Knowing Ourselves as Social Justice Educators

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Although much has been written about the content of social justice education courses, and some about how to engage students in learning about social justice, little attention has been paid to helping social justice educators cope with the emotional and intellectual challenges of this kind of teaching. Yet few would claim that raising issues of oppression and social justice in the classroom is a dispassionate activity. Content as cognitively complex and socially and emotionally charged as social justice inevitably challenges both personal and intellectual knowledge and commitments. In the social justice classroom, we often struggle alongside participants in our classes with our own social identities, biases, fears, and prejudices. We, too, need to be willing to examine and deal honestly with our values, assumptions, and emotional reactions to oppression issues. Accordingly, the self-knowledge and self-awareness that we believe are desirable qualities for any teacher become indispensable in social justice education.

For most faculty, our professional training has not prepared us to deal with emotionally and socially charged issues in the classroom. Social justice education is not simply new content but also often a radical change in process as well, one that requires

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us to expand beyond traditional models of teaching. This shift in standpoint can be a fearful and anxiety-producing experience. "There has to be an acknowledgement that any effort to transform institutions so that they reflect a multicultural standpoint must take into consideration the fears teachers have when asked to shift their paradigms" (hooks, 1994, p. 36).

To examine teaching fears more closely, Weinstein and Obear (1992) invited a group of 25 university faculty colleagues from different disciplines to respond anonymously to the question "What makes you nervous about raising issues of racism in your classroom?" Faculty respondents expressed several concerns that are relevant to our topic. Below, we examine these and other concerns identified in taped discussions among the authors of this chapter. Sometimes, we use a common voice in which "we" refers to the authors. Other times, we use a single voice, identified as Barbara, Jerry, Lee or Sharon.

Below, we discuss faculty fears and concerns about teaching social Justice content providing examples of how we grapple with them in our own classes. Although we treat each issue separately, they do in fact overlap and constantly interact. Moreover, the strategies we discuss are not formulaic responses applicable to any teaching situation. Raising oppression issues in the classroom can be exciting and rewarding, but never entirely comfortable or predictable, especially since group interaction is such a central part of the process.

**Awareness of Our Own Social Identities**

In traditional classrooms, the particular social and cultural identities of teachers usually remain in the background, but in the social justice classroom, where social identity is central to the content, the significance of who we are often takes center stage. In the study by Weinstein and Obear (1992), faculty expressed heightened awareness about their social identities when teaching social justice content, requiring them to be more conscious of the attitudes and assumptions they convey in their teaching. We are not immune as faculty to feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment that arise in discussions of social injustice. Often we are likely to be self-conscious about our own positions in the privileged or targeted group and concerned about how participants are likely to perceive us as we react to material under discussion.

**Jerry:** Even though I come into the classroom as a professional teacher, I do not leave my social identities at the door. I am a blend of such identities, for example, white, male, Jewish, heterosexual, beyond middle age, working-class background, now middle class. Especially when I am conducting antisemitism courses, I am constantly reminded of my conflicts about being at the same time a member of a group that is targeted by antisemitism and a member of the dominant white, male group in this society, with all of the inequities and privileges associated with each status.

As facilitators, we can offer our experience with both advantaged and targeted identities as a way to join with participants, model openness to exploring our own relative positions of power and privilege in relation to different oppression issues and expand the boundaries in the room for discussing these subjects.

**Barbara:** African American students often express difficulty in seeing themselves in the role of dominant or agent of oppression. They are so closely identified with the role of target or victim of oppression that they fail to see how they
benefit from agent aspects of their identity. I grew up with a keen awareness of myself as a black person, but with no understanding at all of the ways I benefit from my status as a Christian. I gathered lots of information about disability oppression, but gained a much deeper understanding of systematic exclusion of people with disabilities when I suffered an injury that left me temporarily disabled.

