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Publisher Routledge

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## Equity & Excellence in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713770316>

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Online Publication Date: 01 October 2009

**To cite this Article** DiAngelo, Robin and Sensoy, Özlem(2009)"We don't want your opinion": Knowledge Construction and the Discourse of Opinion in the Equity Classroom',*Equity & Excellence in Education*,42:4,443 — 455

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/10665680903196354

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10665680903196354>

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## “We don’t want your opinion”: Knowledge Construction and the Discourse of Opinion in the Equity Classroom

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As educators who teach courses that examine social power, we often struggle with a specific form of resistance in the equity-oriented classroom: “That’s just [the author]’s opinion.” This “opinion discourse” emerges when students study scholarship that unsettles dominant knowledge claims and methods or when students are themselves asked to situate their knowledge. The opinion discourse could easily be read as simply an example of the lack of critical thinking skills among students. However, we believe that opinion discourse is more than a facile response to new ideas. We want to take opinion discourse seriously. We argue that opinion functions as a discursive project of resistance in the context of the equity-oriented classroom by solidifying inequitable power relations between the knower and that which is known. Our goals are twofold: to explicate how the opinion discourse functions as a specific legitimization of existing power relations and to unsettle the discursive authority that opinion offers.

[In the context of seeking an unbiased truth], the ideal educator becomes the detached practitioner, an independent operator who rises above the values of special interests. The detached practitioner occupies a secure position immune from critique. He or she has, after all, employed the correct methodology in reaching his or her position. If pursued “correctly,” there is no questioning the authority of the scientific method. Thus, the educational status quo is protected from critics, such as John Dewey, Theodor Adorno, Paulo Freire, or Maxine Greene, with their “agendas,” and value judgments. Their critiques are not deemed scientific; they are “mere opinions.” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 47)

In an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Gary Olson (2007) recounts the story of an honors seminar in which students are reading Michel Foucault’s work. The instructor of the course begins a discussion of Foucault’s writings on discourse and is stunned as one student in the class, who has only been exposed to Foucault’s writings for a week, sneers, “‘Well, that’s *his* opinion, I don’t agree . . . Everyone is entitled to an opinion. And my opinion is that he is wrong” (¶1).

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For critical pedagogues, this response, while displeasing, is likely not surprising. Many of us have encountered some form of opinion-based assertion in the classroom, and opinion assertions appear to surface particularly often in courses that deal with equity oriented content that challenges dominant ideological frameworks (Gallavan, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006, 2009). Responses, such as this student's dismissal of Foucault, are frequently seen as a function of the lack of critical thinking skills among inexperienced students. For Olson (2007), the primacy of opinion, as reflected in this and other examples he offers, also indicates a broader challenge in education wherein "a generation of students and others are training themselves not to become critical thinkers, not to search for evidence or support of an assertion, and not to hold themselves and others accountable for the assertions they make" (¶10).

While we agree with Olson (2007) and accept the challenge to work with our students to develop their critical thinking skills to grapple with and take accountability for knowledge claims, we want to take Olson's analysis deeper. It is our contention that *opinion* is much more than a facile response to new and/or challenging ideas. We believe that opinion is, in fact, doing very sophisticated discursive work in the equity-oriented classroom. In leveling the opinion claim, the student in Olson's example does not simply resist a critical engagement with new ideas. In invoking individual entitlement (everyone is entitled to an opinion) and provoking a neo-liberal democratic rights discourse (exemplified by simplistic binaries like: "that's wrong, this is right"), the student rouses a collection of interrelated knowledge claims that together function to uphold existing relations of power.

We want to move beyond the interpretation of these moments in the classroom as simply a lack of skills. We believe the discourse of opinion, specifically in the context of equity-oriented approaches to education, demands careful attention. Gallavan (2000) writes that teaching about social inequality presents, "challenges and conflicts for those instructors *unlike* the challenges and conflicts encountered when teaching most other courses in higher education" (p. 5). One aspect of these challenges and conflicts she addresses is student resistance to topics they do not fully understand, either via first-hand sociocultural experiences or relationships across sociocultural boundaries. We want to take opinion seriously. It is our contention that opinion functions as a discursive project of resistance in the context of the equity-oriented classroom. Our goals are twofold: to explicate how the opinion discourse functions as a specific legitimization of existing relations of power and to unsettle the discursive authority that opinion offers.

### KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF CRITICAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

When referring to equity-oriented approaches to education, we refer to those traditions (including social justice, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-colonialist, and feminist approaches to education) that work from a shared belief that schooling is a political project and part of a network of social institutions that serve to hold existing relations of power in place. These equity-oriented approaches actively resist mainstream modes of transmitting canonized knowledge claims because such knowledge is theorized as serving existing relations of domination in society (Banks, 1996; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008). From this framework, knowledge is not a collection of discovered "truths"; rather, knowledge is constructed by and expresses the interests of the culture that produces and legitimizes it.

In classroom settings, these approaches seek to actively address the dynamics of oppression, recognizing society as stratified along historically-rooted, institutionally sanctioned group lines (that include primarily race, class, and gender). One of the key strategies of domination in mainstream society is the normalizing of particular knowledge as universal and shared by all, for it is understood that knowledge does not transcend but is rooted in and shaped by social positions and specific interests. Kincheloe (2008) explains:

One of the central dimensions of Western colonial domination has involved its production of “universally valid knowledge” that worked to invalidate the ways of knowing that had been developed by all peoples around the world. In the name of modernization, salvation, civilization, development, and democracy, colonial powers have made and continue to make the argument that they know better than colonized peoples themselves what serves their best interests—and they have the knowledge to prove it. Universalism, the idea that all scientifically produced knowledge is true in all places and for all times, is a key concept in our discussion of knowledge and its relation to critical pedagogy and its concern with power and justice. (p. 5)

Anchored by the belief that validating particular knowledge methods and claims as universal is a key strategy of domination (as Kincheloe describes), critical pedagogues guide students along at least three fronts: first, in critical analysis of the products of mainstream knowledge that masquerade as neutral, universal, and “objective”; second, in critical self-reflection about their own socialization into the matrix of relations of oppression that are embedded in society; and third, in developing the skills with which to see, analyze, and challenge the mechanisms of ideological domination (Banks, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Kincheloe, 2008).

These tasks are especially important in the study of schooling, wherein an explicit project is the production and dissemination of knowledge. Understanding the relationships among the knowledge produced and circulated in school, students’ own relationship to that knowledge and active resistance to the existing relations of power that knowledge upholds are key commitments for critical pedagogues. Thus, many critical pedagogues develop active strategies in their classrooms that are responsive to these three commitments. They present curricular materials that offer alternative accounts of taken-for-granted historical events and new interpretations that challenge existing knowledge about such events (such as Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of America); they guide activities for students to “see” their own socialization into this matrix of knowledge claims, production, and circulation; and they engage students in developing action-oriented activities to respond to these new complexities (such as re-writing existing school curricula).

### CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION AND POSITIONALITY

One important strategy for furthering these commitments to the critical analysis of knowledge production has been to examine the relationship between the knower and that knowledge which is authorized, canonized, and circulated as legitimate (Banks, 1996; Freire, 1970). This is no easy task, for as Kincheloe (2008) continues from the passage above, “Many Westerners after the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries believed that because European science followed the proscribed rules of knowledge production its findings are indisputably universal” (p. 5). This passage cues that attempting to guide students in a consideration of knowledge claims that they have been socialized to consider as universal and long-ago-established

(for example, race as a scientific category based in essential difference) is fraught with difficulties. To suggest, for example, that as a result of racist science, dominant culture has socialized us to see black people as naturally inferior is, especially for many white students, cause for intense resistance and perhaps even outrage and insistence that *their* families taught them that all people were of equal value. Thus, what critical pedagogues often turn to is an examination of students' social positions and the relationship between those positions and the knowledge that they validate.

"Positionality" has become a key tool in analyzing relations of knowledge production and unequal power and is a foundational concept in most equity-oriented courses (Apple, 2004; Banks, 1996; Ellsworth, 1992; hooks, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008). The ability to situate oneself as "knower" in relationship to that which is known is widely acknowledged as fundamental to understanding the political, social, and historical dimensions of knowledge (Banks, 1996; Code 1991; Harding, 1998; hooks, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008; Luke & Gore, 1992). Hill Collins (2000) states, "To maintain their power, dominant groups create and maintain a popular system of 'commonsense' ideas that support their right to rule" (p. 284). Students need to be guided in a political analysis of their "common sense" knowledge in order to identify the social context in which it was created and whose interests it serves. Positionality is a foundation of this type of analysis.

