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Toward a Humanist and Agentic Paradigm of Inclusive Teaching—Lessons from the United States Civil Rights Era for College Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

Inclusive teaching is a potentially transformative mindset and approach to reimagining education. To realize its full potential, we must be willing to redefine what it means to teach. In this essay, I draw on the lessons learned during the civil rights work of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) to make the case for a new paradigm for teaching college classrooms. SNCC identified three key principles that guided their work: — 1) families and organizing, 2) grassroots leadership, and 3) casting your bucket where you are. The late Robert (Bob) Moses, recalls these very principles in his post SNCC years when he founded the Algebra Project across the country. Similarly, I consider here how these principles, and their focus on centering relationships and trust, can be transformative for teaching in higher education.

KEYWORDS

agentic, civil rights, inclusive teaching

INTRODUCTION

As institutions of higher education become more aware of their obligation to pay closer attention to marginalized students, the differences between how privileged and disadvantaged students experience their college environment are being more seriously interrogated. Conversations about the institutional response to these different experiences often involve some version of the keywords, diversity, equity, and inclusion. While there are differences in how these terms are operationalized in different campus contexts, programs that consider these principles as critical to their operations often articulate that a strong commitment to social justice undergirds their overall approach (Dassin 2009). This commitment is based on compelling evidence that status quo approaches to teaching and institutional organization do not serve all students equally, and therefore, the pursuit of equitable educational outcomes is very much a social justice mission (Seymour et al. 2019).

The arguments for ensuring that historically marginalized students have a pathway to success in their discipline is not particularly new. Simple interpretations of this argument focus on adopting more welcoming practices (for examples of welcoming practices see Felten and Lambert 2020) as the only requirements for inclusive classrooms. This line of thinking, however, potentially runs into the problem that inclusion can simply constitute an offering of a slightly different product to a larger, more diverse audience without deeply interrogating the elements of the product itself (Dewsbury 2017). Superficial interpretations of diversity and inclusion also do not necessarily address epistemological and political issues of power (Kayumova and Dou 2022), nor do they automatically help students cultivate critical consciousness. This problem is particularly (but not solely) pervasive in

STEM pedagogies where subject-matter coverage drives the design and structure of the academic experience (Erdmann, Miller, and Stains 2020). That expectation then in turn dictates what the instructor views their role in the classroom to be. This narrow view of their role can lead to well-intentioned inclusion efforts becoming a more sophisticated, and even maybe an active version of Freire's (1970) banking model of education, that equity-minded pedagogies are supposed to reverse. There are ways to address these shortcomings, but it requires a reimagining or reconceptualization of what it truly means to "teach."

In everyday vernacular, the word "teach" is usually suffixed by disciplinary subject matter of some type. The inherent assumption is that the word only makes epistemological sense if, in accordance with its etymology, it involves granting some knowledge to the a priori ignorant. Our contemporary understanding of learning, however, tells us that several social and psychological factors intersect in complex ways and can impact how cognitively present any individual might present themselves to do that learning (e.g. Liu, Ma, and Chen 2024). This means that beyond content distribution, to teach well means having the skills needed to cultivate the intrinsic motivation needed for effective learning to happen. This paradigm was powerfully encapsulated by Moje's (1996) ethnography entitled "I teach students, not subjects." Teaching students by definition broadens the requirements of what the practice entails, beyond simply being an expert in a particular field. It lessens, without dismissing, the role that the delivery of expertise plays in a truly inclusive academic experience. Put another way, teaching students is an act of humanism that calls us to broaden our understanding of ourselves, and who our students are, as we, in accordance with the Deweyan view, prepare them for active participation in civic society (Dewey 1916). This way of considering teaching may seem radical in today's higher education culture, but it is not novel. It aligns with Freirean thought (Freire 1970) and the ways in which relationship-centered authors like hooks (1994), Woodson (2023), and others invited us to view education. More broadly, the notion that authentic relationships are precursors to collective social action is a paradigm that has footprints in America's historic social change movements. The call for America to live up to the ideals of its founding has often been delivered from the voices of grassroot movements whose activism serves as a mirror of the work that still needs to be done for social justice to be achieved in the country. The relationship-driven approach that characterized these movements has a lot to teach us in terms of how we can reframe what it means to "teach," particularly in ways that center critical consciousness within the curriculum regardless of subject matter. An example of this paradigm, and how it was transferred to teaching praxis, was encapsulated by Robert (Bob) Moses (1935–2021), a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later a mathematics teacher and founder of the Algebra Project (Moses et al. 1989).

