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## **Harms and possibilities: Social work doctoral students reflect on social justice pedagogy**

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### **Abstract**

Co-written by four doctoral students and a professor, this article reflects on a novel social work doctoral seminar, “Social Justice Pedagogy.” This course was offered in the 2022 fall term at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada, as part of concerted efforts to acknowledge learning spaces as sites of harm. The mutual draw to this course included all of the authors witnessing, causing, experiencing, or fearing harm in the classroom. This course became about the process and experience of a socially just pedagogical approach. Few PhD social work programs require or even offer a course on the discipline-specific skills of teaching social justice content (Lee et al., 2022; Oktay et al., 2013; Pryce et al., 2011). In this paper, we discuss our motivations for engaging in this novel course and share key insights gained through challenging discussions of racism, gender, and neurodiversity. We engage with themes of intersubjectivity and intersectional identities, attending to process and content in social work education. Further, we engage possibilities related to creating and fostering spaces that emphasize non-hierarchical communication and learning to shape a community of practice among educators. This reflects and reinforces the expectations of social workers to routinely reflect on ethical dilemmas, questions, challenges, and relational dynamics.

### **Keywords**

pedagogy, social justice education, doctoral education, circle pedagogy, social work education

### **Résumé**

Rédigé conjointement par quatre doctorantes et doctorants et une professeure, cet article propose une réflexion sur un séminaire doctoral inédit intitulé « Pédagogie de la justice sociale ». Ce cours a été offert à l’automne 2022 à l’Université Wilfrid Laurier, en Ontario (Canada), dans le cadre d’un effort concerté visant à reconnaître les espaces d’apprentissage comme des lieux potentiels de préjudice. Les auteures et auteurs ont été attirées et attirés par ce cours en raison de leurs expériences communes — avoir été témoins, auteurs ou auteures, victimes ou craintifs ou

craintrives de situations de préjudice en salle de classe. Ce séminaire s'est transformé en une exploration du processus et de l'expérience d'une approche pédagogique socialement juste. Peu de programmes doctoraux en travail social exigent ou proposent un cours axé sur les compétences pédagogiques spécifiques à l'enseignement du contenu lié à la justice sociale (Lee et al., 2022; Oktay et al., 2013; Pryce et al., 2011). Dans cet article, les auteures et auteurs exposent leurs motivations à s'engager dans ce cours novateur et partagent les principaux enseignements tirés de discussions approfondies sur le racisme, le genre et la neurodiversité. Ils et elles abordent les thèmes de l'intersubjectivité et des identités intersectionnelles, en portant une attention particulière au processus et au contenu dans la formation en travail social. En outre, l'article explore les possibilités de création et de maintien d'espaces favorisant une communication et un apprentissage non hiérarchiques, dans le but de façonne une communauté de pratique entre éducateurs et éducatrices. Cette approche reflète et renforce les attentes envers les travailleuses sociales et travailleurs sociaux, qui doivent régulièrement réfléchir aux dilemmes éthiques, aux enjeux relationnels et aux défis pédagogiques.

## **Mots-clés**

pédagogie, éducation à la justice sociale, formation doctorale, pédagogie en cercle, formation en travail social

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## **Introduction**

Following the work of Pittaway et al. (2023), we begin with a composite case study: imagine you are a doctoral student in a social work program. Assigned a social work course to teach, you are entering the classroom with little to no teaching experience. The first few classes proceed uneventfully, but you notice a shift as you begin to integrate content related to social justice. Some students are resistant to this dialogue, clinging to notions of “the good social worker,” questioning why they must discuss white supremacy and settler colonialism, and how this is relevant to the clinical skills that they are paying to be taught. You were never taught how to deal with this kind of contention in the classroom. However, your social work skills have provided you with some capacity to work with resistance. As you engage with these students, you notice the silence of racialized students’ voices. As this continues, you see that students are not listening to one another or you, no meaningful learning is happening, and in fact, you worry that active harm might be taking place (Abrams et al., 2023; Keyes et al., 2023). You wonder: what will this mean for their future practice and the service users they are intended to support? Are encounters such as these an unfortunate reality of teaching social justice content? Are there specific

pedagogical tools that allow students to engage meaningfully with this learning and ultimately enhance their practice?

