

Robin DiAngelo² / Özlem Sensoy¹

“Yeah, but I’m Shy!”: Classroom Participation as a Social Justice Issue

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In-class participation is a common component of many university students’ course grade, yet there has been some debate over whether it is fair to grade participation, given that some students are “naturally” introverted. In this paper, we problematize the central assumption that the arguments against grading participation rest upon: that classrooms are neutral spaces into which a range of personalities come together, each with unique needs that should be recognized and supported. As educators whose work and teaching is grounded in critical social justice frameworks, we argue that there is a fundamental dynamic that is missed when silence is presumed to be a-political. We argue that classrooms are microcosms of the wider society and as such, are political spaces in which dynamics of unequal social power also play out; there is no neutral classroom or natural mode of engagement. In this paper, we lay out the foundation of a social justice approach to teaching and problematize the notion of neutral classroom spaces. We speak back to some of the most common arguments against grading classroom participation and in doing so argue that participation in classroom settings is a central element to dismantling social injustice in our wider communities.

Keywords: social justice education, pedagogy, classroom participation, teaching in higher education, student resistance

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A shy student could be the brightest in the class, but she will automatically lose up to 30 percent of her grade just because she’s afraid to participate ... People need to stop punishing shy, introverted people for being who they are and start being more understanding and accepting of their personalities.

Danielle Bissonette [student]

USA Today: College, Jan. 23, 2015¹

1 Introduction

In-class participation is a common component of many university students’ course grade. Yet there has been some debate over whether it is fair to grade participation, given that some students are “naturally” introverted. In a (2013) piece in *The Atlantic*, Jessica Lahey argued that “Introverted kids need to learn to speak up in school.” In response, Susan Cain (2013) called upon teachers to help rather than “punish” shy kids, for example by finding alternative ways for them to participate rather than relying solely on verbal contributions. Similarly, in a (2015) editorial for the “Voices from Campus” feature of *USA Today*, Danielle Bissonette wrote a passionate call to her university professors to take into account the shyness of students such as herself when grading their classroom participation.

In this paper, we want to problematize the central assumption that the arguments against grading participation rest upon: that classrooms are neutral spaces into which a range of personalities come together, each with unique needs that should be recognized and supported. As educators whose work and teaching is grounded in critical social justice frameworks, we argue that there is a fundamental dynamic that is missed when silence is presumed to be a-political, and even “natural” to students who are “simply shy.” Rather, we want to argue that classrooms are microcosms of the wider social environment and as such they are political spaces in which dynamics of unequal social power in society also play out. These dynamics of unequal social power are always at play; they can be either reinforced or interrupted, but there is no neutral classroom or natural mode of engagement. In what follows, we lay out the foundation of a social justice approach to teaching and problematize the notion of neutral classroom spaces. We then directly speak back to some of the most common arguments against grading classroom participation and in so doing, argue that participation in classroom settings is a central element to dismantling social injustice.

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2 The social justice classroom

The commitments of the social justice classroom are multiple and varied. In particular, they require that we as instructors problematize some of the most common practices and discourses in the “traditional” classroom space. We have written elsewhere about common pedagogical practices such as: a reliance on – and elevation of – sharing opinions and personal experiences (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009), the perceived need and possibility of creating “safety” in cross-group dialogues (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014), the over-reliance on classroom guidelines for behaviour control (Sensoy & DiAngelo 2014), and the effects of grading and grade inflation (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2015). Each of these play out differently in a social justice oriented classroom than in a presumed neutral classroom (i. e. one that does not explicitly name positionality, or explicitly address race, gender, class perspectives in the curriculum or the dynamics among students and instructors).