Awareness of social identity is further complicated by historical and experiential contexts. The meaning of social group membership will vary for people who are from the same social group but from different geographic regions, historical periods, and family experiences, or who view their experiences through different social identity positions. As facilitators, we need to be conscious of how individual members of a social group experience oppression in diverse ways and be cautious about rigid categorizations.

**Barbara:** Being Black means different things to different African heritage people. A light-skinned middle- or upper-class African heritage person growing up in the Northeast in the 1990s will describe the experience of being Black very differently from a dark-skinned working-class person raised in the South in the 1950s. Neither experience is any more or less authentically Black. While different, both experiences interact with a system of racism that extends through time, geographic region, and particular individual/family locations.

Though we experience the oppression directed toward our group as individuals, no one individual can ever embody the totality of group subjugation. This is one of the central limitations of identity politics. We are constantly balancing the broad strokes of group oppression with the finer shadings of individual experience. If we can be conscious of our own identity explorations, we may be more likely to remember that our students too come from a range of different places and experiences as they struggle to define an individual identity in the context of a variety of differently positioned group memberships.

**Sharon:** What may be in the forefront for a student of color at a particular moment may not be race, but sexual orientation, physical ability, or age. Just because a participant is in a wheelchair does not mean disability is the issue that is currently primary. At any given moment a participant may be more engaged with issues of gender, race, or sexual orientation.

As facilitators, we find it helpful to reflect on the experiences that have shaped our various identities and note the particular issues with which we feel most comfortable and those we tend to avoid, distort, or fear. This self-knowledge can be helpful preparation for engaging with student discomfort with these issues and enable us to respond thoughtfully to participants even when we ourselves feel exposed or uncertain.

**Lee:** As a white woman, racism is an ongoing learning process for me. I keep realizing new areas where I'm unaware, learning, and hopefully growing, but it is never closed and finished content. If I acknowledge my own ongoing learning, I can be more open to what participants in my classes raise for me to look at. Being aware of my own struggles to be honest with myself and open to new information hopefully also helps me to be more empathetic and supportive of their struggles.
As teachers, we can keep learning and be thoughtful about our levels of knowledge and awareness of particular issues, realizing that our own consciousness is likely to shift and change through ongoing discovery of the various forms and manifestations of oppression takes in our society. We, too, are life-long learners in this process.

**Confronting Previously Unrecognized Prejudices**

A second issue noted by faculty in the Weinstein and Obear (1992) study had to do with fear of being labeled racist, sexist, and so on, and discovering previously unrecognized prejudices within ourselves. This concern included having our assumptions called into question in front of our students, being corrected or challenged publicly (especially by members of targeted groups), and encountering our own fears and romanticized notions about members of targeted groups.

No one who has taken on the task of teaching about oppression wants to be thought of as homophobic, racist, sexist, classist, antisemitic, ableist, ageist, and so on. Yet we know that recognizing and rooting out deeply socialized, and often unconscious, prejudices and practices is not likely to be easy or completed work. Educators understandably feel a sense of vulnerability that what is out of our awareness will rise up to confront us as we engage these issues in our classrooms.

**Lee:** I grew up in the Midwest and didn’t meet a Jewish person, or at least was not aware I had, until I went to college. I thought that meant I couldn’t be antisemitic. Slowly I came to realize all the assumptions and stereotypes I breathe in just living in this culture. I still have unexpected moments of new learning when I suddenly become aware of something I have missed or overlooked that is tied to antisemitism. And I think, “Oh no, how could I not have seen this?” I can berate myself for not noticing, or try to avoid the discomfort of this awareness, or I can try to be grateful that at least now I can do something about it.

An example of one activity that went awry because of unexamined assumptions is illustrative. Lee had planned an activity to elicit discussion of gender socialization, using a fishbowl format in which first men and then women would talk about their experiences in a homogeneous group so that each group could listen to each other without interruption.

