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Distinguishing Whether the Emperor is Indeed Clothed: Revolutionizing the Classroom by Creating an Environment of Controversial Questioning Rather than Nodding in Conformity to the Dictates of Power Structures

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Sex. Money. Politics. To ensure friendly interactions, this trio of "taboo" subjects is to be avoided in mixed company and polite conversation. Yet the ideas linked with the umbrella of these three are the foundation of personal ideologies, and tell more about a person than casual, "safe" chit chat. Classrooms tend to be safe zones, potentially stale with lessons in need of revival and void of controversy; but if the purpose of a classroom is to be an environment of learning, inspiration, and growth, why are such topics not included solely on the basis of avoiding difficult questions and potential offense? When taboo topics breach a classroom, oftentimes students set forth an opinion but they are unable to pinpoint where the belief set generated from. Ultimately identifying the source of a personal ideology is an essential point of self-reflection and personal understanding on the students' part. Throughout time, social constructs have been forged by the dictates of social groups, religious doctrine, or political agendas that deem what is best for individuals within a society. And all too often, it is easier to follow rather to ask why we act the way we do and where the idea originated. Peeling the layers of personal philosophy down to its inception sets up a new platform for adding to or reconstructing the original belief set; thus, instructors should embrace the inclusion of these hard topics, provide information with and without bias for students to analyze, and allow the students to question and toy with their previously conceived notions and build upon their new ones. The value of individuals who question is critical to the progress of creating multicultural communities that choose understanding over misguided judgement. This, more than ever, should be the new direction classes should be heading.

Keywords:

Given the current political climates world-wide - charged with terrorist acts in the name of religious extremism, gender inequality, and increasing socio-economic gaps – it is important for the current and future generations, who may one day be leaders of their communities, districts, or countries, to think critically about the society they help construct. History has proven that for far too long, citizens that are uneducated, easily manipulated, or seemingly apathetic in regard to social and political issues tend to follow leaders and authority figures' decisions blindly and rarely question their own role as a metaphorical cog in the clockwork of their society. Where then should these integral components of this life-based chronometer gain the skills necessary to be an efficient part to keep the world ticking forward rather than coming to an abrupt halt? The easy answer *should* be "an educational institution". Myles Horton, an American educator and activist who inspired students to think critically about the Civil Rights

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Movement in the 1950s and question and/or challenge the racial rhetoric surrounding it, believed that within the political sphere, there was "the notion that in order for education or institutional change to be effective, it had to begin with the people themselves – a particularly significant tenet of critical pedagogical thought" (Darder et al, 2003, p. 3). Thus, the question is posed: As a student, is it necessary to have an opinion, to question the status quo, to talk about potentially uncomfortable topics? It is my conviction that as educators, it is the duty of teachers, instructors, and professors alike to inspire their students to stop closing doors on taboo subjects, forcing these conversations to the realm of hushed whispers in intimate company, and instead to start opening windows; this would provide a space to learn practical skills to obtain their future careers, but do so in an environment that promotes understanding and the acquisition of a personal stance not just within the confines of their classroom walls, but also within the world in which they are all a part.

On the surface, students who enter university tend to matriculate based on the projection of obtaining a certificate that ensures them a future with a better paycheck than those who did not secure their future through higher education. Those opportunities are clearly what drive most university-going individuals; but are students actually *learning* what is necessary if they only acquire practical skills but do not simultaneously experience a personal evolution? In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*,Critical pedagogy, as Henry Giroux coined it, has "emerged from a long historical legacy of radical social thought and progressive educational movements that aspired to link the practice of schooling to democratic principles of society and to transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities" (Darder et al, 2003, p. 3). Thus, in communities all around the globe, people are suffering from one affliction or another; yet, the narrative surrounding said affliction is often twisted by the media for certain political agendas bought and paid for from the deep pockets of wealthy politicians to manipulate the masses, which then oftentimes trickles down to being reinforced by society itself. This then oppresses an individual's fluidity of thought regarding the affliction so that silence is applauded while speaking about or against the dominant idea is frowned upon or rejected within the individual's community. It is essential then that citizens of these communities are given the space to think about, discuss, and come to decisions about subjects that affect them most, without the judgment of society and the inundation of the paid-off media outlets. What better place than an institution promising the education and growth of the incoming generations? Yet, how often is a classroom utilized to raise the issue of gender discrimination when it comes to equal pay? Or how the pornography industry has pervaded the technology-immersed youth to the point of standing in for a proper Sex Ed course and to an extent is perpetuating rape culture while single-handedly toppling the progress made by feminist movements by reinstating patriarchal dominance in male-female interactions inside and outside the bedroom? Or how the perceptions of certain religions are constantly being misconstrued by the media so viewers construct their ideas about Islam, for example, being a violent religion by believing the propaganda that parallelsthe identifier "Muslim" with "ISIL terrorists"? If there is no education, no place to speak about these real issues, then where will the next generation get their information and construct their perceptions – from the biases and projections of their independent internet searches, through tainted media, and social networking? No. The duty of educators is to incorporate these difficult topics so that students who begin their college education and have no established opinions of their own step away with a diploma as well as an identity – and an identity constructed by their own hands under the guidance of educators with non-politically motivated, non-biased presentations of real-world issues that those students will have to face when they start fending for themselves after college.

