

Part 1. The Hole in Racial Justice: A Love Letter

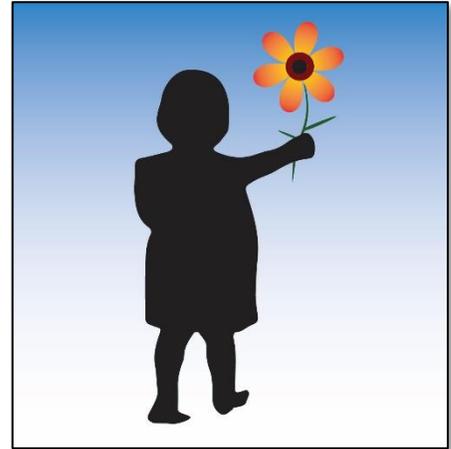
There have always been holes in our work.

In a historical context, the civil rights movement was rife with sexism. The feminist movement of the 70s excluded Women of Color. The 80s were all about race, gender and class and the 90s firmly brought sexual orientation into focus, as well as ableism. And it's been more recent to include transgender people and gender expression into an intersectional analysis.¹

It's obvious when we look back what the gaps are. But what will future generations say about the shortcomings of this time period, as we arc towards 2020? What will be obvious to them that is still obscure to us?

I'm arguing that current strategies in racial and social justice education are hyper-cognitive, overly ideological and incredibly linear. And what I'm proposing is that *psychological literacy*—defined broadly as learning that supports deep self-reflection, self-regulation and compassion—is a key part of what is missing and could strengthen our work. This underdevelopment is also linked to a wide variety of issues we struggle with ranging from the resistance we face from learners in classrooms to toxicity within progressive movements broadly, not to mention the increased polarization in society.

It's important to acknowledge that this piece is offered with a truth-speaking love that comes with being involved in anti-racism/ anti-oppression work for almost 25 years as a student, community organizer and teacher. Some of you will find what I say helpful and relieving while others may be turned off. Regardless of your reaction, I offer it with my deepest respect for the work that you—that we—all do.



Anti-Racism 101: The Perpetual Loop

I frequently hear from racial justice educators about how tired they are of society being in a perpetual loop of *Anti-Racism 101*—and the struggles they encounter working with resistance in the room, especially from those who have the most social privilege. I get it. I've been involved in this work for a long time. It can be frustrating.

But our explanations of what's happening for learners in our workshops and classrooms, is often incomplete. Let me explain using two examples.

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¹ The work in all of these movements predates when they became recognized and integrated into mainstream social justice thought and action.



Beyond Race to the Margins

Firstly, most racial justice educators have experienced what is sometimes called “race to the margins”—the frustrating phenomenon of wanting to focus the workshop on racism, for example, while white learners want to talk about gender or poverty issues. This occurrence is often interpreted as learners replacing the uncomfortable topic with one they may have experienced personally, which is easier to discuss. It is interpreted as a partly defensive response to not wanting to identify with one’s social privilege. Of course, some of this is entirely true, especially for the beginner learner. But it’s not the whole picture.

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This *also* has to do with the relational nature of the brain, which rapidly and automatically associates one topic with another. If I tell you a story of spilling hot coffee on my new shirt, most people’s brains will instantly recall events and stories related to “hot drink spills” and “stains on clothes.” It’s reflexive—a part of what the brain does. Equally, if we begin talking about issues of systemic racial discrimination, most beginners’ brains will automatically start thinking of their own experiences related to discrimination. It may be irritating but it’s unfortunately natural. If we don’t take this into account as educators, then we may misdiagnose our experience, becoming reactive rather than being effective.

Nervous System Regulation

Secondly, it’s not widespread knowledge amongst social justice educators that in order for learning to occur, emotions have to be modulated carefully so as not to overwhelm the nervous system of the learner. Issues like racial and gender justice are the most triggering of subjects as they activate core parts of our identities, involving the survival parts of our unconscious mind. In this mode of *fight-flight-freeze*, big feelings overwhelm our systems, shutting down the possibility of learning as our pre-frontal cortex—the “thinking” self—goes off-line.

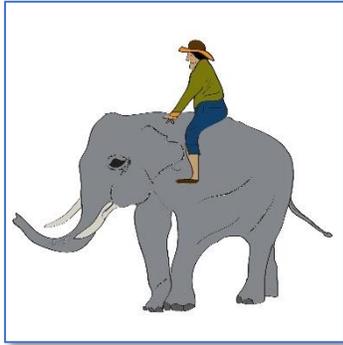
So, if we want to be teaching about issues of identity and justice, a terrain in which the conversation can unconsciously get polarized into “good people” and “bad people”, teachers have to learn to *titrate* in the information at a rate that the nervous systems of the learners can handle. The conventional instruction of just telling learners to “sit with your guilt/ shame” or not letting people “off the hook”, is just plain and simply bad pedagogy.