While generic theories and skills serve as a foundation for university-level teaching across disciplines, these fall short of the specific needs of social work educators. The mandate of professional social work as outlined by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is to advance social justice and address forms of inequities and oppression, considering issues such as classism, sexism, colonialism, racism, heteronormativity, and sexism (CASW Code of Ethics, 2024). Navigating the proverbial minefield of the social work classroom poses a challenge for doctoral students, particularly racialized and other minoritized students, as there are often limited resources available to support them in their teaching. Lee et al. (2022) note that “despite social justice being a principal value of social work, there has been limited pedagogical research on *how* to teach social justice” (p. 774, emphasis added).

This paper, co-authored by four doctoral students and a professor, reflects on an experience of a newly developed social work doctoral seminar on social justice pedagogy. Firstly, the professor offers a grounding regarding the structure and content of the course. Subsequently, the four students reflect on their experiences within this course, examining motivations for engaging in social justice pedagogy and learnings evoked through discussions of racism, gender, and neurodiversity. Key themes regarding positionality and social justice are highlighted, followed by a discussion on harm and repair in the classroom. The authors conclude by offering possibilities for social work education and social justice pedagogy.

## **Methodology and intentionality**

### **Context of the course - Shoshana (course developer and lead instructor)**

I began teaching social justice courses in a Faculty of Social Work twenty-five years ago. I always felt a sense of unease in the way that I, and others, taught these courses: I felt a juxtaposition between what I was teaching and how I was teaching it. My unease was particularly acute during conversations that felt combative, each participant trying to illustrate the “truth” of their position. While some students become silent and withdraw, others urgently interject. Students experience heightened emotions, with hurt feelings, tears, and anger resulting in some leaving the class. I came to feel that, as educators, we were missing the mark. I was concerned that harm was being done, especially in relation to white students’ resistance to anti-racist and decolonizing material. Racialized students often feel hurt and demoralized through the content on anti-racism, experiencing the harms of microaggressions, tokenism, and voyeurism (Jones, 1999; Lerner & Kim, 2024a). White students’ resistance often diverts conversations away from the topic towards their own grappling with white privilege and the ways in which they benefit from white supremacy (Pollack & Mayor, 2022). I found both the distress and the resistance to be challenging. I was also not prepared for the hostility that some students had – citing their religious beliefs – towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (in the early 2000s, transgender issues had not yet landed in the social work academic canon). As a white settler half-Jewish queer woman, I experienced homophobia and antisemitism from students. Discouraged, I dropped out

of teaching these courses for a number of years. I spent time reflecting on my teaching methods, my expectations, my responses to students, and the content of what I was teaching, but mostly, I contemplated the *how* of social justice teaching.

In 2011, I co-founded a prison education program, Walls to Bridges (W2B), which brings together women who are incarcerated and post-secondary students to take courses in a federal women's prison. The pedagogy is significantly influenced by bell hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, Quaker educator Parker Palmer's (2004) "circles of trust," and Indigenous circle pedagogy taught to me by Indigenous Elders and scholars such as Gale Cyr, who was my faculty's Elder-in-Residence, and Dr. Kathy Absolon, Anishinaabe kwe scholar from Flying Post First Nation Treaty 9 (Absolon, 2019, 2022). The W2B pedagogy is designed to create collaborative learning communities between groups of students who are living in dramatically different circumstances and as such is highly attuned to power differentials, varied lived experiences, and collaborative learning processes. I decided to bring the W2B pedagogy to my social justice courses in order to better align social justice *content* with teaching *methods* and potentially reduce harms occurring in social work classrooms.

When Maxxine asked our faculty to offer a pedagogy course to support doctoral students in navigating the complicated, messy terrain of social justice teaching, I was happy to be involved. By way of contextualizing this paper, I offer a brief description of the seminar I developed called "Social Justice Pedagogy."