As scholars who write and teach about social justice in classroom settings, we have spent decades working with students on understanding and seeing patterns of social injustice and developing strategies for constructively interrupting these patterns. Our course content is based upon the following social justice principles:

- All people are individuals, but we are also members of socially constructed groups;
- Society is stratified, and social groups are valued unequally;
- Social injustice is real and exists today;
- Social groups that are valued more highly have greater access to resources and this access is structured into institutions and cultural norms;
- Relations of unequal power are constantly being enacted at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels;
- We are all socialized to be complicit in these relations;
- Those who claim to be *for* social justice must strategically act from that claim in ways that challenge social injustice; this action requires a commitment to an ongoing and lifelong process.

Anchored by these principles, social justice educators guide students in commitments along at least three fronts (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Kincheloe, 2008):

First, social justice educators guide students in *critical analysis* of how mainstream knowledge is presented as neutral, universal, and objective. For example, many social justice educators engage their students in examinations of various accounts of a given historical event, such as first contact between colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples (school accounts versus news media accounts versus pop culture accounts). The goals of this analysis are to uncover how the meaning given to various historical events always reflects a particular perspective and set of interests, and to understand how knowledge is socially constructed (Banks, 1996; Loewen, 1995; Zinn, c. 1980/2005).

Second, social justice educators guide students in *critical self reflection* of their own socialization into structured relations of oppression and privilege. They may do this through popular social justice exercises such as *My Culture Chest*, *Act Like a Man/Act Like a Woman*, and *Step Forward/Step Back*. These exercises help identify our positionality within a matrix of unequally valued social groups and the messages received through such positionality. Educators then ask students to examine how their placements in this matrix inform their action and practice, as well as how best to interrupt injustice from these specific positions (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Johnson & Blanchard, 2008).

Third, social justice educators guide students in *developing the skills* with which to see, analyze, and challenge relations of oppression and privilege (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; 2011). For example, many educators encourage their students to participate in cultural events, learn about activism in their community, work with case studies, and brainstorm strategies for social justice action projects in their schools and communities (Nieto & Bode, 2007).

Pedagogues who work from a social justice perspective develop strategies in their classrooms that are responsive to omitted histories, positionality, and complicity. In sum, merely *believing in* social justice without intentional and strategic corresponding *action* is meaningless. Yet action is challenging: it often begins with instability and uncertainty, can cause conflict that is challenging especially among peers, family and friendships, and is heavily resisted through our socialized patterns of comfort and investments in the status quo. Social justice action takes courage, commitment and practice. As such, the social justice classroom is a key space in which students begin to learn not only the theories and historical effects of social injustice, but practice demonstrating their ability to translate that knowledge into action.

Two key concepts are relevant to understanding common challenges to the courage, commitment and practice required for social justice action: *internalized dominance* and *internalized oppression*. Internalized dominance occurs when members of dominant groups internalize and act out (often unconsciously) the constant messages circulating in the culture that they and their group are superior and thus entitled to their higher position. Conversely, internalized oppression occurs when members of minoritized groups believe and act out (often unconsciously) the constant messages circulating in the culture that they and their group are inferior and thus deserving of their lower position (Freire, 1970; Frye, 1983; Sue, 2003).

When thinking about classroom participation and the choice of speech versus silence, we cannot separate out the social identities of the speakers from the context. For example, there are several key reasons why members of a minoritized group (e. g. non cis-men and women, persons of Color) may at times choose silence in a class discussion including: (a) responding to resistance or hostility expressed (consciously or not) by dominant group participants; (b) feeling a lack of trust based on well-founded experience that they will be penalized for challenging dominant perspectives; (c) feeling hopeless in the face of dominant denial; (d) risking vulnerability and invalidation by sharing their experiences and perspectives and then being met with silence, argumentation, or rationalization; (e) being outnumbered by those in the dominant group and not seeing any allies; or (f) being acutely aware of the power differentials and choosing to protect themselves in the face of inevitable hurt (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). Given these and other dynamics, there are costs to minoritized students for choosing speech over silence. The dynamics of internalized oppression, layered with the personal knowledge of minoritized groups, often function to uphold the dominant framework the course is seeking to unsettle (Acosta, Moore, & Perry, 2005).