**Lee:** I was so intent on gender issues in my planning that I didn’t anticipate the discomfort a gay man might feel in the rather raucous male-bonding discussion that took place among the men in the fishbowl emphasizing sports and heterosexual dating. I had not anticipated the way a gay man might have a very different relationship to his experiences of maleness. I noticed the student’s discomfort and began to guess my mistake, which he confirmed when we talked about it later.

This lesson serves as a helpful reminder for instructors to continually ask, “Who are the participants I imagine as I do this planning?” and “Who might I be leaving out or forgetting to include?”

Barbara notes that encountering previously unrecognized prejudice enables her to be more effective and empathetic with her students:

**Barbara:** An important part of my own learning has been to recognize the ways I have internalized oppression and how it permeates my consciousness without my
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2) study had to do with previously unrecognized assumptions called into question, and were cast into public light, which is particularly of interest. Educators are likely to be made aware of these assumptions and to reflect on them. The awareness will rise to the surface, and we can think about them and do something about it.

On the other hand, I should note that I don’t mean to dismiss the idea that stereotypes are not important. Stereotypes are not something to be taken lightly. They have been the basis for our human history, and they continue to be a force in our lives.

The effects of oppressive socialization are of particular concern, and we must be careful to address them. For example, learning to confront the homophobia at the heart of our own religious tradition has been vital to being able to support students who are seeking to learn about heterosexism and homophobia while remaining loyal to our own religious beliefs.

Self-examination about the effects of oppressive socialization in our lives is a never-ending learning process. We all have areas of limited vision, particularly where we are members of the advantaged group and have been taught to assume our own experiences are normative. When we stay open to ongoing learning and accept the inevitability of mistakes as we uncover new areas of ignorance or lack of awareness, our students can learn to do so as well. Such self-awareness supports the long view needed to sustain our commitments and not retreat from this difficult but vital work.

Responding to Biased Comments in the Classroom

Faculty anxiety about how to respond sensitively and effectively to biased comments in the classroom is understandable, yet such comments invariably arise once we open up the topic. Those interviewed by Weinstein and Obar (1992) worried most about dealing with biased comments from privileged group members in the presence of targeted group members, especially when made by members of their own socially advantaged group.

Language plays such a central role in perpetuating oppression that miscommunication and misunderstanding can easily arise. Targeted group members usually have a long history with and have developed sensitivity to negative cues that signal oppressive attitudes. They have been subjected to, have suffered from, have discussed, and have thought about such cues throughout the course of their lives and so are highly tuned to note them in the language used by members of the advantaged group. Advantaged group members, on the other hand, are often oblivious to, and quite often shocked to realize, the injury they can cause to members of the targeted group. Thus, the potential for breakdown in communication, hurt feelings, defensiveness, and recrimination is high. As educators, we want to create an atmosphere where all participants feel included, and where we can address hurtful language without inhibiting honest discussion. We have found that setting ground rules and establishing mutually agreed upon procedures for addressing offensive statements when they arise can be productive in creating an atmosphere of honesty and support. (see Chapters 5, 12 and 13; Appendix 12K).

As social justice educators, we are not immune to triggering cues, either, thus we find it helpful to recognize beforehand the comments and signals to which we are most susceptible.

Jerry: As a Jew, particularly when I am teaching about antisemitism, I am vulnerable to all the dominant signals concerning my group. Some version of all the stereotyped statements and attitudes that have pursued me my entire life are bound to be expressed. I always experience those expressions and attitudes with some degree of pain, for they reestablish the past fears. When I hear those expressions, I may get angry and want to retaliate, but I know that acting directly on my feelings would be inappropriate and counterproductive to the goals of the session and my role as teacher and facilitator. By anticipating typical responses that I have experienced before, I can prepare myself to address these triggers intentionally and constructively during the class.
Careful analysis of how we typically react in situations of tension can lead to more options for responding in thoughtful ways when conflicts arise. For example, we can examine motives for avoiding conflict, proving ourselves as unprejudiced, or wanting people to like us. Through paying attention to our internal dialogue in these situations, we can make more conscious choices in the moment:

Sharon: I make sure that I know myself in relation to the material and the particular issues that give me the most discomfort or anxiety. If I feel like a well of emotion, I remind myself this class is for the students. Once I had someone co-teaching a particular session, and this person just lost it and raged at the class. I went away thinking, “Wow, she just threw up all over the class!”