The call for positionality is an assertion that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and ascribed social positions. Banks (1993) states, "The knowledge that people create is heavily influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society" (p. 6). Thus, who you are (as knower), is intimately connected to your socialization into a matrix of group locations (including gender, race, class, and sexuality). Similarly, Kincheloe (2008) explains that a goal of critical educators is to reveal these relations. He writes, "Critical educational knowledge emerges neither from subjects nor from objects but from a dialectical relationship between the knower (subject) and the known (object)" (p. 29). Because so much of academic training reflects the values of the dominant ideological framework, some critical pedagogues' calls to positionality manifests in an explicit framing of their courses to set the tone from the start. Here is an example from DiAngelo's syllabus:

This course does not require you to believe in the concepts of multicultural education, but it does require you to grapple with them. "Grappling with them" means to receive, reflect upon, and practice articulating the concepts, and to seek deeper clarity and understanding. Grappling is not negation, debate, or rejection. The goal here is to move us beyond the mere sharing of opinions and toward more informed engagement.

Some overall questions to guide your approach to the reading:

- If I give the writer the benefit of the doubt that her/his perspective is as valid as mine, even though I may not have ever had the experiences that are being written about, how does considering this viewpoint challenge or expand the way I see the world?
- How have I been shaped by the issues the author is talking about? Or, how have I been shaped by my socialization and culture? For example, if the writer is talking about the experiences of the poor, and I was raised middle class, what does their perspective help me see about what it means to have been raised middle class? What about my life in relation to my race/class/gender might make it difficult for me to see this perspective?
- Why might it be valuable to understand this perspective?

Despite efforts such as these, scholarship among critical pedagogues has documented the persistence of various discourses of resistance that manifest among students and within classrooms (Chinnery, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay & Howard, 2000; Kumashiro 2002; Schick, 2000; Schick & St. Denis, 2003; Sleeter, 1993; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994, 1996; Whitehead & Wittig, 2005). For scholars who are member of marginalized groups, there are additional layers of resistance and tension (for example, see Dlamini, 2002; Schick & St. Denis, 2003; Sensoy, 2007). These discourses of resistance surface in a range of ways, including what Ladson-Billings (2004) has described as “main street multiculturalism,” referring to the ways that corporate culture, such as Disney and Crayola, have co-opted and marketed diversity (i.e., “multicultural crayons”). There is the broadly applied multicultural festival approach, which has students celebrating ethnic diversity through “foods, fun, and festivals” (also termed the “3-D approach,” referring to diversity, dance, and dress [Srivastava, 2007]). Other forms of resistance have been termed “Compassionate conservatism” to capture the de-politicizing of equity discourses (Gorski, 2006) and “colorblindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Sleeter, 2001) to capture the neo-liberal illusion of race as invisible and insignificant.

### OPINION AS A DISRUPTION OF THE CALL FOR POSITIONALITY

Here, we argue that opinion functions similarly as a discursive move of resistance and that this move occurs through the dynamics of and relationship between knowledge construction and positionality. For example, in her discussion of resistance and anti-oppression teaching, Schick (2004) notes that the more removed from a raced or gendered identity she is perceived by her students, the more objective—and thus credible—the knowledge she generates is taken to be. She writes:

It is ironic that in areas of social justice—when talking about inequality, being seen as “objective” and believable can often coincide with being less informed. Among some audiences, even though my understanding of the effects of homophobia is second-hand, my speaking against homophobia will not be seen as “self-interested,” but perhaps “unbiased.” This is similar to the way that white people are sometimes called upon to verify a charge of racism made by a person of color, or the way a man will be able to decide whether or not a situation is sexist. (p. 246)

In these cases, Schick is perceived to be the “detached practitioner,” and her critiques are deemed scientific and not “mere opinions” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 47). When addressing racism and homophobia, because she is white and heterosexual, she is seen as detached and unbiased. However, were she to be discussing sexism, a location in which she is marked as female (and thus “other”), she is not deemed as detached and unbiased. Without this perceived detachment in relation to the object of study, she is positioned as a biased instructor with a personal agenda.