The reasons that students who are members of dominant groups (e. g. cis-men, White students) choose silence also cannot be separated out from their social identities in that context. In cross-group dialogue, dominant groups remain silent for reasons that include: a) fear of saying the wrong thing; b) not wanting to dominate the discussion; c) seeing themselves as “innocent” about the oppression; d) seeing the oppression as belonging to the minoritized group and therefore expecting minoritized groups to teach them about “their” oppression (i.e. racism, sexism); e) feeling entitled to social comfort when challenging topics are brought up; f) socialized apathy about the form of oppression under discussion. The impact of this silence includes sheltering students with dominant identities by keeping their perspectives hidden and thus protected from exploration or challenge. While one can of course gain deeper understanding through listening, there are several problems with this being one’s primary mode of engagement. Listening alone leaves everyone else to carry the weight of the discussion so that there is something to learn *from*. And of course, if everyone chose this mode no discussion (and hence no learning) would occur at all. Speaking builds community, lends support, and lets others know where you are coming from. Sharing what is going on in one’s mind or emotions allows “blind spots” and assumptions to be identified and addressed.

Dominant group silence has different effects (than minoritized group silence) depending on what it follows. For example, in the context of a racial discussion, if White silence follows a story shared by a person of Color about the impact of racism on their lives, that silence serves to invalidate the story. Person of Color who take the social risk of revealing the impact of racism only to be met by White silence are left with their vulnerability unreciprocated. White students could offer validation, for example, by sharing how the story impacted them, what insight they gained from hearing it, or what connections to the course concepts they are making. Conversely, when White silence follows a particularly problematic move made by a fellow White student, that silence supports the move by offering no interruption. In essence, the silence operates as a normative mechanism for these tactics. When White silence follows a White anti-racist stand (such as challenging fellow Whites to racialize their perspectives rather than to presume a shared experience), it serves to isolate the person who took that stand. This isolation is a powerful social penalty and an enticement to return to the comfort of White solidarity.

When dominant and minoritized groups come together, the pattern is that dominant group members will speak first and most often and will set the agenda where their dominant identities are salient. Yet this pattern is contextual—for example, Whites who typically dominate discussions often choose silence when the topic is race and racism, and men may choose silence when the topic is gender inequality and sexism. Similarly, dominant group members may take up a lot of the intellectual space in discussions, but leave the emotional (or self-reflective) work to minoritized group members. Thus, minoritized group members often experience dominant group silence, regardless of what drives it, as hostile (DiAngelo, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Whereas silence from minoritized group members can be an act of resistance, silence from dominant group members can function as a power move and as such needs to be interrogated.

These are examples of the complexities inherent in facilitating discussions across the dominant and minoritized positionalities in classrooms. In the context of the social justice classroom in particular, grappling with these complexities is the very foundation of the course. Any default mode of engagement (e. g. “I never speak” or “I always speak”) does not demonstrate grappling with that complexity; it can only serve to protect the

status quo. Interrupting social injustice requires something from all of us, most particularly where we occupy dominant group identities it requires going above and beyond our comfort zones. When we compare pushing oneself to move beyond comfort (“I feel nervousness” or “Someone might have a judgmental thought about me”) with the very real consequences of race, gender, class and other socio-political systems of inequalities, comfort and preference seem rather superficial.

In the next section we share examples of complaints by students about our participation grading policy and speak back to common reasons students have given for not participating in class discussions.

3 “Yeah but ...”

3.1 “It’s just my personality; I am an introvert and I rarely talk in groups.”

Throughout this quarter we learned about discrimination and how we need to fight against it. We feel grading how much we talk is a form of ableism. We know that public speaking is a valuable skill but telling someone to speak even if it is uncomfortable is disrespect to his or her experiences. The “just do it” mentality contributes to discrimination because people can’t just erase their past and current experiences/problems to change their behaviors. You taught us to challenge discrimination and we just want to let you know how we felt. (student email)

Our personalities are not separate from the society in which we were raised. Because society is stratified and hierarchical, patterns of engagement are not merely a function of a unique personality, they are socio-political and co-produced in relation with social others. By focusing on ourselves as individuals, people in dominant groups are able to conceptualize the patterns in our behavior as “just our personality” and not connected to inter-group dynamics.