To avoid responding in ways we might later regret, we can build in ways beforehand to deal with and respond effectively when we are triggered by what participants say in class. For example, creating a support system, a person or group with whom we can discuss these issues, share feelings, and get support, can be extremely helpful. Sharon regularly meets with a friend and colleague, another African American woman, to debrief and talk about her classes. She has also at times used a journal to note her feelings and reactions as the class progresses. This process is a helpful reminder, at points in a course where resistance is particularly high or she is feeling down on herself, that these are predictable parts of the process rather than flaws in the class or her own teaching. Such realizations can be very reassuring.

An appreciation for the process people go through in developing awareness about oppression can also help us acquire patience and understanding when dealing with our own frustrations and feelings toward students.

Lee: I can feel very impatient sometimes. But when I shift my frame of reference to one of trying to understand the process by which people can be engaged in unlearning oppressive attitudes, it kind of unhooks me. Then it becomes a challenge to figure out, “Okay, how is this person thinking about these issues now, and what is going to be the way to help them to try out a different perspective?”

Attention to process in the moment occurs on two levels. One level relates to noticing how participants may be thinking about or experiencing what is going on in the classroom: “Why does that person say or think that? What is getting triggered for him or her?” On a parallel track, we can also note and try to understand our own reactions to what is occurring in the moment: “Why am I so annoyed at this person? What does it trigger for me?”

We often hold romanticized notions that those who are themselves victimized by bigotry and discrimination will naturally be more sensitive and vigilant when groups other than their own are targeted or victimized. Unfortunately, the experience of oppression does not automatically render one an expert or liberate one from bias toward another group. It can be quite disillusioning when such expectations are shattered.

Jerry: I have been exposed to Jewish racism and sexism, African American antisemitism and sexism, and white, Gentile women who are racist and antisemitic. I always harbor the wish that all targeted group members would be allies in interrupting bias in all of its forms. However, wishing doesn’t make it so. When I am confronted with bias toward my group from other targeted
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people, I have to overcome my fear of alienating those whom I thought were “on my side” and challenge their beliefs in the same way I would anyone else. However, in the process I try to provide continuous evidence that I am also sensitive to their target group issues.

The challenge for us as educators is to stay open both to our own internal process and to what may be going on for our students, so that we can respond to biased comments clearly and directly, but also with compassion and understanding for what it means to discover and challenge oppressive beliefs and behaviors in ourselves (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of triggers).

**Doubts and Ambivalence About One’s Own Competency**

Weinstein and Obear (1992) found that faculty members often worry about having to expose struggles, uncertainty, or mistakes because we are assumed, as college faculty, to be experts. To the degree that we expect ourselves to appear certain about what we know, we may find it difficult to encounter hot spots or knowledge gaps exposed through our interactions with participants in our social justice classes.

**Jerry:** This is especially true when targeted group members other than my own describe perspectives to which I am not yet sensitive. Unless I can admit to students that I am still in the process of learning and that there are areas about which I still need to be educated, I may give the impression that there are simple solutions to which I have access. This places great pressure on me to have “the answer.” One way of diminishing the pressure is to disclose my own uncertainties to students. It also models that unlearning prejudice is a lifelong process in which there are rarely simple answers.

The issues participants raise that challenge our awareness and sensitivity can create a valuable space for opening up the learning process. As we confront our own misinformation, ignorance, and the blind spots of privilege, we create the possibility for modeling honesty and openness to what can be learned by listening to others who are different from us, especially those who have been targets of stereotypes and assumptions from members of advantaged groups.