### ***Engaged Pedagogy***

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) writes about an "engaged pedagogy," building on Freire's (1970) assertion that classrooms should be spaces of liberation in which marginalized knowledges are lifted up as social analysis and critique. While Freire's socio-economic perspective on teaching is influenced by Marx, hooks' critical feminist pedagogy critiques the conventional classroom as upholding class relationships *and* the norms and values of white patriarchy. hooks (1994) writes,

Working with a critical pedagogy based on my understanding of Freire's teaching, I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build "community" in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us. (p. 40)

Building a classroom learning community requires intentional pedagogical strategies, including methods of destabilizing the instructor as the sole authoritative voice, and building relationships and connections between students. We also endeavour to practice "in the here and now" the social justice theories and concepts often taught in our classes, such as decolonization, anti-racism, feminism, inclusion, and power-sharing. In social justice pedagogy, teaching methods are intentionally designed as experiential—aiming to assist with both democratizing the classroom and providing opportunities to experience, observe, and reflect on social justice

theories and perspectives (Adams et al., 2023). I spend a good deal of time collaboratively working with students to generate community care (Eromosele, 2020; hooks, 1994) guidelines. This activity, which may take several hours, supports group formation and collective ownership of how students and instructors will communicate, including issues like dealing with disagreements, identifying what respectful and non-judgmental communication means, and understanding varied social positionings. The process of taking a good amount of time with the group guidelines is informed by my work developing the W2B program. The process helps provide a frame for people with various backgrounds to be accountable to one another and to the collective space as a whole (Pollack, 2016). As discussed in this paper, we revisited our community care guidelines to help us work through a rupture in our class dynamic.

### ***Circles of trust***

Palmer (2004) writes about “circles of support” grounded in Quaker principles of speaking one’s truth, exploring inner wisdom, and setting aside judgment to listen deeply to others. He writes that in circles of trust “we speak from our own center to the center of the circle—to the receptive heart of the communal space—where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully” (Palmer, 2004, p. 188). I adopt this notion in my classes as a way of shifting conventional university dialogue from attempts to convince or persuade, towards a collective responsibility to share one’s own perspectives from where they stand. Another key principle of Palmer’s (2004) circle of trust is to avoid “helping, saving, advising or setting each other straight” (p. 114) which assists both students and facilitators to recognize these communicative impulses and encourages reflective rather than reactive speech. In many social justice classrooms, debate, criticism, calling out, and competition for who is “right” can dominate conversations, derailing and harming productive exploration of course content.

### ***Indigenous circle pedagogy***

My learning as a settler educator has and continues to be deeply influenced by Indigenous Elders, scholars, authors, students, and activists. During my MSW degree in the 1990s, Métis educator Fyre Jean Graveline’s (1998) book *Circle works: Transforming Eurocentric consciousness* was required reading. This book, as well as Michael Hart’s (2002) *Seeking mino-pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to helping* have provided me guidance on the epistemology and process of Indigenous circle pedagogies. Over the past three decades, my teachers have included the late Elder Art Solomon, the late Elder Wanda Whitebird, Elder Gale Cyr, and Anishnaabe kwe scholar Dr. Kathy Absolon (Absolon, 2019, 2022). As an academic, I engaged in ongoing decolonizing learning through the Centre for Indigegogy in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University (as have several of the co-authors of this paper). The Centre is unfortunately no longer operating, but among its offerings is an advanced two-day circle work training. In this training, settlers were encouraged to honour the origins and protocols of Indigenous circle pedagogy, while simultaneously grounding our approach in our own genealogies, histories, and ways of knowing (Absolon, 2019; Absolon & Dias, 2020).

The pedagogy underpinning the doctoral seminar discussed in this paper is informed by the W2B pedagogy, bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, Palmer's circles of trust, Indigenous circle pedagogy, and my own experiences, background, and spirit. This pedagogy focuses on process just as much as content, reflecting an attempt to develop "accountable spaces" (Ahenkora, 2020) in our social justice classrooms.

The purpose of the course was to examine theoretical, empirical, and practice scholarship on teaching social justice material, to provide an experiential learning opportunity for students to navigate the complexities of classroom spaces in which topics of power and marginalization are explored, and to support doctoral students in developing their own teaching philosophy and practice. There were six students in the course. The idea for this paper came from the students, four of whom wanted to take part. Our reflections are offered below.

## **Reflection one: What brought you to the social justice pedagogy doctoral seminar?**

### ***Maxxine***

When I was a student member on my faculty's PhD curriculum committee, I advocated for a course on the unique complexities of teaching social work, wherein personal and professional intersections of privilege, power, oppression, and marginalization are ever-present. I did not anticipate I would have the opportunity to take such a course; the sudden death of my wonderful dad delayed my PhD completion, so I audited the course during my final semester.