Let’s take racial dynamics as an example. As a White person, I might be an extrovert and talk over people when I am engaged in a discussion. I can say, “That’s just my personality, I do that to everyone. That’s how we talked at the dinner table in my family. And because I do it to everyone, it can’t be racism.” However, what I need to understand is that when I talk over a person of Color, the impact of that behavior is different because we bring the racial history of our groups with us. While White people tend to see themselves as individuals, people of Color tend to see us as *White* individuals, thus the meaning of cutting off or talking over a person of Color is very different. Conversely, remaining silent as a White person in an inter-racial dialogue also has a cross-racial impact. Anti-racist action requires us to challenge our patterns and respond differently than we normally would. The freedom to remain oblivious to that fact, with no sense that this obliviousness has any consequences of importance, is a form of White privilege. In effect, we are saying, “I will not adapt to you or this context, I will continue to act the way I always act and you will have to adapt to me.” Participants of Color seldom see themselves as having the option to disengage or withdraw from the discussion based solely on their personal preferences for engagement. Because dominant culture does not position them as individuals and has a different set of stereotypical expectations for them, when they hold back, they can reinforce these expectations, a concern that puts constant pressure on them.

As another example, consider gender dynamics related to patterns of sexism. If 2 women were in a meeting with 20 men in a male-dominated workplace and whenever the women spoke, the men would get up for more coffee, start checking their emails or rummaging through their papers, the women would very likely notice. If, following the meeting one of the women checked in with a male colleague she considered an ally to ask why he didn’t speak up or otherwise intervene in the behavior, and his reply was, “I’m really shy I never speak up,” what would the impact of that response be? Few people in a marginalized position would say that a dominant group member’s “shyness” is a legitimate reason for silence and lack of intervention in patterns of inequality. Nor would, “I was afraid they’d judge me if I spoke up” be seen as legitimate. To add another layer of complexity, if the women were cisgender and the dynamics were hostile only when nonbinary persons spoke, it would also be the cis-women’s responsibility to speak up.

Any default way of engaging – whether it be *always* speaking up or *never* speaking up – is problematic because it is not strategic; default modes do not take into account the given moment, one’s social position in that given moment, and how best to leverage that position. Interrupting patterns of inequity requires courage and risk-taking; it will not happen by defaulting to our most comfortable mode of engagement.

3.2 “Grading should be objective.”

I hope you consider these differences [in how we participate in class] and find objective ways to grade us. (student email)

Grading in a course whose primary goal is to challenge inequality is not without its irony. Activist and scholar Audre Lorde (1984a) captured this irony when she stated that, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” By this she meant that in using the tools of the system we are more likely to uphold that system than to challenge it. As instructors, we recognize that by grading, we are upholding an institutional system that ranks students hierarchically, and such rankings are part of the very systems we seek to challenge. Still, many of us choose to work within the system, despite its constraints, in order to challenge the system.

Mainstream schooling places a tremendous emphasis on grades, and the prevalence of high-stakes testing has only intensified this emphasis. Grades convey powerful ideas about our presumed intellectual abilities and these ideas influence what education we will have access to (through tracking into “gifted” or “special” programs and ability grouping). We are placed into academic tracks as early as 1st grade and these tracks have very real consequences for the kinds of careers we will have access to later in life (Oakes, 1985). Thus an understandable but regrettable outcome of tracking based on grades in K–12 schooling is that we may care more about the grades we receive than about the knowledge we gain. The focus on grades often shapes our very identities and sense of self-worth, further complicating the dynamics of grading. Although we as instructors are aware of the complexities and contradictions of grading, we are also deeply invested in student comprehension of the course concepts. The grading system is one of the primary tools we use to both measure and communicate our assessment of this comprehension. In order to grade comprehension, instructors must see *demonstration* of comprehension. Whether through assignments or in-class participation and discussion, students must demonstrate understanding. If students do not speak up in class, we as instructors cannot have confidence that they will (or can) speak up against inequity in social or workplace environments in the future. These contexts are much more difficult to speak up in because there are powerful investments in us *not* using our voices to challenge inequity. The social justice classroom offers a rare opportunity to practice interrupting the inequities that students will face in the professional world.