In our discussions for this chapter, Lee recalled a course in which classism was a central focus. Because most of the students were teachers or human service professionals, she had assumed a predominantly middle-class perspective and focused the course accordingly, only to discover the simmering anger at the cost of textbooks and the amount of time outside of class needed to complete the homework among participants working two jobs and struggling to make ends meet. Once Lee realized her mistake, she acknowledged the false assumptions she had made and initiated a discussion about how to address the problems participants were experiencing in ways that would be supportive and promote learning. The discussion with her students provided an opportunity for them to explore the issue of classism and the unexamined assumptions that reinforce class privilege. The discussion also gave Lee useful new ideas about how to select texts for courses, develop a library of books to loan to students, and think about new ways to construct assignments and build supportive classroom community.

**Sharon:** You can’t come into the class saying, in effect, “I know everything there is to know about this and let me tell you.” When you make a mistake, you have to
be willing to say, "Well, that was a mistake" or "I've learned something about this now, and I'll do it differently next time." I don't know how comfortable most teachers are with doing this, but there is a way to say, "It didn't occur to me" or "I didn't notice, I'm sorry."

Teaching in ways that invite challenge and model ongoing learning conveys a different definition of competence than the traditional one of mastery and expertise. *Competence* here means skill in creating an atmosphere where difficult dialogues can occur (Goodman, 1996), developing processes that enable people (including the teacher) to expose and look critically at their own assumptions and biases, and building a community that encourages risk taking and action to challenge oppressive beliefs and behaviors within and beyond the classroom.

**Need for Learner Approval**

Most educators hope that their students will like and respect them, and leave class feeling positively about their experience. Those interviewed by Weinstein and Obear (1992) revealed fear of making students frustrated, frightened, or angry. Such encounters often leave faculty feeling shaken and confused, and uncertain of how to respond.

*Lee:* I think I’m good at creating community in the classroom and making people feel welcome and supported. Where I have to push myself is to introduce and not smooth over conflict, to challenge students, and risk their not liking me. I do it, but I realize I’m much more comfortable with the community-building part. It makes me feel good. I want students to like me. But there are times when that can get in the way of productive learning.

In social justice teaching, we intentionally create tension in order to disrupt participants’ complacent and unexamined attitudes about social life. These very conditions can cause participants to dislike or feel hostile toward us at various points in the course. Confronting oppression invariably involves feelings ranging from anxiety, confusion, anger, and sadness, to exhilaration and joy. We need to remind ourselves that as much as we crave approval from our students, a sense of well-being is not always conducive to long-lasting learning, especially with regard to issues of oppression. A better indication of our effectiveness might be whether participants leave with more questions than they when they entered, are unsettled by what they have learned, are pushed to know more about core assumptions in their own socialization, or feel a need to get more actively involved in the world around them.

*Jerry:* When participants left feeling frustrated, upset, and confused I used to regard it as evidence of my failure as a facilitator. It was not until we ran a racism workshop for a community college in which the entire faculty and administration were involved that my concept of what constituted successful teaching began to change. On finishing the weekend-long session the participants were not smiling. On the way home my co-leader and I felt that the workshop had been a failure. Over the next 3 to 5 years, however, we kept getting reports of systematic changes in that institution that promoted greater racial equity and awareness and that were directly attributed to the workshop.
Dealing With Emotional Intensity and Fear of Losing Control

Faculty worry they won't know how to respond to angry comments, discussions that blow up, participant anger directed at them, or their own strong emotions engendered by the discussion (Weinstein & Obear, 1992). Johnella Butler describes this process well:

All the conflicting emotions, the sometimes painful movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar, are experienced by the teacher as well. We have been shaped by the same damaging, misinformed view of the world as our students. Often, as we try to resolve their conflicts, we are simultaneously working through our own. (1989, p. 160)

Many educators have been taught that emotions have no place in academia. However, traditionally dispassionate modes of teaching can distance us from the core issues and conflicts that are central to social justice education and can often result in simply skimming the surface. Ultimately, it is questionable whether intellectual and abstract reflection alone can effectively change oppressive attitudes and behaviors. Emotions and experience must inevitably be engaged for social justice learning to be meaningful or have a lasting impact on how we and our students act in the world.