In social work education, we ask students to reflect on how their visible and invisible intersecting identities inevitably shape their social work practice and experiences with service users, as well as service users' experiences of them. Our intersecting identities also shape our experiences in the classroom (e.g., Jeyapal & Grigg, 2021; Khan & Absolon, 2020; Mak et al., 2021). As a PhD student, I knew I wanted to teach social work, however, as a white settler, I felt ill-equipped to address micro-aggressions in the classroom (Sue et al., 2007) and was worried (scared?) about whether I, or students, would perpetuate harm. Underlying this worry/fear was my own experience of harm. Antisemitic views were openly made in a social work classroom I was a part of; at that moment, my own Jewishness and that of other Jewish students in the classroom was invisible, seeming to permit the sharing of antisemitic tropes. After the antisemitic statements were said in front of the whole class, the discussion swiftly moved on as if nothing had happened, no harm done. I can still remember the sound and feeling of my heart beating right out of my chest as I processed what I was hearing. Had Jewish students in the class not interrupted and opposed the antisemitic discourse, those deeply harmful views would have gone unchallenged. I think one of my motivations for advocating for and auditing this social justice pedagogy course was that I was hoping this course would help ensure students' hearts won't beat right out of their chests because of harmful things said in classrooms.

### ***Amilah***

I am a first-generation Canadian of Indo-Caribbean heritage. As a Muslim, almost all of my religious instruction occurred in *halaqa*. This is the Arabic word for circle and denotes a pedagogy that is remarkably similar to circle teachings embraced in our class. While I am very familiar with this approach to learning, I had never seen this embraced in a Canadian classroom. I was cautious: for me, circle was a sanctified space, one of vulnerability, and I was nervous about engaging in circle within the context of higher education, a space which is often devoid of spirit. My own experiences of harm as a student and instructor within higher education contributed to this trepidation.

For the past ten years, I have been a sessional instructor in undergraduate and graduate social work programs. While I developed skills through the crucible of teaching, I never received formal education on navigating harmful encounters in classrooms. As a hijab-wearing Muslim woman of colour, I was responsible for teaching social justice content and managing the classroom, but I was also experiencing harm while doing so (Baksh, 2024; Baksh & Khan, 2023). Sometimes, this harm came in the form of doubt regarding my knowledge and expertise. While students' critical engagement and questioning are important, this manifested differently for me than for my white colleagues. I have been perceived as having "an axe to grind" when teaching social justice content. White educators tell me they do not face this — their politics are interpreted as progressive and anti-racist, while their scholarship, qualifications or reasons for embracing anti-oppressive teaching methods are not questioned or considered self-serving.

Harm in the classroom has shaped my teaching. I have been given the message that I should hide or at least downplay my identity. I attempt to challenge this by sharing stories from my practice to demonstrate how race, gender, religion, and other aspects of identity are constantly mediating the experiences of service users and social workers alike. Racialized students receive this very well, with many sharing that they have never had an instructor provide insight on how to engage in this profession as a racialized person.

I continue to question how I can be a more effective instructor while navigating these concerns. How can the social work classroom become a site of liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) if we cannot move past stereotyped assumptions of who belongs in the role of educator? How can I employ the tools of critical pedagogy (collaboration, community-building, and diminishing hierarchies) when my status as an instructor is already in question? How can I offer constructive feedback or encourage engagement with challenging subject matter if students perceive me as having selfish motives? How can I use terms like "white supremacy" culture when doing so places me in more precarity, running the risk of hurting white students' feelings, which is seemingly more important than enhancing their knowledge and practice capacities (Mak et al., 2021)?

I enrolled in Social Justice Pedagogy as it offered space to explore the pedagogical implications of teaching social justice in the often-unjust space of higher education (King-Jordan & Gil, 2021). I share with my co-authors a belief in the necessity of the critical lens of social justice as essential to all social work education. However, liberatory education requires

vulnerability – this is not a straightforward process when my identity has already placed me in a vulnerable position.

### ***Andrew***

Early in my teaching career, I heard from MSW students that the first-year mandatory social justice course was collectively disliked. I was shocked: the content included topics that were relevant and necessary to social work practice. Having excellent student feedback and experience with oppression as a queer disabled person, while existing with privilege as white and male-presenting, I believed I could teach social justice in different and better ways. I asked students to imagine a dream version of the course. They didn't want to read academic texts about diversity, oppression, and marginalization; they wanted to talk about how the issues manifested in their lives and in the classroom. Based on this feedback, I prepared an experiential approach to the content. Immediately, my plan went awry: students were crying, shouting at me, shouting at each other. Rather than improve the course, I'd made it worse. It took all semester to build a semblance of group trust.

