

# Knowing Ourselves As Instructors

Lee Anne Bell, Sharon Washington,  
Gerald Weinstein, Barbara Love

While much has been written about how to engage students in social justice courses, little attention has been paid to the teachers in these classrooms. Yet few teachers would claim that raising issues of oppression and social justice in the classroom is a neutral activity. Content as cognitively complex and socially and emotionally charged as social justice, is inevitably challenging at both personal and intellectual levels. In the social justice classroom, we struggle alongside our students 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. The self-knowledge and self-awareness that we believe are desirable qualities in any teacher become crucial in social justice education.

For most faculty, our professional training has not prepared us to address emotionally and socially charged issues in the classroom. Social justice education is not simply new content but often a radical change in process as well. "Among educators 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, 36).

Weinstein and O' Bear (1992) asked a group of twenty-five university faculty colleagues from different disciplines to respond anonymously to the question, "What makes you nervous about raising issues of racism in your classroom?" These faculty expressed several concerns that are relevant to our topic. Here, we examine these and other concerns identified in our discussions for this chapter. Sometimes we use a common voice in which "we" refers to the four authors. Other times we use a single voice, identified as Sharon, Jerry, Lee, or Barbara. These quotes come from our taped discussions or from the article by Weinstein and O' Bear.

Below, we describe each concern with examples to illustrate how we grapple with it in our own teaching. Although we treat each issue separately, they do in fact over-

lap and interact constantly. Further, the strategies we discuss are not intended as standardized responses applicable to any teaching situation. Raising oppression issues in the classroom can be exciting and rewarding, but never entirely comfortable or predictable, especially when group interaction is such a central part of the process.

### **Awareness of Our Own Social Identities**

In most traditional classrooms, our particular social and cultural identities as 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 O'Bear (1992), faculty expressed heightened awareness about their social identities that required them to be more conscious of their attitudes and assumptions, and often raised feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment at behaviors and attitudes of members of their own social group(s). Whether we are members of the privileged or targeted group with respect to particular issues inevitably influences how we react to material under discussion as well as how our students are likely to perceive us.

*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 teachers we can offer our experience with both dominant and targeted identities as a way to join with students, expand the boundaries in the room for discussing these subjects, and model being open to exploring our own relative positions of power and privilege in relation to different oppression issues.

*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.

The historical and experiential complexity of social identity further complicates awareness. The various meanings of group membership for people from different geographic regions, historical periods, and family experiences, yet who are members of the same social group, are important to note. As teachers we need to be careful about the categories we use and conscious of how individual members of a social group experience oppression in diverse ways.

*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.

Exploration of our own social identities and relationships with other members of the groups to which we belong can help us as teachers to remember these complexities. Though as individuals we experience the oppression directed toward our group, 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. This balancing extends to assumptions we make about our students. If we can be conscious of our own identity explorations we may be more likely to remember that that they too may be coming from a range of different places.

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 student is in a wheelchair does not mean disability is the issue that is currently primary. At that point in life, a student may be more engaged with issues of gender, race, or sexual orientation.

As faculty, 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 as well as those we tend to avoid, distort, or fear. This knowledge can be helpful preparation for engaging with social justice issues in the classroom, and enable us to respond thoughtfully to students even when we ourselves feel exposed.

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 students 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 also try to be thoughtful about our own different levels of awareness on particular issues and realize that our own consciousness is likely to shift and change through our ongoing learning about the various forms and manifestations of oppression in our society.

### **Confronting Our Own Biases**

A second issue noted by faculty in the Weinstein and O'Bear study had to do with fear of being labeled racist, sexist, and so on, or discovering previously unrecognized prejudices within ourselves. This included having to question our own assumptions, being corrected or challenged publicly (especially by members of the targeted group), 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, or ableist. Yet we know that recognizing and rooting out deeply socialized, and often unconscious, prejudices and practices is difficult. Faculty understandably feel a sense of vulnerability that what is out of our awareness will emerge 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.

One example of an activity that went awry because of unexamined assumptions is illustrative. Lee had planned an activity to elicit a discussion of male and female gender socialization, using a fishbowl format in which men and women could listen to each other without interruption.

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 fish bowl 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 in planning courses to continually ask, "Who are the students I am imagining as I do this planning?" and "Who might I be leaving out?"

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

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 awareness. For example, learning to confront the homophobia at the heart of my 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 their own religious beliefs.

This self-examination is a lifelong process. We all have areas of limited vision, particularly where we are members of the dominant group. If we can model openness to ongoing learning, our students will benefit and we can be less judgmental and more self-accepting when we make mistakes or uncover new areas of ignorance or lack of awareness, and not retreat from this difficult but important work.