Despite specific, intentional, and sustained efforts to situate ourselves as instructors and our students as knowers in relationship to the knowledge produced and circulated in our classrooms, we see the emergence of “opinion” as a response to “position.” We contend that opinion, in the context of equity-oriented approaches to education, is a rhetorical device used to resist the call for positionality and to counter claims of inequality. In effect, opinion works to destabilize these claims and to reinstate dominant knowledge. We define the discourse of opinion as a set of interrelated ideological claims that function simultaneously as neutral, universal, and objective, and personal, private, and sacred. The discourse of opinion, when deployed in the equity-oriented

classroom, functions multilaterally to reduce critical scholarship to the level of opinion and then to negate that opinion by countering it with another of equal (and uncontested) value.

In the next section, we build our argument by analyzing ways that the discourse of opinion functions specifically as resistance to the call for positionality. We offer an analysis of the effects of opinion discourse and its relationship to the principles of knowledge construction in order to build a conceptual framework with which to understand “opinion” as a sophisticated move of resistance on par with colorblindness, neoliberal multiculturalism, and other discourses that function to hold inequity in place.

### OPINION AND DOMINANT KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

We began our examination of this topic with an example from Olson (2007) when trying to unravel a common classroom phenomenon: the ease with which the scholarship on inequity is dismissed as mere opinion. The following are more examples from our own teaching practice exemplifying how opinion has been deployed. These examples are composites, representing the most common ways that opinion surfaces, and are inspired by our observation of our students in our more than 15 years of collective experience teaching equity-oriented courses in higher education settings. When we refer to opinion as resistance, we refer to the following types of dynamics that manifest in the classroom:

The class watches a filmed interview with bell hooks [or other noted scholar] in which she is discussing racism. Following the film, the students are working in small groups through a set of questions relating the film to the day’s readings. The groups are reporting back key insights and questions from their discussions. A white female student is the spokesperson for her group. She ends her report with the declaration, “We disagree with bell hooks. We think anyone can be racist. We think bell hooks is being racist against Whites.”

After viewing *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, 2003), a student wants to know where the film got its information because he disagrees with geneticist Stephen Jay Gould as well as with the other race historians and race scientists featured in the film. They have the right to their opinions, but what these scientists say does not match what he knows.

After a class dealing with anti-oppression theories and in response to Mullaly’s *Challenging Oppression* (2002), the only male student in the class of 20 graduate students declares that he disagrees with Mullaly’s framework—that he [the student] is a minority as a male and thus oppressed and marginalized in this class.

Student disagreements with scholarship (and the presentation of their own ideas as equivalent) do not function in a neutral classroom space. Rather, they exist in an academic context in which the ideal of scientific objectivity (or “neutral knowledge”) is a firmly rooted and institutionalized form of knowledge. These disagreements also exist in the context of a course that attempts to challenge (or at least unsettle) the idea of neutral knowledge.

Dominant knowledge claims are characterized by universalism that is rooted in an idealized objectivity. Universalism positions dominant knowledge claims as transparent—as descriptions of the world as it really is, outside of language or ideology. Universal knowledge is purportedly arrived at by scientific methods that prove its legitimacy. By responding to the question of positionality through opinion, our students dismiss all of the ways of knowing that are anchored

in the question of who is doing the knowing. The rigor of positionality is removed and universalism is reinstated. In the hooks example, her knowledge claims are rendered non-rigorous, and the conversation slides into subjectivity. If we are all being subjective, then the students' knowledge is as valid as hooks'. Further, while the opinion move accomplishes this discursive effect in the classrooms of critical pedagogues, it simultaneously positions other kinds of classrooms—those in which allegedly neutral or “transparent” frameworks are taught, for example, historical “facts,” measurements, assessments, or classroom management techniques, as objective spaces of real and preferable knowledge.