As a member of SNCC, Bob Moses was part of a brave group of mostly college-aged students in the 1960s whose almost singular mission was to increase the number of African Americans who, inspired by the Greensboro sit-in (Weatherford 2007), would register to vote in southern states in the United States. At this particular political time in history, African Americans experienced direct, systemic, and violent reprisals if they tried to exercise political power through the ballot (Santoro 2008). Attempting to register to vote and the subsequent act of voting was literally a life-threatening exercise. To increase the likelihood of success, SNCC guided their activist work in accordance with three principles: 1) the importance of organizing through the cultivation of "family ties," 2) believing in the power of grassroots leadership, and 3) abiding by a contextual approach which they phrased as "casting your bucket where you are" (Moses and Cobb 2002). Later in life, after Robert Moses was trained in the philosophy of mathematics from Harvard University, he taught mathematics in several countries before founding the Algebra Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Algebra Project uses

a five-step method and other pedagogical approaches, that today's scholarship would call Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso 2005), to teach algebra in high-needs schools and neighborhoods, first in New England and eventually in several states across the United States. The Algebra Project's pedagogy did not solely focus on student proficiency in mathematics, it involved the families of the students in community and hosted political organizing events in the belief that the youth numeracy challenge was a community problem and a civil rights issue. In the book "Radical Equations" (Moses and Cobb 2002), Moses chronicles his journey from the streets of Freedom Summer to the Algebra Project in ways that hold deep lessons for how we should consider inclusive teaching in our current classrooms. In this essay, I will focus on these organizing principles. In the same way Robert Moses applied the organizing principles of SNCC to the design and implementation of the Algebra Project. I consider these principles in the context of my favorite course, introductory biology, that I teach at a large, public, research university in the northeast region of the United States.

The "intro" in introductory biology is more important than the "biology"

Introductory biology is a crucial course in the journey of students who usually intend to pursue a career that requires deep expertise in the life sciences. For traditionally aged college students, it marks an important inflexion point in their science journey in that they begin to meaningfully engage at this point with significantly more technical material. Also, for this particular age group, it coincides with their transition into higher education at a time that brings with it all sorts of complex sociopsychological processes unrelated to the subject matter of individual courses. For some, the transition to the college classroom means being introduced to an environment where they may become a numerical minority for the first time in terms of a visible or invisible identity they may hold. An implicit or explicit realization of this can in turn trigger contingencies that impact their ability to be fully present in their learning (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). Developmentally, students are also in an exploratory phase of their growth that Arnett (2000) terms "emerging adulthood." Bennett (2000) describes this phase as post adolescent, but not quite adulthood. Marked by personal and professional exploration, this phase is a direct function of the relatively recent trend in western cultures for major life events like marriage and childbearing to happen in people's third decade of life, as opposed to their twenties like in previous generations. All of the above means that in many introductory courses, students are walking in with a catalog of sociopsychological externalities that may serve as potent motivators or potential stumbling blocks on their road to excellence. If design choices (like testing structures, feedback language, and opaqueness in assignments) made for the course are oblivious to this reality, the classroom can serve to exacerbate these contingencies in ways that severely affect performance.

From this lens, introductory courses are sometimes designed in ways that test things other than students' actual ability to develop technical expertise. This has contributed to the persistence of higher education's inability to make a significant dent in the high attrition rates from introductory STEM courses, resulting in STEM fields losing out from benefiting from the brilliance of millions of diverse minds. The term "gateway course" has been used to describe these classrooms, sadly indicative of the predictive nature (in terms of persistence) of the grades received from these courses (Flanders 2017). Studies have shown that low grades in these courses often lead to a departure from STEM or from the institution entirely (Koch 2017). Students from minoritized backgrounds are significantly overrepresented in these departure rates (Chen 2013), which makes sense, because many sociopsychological barriers have been shown to affect this population at much higher rates (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008; Walton and Cohen 2011). In the context of the reimagining happening here, I encourage us to rethink the term "gateway" as it connotes the physicality of a barrier which

unfortunately comes to represent how the class is perceived. A more useful and hopeful perception would be to imagine the course having an open gate. Standing at this opening are instructors, enthusiastically welcoming all students into this portion of their incredible journey. Introductory biology is a joy and a privilege to teach, and given this joy, I will describe here how the very principles that guided the humanism that Bob Moses and SNCC centered in their activist and education work manifests in the ways I approach this course.