Tension, anger, and conflict in the classroom are truly challenging and often exhausting to handle. However, avoiding the feelings that are stimulated by oppression ignores how deeply it is embedded in our psyches, and reinforces norms of silence and discounting that ultimately sustain oppression (Aguilar & Washington, 1990). Often, the disequilibrium that direct confrontation with feelings and contradictory information generate leads to the most significant learning (see Chapter 4; see also Kell, 1984; Zaharna, 1989).

Barbara notes how helpful it can be to examine our own personal history with emotional expression to understand our responses to emotion in the classroom.

**Barbara:** I have had to examine how anger and other intense emotions were handled in my household to get a better understanding of my current response to emotions in the classroom. Quite apart from my professional training to be carefully neutral and suppress any display of emotion, I was raised in a household where feelings were denied until they erupted. My response has been to deny feelings any place in discussions, and especially to disallow loud voices. Learning to listen to loud voices and to encourage others to be receptive to them has been important for my ability to facilitate authentic discussion. Reminding learners that loud voices sometimes indicate that a person cares a lot about an issue can provide a context that allows “heated” discussion to take place.

Once we accept emotional expression as a valid and valuable part of the learning process, we can turn our focus to finding effective ways to enable its expression in the service of learning.

**Sharon:** I actually don’t really try to control emotions, but I do try to manage outlets for expressing emotions through dyads or journals, for example. If people are upset, I say, “Be upset! Be angry, whatever, and we’ll just notice it.” And I just sort of acknowledge that it’s part of the process.

Simply acknowledging when we feel overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do can be a powerful step. When emotions are running high and we are uncertain about
how to proceed, one useful strategy is to acknowledge that and create time-out for the whole class to reflect before deciding on next steps.

Jerry: There have been a number of times during my antibias teaching when I have felt totally helpless in dealing with certain interactions. A participant may say something that stimulates great tension and anxiety, and a dense silence overtakes the group. I may feel upset and paralyzed as all eyes turn to me to see what I will do, expecting me to take care of the situation. I cannot think of any helpful intervention. I am too upset to think clearly. It is a fearsome moment, one I anticipate with dread.

Over the years, Jerry has accumulated a few emergency procedures that help him survive these moments:

- Give participants a brief time-out.
- Ask people to record their own immediate responses in their notebooks.
- Invite each participant to share his or her responses with one other person.
- Return to the whole-group discussion to consider what has occurred and what can be learned as a result.

Such strategies change the focus momentarily from public to private, allow time for participants and instructor to assess how they are feeling, and regroup. Often, it then becomes more possible to return to the discussion with greater clarity, thoughtfulness, and honesty.

When a supportive climate has been previously established, losing control or facing strong emotions can be a constructive event, one from which both facilitators and participants learn. In fact, participants often make fundamental shifts in perspective after they have experienced someone “losing” control, revealing the deeper feelings, fears, and experiences surrounding oppression that are always operating but rarely expressed.

Barbara: I teach social justice education from a position of hope and belief that our efforts can make a difference in the elimination of oppression. I was co-teaching an antisemitism course with a Jewish colleague who said that she did not think antisemitism would ever be entirely eliminated and that other holocausts were and are possible. Before I could catch them, tears coursed down my face as I felt the enormity of the task before me and the challenge to my own optimism. Several students later told me that this was a powerful learning moment for them.

**Personal Disclosure and Using Our Experience As Example**

As social justice educators, we are in many ways texts for our students. Our social group identities, behavior in the classroom, and openness about our own process of learning can all be significant aspects of course content, as who we are affects student perceptions of the issues we raise. In some respects, we are both the messenger and the message. Asking participants to engage experientially with oppression-related material also requires that we be willing to take the risks we ask of them.