In order to diagnose the reason why educational facilities are not already being utilized as critical pedagogy platforms, it is essential to observe the current educational climate regarding what students believe their role in society is and the legitimacy of participating in higher education. In a random survey

given to forty-five participants currently completing their undergraduate degrees, 70% male and 30% female all between the ages of 18-26, several questions were posed regarding the significance of education and what place hard-to-talk-about topics have in their classes. Often when students go to class, they exit much the same individual as they were when they entered the class, with little to no difference made. So the question then becomes, "What is the point of education?" When the participants were asked, the majority – 30% - stated that they were attending higher education classes because they wanted to ensure their own financial security for the future; they wanted to secure future career opportunities so that they could collect a paycheck that would support themselves and their future families. This is obviously the fundamental reason that most people attend university. Time invested in education equates to higher paid positions of capability and respect. Interestingly though, an equal amount of students – 30% - stated that they attend university classes because they have a love of learning and believe that people should go to university in order to understand more complex ideas and construct viewpoints on those. Acquiring the tools to become activists within their community came in a close second to the two front-runners at 28% and securing a handsome marital future rounded out the bottom at 12%.Given these data, it seems that there is a genuine interest on behalf of a decent portion of students to engage themselves in their classes to gain something more than just a certificate qualifying higher paydays in the future.

Likewise, when asked if they feel personally like their voice – if given the opportunity to speak – matters and actively affects the people in their immediate surroundings, 53% - more than half of the participants – responded that they feel like they have the capacity to influence those around them based on their opinions if they choose to share. The rest of the participants were split between a 22% divide of feeling that they had opinions but did not possess a voice worthy of being listened to and 25% willingly admitted to being apathetic on most topics and thus didn't feel the need to speak up at all. The divide is interesting. The fact that over half of the participants do feel that they have a stance that they are willing to share and will have some sort of following or personal sway with others if they share those thoughts could be confidence derived from the rise in the social networking era. Douglas Kellner and Gooyong Kim (2010) in their article "YouTube, Critical Pedagogy, and Media Activism," claim that with the emergence of new media technologies, there has been a sharp incline in voices coming forth from behind the curtains of their computer screens to merge together to create and receive information so as to establish a democratic education system of its own – a platform for people to gain input and give output; the "technological development has amplified individual, voluntary participation in mutual education through proliferating new voices and visions, making possible the democratization of knowledge. In these ways, conventional relationships between the producers and the consumers of knowledge have been productively challenged" (p. 4-5). When asked, the survey participants readily admitted that oftentimes when they had an opinion they wanted to be heard, they sought out internet sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to do so. Thus, the platform of social media emboldens those who would normally remain silent. The question then becomes: how can educators utilize this momentum where students feel they can present their ideologies and contribute to ongoing debates online and repurpose this drive in a classroom?Of the undergraduate participants surveyed, 64% decreed that they considered the classroom to be a "safe zone" that can be utilized to talk freely even about difficult subjects and won't be judged by their fellow peers. Of the others polled, 16% did not consider a classroom to be a safe place at all and 20% indicated that they wouldn't speak up in a class regardless of whether it felt like a "safe place" to communicate about hard topics or not. Yet, if 64% are claiming that they see classes as safe zones and over half believe they have a voice worthy of being heard, how often are they given the opportunity to speak up about a hard topic presented in classand how willing are they to do so? Does it depend on the actual environment or the teacher with which they are taking a course?