Advocating for participation grade points does not demonstrate that one has learned to challenge inequity. Consider this student’s claim in her email requesting a higher participation grade:

It is a big challenge for me to tell you this, and I am still afraid to send you this email. However, as I learned from the class, I think I need to speak up for all of us. I believe this class taught me to do so. (student email)

In our courses, we explain clearly why participation is important and how it will be graded. We also remind students that they are being graded on participation throughout the course. Yet invariably once grades are posted, we get email complaints from students who have never spoken up in class, and by definition, have never spoken up in support of a group they are privileged in relation to. We can’t help but notice that these students who claim that we taught them to speak up against injustice, are only speaking up now on behalf of *themselves*, after the course is over, via email, and in service to personally receiving a better grade. This is not what we mean when we describe a key course objective as learning to speak up against injustice.

3.3 “I feel intimidated by people in this group who have power over me.”

Complex sociopolitical power relations circulate in all groups, and there are multiple identities at play in any situation. Because we swim against the current in our minoritized identities, they are generally more salient to us. However, not being salient does not mean inoperative; indeed, much of the power we derive from our dominant identities is in its unremarkable, taken for granted elements. Let’s take the example of ableism. Imagine that I am a student of Color who is able-bodied. The topic for class that day is ableism, which I benefit from. Because I rarely speak up in class, I don’t speak up in this class either. The feelings of intimidation that drive my silence may indeed be coming from a place of internalized (racial) oppression, but in practice – in the context of ableism – my silence colludes with oppression and ultimately benefits me by protecting my ability-privilege and maintaining solidarity with other able-bodied people. This solidarity connects and realigns me with the other able-bodied people in the room, even across our racial differences. When I work to keep my privileged identities visible and speak up in this context, I not only break ableist solidarity, I simultaneously interrupt (and thus work to heal the “lie” of) my internalized inferiority where I am also in a target position.

In situations in which we may share key identities such as race and gender with someone but fear there may be repercussions because they hold more power in the specific context than we do – i. e. I am a staff worker and

my supervisor is in the room, or the professor who is grading me is in the group – a different kind of courage is needed. This is the courage to put our integrity to do the right thing above the possibility of repercussions. Ultimately, we have to make a decision: do I protect myself and maintain dominant power, or do I authentically engage in anti-oppression practice?

3.4 “I need time to process.”

In our experience, students who use this rationale seldom return after processing and share the results of their processing, suggesting that this may instead be a deflection against “putting ourselves out there,” rather than an expression of a sincere difference in how people process information. We may indeed need time to process, but taking the time we need is still a privilege not everyone has. At the minimum, we can try articulating what we are hearing that we need to process, and then let the group know that these are new ideas, that we are feeling overwhelmed, and we want to let things settle in. At the minimum, we can let the group know why we need the time to process and what we will be processing, rather than remain silent and leave others to wonder. When we have had time to process, we can share the results with the group.

It is also helpful to distinguish between the need to process and the need to sound controlled, correct, and coherent. If composure is what we are waiting for, we are working at cross-purposes to the discussion. Emotions, confusion, inner conflict, and inarticulation are all welcome in social justice discussions. Vulnerability and openness build trust, and while thoughtfulness and respect are critical, control and composure are not necessary and can be counterproductive.

3.5 “I don’t want to offend anybody.”