Building trust

SNCC's valiant efforts to increase voter registration were met with fierce political and physical resistance. The political establishment at the time was mostly white. SNCC and similar groups were branded as enemies of the state and outside agitators (Alderman, Inwood, and Stack 2024; Finley 2006). There was even a narrative espoused by the white ruling class that race relations were in fact fine, and that it was SNCC and their collaborators that rabble roused local African Americans into an unnecessary restive state. The notion of "families and organizing" was a philosophy that underscored the critical need for activists to build trust with the local African American community, as a precursor to engaging in activist work (Moses and Cobb 2022). Gaining the trust of the local African American community was critical for three reasons. First, attempting to register to vote or to vote itself posed a very real threat to life and limb. If SNCC was going to have any hope in convincing the local community to take that risk, that community had to trust SNCC's message of the long-term uplift that the risk would bring them. Second, many of the towns in the south were officially or unofficially "sundown towns," meaning that if you were black and/or an outsider caught outside after sundown you were liable to get locked up or worse lynched (Loewen 2009). SNCC workers therefore sometimes had to rely on local families to provide housing in the evenings, a request that required a great deal of trust from the community. Third, by building bonds with the local community, SNCC essentially disrupted the narrative of them being outside agitators; in reality, they were accepted, integrated, and accepted as family.

In the introductory biology classroom, I am asking students to trust me as one of the facilitators of a journey toward actualizing their true potential, of which my course is but one part. The stakes for not gaining that trust are in no way similar to ancestors who faced lethal dangers in their pursuit of the vote, but the principle of trust-building in pursuit of a greater good is still applicable. Bob Moses himself similarly drew on this mindset in convincing marginalized communities and classrooms to trust a numeracy movement that embraced mathematics education as a civil right. Supporting students' journeys means helping them develop the ability to lean into the uncomfortable, to embrace the zone of discomfort, and to trust that the clarification of the messy emotions involved will lead to intellectual and social growth. We tell the full story of biology. We honestly speak to the times when science was part of and sometimes an instigator of social black eyes, some of which we are still wrestling to undo. These are examples of conversations that can be uncomfortable.

The goal of having the conversation, however, is not to simply create discomfort, but to work through the messiness of that discomfort in order to extract valuable lessons that teach humanity how to live better and more in service to each other. Much of the synchronous time, therefore, is spent in dialogue. Dialogue occurs in small groups, wrestling with complex case studies that explore the social contexts of biological phenomena (e.g., understanding lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, USA; Campbell et al. 2016). It also occurs when the whole class wrestles with the complex ideas associated with answering the beautiful questions in biology. Dialogue, according to Freire (1970), is built upon a trust process between instructor and students as this empowers each stakeholder to come to the

dialogue with the agency to give their best self. Trust in the college classroom is not built through a single event or activity, it is a cultural norm that is set with supporting activities that sustain and build upon its initial platforming throughout the semester. Here, in lieu of a comprehensive review of all the ways in which trust is created and maintained in the course, I describe one activity that is key to communally setting this cultural norm from the first day of class. As a class, we read a list of statements called "guideposts" which anticipate and address some of the emotional challenges that might arise when dialogue sometimes gets difficult (Geary and Manusov 2024). The use of the term "guideposts" is deliberate, since it avoids the legalese perception and punitive affect given off by calling them rules or something similar. The guideposts' statements speak of the value of active listening, respecting silence, paying attention to visceral emotions, assuming one another's humanity, being open to everyone's truths, and being in a state of wonder as to the sociohistorical contexts that bring people and their views to the present. The nine statements are read aloud with students volunteering to read each one. After reading, I invite students to reflect for a minute on which of the statements they envision struggling with the most. After reflection, students volunteer to share their thoughts. Through this class-wide conversation, we identify the statements that they would need to pay special attention to (respecting silence is a commonly identified challenge), and we openly discuss how that challenge will be navigated. In some cases, we amend language so that it meets an agreed upon feeling that statements were not comprehensive enough or didn't capture the sentiment of the parameters around which the community felt discourse should take place.