As many participants indicated, the definition of "safety" when it comes to talking about tough issues in a class comes from the demeanor of the instructor. If an instructors looks only to stand as an enforcer of certain belief sets or attempts to persuade students to their ideologies or discard certain beliefs that counter their own position, then students lack comfort in the class and feel less likely to speak up for fear of being castigated for thinking or feeling something in opposition to the authority. One participant indicated that the inclusion of hard topics is necessary to a well-rounded education, but the "difficult part is getting professors who are completely unbiased to teach these things." Thus, the idea of neutrality within the framework of critical pedagogy is crucial. Although being completely unbiased and neutral are daunting tasks for many educators because their personal convictions are so critical to the makeup of their own identity, a safe zone cannot be established for students without impartiality. The educator already rotates between many hats, but if the unbiased one and the one that seeks to challenge students remain collecting dust in the closet, the growth of students is actually squelched, which directly opposes the purpose of education itself. Thus, these two hats need to be rotated into the mix regularly to stimulate mental growth and emotional maturity for those students who enter the classroom on a daily basis, ready to be challenged.

Aside from a teacher willing to put aside his or her own biases and opinions, some students will naturally oppose the nature of some "hard" subjects because free lines of communication have not been established and have often been shut down by those in their immediate vicinity. Of those surveyed, the leading taboo topics that students claimed they'd be uncomfortable talking about in an educational setting, let alone in mixed company, were pornography at 22%, politics at 20%, terrorism at 17% and various sexually-based topics like sex education, abortion, and teen pregnancy rounding out the top taboo topics at 15%. When asked why they thought conversations on these should be avoided in their classes, the responses were as follows. One student claimed that all of these subjects "shouldn't ever [be] brought up in [a] classroom, because it's against religion. Terrorism shouldn't [be] brought up just to be safe." Similarly, another student responded that "In different religion[s], many social things are described differently. It may create a negative relation between the students as there will be [a] lot of students from different religion[s]. (e.g : Jihad in Islam, prohibition over killing animal[s] in Buddhism, Shatidah trend[s] in Hinduism, etc.)." Thus, these two – among others that responded similarly – have identified that these subjects have become taboo because of the repudiation of said topicsin their respective religious spheres which could cause rifts in one's own religious ideology or offend another. This is a valid concern. The religion (or lack thereof) that people practice is quintessential to shaping one's thoughts and sense of self, and when that ideology becomes threatened, then people tend to lash out to protect that which they hold to be true. The conundrum is though that nearly every "hard" topic is a problem that stems from material that is "haram", forbidden, or casts judgment within religious forums; these topics beg people to respond based upon those deeply-rooted personal ideologies that grow from the same tree as their spirituality. Gay marriage, for example is a transient topic among the variety of religions. While some religions adopt the idea that God did not make mistakes and love between two people, regardless of gender, could never be wrong, other people of faith believe that if a couple engages in a homosexual courtship and not a heteronormative one, that it is a sin before the Creator and ultimately a unionwhich is not one God intended. So even with different religions and spiritual belief sets - which all tend to be built with a similar framework - the interpretation of texts, the experiences the individual has had, and the time they've spent thinking about a "grey area" topic that neither falls on the side of black or white, creates the individual's identity. The grey area is the target for educators. The job of an educator is not to sway or persuade, but to get students to a neutral zone until they figure out for themselves what the truth is and why exactly they believe what they do – regardless of what they've been told to blindly believe by parents, leaders, or authority figures.

Even with a topic that seems an uncomfortable one to raise points about – like gay marriage for some, there are always numerous strategies to approach such a topic and do so in a general, unbiased way; the educator just has to be willing to try. One morning in late February 2014, I read an article about a situation in Arizona where the state drafted a bill to the U.S. Senate to allow business owners with a certain religious affiliation to retain their own religious freedoms by refusing service to anyone who hindered their religious beliefs. The backstory to the creation of this bill was that two men had entered a bakery to order a cake to be made for their wedding. The shop owner was Christian and felt offended by the couple's union and thus refused to serve them based solely on the justification, "I don't agree with your lifestyle." The article stated that it had already gained some support from the Senate and had a chance of passing in the coming months. So later that morning, I wondered how my English as Second Language students at Washington State University would respond to a bill like this. Upon entering my class – with mostly Saudi, Libyan, Omani, and Chinese students - I asked my students to visualize the events that occurred in the Arizona bakery as I recounted them. I consciously watched my tone and inflection to broach the subject with no biases, and just told the story how it had been conveyed to me in the NPR article. After telling them about the two men in the bakery and the new bill that was up to pass into law, I asked the students to talk about what they thought of the situation. Was it a good, justifiable bill to pass? Why or why not? Many of my Muslim students were quick tooffer up their opinion that they completely agreed with the bill and thought it should pass. I asked why they thought that. They responded that if the prospect of gay marriage offended the shop owner because being gay is not acceptable in Christianity, then anyone like him should be able to refuse service on the basis of not agreeing with a lifestyle that went against their own. A decent answer for the scenario, but I wanted my student to go deeper: "Why do you personally feel that the Christian shop owner is right?"The same student answered, "Well I'm Muslim and being gay isn't acceptable in Islam. So I would want the right to refuse service to a gay couple too because I wouldn't agree with their marriage." So at the root of many of my students' answers was a personal perspective formed from the pool of their own experiences, their own cultural makeup, and their own religiously appointed authority which has given a rule to which they abide. I then gave them the printout of the bill to break down the jargon of the proposed law so there was no misunderstanding as to what the bill, and potential law, would stand for. The 2014 Arizona-state-filed SB 1062 states:

Free exercise of religion is a fundamental right that applies in this state even if laws, rules or other government actions are facially neutral… State action shall not substantially burden a person's exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability…. 'Unreasonable burden' means that a person is prevented from using the person's property in a manner that the person finds unsatisfactory to fulfill the person's religious mission. (p. 1-2)

After looking over the bill, I gave them another scenario – a hypothetical one that the passing of the bill may present. "So if this bill becomes a law, which means that anyone can refuse services to anyone they don't agree with under the umbrella of religious offense, right?" My students agreed that that was what the document had stated. I then asked my Muslim and Buddhist students, "So if that is in fact what this document wants to set as a law, then doesn't that mean that that same Christian shop owner could deny services to any of you on the basis of not agreeing with your religion?" The students sat quiet for a moment and pondered the idea of not being served at an establishment based on the fact that they were Muslim or Buddhist. "I don't think that's fair," said the same student who initially agreed with the bill. "Why isn't it fair?" I asked. He said that people shouldn't discriminate based on the fact that someone believes differently than themselves. So I came back to the scenario with the two gay men; is it alright for them to be refused service then? And unanimously the students said "no". The point of this exercise was to make my students venture beyond black and white – visit the grey areas that coexist with the reality

surrounding them and the reality they construct based upon their beliefs. I want to emphasize that my point was not to persuade or sway, but to present a real-life situation with real-life consequences and give my students the opportunity to critically think through the logical outcomes. By reviving the Socratic method in a way such as this, students will be able to question their own basis of understanding and where their personal ideologies take root. This is the important question and will get them to think critically, not just instantly judge the world they perceive based on the opinions they've acquired that may not be stemming from their own introspective judgments.

Besides religion, others claimed that society wouldn't approve of the casual discussion of taboo topics. One participant stated, "It is not something that should be discussed in a classroom because it holds ideals that are not generally accepted in society." Another claimed that these shouldn't be discussed, "because it's not what my society would accept discussing in a classroom."Others just dismissed the idea of discussing these topics completely by saying, they are "not related to studies and can make people uncomfortable" and"It's a kind of personal decision someone takes for their lives.Why debate about it?" From these responses, it is obvious that there is a push-back even from the students to discuss these topics. But is this because the idea of discussing such topics is indeed too uncomfortable for them to even think about, or is it because it has never before been done in educational institutions and they are rejecting the idea of change? In another ESL class of mine, I raised the topic of abortion – one of the most heated topics to talk about in any company, let alone in a classroom. My students – a mix of 18- and 19- year-olds from China, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Japan- were very opposed to even bringing up the topic in class because the thought of it made them uncomfortable. As an educator, it is my duty to create a safe zone for my students, but I equally believe that it is my responsibility to challenge them (also abortion was a pivotal theme in the novel that could not be ignored and had to be discussed). So as the instructor, if I shy away from a topic just because my students don't feel like talking about it, I would then be allowing them to maintain their ideas and shut down on topics they don't feel like thinking about in future academic or social circumstances. So I assured them that the topic would be brought up in an academic format which would allow for deep conversations with potentially opposing views, but in a way where respect is maintained for all viewpoints in the group. The group, however hesitantly, agreed. On the first day, I asked the students if they were Pro-Life or Pro-Choice – and as I had anticipated, the group was divided between most of my Eastern Asian students who claimed they were Pro-Choice and my Middle Eastern students who claimed they were Pro-Life. I then asked if my students knew the difference between Pro-Life and Pro-Choice stances. One of my students from Oman ventured, "Pro-Life means that you believe babies should be born and Pro-Choice means you are okay with abortion, or killing babies." Okay, a place to start. Throughout the week, the students watched a documentary of a woman who worked at a branch of Planned Parenthood who spent thirty days in a Christian-based Pro-Life maternity house that actively protests against women having abortions. The documentary explained the ideas of Pro-Life, meaning that under no circumstances should a woman ever receive an abortion, and Pro-Choice, meaning that a woman has the right to choose what she does with her body – including in cases of rape, incest, or teenage pregnancies. The students became very educated on the topic, now knowing the ins and outs of the argument rather than just rejecting the thought of talking about an uncomfortable topic. At the end of the week, the students were told they were going to have a debate and that I would randomly assign them to a group – either Pro-Life or Pro-Choice – and regardless of what their actual stance was, they had to argue for the position they were given. Personally, I was astounded at the incredible effort my students put into the task and the impressive arguments they presented. At the end of the debate, I told them that they could divulge their real, personal position on the topic and nearly all of them had presented opposite of their true feelings, but had done so calmly, academically and with logic to back up their points. Some even decided to change their position on the issue because they admittedly didn't fully know what the two opposing sides stood for. Although religious doctrine, familial