### **Responding to Biased Comments in the Classroom**

Faculty anxiety about how to respond to biased comments in the classroom is understandable. Those interviewed by Weinstein and O'Bear expressed fears about dealing with biased comments from dominant members in the presence of targeted members, especially when such remarks were made by members of a dominant social group to which they themselves belonged.

Language plays such an important role in perpetuating oppression that miscommunication and misunderstanding can easily arise. Targeted group members usually have a long history of developing sensitivity to negative cues that signal oppressive attitudes. They have been subjected to, suffered from, discussed and thought about such cues throughout the course of their lives and so are highly tuned to note them. Dominant group members on the other hand are often oblivious to the effects of their language on targeted group members and in fact are often shocked to realize this effect. Thus the potential for breakdown in communication, hurt feelings, defensiveness, and recriminations is high. As educators we want to insure that our language does not inhibit discussion or contribute to any student feeling excluded. Setting ground rules and establishing a commonly agreed upon procedure for addressing offensive statements when they arise are ways to address this problem through classroom process (see chapters 5 and 13).

As teachers, we ourselves are not immune to these triggers either and need to recognize beforehand those to which we are most vulnerable.

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 re-stimulate 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 use these triggers intentionally and constructively during the class.

Greater self-knowledge about how we typically react in situations of tension can give us more options for responding in thoughtful ways when conflicts arise. For example, we can examine our motives for avoiding conflict, or proving ourselves as unprejudiced, or wanting people to like us. When we pay 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!"

There are several ways to prepare beforehand to deal with our own triggers as they arise. Having a support system, a person or group with whom we can discuss these issues, share feelings, and get support is very important. For example, 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 often a helpful reminder at points in a course where resistance is particularly high or she is feeling down on herself, and allows her to recognize that these are predictable parts of the process rather than flaws in the class or her own teaching. These 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 feelings as teachers.

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 our awareness about how students may be thinking about or experiencing what is going on in the classroom: "Why does that student say or think that, and what is getting triggered for him or her?" On a parallel track, we note and try to understand our own reactions to what is occurring: "Why am I so annoyed at this person; What does it trigger for me?"

It is often easy to hold romanticized notions that those who are themselves victimized by bigotry will be more sensitive and vigilant when groups other than their own are targeted. Unfortunately experiencing oppression does not automatically

render one an expert or liberate one from bias toward another group. We can easily be triggered 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 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 is to maintain an openness to both 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 change oppressive beliefs and behaviors in ourselves (see chapter 5 for further discussion of triggers).

### **Doubts and Ambivalence About One's Own Competency**

Weinstein and O'Bear found that faculty often worry about having to expose their own struggles with the issues, reveal uncertainty, or make mistakes. As college faculty members we are assumed to have expertise in what we teach. 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 by our interactions with students.

*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 students raise that challenge our awareness and sensitivity can create a valuable space for opening up the learning process. As we confront misinformation or ignorance and the blindspots 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 dominant stereotypes and assumptions.

In our discussions for this chapter, Lee recalled a course in which classism was a central focus. Since most of the class were teachers or human service professionals, she had assumed a predominantly middle-class perspective and focused the class accordingly, only to discover a simmering anger at the cost of textbooks and the amount of time outside of class needed to complete the homework felt by students who were working two jobs and struggling to make ends meet. Once Lee realized her mistake, she told the class the false assumptions she had made and initiated a discussion about how the problems students were experiencing could be addressed in ways that would be supportive and promote learning. The discussion provided an opportunity for the whole class to engage in an exploration 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 a 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 demonstrates a different definition of competence than the traditional one of mastery and expertise. Competence becomes instead skill in creating an atmosphere where difficult dialogues can occur (Goodman, 1995), 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 conditions within and beyond the classroom.

### **Need for Learner Approval**

Most faculty hope that our students will like and respect us, and leave our classes feeling positive about their experience. Those interviewed by Weinstein and O'Bear named such fears as making students frustrated, frightened, or angry, leaving them feeling shaken and confused and not being able to fix it.

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 the social justice classroom we intentionally create tension to disrupt complacent and unexamined attitudes about social life. These very conditions can cause students to dislike or feel hostile toward us at various points in the course. Confronting oppression invariably involves a range of feelings 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 and long-term learning are not necessarily synonymous. A better indication of our effectiveness might be whether students leave with more questions than they came in with, wanting to know more and questioning core assumptions in their own socialization.

Jerry: When students left feeling frustrated, upset, and confused I used to regard it as evidence of my failure as a teacher. 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 three to five 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 about not knowing how to respond to angry comments, having discussions blow up, dealing with anger directed at them, and being overwhelmed by

their own strong emotions engendered by the discussion (Weinstein & O'Bear, 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, 160).

Many faculty have been taught that emotions have no place in academia. Traditional modes of teaching 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 effectively change oppressive attitudes and behaviors.

