Addressing Student “Resistance” to Social Justice Learning

Mindfulness Strategies that Make a Difference
Who We Are

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Grounding Practice
How is “Resistance” usually defined?

- As students’ unwillingness to learn.
- As their desire to cling to their privilege and entitlement.
- As an act of internalized oppression.
- As willful, conscious, and antagonistic resistance to social justice content.
How Does It Show Up?

- Withdrawal
- Shutting down.
- Not coming to class.
- Deflecting to other issues.
- Playing on Iphone (withdrawing)

- As arguing with SJ perspectives.
- Interrupting.
- Antagonistic questioning or challenging.
- Defending dominant perspectives.
What if these reactions are actually a reflection of students’ difficulty with, or inability to sit with new and challenging perspectives?
Social Constructions: Identities are mutually bound

“An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being...Identity requires difference in order to be, and converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty”

-William Connolly, *Identity\difference: Democratic negotiations of political paradox*
Social Constructions: Invisibility

A common form of blindness to privilege is that women and people of color are often described as being treated unequally, but men and whites are not. This, however, is logically impossible. Unequal simply means, “not equal,” which describes both those who receive less than their fair share and those who receive more. But there can’t be a short end of the stick without a long end, because it’s the longness of the long end that makes the short end short. To pretend otherwise makes privilege and those who receive it invisible.”

- Allan G. Johnson, Privilege, Power, and Difference
Reframing it as Cognitive Dissonance

- Holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously.
- An inevitable part of the process of unlearning oppression.
- We are often *unsettling a person’s sense of self and worldview*. So these reactions are *inevitable, natural and inherently neutral*.
- Defensiveness, denial and trivialization=socialized behaviors that keep the system in place.
Mindfully Sitting with Cognitive Dissonance

- Be. Breathe. Sit with the reactions.

- Witness: Get bigger than the reactions.

- Reflect: How are these reactions part of the system?

- Intentionally Engage: Mindfully decide how to respond.
Different Types of Discomfort

- Discomfort as different from Oppression.
- Some discomfort is more benign than others.
- Different identities experience different types of discomfort.
- Our ability to sit with discomfort depends on many things.
- Compassion is important.
So how can Mindfulness Help?

Step 1
- Tell students from the beginning of class that the SJ content will challenge deeply held beliefs.
- When our deeply held beliefs are challenged it is UNCOMFORTABLE.

NAME the Process
- This Discomfort is an inevitable part of the process.
- The DISCOMFORT can show up differently depending on our identities.
Step 2: Practice Mindfulness Regularly

- Short, daily mindfulness practices to get used to “easier” discomforts.
- Set your intention: What does a JUST world look like to you? How do you want to respond to other people’s humanity?
- Write it down.
Step 3: Examine it in a safer context

- Use a hypothetical student scenario that allows the class to discuss the issue of discomfort and SJ in a context removed from these students’ experience.
- Then invite students to reflect on a moment when they were uncomfortable.
Let’s Try it.
Exercise: Cultivating mindful narratives

- Identify an experience in which your worldview/belief system around identity/diversity was challenged.
- Center yourself in a stance of patience, forgiveness and affectionate curiosity.
- From that stance, reflect on the impact the experience had on your learning and experiences in two forms:
  - The initial one at the time (resistance)
  - Revisited from the place of dissonance
- Notice the difference a gracious stance can have on experience and learning.
Step 4: Reflect on It as the Witness

- Examine the responses without drowning in them.
- Witness them without judgment.
- Reflect on them without acting or reacting.
- Notice what happens if we don’t respond to our initial responses.
Step 5: Mindful Social Justice Reflection

- What narratives arose when the discomfort happened?
- How do those narratives shore up certain worldviews?
- Who Benefits from those narratives?
- Why do certain SJ perspectives and concepts raise discomfort for certain people?
Step 6: Come back to our Intention

- Return to your intention from earlier in the webinar.
- Given what we now know about the internal discomfort that arises and why.....how do we want to respond?
- What practices/rituals can you adopt to set your gracious intentions in your roles/instances as an educator?
Some Caveats.....

- This does not mean that all students will agree with/support SJ.
- Some students may still respond with the more traditional types of “resistance” (yet you/we can reframe our own tensions around this as dissonance and grow)
- Students will be at very different identity development stages, which will affect how they respond.
It’s a Lifelong Process

- Make this clear in our classroom.
- The rest of culture—including their other classes—reinforce dominant narratives.
- Some moments we will sit with discomfort better than others.
- Commit to the process. It takes practice.
Thank you!
Please feel free to contact us:

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