In each of the examples above, the call to positionality is rejected, and dominant knowledge claims are reinscribed. Ironically, the reinscription of these knowledge claims rests on an uninformed certainty—a kind of willful ignorance. Were these students to try-on positionality, rather than insulate and protect their current perspectives, their understanding of social power could be expanded. de Castell (2004) has described this *not knowing* as a “right to be ignorant and the right to speak ignorantly” (p. 55). For de Castell, a resistance to positionality (as represented by the presentation of alternative knowledges) depends upon a re-entrenchment of the “logic” of scientific method, imbedded in the demand for further, better (more “neutral”) evidence. She writes,

The categorical imperative to remain “positive” at all costs reigns here, even at the cost of willful blindness, misrepresentation, a kind of “studied ignorance” which cannot be other than intentional, where full-grown “men of good will” speak unashamedly of the “wonderful world of education,” disregarding utterly Cornel West’s reminder to us that there are certain things in this “wonderful world” we cannot any longer be permitted NOT to know, things which we may no longer claim not to have seen, not to have understood, critical matters we may no longer defer with endless demands for “further evidence.” (de Castell, 1993, p. 186)

The discourse of opinion is another demand for more evidence—a strategy for *not knowing*, a refusal to know (de Castell, 1993, 2004; Schick, 2000). Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) state, “There is usually little expression of humility in such ‘knowledges’ and, as a result, the power to ‘know’ often mutes the recognition that there is also power in not knowing” (p. xi). Therefore, if the new knowledge does not support existing knowledge, the call for more data or better evidence serves as an institutionally coded block to protect *not knowing*. This “not knowing” is not simply a lack of enough information or critical thinking skills; it is a specific discursive move that functions to counter the challenge to institutionalized relations of power.

A further effect of the reduction of critical scholarship to personal opinion (and then the dismissal of that opinion as equal to—but not as legitimate as—one’s own) is a reduction and dismissal of a lifetime of scholarship, lived experience, and personal and professional work. Not only is the specific body of work of critical scholars disregarded but also any embodied (first-hand) knowledge that that scholar represents. For example, the particular standpoint a scholar, such as bell hooks, brings by virtue of her position as racialized within a white dominant context is also disregarded. Given the salience of hooks’ black body and its visibility to the (predominantly white) students in our earlier example who viewed the film, students are also responding to hooks racially. All of us, within a white supremacist patriarchal society (as hooks has theorized it) have been socialized in myriad ways to consider the viewpoints of white people as more valuable than the viewpoints of people of color (Dlamini, 2002; Hill Collins, 2000; Morrison, 1992; Scheurich & Young, 1997). For white students to validate the scholarship of bell hooks is

not only to have one's worldview challenged but to have it challenged by a black woman within a white-centric context. And it is precisely when the significance of social location, inequitable power, and macro-level group patterns are raised that we most often see the discourse of opinion, functioning to re-stabilize the disequilibrium that the oppositional discourses present and to reestablish dominant ("objective") knowledge claims.

Ironically, it is the scholars who acknowledge and articulate their social locations who are most often deemed subjective, invoking Lorraine Code's (1991) question, "From whose subjectivity does the value of objectivity come?" (p. 70) and negating Sandra Harding's (1998) assertion that the closer one is to knowing her subjectivity, the more objectivity becomes possible. In other words, these scholars argue that perception of positionality expands (rather than contracts) what can be known. Yet by positioning this scholarship as "mere" opinion, students ultimately protect their existing viewpoints from the challenge to explore the social, political, or historical context in which they are embedded. At the same time, opinion positions critical scholars who (unlike the majority of our colleagues in other disciplines) often belong to at least one, and often multiple identities of marginality, as uniquely biased and driven by agendas. In so doing, locations that are unmarked by race, gender, or sexuality are further normalized. Conversely, locations that are marked by race, gender, and sexuality are rendered deviant. In a social context, in which knowledge unmarked by social location is presented as neutral and transparent, the discourse of opinion reinforces the binary that not only invalidates critical scholars and scholarship but simultaneously maintains the invisibility of dominant power and reinforces the idea that the Western canon is objective and operates neutrally.

### THE RIGHT TO OPINION

Thus far, we have argued that the opinion discourse emerges in the equity-oriented classroom as a counter to the call for positionality. We have discussed the conceptual foundation of the call to positionality in relation to knowledge construction and have suggested that the discourse of opinion results in the re-entrenchment of dominant knowledge claims and methods. There is yet another discursive effect we want to discuss here: how opinion upholds the longstanding ideal in mainstream schooling and society of the right to speak. Within this ideal, everyone is entitled to not only have but also express an opinion. Indeed, in many neo-liberal classrooms students are encouraged (even pressured) by teachers to speak up and express their perspectives (Jones, 2004). The encouragement to express opinions is often rooted in the desire for teachers to create an "open" dialogue that makes room for non-dominant points of view and allows students to "unpack" or politicize their perspectives.