Lee: If we want to create an environment where our students can be vulnerable enough to look at painful issues that challenge our faith in a fair society and
ourselves as good human beings, then we have to give ourselves the same permission to be vulnerable and confused. I'm constantly struggling against this image that teachers are supposed to be perfect, in control, totally aware. Which is ridiculous! Nobody can be that. The question is how can I try to be skillful, and at the same time give myself permission to be a fallible human being? If I'm going to ask my students to disclose something, then I should be willing to do that too. I try to disclose ways in which I've made mistakes and where I felt really stupid when I realized what I was saying, to let students know there's not perfection. We're just human beings trying to be humane with each other and not perpetuate this bloody system.

Sharing our own struggles with issues of oppression gives permission for our students to engage in this difficult process themselves. Acknowledging that we cannot know everything, but can commit to persistent effort to learn about oppression, helps us and participants in our classes let go of expectations of perfection that often block action. Better to take imperfect action and continue to engage with these crucial issues than to avoid responsibility for action altogether while we search for perfect knowledge.

Sharon: I want students to understand that learning about social justice is part of a lifelong process. I will share with them stories of my own development, both in areas where I was a target of oppression, or stood in the shoes of an agent of oppression with the accompanying privileges.

The amount, context, and nature of personal information that we disclose are always a matter of judgment, depending on the learning purposes of disclosure, nature and size of the group, relationships we have established, and amount of time we have together. What we choose to disclose as facilitators should have a clear relationship to the topic under discussion and serve a learning purpose.

For many social justice educators, especially from targeted groups, the risks of self-disclosure, however, need to be thoughtfully weighed. For example, self-disclosure by a gay or lesbian facilitator can be a significant boon to learning, especially if the topic is heterosexism, but can also backfire. The instructor should be aware of the homophobia and misinformation sure to exist among her students and plan carefully how and when she will come out and the educational purposes this will serve.

Sharon: I know that for myself I'm always conscious about when it is that I'll come out in class, or even if I will. Because I want them to still see me as credible and I believe that as soon as I come out, that piece of knowledge looms in their eyes over everything else. Like all of a sudden their teacher is sexual, and they have to deal with the internal contradictions of respect for teacher along with societal messages that gay men and lesbians are bad, perverse, immoral, etc. So I know that I'm very conscious about when to share that information. I try to wait until after I've gotten their trust so that any trust I lose during that time period can hopefully be reestablished before the end of the semester. I have had students deny my being lesbian and think I was only saying it to create a learning opportunity for them.

A facilitator's purpose and role in disclosing personal experiences differ in important ways from those of participants. Participants draw on their experiences to probe and understand the personal implications of a specific issue. Facilitators often use
personal experience to illustrate a point, push the discussion forward, challenge misinformation, or support a particular learning goal. Our role is to be comprehensive, so we also need to understand the limits of our own experience and to consciously develop examples that go beyond our own personal range.

Negotiating Authority Issues

In the social justice classroom, we deliberately interrupt the traditional classroom hierarchy in order to build a community of learning in which the teacher participates as a facilitator of process rather than an authority delivering knowledge (Tompkins, 1990). Issues of authority in the classroom are especially complicated for faculty who are members of targeted groups. Much has been written, for example, about the dilemmas faced by faculty of color and by female and gay/lesbian faculty who often cope with both institutional and student devaluation of their professional status (Aguilar & Washington, 1990; Ahlquist, 1991; Arnold, 1993; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Students sometimes perceive them as less authoritative and may discount the legitimacy of what they teach or accuse them of pushing their own agenda. A professor of color and a white professor teaching about racism, for example, are likely to be perceived quite differently by students of color and white students. Sharon describes the various issues she often juggles and the common student perceptions she faces as an African American woman teaching about racism.

Sharon: The fact that my students are often 99 percent white means that I have to set up an environment where they can talk about their perceptions of reverse discrimination, quotas, affirmative action, etc. I also don’t want to come off appearing like it’s only my issue, or it’s my personal thing, or that I’ve got a chip on my shoulder. And if I do have students of color in the class, then I’m also concerned about trying to keep them from having to be the authority on all issues of race.