influence, or society may dictate what an individual says he or she believes, it is always up to the individual to decide. In Maxine Greene's *The Dialectic of Freedom*(1988), she states that, "If situations cannot be created that enable the young to deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them. Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins" (p. 9). Hence, by posing hard questions and engaging students to think critically on crucial topics that do in some way – however large or small - affect them by simply being members of society, then the educator becomes a guide in reestablishing the students' agency and solidifies the students' role as a worthy participant in society's decision-making. That is what a classroom is for – to clear the space for students to decide for themselves what they truly believe and identify the reasoning behind those beliefs.

While pornography topped the list of inappropriate content for the survey participants, it is also important to note that 44% of those who responded claimed that they would be comfortable with any and all topics that would be presented in class. Accompanying responses to this notion included: "All of the mentioned topics are important for a human being living in a society. So, in my opinion, before joining a work force, a student must have a minimum level of knowledge about all of these topics because such knowledge will help him in every aspect of real life" which was coupled with another response: "The more we are exposed to these [topics], the more opinions we can form about them, and make educated decisions based off of our own knowledge." Thus, for some who attend university, the point of their education is not only to acquire a diploma and move on with degree in hand to pursue financial stability, but to explore topics that they have not yet been exposed to, or build on the platforms that they already have constructed in order to be better citizens; by way of this, they can also become constructive debaters that supports ideas with logic rather than emotion, they will be able to properly navigate interpersonal relations, and really, they will be able to establish themselves as self-actualized who have a sense of agency and use it responsibly. To reiterate, Kellner and Kim (2010) state thatAs long as the aim of education is to bring forth individuals' many-sided potential, self-directed human agency can become akey goal for education. Further, human agency is a requirementfor realizing education as a self-renewing and self-realizing processover time through continual communication with others and democratic transformation of one's environment. (p. 20)

Although it may seem an impossible task, no topic is ever off the table – no matter how difficult – as long as it has an academic purpose lying beneath the surface and a facilitator willing to harness his or her own ideologies to reintroduce Socratic strategies for students to come to conclusions on their own. The identification of the root of ideologies and the rejection of popular belief to come to one's own conclusions is invaluable and should be the target of all educators, regardless what subject they teach.

When asked how many university instructors and professors the surveyed students would say that they felt listened to them, cared about them and what they had to say, and ultimately altered their personal ideologies on real-life topics, the majority answered that they would consider only one to two teachers in their university classes to fit this description. And although it is easier to bring up critical topics in some classes than it is in others, the students claimed that the teacher who impacted them the most came from a variety of fields, including Math, English, Chemistry, Anthropology, Art, and Environmental Science. There is no limit to an educator's impact; there is only the limitations that educators put on their classes that dictates the growth of the students. Really the incorporation of these tough topics leads to – as one of the participants said -"An increase in knowledge, understanding and decreasing the fear that is associated with these topics. Fear of the unknown is greater than what we do know." So educators need to stop allowing students - future citizens and leaders - to remain in fear and instead, embolden them with tools to embrace that fear and break down the walls that are forged by external factors, which

constantly oppresses their freedom to think. It is the unwritten duty of educators to encourage student questioning so they can stop reassuring the emperor he's wearing his finest garments, and instead support them in their own freedom and agency to point out the naked truth.

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