There are, however, various problems that emerge in the right to speak discourse. Students often reinterpret attempts for dialogue as an affirmation that all knowledge is of equal value. This reinterpretation functions not only to invalidate the rigor of the scholarship as discussed earlier ("My opinion is as valid as hooks") but also to close off and protect students' perspectives from politicization (DiAngelo & Allen, 2006). This closing off becomes framed as a democratic activity via the right to speak discourse: "I have the right to think and say what I want, and you don't have the right to challenge what I think and say."

In addition to closing off one's perspective from further exploration, a fundamental problem of the right to speak discourse in the equity-oriented classroom is that not all voices have been

granted the right to speak and be heard equally in dominant society. As Boler (2004) notes, all speech is not free as institutionalized inequities in power ensure that not all voices carry the same weight. Given that inequity in weight, she asks, "If all speech is not free, then in what sense can one claim that freedom of speech is a working constitutional right?" (p. 3) Yet the right to speak discourse assumes that the only reason some voices are not heard is simply because some people are exercising their rights by *choosing* not to speak. While mainstream neo-liberal classrooms often hold a desire to create democratic learning spaces, those of us working within Western institutions are challenged to uphold the ideals of making space for students to examine their positionalities in relation to the knowledge presented while simultaneously and unequivocally challenging the mainstream discourses that students invoke in the classroom (Applebaum, 2003; Chinnery, 2008; Li Li, 2004). Can we block the opinion discourse while still upholding the ideals of an inclusive classroom? In order to do so, the idea of a democratic space needs problematizing. Jones (2004) states, "[D]emocratic dialogue is far more than an opportunity for the exchange of ideas . . . It is an explicitly political event because it attempts to shift the usual flow of power in order to un-marginalize the marginalized" (p. 59).

Extending Jones's (2004) caution, we wonder if it is not necessary for students to come to the classroom *already* aware of themselves as political entities, comprised of not simply their individual values but their socially-organized group privileges and oppressions for a more authentically democratic exchange of ideas to occur. de Castell (2004) notes, "The truth is, whatever arguments we can marshal, teachers, and especially women and minority teachers, are rarely *able* in reality to silence speech both hostile *and* ignorant, when spoken by dominant 'voices'" (p. 55). Further, there is a broad spectrum of activities that operate along the continuum between "speech" and "silence" (Applebaum, 2003; Jones 2004; Li Li, 2004). Li Li explains:

To develop the ability to see things "as they have come to be that way," one must listen to silences. . . . Silences not only interrogate the authorities but also shed light on the complicated yet articulate nature of silences. It follows that a genuine effort to reclaim the silenced voices must acknowledge that the silenced voices are not the absence of speech. . . . A truly liberating pedagogy must be based on a conjoint effort to listen to the silences and to reclaim the silenced voices. (p. 79)

How do we reclaim silenced voices in an institutional context that denies the silencing of these voices and frames that denial in the characterization of dominant speech acts as each individual's democratic right? This leads us to another significant challenge to positionality embedded in the right to speak discourse that we want to explore—the ideology of individualism.

The sense of a democratic right to speak without attention to positionality rests in the ideology of individualism that is embedded in the discourse of opinion. Individualism counters positionality via a set of ideas, words, symbols, and metaphors that create, communicate, reproduce, and reinforce the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our positionality (such as our race, class, or gender) is not important or relevant to our opportunities. The discourse of individualism, in positioning us as unique individuals outside of culture and history, is thus dependent on the denial of history as relevant to the present. This denial allows the dominant group to deny the results of dominance for itself: privilege, excessive power, and resources. Insisting that we ought to just see ourselves as individuals, each with our own "unique" opinions obstructs our ability to see and address social, historical, and political contributions to organizing those opinions. For example, racial group membership is traced to consistent outcomes on every indicator of quality of life and these outcomes are well documented and predictable (Fine,

Weis, Powell Pruitt, & Burns, 2004). Thus how might one's opinion that my (white) family worked hard for the rewards we incurred in life be influenced by the social, historical, and politically-organized privileges afforded to Whites at the expense of people of color, immigrant, and indigenous peoples? Limiting our analysis to the micro or individual level prevents a macro or big picture understanding of these dynamics.