Is there any other place in education where there is a strongly articulated belief that an overwhelmed student is capable of learning anything?

We don’t actually recognize the issue of nervous system overwhelm in the learner, as our work is *not* strongly rooted in a psycho-educational context. And this is part of the reason we get such kickback from learners. We are overly reliant on political-historical analyses—cognitive strategies—to tackle problems that are fundamentally emotional in nature. Like throwing a drowning person a fire extinguisher, it’s the wrong tool for the task. After all, how easy is it for any of us to be effective, let alone learn, if we are experiencing strong feelings of confusion, guilt or shame?





The metaphor that I've found helpful is that of the Rider and Elephant, referring to the conscious and unconscious mind, respectively. Created by researcher and psychologist Jonathan Haidt, this metaphor immediately speaks to size mismatch between the Rider (thinking) and the Elephant (feeling) parts of ourselves. This is why emotional literacy is so critical to the work

Educator Role Overshadowed by the Academic and Activist

The teacher has to expect the aforementioned issues will emerge, give permission for it be acceptable in the learning process and design the teaching to unfold in order for the learner to understand the issues and what is at stake. This adds to the challenge because already the topics of race, gender and identity are the most difficult to teach as they evoke strong emotions because of the urgency of the issues—people's lives are on the line, literally.

But if we are teachers then we must *teach*.

And *because* of the volatility, it's even more imperative that we take the educator's stance, which is different than that of the academic who is research-oriented, or the activist who pushes for social change. These are important roles under the same umbrella, but fundamentally different than that of the social justice *educator* whose key job is to take that which is complex (and emotional) and turn it into something digestible and understandable for students in order for new ideas, skills and attitudes to develop.

Of course, I am not suggesting we must be neutral—for that only serves the oppressor—but we need to enter into the justice frame in the role of teacher who is working with learners and, as the saying goes, *meeting them where they are, not where we want them to be*. This is where true transformation and ally ship become possible.

So, *teach*. Embrace the difficulty of the subject matter. The emotional volatility is not an impediment to our work—it *is* the work.

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My Journey: How I Got Here

It took me quite some time to figure this out. As a student of anti-racism and anti-oppression education since the mid-90s as well as a professionally trained public school teacher, I did what I was taught: I explained concepts like oppression, focused on systemic rather than overt forms of discrimination, and talked about power, privilege as well as intersectionality. I was also knowledgeable in popular education principles, so I developed processes that were interactive, experiential, and suited the needs of the adult learner. These are the strengths of our work, as these are critical pieces to understand.



But, when I got resistance from students with social privilege—especially those who were white and male—I did what had been modeled by my social justice teachers: out-talk, out-maneuver, and if needed, shut down my students. Afterwards I would vent about my experience to peers, complain about the team, staff, or workplace I had just presented to—how they just did not “get it” due to the high levels of privilege.

The weird thing was that I did this for almost a decade and was uncomfortable with it much of the time. But I did it anyways without stopping to think about why. This is how my people did it...so it became a habit. But my professional teacher training was always bothered by it—there was a disconnect, a feeling I found hard to name. It took many years for to verbalize the discomfort. And then it landed: *If the teacher fails to impart the learning, the student gets blamed.*

Unfortunately, this approach is common. It’s also a fundamental abdication of responsibility in our role as educators. As a result, we are unable to step into our full power and responsibility. Our over-built political awareness has hypnotized us to social power dynamics at the expense of deep self-awareness, personal power, self-efficacy and resiliency— critical inner tools our people have always leveraged to advance the work. It is to the detriment of our movement-building.

And, it doesn’t have to be this way.

In the next article, join me as I explore how the hole in racial/ social justice work impacts not just how we teach, but how we are with each other. I’ll demonstrate how we use the infamous Master’s tools on each other, nurturing a culture high in judgment, ideology, fear and unprocessed pain. And how integrating psychological literacy can help.

Until then,
Shakil Choudhury
Author, *Deep Diversity: Overcoming Us vs. Them*

This is Part 1 in a series of articles to be published over the next 12 months to encourage community dialogue regarding cleaning up our own house with regards to racial/ social justice education in order to be more effective and compassionate, both within justice-based communities and society at large.

