own construction as members of gendered, minoritized, racialized and/or historically marginalized people, and personal ideas of what those labels mean when ascribed to others. Even if they do not choose to describe themselves in these ideological terms, the very existence of these societal markers informs classroom interaction.

The prevalence and predominance of socially constructing ideologies outside the classroom is sometimes obscured by the need to believe that the classroom can be rendered immune from societal "-isms" by the commitment to critical theory touted by Prasad and Caproni (1997) and others. Once again, one might offer that the notion of classroom as a potential safe space operates as a competing ideology, which sometimes serves to lull classroom participants into a false sense of security regarding the educational process (Boostrom, 1998). The notion of classroom safety thus creates a different, but no less potentially harmful, "false expectation," which, when proved artificial, can, in turn, more damaging than had the conviction not existed in the first place (Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 287). Those who unwittingly (or perhaps provocatively) question shared ideologies may find themselves

trumped into submission or silence by communal acquiescence to concertive control.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGUES: CAN WE TALK? DO WE LISTEN?

In her influential article "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) used her experiences as the professor and creator of an undergraduate antiracist media course to develop a critique of the theoretical axioms of critical pedagogy. Ellsworth noted that the role of the critical educator was to establish and foster constructive dialogue and exchange amongst the myriad voices and experiences brought by students to the university classroom. The role of the critical educator is to create space within the classroom where students can engage with their colleagues and their experiences of oppression in order to learn about, and from, each other. These projects are to be undertaken with the full acknowledgement of the "unequal power relations in the classroom," despite critical pedagogy's failure to effectively explore and account for how these imbalances challenge "the kind of student expression and dialogue" called for by the method itself (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309). This is acutely felt when

> [Critical] pedagogues speak of student voices as "sharing" their experiences and understandings of oppression with other students and with the teacher in the interest of "expanding the possibilities of what is it to be human." Yet [differentially marginalized individuals] do not speak of the oppressive formations that condition their lives in the spirit of "sharing". Rather, the speech of oppositional groups is a "talking back," a "defiant speech" that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival. (Ellsworth 1989, p. 310)

Ellsworth insisted that, until critical pedagogy could address the roles of such notions as fear, trust, desire and risk within classroom discussions, the power imbalances and divisions these imbalances (re)create would continue.

Critical theory assumes that classroom interaction can exist in created spaces where all participants have the same right to speak, that this right is respected by all those present, that classmates feel safe speaking, and that all shared ideas will be engaged respectfully and critically. However these assumptions regarding classroom dialogue prove illusory due to the embodied and historical differences of students and teachers. Unfortunately, according to Ellsworth,

> [Dialogue] in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historical moment, power relations between raced,

> classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust. The injustice of these relations and the way in which those injustices distort communication cannot be overcome in the classroom no matter how committed the teacher and students are to "overcoming conditions that perpetuate suffering." (1989, p. 316)

But is there a way to acknowledge and tap into the classroom's intrinsic potential without obfuscating the impacts of competing ideologies and often repressive hegemonies cautioned against by the thinkers critically examined thus far? In other words, in spite of racism, sexism, caste, ableism, heteronormativity, and other oppressive systems, can students and teachers construct "intentional spaces" in which they engage to learn and un-learn their lives? I answer in a tentative affirmative.

YOUR MISSION (IMPOSSIBLE), SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT…

What is essential to this construction is a minute-to-minute, exchange-to-exchange acknowledgement by all involved of the ever-present distortions in communication that Ellsworth warned against—a ubiquitous realization that the classroom's freedom (read intentionality) comes at a price. As Ng (1995) reminds us,

> [The] university classroom is *not*, by definition, a democratic place. To pretend that it can be is to deny that hierarchy and institutional power exist. It is to delude ourselves that democracy and empowerment can be achieved by goodwill alone. (p. 140)

The power of the university classroom, therefore, lies not in the facilitator's ability to create a false sense of security for students, as though a safe classroom can exist in a vacuum free of societal pressures, but instead for all classroom participants to refuse to engage in a collective delusion by constantly (re)problematizing the classroom's undemocratic nature, thus teaching subversively while undermining the "commonsense" nature of society's hegemonic influence. Yet, even as I maintain that the classroom's liberatory potential lies not in dialogue, but in constantly naming why dialogue is problematic, I recognize that even these assertions are not without difficulty.

After Anne's query, I was uncomfortable and I just wanted it all to stop. Knowing that this subject matter is often difficult for students to engage with did not help me. I was uncomfortable with the discordance between students, and I cringed away from conflict. I was unable to recognize that the "role of the [constructivist] teacher is in fact to maintain the tension of this

struggle [between individual need and group demands] in such a way that it doesn't become resolved" (Osborne, 1997, p. 193). Instead of naming and maintaining this tension, I felt like a bystander to a slow-motion, multiple car pile-up: aware of the danger, fearing the aftermath, hearing the crunch of damage, but unsure of whether throwing myself into the situation could actually prevent any further injury. Rather than modeling myself after the kind of educator I had craved as a student (i.e. seizing the moment and challenging all present to unpack their ideological baggage), I turned away, wincing.

Nevertheless, I want to be a constructivist educator. I was witness to a dynamic where, reminiscent of Ng's seminar experience, "principles of anti-racist education were used by some students as a control mechanism to suppress other voices that deviated from their own" (Ng, 1995, p. 145). I was scared. I was in a role of authority as a teacher, and yet I felt impotent and subsequently cowardly in the face of this classroom dynamic.