This trust-building exercise is important because during the course of the semester, authentic trust is needed as they 1) rely on each other for support as they navigate complex technical tasks, 2) prioritize each other's humanity when they engage in difficult dialogue over topics like the Tuskegee Study (Brandt 1978) and differential death rates from COVID-19 (Millet et al. 2020), and 3) engage with my continuous feedback and diffuse assessment structure meant to provide "growth mindset" and actionable approaches for constant improvement (Dweck 2016). In creating a climate of trust, introductory biology operates like a family. Like a functional family, we hold each other accountable to the norms by which the family intends to operate by. Trust in the family frees its members to zero in on maximizing their potential in the knowledge that the community is there for their support and not competition. Let us then, in our reimagining, revisit how we come to better understand this support, by reframing how we discuss potential in the college classroom.

Grassroots leadership–on the difference between potential and readiness

During the civil rights era, there existed an under-told but palpable tension surrounding the nature of the leadership model needed to move the social justice question of the day forward. One point of debate was whether the unwavering nonviolent approach advocated by Martin Luther King or the more militant confrontational methods of Malcolm X were better suited to bending the arc toward justice (Nimtz 2016). Another simmering concern was a broader discussion of what constitutes leadership and more importantly, how different leadership approaches should be valued. In other words, people wondered aloud if most of the movement's resources should be dedicated to elevating and supporting the national profile of the charismatic Martin Luther King, or if there was space to encourage leadership in ways that were not as visible but equally important (Miller 2016). Conservative values within the community and the tendency for leadership positions to be male-dominated meant that names like Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker rarely featured prominently in the more popular civil rights era narratives. Several scholars have detailed these tensions to a considerable degree, particularly in terms of how it shaped the arc of the civil rights movement at that time (e.g. Andrews 2018). Here, I raise the issue to mainly make the point that for SNCC, that tension

led to a different way of conceptualizing leadership as a label and practice. SNCC made the intentional decision to empower grassroots labor, citing the critical roles that pushed the movement forward, but perhaps had not historically been necessarily considered as "leadership." These included activities like driving individuals to get registered for voting, providing medical attention for civil rights workers who were attacked, and housing supporting civil workers, particularly those from out of state. In so doing, every member of the community was able to envision different ways in which they could be part of moving the social justice problem toward a solution (Moses and Cobb 2002).

The belief that there is a light within every individual that can help brighten the world is a paradigm that also applies to teaching and learning. This is a mindset, however, that requires us to pay special attention to language, particularly in terms of how we describe students' experiences in our classrooms. Typically, students are described loosely in terms of whether they "can or cannot" perform well in a subject or major. This is the result of an unfortunate conflation of two words used to describe students in terms of their relationship to the course—potential and readiness. In the same way SNCC believed in the leadership potential of all members of its community, I believe in the potential of all my students to engage in, enjoy, and be excellent in the biological sciences. SNCC's lesson to us is that some of the traditional markers people assumed were all that leadership constituted needed to be expanded in order to be more inclusive of other approaches. Similarly, inclusive teaching asks us to expand our thinking on what we have been traditionally coached to look for in adjudicating "who gets to do be excellent in a subject area." There is no credible reason in my view for me to believe that if given the right amount of time, support, and intrinsic motivation, that any student cannot move toward mastery of the material. Whether they are ready for the level of technicality associated with what they will face in "introductory biology" at the course's beginning is an entirely different question. In other words, students have the potential to do great things, but their readiness to be excellent, particularly at semester's beginning is varied and impacted by several sociohistorical factors, many of which they have no control over (Nagaoka et al. 2013).