If we fear offending, it can only be assumed that is because we are having offensive thoughts or are hostile toward what is being said. If this is the case, to not put our disagreement into the room is to deny the group knowledge of where we are coming from and the ability to navigate our hostility. Similar to “I don’t want to be misunderstood,” this rationale allows dominant group members to protect themselves against accountability for their biases. It also protects them from engaging with perspectives that may be challenging but are necessary to hear in order to expand awareness, and denies the targets of our biases the opportunity to speak back and offer counter-narratives. If we are not hostile to what is being said but just worried that we may inadvertently offend someone, how will we learn that what we think or say is offensive if we do not share it and open ourselves up to feedback? In effect, by not taking this intentional opportunity to discover which ideas we hold are offensive, we protect these ideas and enable them to surface at a later date and offend someone else.

In the unique and often rare learning environment of discussions on oppression, to remain silent so as not to offend is to offend twice – once through our silence and again in our unwillingness to discover and change problematic dimensions in our thinking. If unsure, we can simply offer our thoughts with openness and humility rather than as declarations of certainty or truth – i. e. “Please let me know if something is off in my thinking, but here is how I am responding to this ... Can you help me understand why ... ?” “I have often heard ... what are your thoughts on that?”

3.6 “I have social anxiety disorder.”

It seems like grading how much we talk in class is contributing to ableism. We all worked so hard to do well on our papers, it seems unfair to be penalized for not talking. In American society people who are extroverts are highly valued while the others are left behind. Some of us are raised to not talk while other of us experience social anxiety. Just coming to class is a big accomplishment for some of us. Grading how much we talk is a disrespect to us and our experiences. I have talked to some of my classmates and our grade has made us feel hopeless about our future as students who don’t talk in large settings. We don’t believe that talking correlates with knowledge. (student email)

In a course about systems of oppression and our places within them, to suggest that anxiety about speaking is a disability and thus pressure to speak is a form of ableism is problematic for several reasons. All university and college environments have Centers for Students with Disabilities that contact instructors of students with verified medical conditions that require accommodations in the classroom. While we understand that these categories are socially constructed, there is help for students who consistently find that anxiety prevents them from full participation in their classes. Instructors are notified at the *start* of class which students will need

accommodations. Typically, claims of a condition preventing participation only surface in the specific classes that require in-class contributions. Further, these claims are often made *after* the fact of a grade being received, not before.

Second, in using social anxiety as an explanation for silence in class discussions, students minimize the impact of ableism for students with ongoing disabilities. For example, we have had students who use wheelchairs or other mobility tools, who do not have motor control, who are blind, who are in the end stages of terminal illness, and/or who communicate using computer software while continually accompanied by an aide who vocalizes their contributions for them (and these students manage to receive full participation points). While fellow able-bodied students may be friendly towards students with disabilities, we seldom see ableist lines of social segregation crossed in any sustained way. To raise the specter of ableism at the end of a course because one did not receive full participation points due to “social anxiety,” when one has attended classes in a cohort that includes students with these levels of disability, is disingenuous. The physical space of classrooms are not accessible to everyone. Students with disabilities are struggling to access that space regardless of what kind of participation is required. Students with self-identified social anxiety related to speaking in groups are only experiencing inaccessibility *if* and when participation is required and graded.

If we use a social model rather than a medical model of disability, then access is about the social organization of a given context. The range of human bodily diversity (cognitive, physical, emotional, psychological) has been denied institutional access throughout history. These are the very dynamics that a course on social justice education is trying illuminated and help students intervene in from their specific positionalities. To equate a temporary and contextual discomfort with an historical form of systematic oppression - ableism - is to perpetrate ableist privilege. Opting out of examining one’s place within this system through cooptation is itself ableist.

Speaking up about injustice is anxiety producing for many because it often triggers conflict. The desire to avoid conflict is a key reason why so many of us seldom do it. Navigating the common response of resistance and fragility from those who benefit from systems of inequality takes courage and commitment. Oppression depends on our silence within these systems and this is precisely why we need to develop our capacity to withstand the discomfort of breaking silence.

3.7 “I don’t feel safe.” Sub-discourses: “I don’t want to be attacked.” “I don’t want to be judged.”