When the Social Justice Pedagogy elective was offered, I eagerly signed up. I thought it would be good to reflect on my prior failure. This was the only opportunity I'd ever received that focused on *how* to facilitate social justice education. I knew from first-hand experience that good intentions weren't enough.

### ***Alison***

My prior exposure to social justice pedagogy was limited. As a white settler social worker, occupying many dominant social positions and working on a PhD in a colonial institution, I grapple with constant contradiction. I want to do no harm, yet given the reality of white supremacy, its manifestations in the classroom, and an identity which places me in a position of privilege, I do. I have wondered why these learning opportunities are often unavailable to both novice and seasoned instructors. I entered the Social Justice Pedagogy seminar to expand my awareness and to develop tangible skills that would allow me to bring justice and accountability, values which inform social work practice, into the classroom.

My previous experiences as an instructor did not provide any opportunity to focus on the *how* of delivering material. I was not interested in the banking method of teaching, as Freire (1970) described, where the instructor's goal is to deposit knowledge into students' minds. I prefer collaborative exploration and learning. This course felt vital. My interest also reflected a desire to explore ethics in teaching that mirror how I strive for ethical practice in the field.

### **Reflection two: What are your key learnings from the class?**

While there is overlap in what we found impactful in the seminar, our varied social locations impact the vantage point from which we engaged in class. Our discussion here illuminates the ways that race, class, gender, religion, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation shaped our experiences, and how engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004), as

outlined by Shoshana, allowed for deep listening, transformative understanding, and collaborative learning.

### *Andrew*

On day one of the seminar, we generated community care guidelines (Eromosele, 2020; hooks, 1994). I suggested that we adopt a mantra from group therapy: “blurt-and-sort.” It is better to get something out on the table and work it through than to keep it inside and unprocessed. My classmates shared stories of being hurt by things blurted out in class discussions and consensus formed around a contrasting idea, “think before you speak.” I felt shut down, though I wasn’t fully cognizant why. Everything that had been shared made sense. How could anyone argue against thoughtfulness? I couldn’t shake the feeling there was something else to say. But what?

I left class that day confused, vaguely upset, but biting my tongue. I thought about the interaction all week. I talked with friends and colleagues, many with mental health issues, on the autism spectrum, and/or with learning and processing disabilities. I gained clarity from my community about what I would like to add to the conversation. I resolved to advocate in our next class for myself as a neurodivergent person and for my community—folks with the sorts of invisible disabilities that clash with conventional codes of conduct.

There were two essential factors that enabled me to speak up. The first factor was that the dialogue I aimed to initiate would be taking place among many such conversations: our class commitment to sharing about all aspects of social justice meant that my return to the “blurt-and-sort” conversation would not be seen as tangential. The second was my positive experience of the process: the use of engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004), as articulated by Shoshana, meant I would not have to confront or be interrupted by an objection. I would have my turn to speak, and it would be greeted with sustained and gentle listening. Those who wished to respond would have their turn to do so. This contrasts with traditional classrooms in which advocacy like this can be experienced antagonistically, triggering defenses and shutting down dialogue.

I voiced my concern that “think before you speak” is a sophisticated social skill, harder for some than others. Were we perpetuating sanism, reinforcing the exclusion and oppression of those who think, feel, and behave in ways that are deemed unconventional (Poole et al., 2012)? Could we consider that circumspect speech was a very WASP-y (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) value, a mode of conversation that reinforces the dominant ableist culture within the university? I shared that as a neurodivergent person, I often find myself at the wrong end of social norms, without any intentional ill-will. I questioned if there was a way to soften this guideline that many neurodivergent people may find exclusionary. I felt raw after speaking, but not unsafe.

A classmate then shared about her process—she too had to speak aloud, hear words in the air as part of her learning; she noted that many folks with communicative and processing disabilities were similar. Several others expressed that they hadn’t considered this; of all social justice topics, invisible disabilities were among the least discussed (Matthews, 2009). Class members agreed that they didn’t want to create an atmosphere that excluded those with interaction styles

commonly deemed less acceptable in university classrooms (Poole et al., 2012). In the end, we revised our community guidelines to reflect this discussion and incorporated a variation of “blurt-and-sort” that created space for us to engage in open dialogue, while respecting diverse communication needs.