Good teaching therefore can be plausibly defined as the degree to which, in spite of whatever a student's history is, we can walk them from their current state of readiness to the potential that we assume they have. The effectiveness of closing that gap depends on our own knowledge and mitigation strategies that obfuscate the factors that result in the state of readiness they show up with. Reasons for unreadiness may not always be visible, but they can impact everyday things we take for granted as normal aspects of course structure. Take, for example, the course feature commonly called "office hours." On most campuses it is required for professors to dedicate a certain amount of time for students to engage with them outside of class. It also is a major point of complaint from professors about students' unwillingness to attend them (Abdul-Wahab et al. 2019). An interesting irony with this complaint is that the average acreage of a professor's office is set up to fit students one or two at a time. So, even if the "office hours" became wildly popular, the professor's office wouldn't have the real estate to accommodate but a small percentage of the class. In other words, the "office hours" system has an internal design flaw that most don't realize makes it, by definition, exclusive. In the mindset of teaching students and not subjects, we should also understand that, particularly in the first year of college, students may be navigating identity contingencies or reacting to sociocultural norms that make the trek to the professor's office tantamount to walking a "green mile." Phenomena like John Henryism sometimes means that students would rather attempt to power through technical material by themselves rather than seek support, as that seeking may be viewed as a sign of weakness (Volpe et al. 2020).

In believing in their potential, I renamed "office hours" to "student hours," signaling through the naming and reinforcing explicitly in the classroom that the time set aside is for them, and my

engagement with them during that time is not an intrusion on my schedule. I also moved the physical meeting location to the basement of the dorm where they live, which is a large room with several whiteboards that can seat over 50 students. We also offered it at different times every week so that someone with a course conflict wasn't timed out of attendance for the entire semester. We averaged 30–40 students every week (out of a class of 155), simply by taking the view that in order for potential to be realized, conditions needed to be created that lessens the barriers present on the journey to excellence. Default office hour models select those who already possess the navigational and social capital necessary to understand and utilize the resource of professor access. Belief in innate potential means having the bravery to implement models that allow for the readiness to potential journey to be the feature of the pedagogy, and for it to be collaboratively traveled as both instructor and student understand how much they need each other for it to be successful. Grassroots leadership was both a belief and a method, but SNCC was never so rigid in their thinking that they were not prepared to adapt to conditions as they changed. Adapting in community with the people on the ground was a philosophy called "casting your bucket where you are" (Moses and Cobb 2002).

Cast your bucket where you are–context matters

"Cast your bucket where you are" is a term originally used by Booker T. Washington in his Atlanta Compromise speech (Washington 1895); in the context of their work, SNCC used it quite differently. While there was a generally hostile atmosphere toward civil rights and social justice for African-Americans in the United States' political south, the ways in which this hostility unfolded differed by state. Some states had more active chapters of the Klu Klux Klan, and others were more intentional on emboldening the states' official security apparatus to maintain the status quo power structure (Chong 2014). Therefore, it was important for SNCC and other civil rights groups to spend the necessary time understanding the conditions on the ground before deciding on what the appropriate social activism strategy would look like. Casting your bucket where you are meant knowing and appreciating where and how one's particular skill set might be useful and effective, knowing that said skill set may not be similarly effective in all contexts. Understanding the context of the work was a commitment. Workers had to be willing to go deeply into solving a locally relevant problem in community with the people who were impacted by that problem. In many ways, the "casting of the bucket" was a culmination of the a priori trust building and belief in people's potential.

A similar appreciation for the importance of context is crucial for inclusive teaching. Very often, scholarship in higher education pedagogy trot solutions aimed at improving success with the implicit assumption that if dutifully applied regardless of institutional context, the identical outcomes from the study would replicate. This thinking has features similar to the WEIRD (white, English-speaking, industrial, rich, democratic; see Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010) crisis that complicated the reliability of several studies in psychology. I have had the benefit of working in different contexts. My teaching career has spanned two institutions. The first, a large, public, research-intensive institution in Miami, Florida has a student population that largely reflects the demographics of the city of Miami and its environs. The immigration patterns that shape the politics and social dynamics of the city similarly shape the climate of that campus, since most of the student population are derived locally. From an introductory biology perspective, the factors that served as powerful motivators for students to pursue their career goals (mostly in the medical field) are tied to deep-rooted cultural motifs that I had to fully understand before designing courses that allowed for their readiness for a potential journey to unfold (Garcia and Flores 2024). My second institution was a large, land-grant, research institution in the northeast United States. It was a predominantly white institution (PWI) with about 50 percent of their students coming from within the state. Their students

of color made up about 24 percent of the overall school population and mostly came from within the state as well. More specifically, many of them came from neighborhoods that were ethnically monolithic, consistent with the ways in which they identified. This means that for some, matriculating into college was their first experience being a numerical minority. Furthermore, some students matriculated from neighborhoods whose boundaries were within historically redlined neighborhoods.