Also, some of us might feel unsafe to express their feelings/thoughts in a large group setting. I know one of my classmates felt uncomfortable to talk with some of our classmates because of having different values. But, the classmate was fully involved in a small group discussion ... (student email)

The safety discourse, while one of the most familiar and understandable, is also one of the most problematic. On the surface it conveys a kind of vulnerability and desire for protection. Unfortunately, when expressed from the dominant position (e. g. White people asking for safety in a cross-racial discussion) it rests on a lack of understanding of historical and ongoing institutional, cultural, and interpersonal power relations. While the feelings may be real, some clarification may help distinguish the difference between actual *safety*, and what is more realistically a concern about *comfort*. To help differentiate safety from comfort, one might ask what safety means from a position of social, cultural, historical and institutional power? If one does not fear that they are in actual physical harm, then some reflection on what one actually fears to be at risk can offer much insight. Often, it is our self-image; because we have been taught that only bad people participate in oppression, we often fear that is it is somehow revealed that we participate in oppression, we will lose face and be judged. Indeed, many people feel very uncomfortable in these discussions, but this discomfort is actually a positive sign, for it indicates that the status quo is being challenged. Where we are in a dominant position in relation to a topic under discussion (ableism; heterosexism; Islamophobia) it is actually necessary that we feel uncomfortable. The default for dominant groups is comfort and we will not challenge inequality by protecting that comfort. Rather, we need to unsettle dominant group comfort. But we must not confuse discomfort with danger. As for being judged, there is no human objectivity – all people judge and we cannot protect ourselves from judgments in any context. But feeling judged, while dismaying, should not be confused with a lack of safety.

A social justice oriented classroom provides a rare opportunity to practice ally skills. Fear of judgment is a powerful tool of oppression because it keeps people complicit through silence. We cannot fully control how others see us. All people judge, in every moment and interaction; humans are not and cannot be free of judgment. People who fear others’ judgement are themselves - of course - judging. At some point we have to be brave and recognize that our fear of judgment and all the tactics we might use to avoid it cannot actually prevent it. We might also consider that those who are hurt by our silence may also judge us for that silence.

4 Conclusion

As Audre Lorde (1984b) reminded us:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us ... I speak in..an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken. (pp. 40–44)

We are not arguing that silence is never a constructive mode of engagement in these discussions. Indeed, too much participation from dominant group members simply reinscribes the dominance and centrality embedded in the larger society. We are arguing that silence as one's *default* mode of engagement is not a constructive move. What differentiates constructive use of silence from a reinforcement of dominance is that the person is using their best judgment, based in a social justice framework, of how to engage with the goal of deepening self-knowledge, building just community, and interrupting traditional power relations. Social justice commitment asks that one *continually grapple* with the question of how best to interrupt power and privilege in each context, anchored in awareness of which identities are most salient (eg. When the topic is ableism I am in a dominant position; when the topic is sexism I am in a subordinate position; when the topic is racism against women of Color, I am in a dominant position).

A lifetime of schooling that has denied acknowledging the significance of positionality and built on a collective history of denial is difficult to counter in a single course. Yet to challenge one's most comfortable patterns of engagement, while it may be counterintuitive, is necessary to interrupt all of our socialization into relations of inequity. From a social justice perspective, we can assume that our socialization has not prepared us to be competent in cross-group relationship building. Although consistent silence in these discussions often feels benign to those who practice it, we argue that no form of engagement that is not informed by a social justice perspective is benign. Going against one's grain for engagement, while difficult, is necessary and will result in the least harmful and most authentic and rewarding engagement. Participation in the social justice classroom is not concerned with "how many times" you speak, but "did your speaking reveal that you understand the dynamics in play?" Your participation must be *strategic* in recognition of and responsiveness to relations of power and your positions within those relations.

Notes

- 1 <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/01/23/voices-typically-quiet-students-suffer-in-classes-with-participation-grade/>

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