The discourse of individual "rights" (not only to have, but to speak my opinion), that goes hand in hand with opinion discourse, is invoked. To argue with opinion (which everyone is entitled to) is to break a dominant norm: I have the right to my opinion and negating my right to my opinion is anti-democratic, making any challenge to my opinion inherently unfair at least, and undemocratic at its worst. The latter move is deeply embedded in the individualism and Cartesianism that characterizes Western notions of self. As DiAngelo and Allen (2006) argue, Cartesianism posits that when one's language and one's ideas are seen as existing in the mind and finding expression (being released into public space), then the mind becomes non-social, private, and inaccessible to anyone outside of the individual. Thus one's opinion is conceptualized as internal and private rather than as social or interrelational. The individuality framework provides the claim with validity and thereby positions one as the only expert on her or his perspective. This move depoliticizes opinion and says, in effect, "Since nobody else has access to the personal space that my opinion comes from (my "self"), it is therefore incontestable." Individualism works to de-contextualize and de-politicize positionality (Ellsworth, 1997; Fine, 1997; Tatum, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

When the request to situate oneself as knower in order to critically examine the production of knowledge is re-interpreted as "the right to my opinion," positionality and its relation to the production and legitimization of knowledge is closed off, along with inquiry, reflection, and accountability. In this way, historically marginalized voices and knowledges are dismissed or trumped via alterative and "just as valid" counter-opinions. The effect of this is the silencing of marginalized voices, a rejection of the implications of positionality, and the closing off of the examination of knowledge as socially constructed. In response to these challenges, we are increasingly convinced that to uphold the ideals of positionality in the classroom, we may also need to withhold "the right to be ignorant and the right to speak ignorantly" (de Castell, 2004, p. 55). Ruitenbergh (2008) expresses this sentiment when she describes the case of a student who during a lecture she was giving, expressed that he did not agree with the "homosexual lifestyle." She writes, "[His question gave] teachers with particular religious and/or moral beliefs permission not to consider my presentation, or presentations of anti-homophobia educators, seriously" (p. 4). Similarly, when students assert that race scientists and geneticists who claim race has no biological significance are merely expressing opinions, they are rendering it permissible *not* to engage with the implications of their work.

We have argued that "opinion" is much more problematic a discursive project than simply an absence of critical thinking. On the one hand, institutions make advances and adopt courses that explicitly attend to equity issues; while on the other hand, we continue to face discursive constructs that masquerade as objective, neutral, valid, and universal that function to block these advances (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009). The discourse of opinion is one of these constructs. Given how the discourse of opinion functions, we increasingly take the position that we do not want our students'

opinions in the equity-oriented classroom. Because freedom of speech does not operate equally, it is the task of the critical pedagogue to guide dominant voices in an analysis of the knowledge positions they represent. Sometimes, that task requires that certain knowledge claims—those that function to *prevent* critical analysis—must be denied circulation in the equity-oriented classroom.

We do not see our rejection of opinion as silencing our students or denying them their right to voice. Paradoxically, it is for the very reason of keeping critical dialogue alive that we seek to counter opinion in the classroom, for we are increasingly swayed that creating a “democratic” space interpreted as “everyone has the right to voice their opinions” is counter-productive. However, let us be clear. While we are not interested in our students’ opinions *as they stand*, we *do* want students to examine their opinions. Opening one’s perspectives to exploration and analysis is not the same as simply announcing them. In countering opinion, we are not interested in agreement as much as consideration—grappling with theory is not dependent on agreeing with it. Further, the agree/disagree frame of opinion sets up a binary that is counter to our goals. This shift in approach from agreement to exploration may be especially important in the context of preservice education in which a high degree of resistance to (or fear of) anti-oppression values are found. As critical pedagogues it is imperative that we engage our students with scholarship that challenges existing relationships of power in school and broader society. We are hopeful that by challenging students’ right to their opinion, other knowledge claims may be heard. For in the sociocultural context of inequitable power relations, an opinion is never *simply* one’s opinion.

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