Studies have shown that many of these neighborhoods experience economic disparities similar to those experienced during the time of legalized redlining policies (Aaronson et al. 2021). This means that a percentage of my students of color were transitioning into college while potentially dragging the sociopsychological contingencies that studies have shown to impact this group (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). "Casting my bucket" in the context of this college meant employing strategies that spoke to potential transition-related belonging challenges. Context differences between teaching situations hold two important lessons for how we think about teaching and research in higher education teaching. First, perhaps less emphasis should be placed on searching for grand comprehensive theories that seek to explain classroom dynamics regardless of location, and more focus should be placed on understanding the unique narratives that each situation presents. This is not to be dismissive of the commonalities that do exist between teaching situations, but to not be so in service of them, that we are not open to learning from what's emergent and evolving from the relationships and dynamics in front of us. Second, understanding our bucket means that the appropriate vulnerability and humility needs are present in order to be open to engaging in that understanding. As a prerequisite, faculty would have to see the opportunities offered to teach a college classroom as an opportunity to engage in further learning of this. "Casting your bucket" where you are calls for both a willingness to understand context, but also to adopt a growth mindset about what it means to teach.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his long career between the civil rights movement and tackling innumeracy among the nation's youth, Bob Moses reminds us that the cultivation of the mind is best done within the context of who humans are and how they have come to be. Ignoring this element replicates power hierarchies that equity-minded education aims to disrupt. If through the acquisition of knowledge, students gain agency to hold the powers that be to greater account and/or embark on claiming their own spaces within those power structures, then their academic experience cannot simply be about being exposed to knowledge. The tenets of SNCC guided the ways in which students engaged the communities they served and in so doing teaches us the depth of the transformation that can be wrought if the humanity of people is properly attended to. It also repositions current discussions on inclusive teaching as both important and woefully insufficient. Later in SNCC's efforts, when greater success was achieved in getting people to vote, the subsequent question was asked—to what end? In other words, once power was accessed through the ballot box, how would this power be used to reshape local communities, improve the lives of its members, and help the United States as a whole rethink its relationship with blackness? This perhaps is the final and most arresting lesson and question that SNCC has for how higher education thinks about teaching. Mere inclusion was never, and should never, be the goal. In a functional democracy, it goes without saying that its inhabitants, regardless of their identity, should be considered part of shared governance. The protracted struggle to realize this was only meant to free our collective consciousness to tackle more arresting questions on how to sustain social justice in the age of contemporary challenges, like climate change and rapidly evolving technologies. Similarly, inclusive teaching, if successful, merely makes possible the opportunity for that full participation to occur in the classroom. Beyond that, higher education has

important questions to answer on how it operationalizes inclusive education to prepare students to be civic participants in the democratic experiment. It is a critically important but under-discussed element of what humanist and agentic education regard as successful outputs. In the same way the SNCC understood that its tenets were never simply about voting, inclusive teaching should never be positioned to be simply about knowing more of a subject or having more students partake in the knowing.

Inclusive teaching provides an opportunity to create an environment where greater access equals more citizens potentially being capable of sharing in societal improvement. For this to be realized, however, instructors, as critical facilitators of this experience, need to show up with skill sets that transcend subject matter expertise. Those who prepare graduate students for teaching positions, and who continue to support instructors of practice, must also be mindful of this humanist way of perceiving the craft of teaching. It is one of the most significant lessons of the civil rights movement and of Bob Moses in particular—that education in its purest sense, is one of the most trusted ways in which we can pay attention to, be aware of, and challenge where needed, the power structures of society. What does this then mean for how we think about teaching and the professional development of the craft? The answer depends on our collective bravery that first begins to construct our collective vision of what this teaching can look like and then operationalizes this view in our practice, support, and other elements of the complex ecosystem in order to make teaching inclusive and transformative.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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