Gender also casts authority issues in particular ways. We are socialized to expect females to defer to male authority, not to be authorities themselves. Women who achieve professional roles often juggle negative social messages about women in power with an internal sense of being imposters in these roles (Bell, 1990; McIntosh, 1988). When we are dealing with emotional issues and feelings in the classroom, female professors can easily be typecast in unfair and distorting ways. Students, for example, often expect female teachers to be warm and nurturing and may become angry or challenge our authority when we do not fulfill their expectations (see Culley, 1985).

Institutional Risks and Dangers

One additional concern relates to the institutional risks involved when we depart from traditional teaching formats and content. As we engage with social justice issues and change our classrooms accordingly, we often come into conflict with institutional norms of professed objectivity, authority, and professorial distance in ways that can undermine our confidence, lose the support of some of our colleagues, and in some cases jeopardize our positions as faculty.

When we take on the challenge of teaching social justice content and developing a democratic, participatory process in our classrooms, we run the very real risk of getting in trouble with our institutions because we are challenging traditional content, teaching
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the class, then I'm
be the authority on

socialized to expect
men who achieve
power with an
1988). When we
professors can
ple, often expect
or challenge our

we depart from
justice issues and
ith institutional
ways that can
es, and in some
nd developing a
al risk of getting
ontent, teaching

processes, and norms about the teacher-student relationship. We may also encounter
problems with grading and evaluation not typical for traditional instructors.

Sharon: A student's mother wrote to the dean and told him that I was a bad teacher
and that if her daughter didn't get a B, she was going to take this to the pro-
vost and the president of the university and have them call me on the carpet.
And it was really hard holding my own ground. [Did the dean support you?]
The dean did support me but not without questioning me.

In this example, we see multiple vulnerabilities: the jeopardy facing an African
American teacher in a predominantly white institution where she cannot necessarily
count on the support on which white faculty can usually rely. Also, she is introducing
subject matter that may not be supported by the institution. Finally, she is engaging in
a process of teaching that also may not be valued institutionally.

Faculty who teach social justice courses are commonly from underrepresented
groups, often women and the few people of color on a faculty, and frequently unten-
ured. Thus, the most vulnerable groups take on the most difficult and institutionally
risky teaching. Faculty who teach social justice courses sometimes receive lower rat-
ings on teaching evaluations than those who teach traditional courses, adding yet
another layer of institutional danger to an already exposed position. Such teachers,
especially if they are members of targeted groups, are often left in an extremely vulner-
able position institutionally.

Team teaching, particularly with a tenured faculty member, can be a valuable way
to build support for untenured faculty. Other support systems also need to be de-
veloped and nurtured so that faculty who teach social justice education can survive and
hopefully thrive in institutions that benefit from their perspectives and experiences.

**Conclusion**

Too often, people who write about social justice education fail to share their own strug-
gles in the classroom. We hope that through naming and discussing the fears and con-
cerns faced by faculty who teach about oppression, we can begin a dialogue of support
and encouragement that will enable teachers to sustain their commitment to social
justice education and contribute to the ongoing development of effective social just-
ice pedagogy and practice. We recognize that we are part of a much larger process of
change, and we want to affirm the importance of the small but essential role each of us
can play in the quest for a more just and inclusive society. What we do counts, often in
ways that will not come back to us for validation.

Sharon: I just think it's helpful to know that I am doing the best I can do and not to be
too wedded to the here and now. I know ancestors who came before fought
for freedom, equality, and justice and made it possible for me to live this life.
Even if I don't change the world for me, I have faith that my work can contrib-
ute to a better world for the generations yet to come. That's what keeps me
doing it, keeps me grounded, being grateful and knowing that my little part
counts.

We hope that nurturing this perspective in our students will make it possible for
them to see the meaningful role they too can play in envisioning and working to create
a just society.