A student had tried to question and augment her understanding, but I was not able to serve as a public role model.[2] Despite our professed commitment, as evidenced in the course's educational philosophy, to "fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish" through "the development of an educational climate that is conducive to openness and risk-taking," I knew in that moment that we had failed, not only this student, but all her classmates as well (course outline, p. 2). Anne had asked for clarification, but had instead received contempt. My inability to serve as a role model compromised student learning (Knight, 2001). The incident passed without professorial comment regarding classroom process—the "learning moment" had been lost.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED…

> Social work faculty should look for ways to help students move from self-censure to alternative beliefs and behaviors that reduce the dissonance they feel when confronted with the oppression embodied in the dominant culture and their own privilege status in it. (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997, p.127; see also Helms, 1990)

This student's question could have and should have furthered her understanding regarding the impact of Leno's alleged "monoculturalism" or culturally-exclusive thinking (McIntosh, 1990, p.1). Instead, she left the classroom feeling hurt, alienated, silenced and misunderstood (Anonymous, 2005, p. 1–3). Further, I had failed to facilitate her struggle with a new concept and, only in our later private conversations did I try to encourage

the "self-reflection [required] to develop a positive White racial identity" (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997, p. 127).

HOW DARE YOU? OTHERING AND PERCEPTIONS OF PRIVILEGE

In a subsequent conversation after the end of the semester, Anne and I talked about how her comments had tapped into an undercurrent of debate among second and third-wave feminists. In my opinion, her lack of familiarity with more critical feminisms had left her exposed to the criticisms of her classmates. Her colleagues were, perhaps, emboldened in their responses by her "White-ness," "middle-aged-ness," "middle-class-ness," and thus ascribed privilege. Ironically, she had been "othered:"

> If you are "other" to me, I see you primarily as symbolic of something else–usually, but not always, something I reject and fear and that I project onto you. We can all do this to each other, but very often the process is not symmetrical, because one group of people may have more power to call itself the paradigm of humanity and to make the world suit its own needs and validate its own experiences. (Wendell, 1997, p. 271)

Susan Wendell's cautions regarding the "othering" of people with disabilities can be extrapolated to Anne's experience in this social work classroom. While the guest lecturer had clearly situated her work in an anti-racist, anti-Islamophobia, and anti-imperialist feminist framework, Anne's missed understanding caused her to serve as the embodiment of a theoretical position that her classmates felt compelled to correct. She became Ms. Leno incarnate, emblematic, perhaps, of what was wrong with feminism, and thus was lectured about racism. Sadly, while discussing a seemingly liberatory pedagogical method, the student became the "object of [her classmates'] experience instead of regarding [her] as [a] fellow [subject] of experience with whom they might [have identified] (Wendell, 1997, p. 271). Her questions remained unanswered because she and her classmates could not surmount the obstacle of "unequal power relations" deemed inherent to classroom dialogue by Ellsworth (1989).

"IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE CAPSULE, IF YOU DARE": CREATING A PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT

Cognizant of Ellsworth's critique, we might have been able to create the "pedagogy of discomfort" advocated by Megan Boler (1999). It "aims to invite students and educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment," and, in so doing, rejects the oversimplified binaries of innocence and guilt or

right and wrong, which are often associated with such discussions (Boler, 1999, p. 179). This graduate social work classroom discussion proceeded in the way that it did because "our ethical language and modes of discussion are impoverished by reductive binary positions…only one of us can be right" (Boler, 1999, p. 197). The rigidity I heard in some of the participants' submissions belied findings of such work as Hyde and Ruth (2002); some students aren't self-censoring–some are censoring each other. For example, some students were more than willing to "fix" their questioning classmate when all Anne required was clarification.

As an educator, I missed the opportunity to (re)problematize the specifics of that classroom encounter. Despite the course outline statements, the professor, guest lecturer, and I were not actively "engaged in the development of an educational climate that is conducive to openness and risk-taking" (course outline, p. 3). We did not enjoin students to (re)construct an intentional space à la Fain (2004), but instead chose to ignore a problematic dynamic. Perhaps we hoped that students' internalized notions of the illusory safe space would protect the class participants. In this instance, I believe these encounters went unchecked because they did not look like the apparent -isms we usually fight. Anne's experiences highlight the concerns raised by Ellsworth almost 20 years ago. I believe ideological agreement and the concertive control of valued anti-oppressive mores were being used to suppress her engagement with class content, but the classroom participants did not or could not see it for what it was because of the reductive binary oppositions lamented by Boler (1999).

And herein lies the rub: oppression comes in myriad forms, and it works to deny classmates and professors, through the problematic of distorted dialogue, the understanding we all crave. In my opinion, the primary calling of the critical educator is not to create understanding(s), but to name the obstacles that keep them from us—this is something to which I can commit.

NOTES

1. After the events described, I obtained this student's permission to write about her and my experiences. She has favorably reviewed this work but I have changed her name for the purposes of this piece and have referenced her submitted essay as Anonymous. Throughout the essay she is referred to as Anne because she is Anonymous.

2. I was not comfortable during this discussion. I remember thinking that students, in their enthusiasm, had come close to "ganging up" on their questioning colleague. I made a conscious decision to see if the student was alright after the class. As she left the classroom, she was chatting with another student and so I did not speak to her directly. In retrospect, I think that this was because of cowardice on my part.

As a slightly disempowered TA listening to an invited guest, I did not feel as though I could intervene in the classroom conversation. In retrospect, I wonder if my unwillingness to intervene might also have been influenced by the fact that the guest and the other students were expressing views that I, as self-identified Black feminist, did not disagree with. I was not opposed to the discussion's basic content but its tone and form, so when Anne was not visibly upset, I was able to tell myself that my fears about the

discussion's emotional impact had been unfounded. Through her final essay and subsequent conversations, I discovered how wrong I had been.

In retrospect, I realize that had she been visibly upset, I may not have felt more equipped to act but would have felt compelled to, at least, try.

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