Dealing with tension, anger, and conflict in the classroom is difficult. 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 support oppression (Aguilar & Washington, 1990). Often the most significant learning results from the disequilibrium that open confrontation with feelings and contradictory information can generate (Keil, 1984; Zaharna, 1989).

In preparing ourselves to deal with difficult emotions it can be helpful to examine how our own history with the expression of emotion may affect the way we respond 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.

If we learn to 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.

We also acknowledge that there may be times when we feel overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do. When emotions are running high and we are uncertain about how to proceed, we have found it helpful to create time-out to reflect and decide on next steps.

Jerry: There have been a number of times during my anti-bias 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 their responses with one other person.

The purpose of these strategies is to change the focus momentarily from public to private, so that participants and instructor can reflect upon and articulate to themselves what they are feeling. It then becomes more possible to return to the discussion with greater thoughtfulness and honesty.

In many cases when a supportive climate has been previously established, losing control or facing strong emotions can be a constructive event, one from which both professor and students learn. In fact, students often make fundamental shifts in their perspectives after they have experienced someone “losing” control, letting go enough to share deeper feelings, fears, and experiences.

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**

We as instructors are also 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 important and challenging aspects of course content. Who we are affects student perceptions of the issues we raise. In some respects we are both the messenger and the message.

Asking students to engage experientially with oppression material requires that we be willing to take the risks we ask of them. Self-disclosure is an important part of this process and one of the most powerful ways of teaching is through modeling the behavior we hope to encourage in others.

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. There's just human beings trying to be humane with each other and not perpetuate this bloody system.

Sharing our own struggles with the issues provides important permission for our students to engage in the difficult process of doing so themselves. This stance can

help to avoid expectations of perfection which often block action. Better to take imperfect action and continue to engage with the issues, than to avoid responsibility for action altogether while we search for perfection.

Sharon: I want students to understand that learning about social justice is part of a life-long 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 is a matter of judgment, depending on the nature and size of the group and the amount of time we have together. We try to make clear the relation of our own disclosure to the topic under discussion.

For many teachers, especially those from targeted groups, the risk of self-disclosure needs to be thoughtfully taken. For example, self-disclosure by a gay or lesbian teacher can be a significant boon to learning, especially if the topic is heterosexism. The instructor, however, should be aware of the homophobia and misinformation sure to exist among her students and plan carefully about how and when she will come out.

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 re-established 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!

Our role in disclosing personal experiences differs from that of our students. Students will use their experiences to probe and understand the personal implications of a specific issue. As instructors, we often use personal experience to illustrate a point. Our role is to be inclusive. Understanding the limits of our own experience allows us to consciously develop examples that go beyond our own personal range.

### **Negotiating Authority Issues**

In the social justice classroom, we deliberately challenge 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 female and gay/lesbian faculty who often cope with both institutional and student devaluation of their professional status (Ahlquist, 1991; Arnold, 1993; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Aguilar & Washington, 1990; 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.

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 (McIntosh, 1988; Bell, 1990). When we are dealing with emotional issues and feelings in the classroom, female professors can be easily typecast. Students often expect female teachers to be nurturing or to smile; they become angry or challenge our authority when we do not fulfill their expectations (see Culley, 1985).

### **Institutional Risks and Dangers**

One additional concern is the fear related to the institutional risks involved in departing 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 very real risks of getting in trouble with our institutions. We are challenging traditional content as well as traditional teaching processes and norms about the teacher-student relationship. We also often encounter problems with grading and evaluation that other instructors rarely deal with.

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 Provost 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.

Here, we see multiple vulnerabilities. There's the jeopardy of being an African American teacher in a white institution where she cannot necessarily count on the support that white faculty can usually rely on. Then 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.

Many of the faculty teaching social justice courses are women, often among them the few people of color on the faculty, and often untenured. Thus the most vulnerable group takes on the most difficult and institutionally risky teaching. Faculty who teach social justice courses also sometimes receive lower ratings on teaching evaluations than those who teach traditional courses, adding yet another layer of institutional danger to an already exposed position. Thus faculty who take on the challenge of teaching social justice, especially if they are members of targeted groups, are often in an extremely vulnerable position institutionally.

Team teaching, particularly with a tenured faculty member, can be a valuable way of building in support for untenured faculty. Other support systems also need to be developed and nurtured so that faculty who teach social justice education can survive and hopefully thrive in these institutions.

### **Conclusion**

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We hope that through naming and discussing the fears and concerns 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. More often than not, people who write about multicultural education say very little about their own struggles in the classroom. We want to contribute to a discussion where teachers can expose the problems and difficulties we all face in this work and support each other in being more effective.

We also want to recognize that we are part of a much larger process of change and affirm the importance of the small part each of us individually plays in this process. 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 contribute 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 become engaged in social justice action and to believe in the importance of the role each of them can play in creating change.