### ***Amilah***

The practice of engaging across our different intersectional identities was powerful learning for me. There were two moments which exemplify how we navigated this together. The first was during the conversation regarding developing community care guidelines (Eromosele, 2020; hooks, 1994). As Andrew shared, the phrase “blurt-and-sort” was offered and then challenged. In class, I shared an example of white students blurting out statements that reinforced racist beliefs and the impact of this on racialized students. Andrew offered more insight in the following class, as “blurt-and-sort” was not articulated as an accessibility need or resulting from neurodivergence and alternative ways of learning and communicating in our initial conversation. This was a profound learning moment for me. As a racialized neurotypical person who has been schooled in institutional norms and required to conform to communication styles rooted in whiteness, it hadn’t occurred to me that “blurt-and-sort” could be anything other than a function of privilege. I was relying on essentialized notions of identity, predicated on Western notions of the ideal student (Liasidou, 2012). Through engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004), we were able to embrace our full selves. We explored how we can make space for those who benefit from or require external processing while acknowledging that this can be harmful for those whose lives are being discussed in abstract senses. Our understanding of each other’s needs was transformed. Although there is no formula or directive detailing how to engage across intersectional identities, we were able to embrace an ethic of love and care (Godden, 2017; Horsfall, 2008), centering relationality and process over content (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004).

The second key moment came in the latter half of the course. During a discussion about racism, a white classmate shared that they have embodied reactions to Black men, experiencing fear and anxiety in their presence. I had an immediate reaction to this. This subjective fear response is dangerous and life-threatening for Black people and is used to justify the surveillance, policing, and murder of unarmed Black citizens (Aymer, 2016). Although it was a challenge to speak in this moment due to my emotional activation, it was clear from the way the course had been structured that I would have the opportunity to openly express my concerns without having to downplay my emotionality. I spoke to the very real fear that exists for racialized people, and Black communities in particular, who experience the devastating impacts of anti-Black racism. In the context of care and compassion, I was able to express my concerns about whiteness in the classroom. What the student had expressed was an important internal bias to explore, but was a class with racialized students who would be harmed by this processing the appropriate place for this exploration? The structural violence that is enacted in the classroom through these conversations leaves racialized and marginalized students facing yet another space in which their identity is used as a teaching tool, a learning opportunity for students with dominant identities

(hooks, 2014). I was able to voice these concerns, something I had never done as a student, because it was made clear that through engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004), there was space for critical conversations and all of the emotions that can arise with them.

### ***Maxxine***

I distinctly remember when a classmate shared their embodied reaction to Black men, as Amilah describes above. I, too, had an embodied reaction, instantly feeling the harmful impacts: my body tightened; my breath stopped, catching me off guard. I was still processing what I had heard when Amilah shared her experience. I wished I had spoken up first. I am no stranger to embodied responses within social work classrooms, moments when my heart beats right out of my chest. I need to grow to trust these embodied responses as central to social justice pedagogy (Jeyapal & Grigg, 2021; Pollack & Mayor, 2022); to use them as cues to pause, slow down, speak up, and/or check in.

Learning, unlearning, and relating in classroom spaces happens in real time and is complex. We listen, try to hear, have embodied reactions, muster courage (or struggle to), and try to find our way through. Painful experiences happen in “brave” social work classrooms (Shelton et al., 2019) — including ours. Rather than avoiding or ignoring these moments, they can be worked through by engaging one another with care and vulnerability. Later, Shoshana offered a suggestion about wording how something impacted us: “Here’s how I experienced that...” These words resonated with me, giving language in such moments to turn inward and centre our own experience rather than pointing at others. I am increasingly struck by the deep levels of trust that learning and unlearning requires. This is not easy work! I wonder: is teaching and learning social work an inevitably harmful practice? Is our more realistic aim to try to mitigate, rather than eliminate, these harms?

### ***Alison***

As we learned in this course, harm-doing can occur in multiples ways: instructor to student, student to instructor, and student to student. How are we to teach and train effective social workers if harm is being done in the classrooms that are supposed to mitigate this risk out in the field?

The first experience Amilah and Andrew discussed was also poignant for me. Working through the concept of “blurt-and-sort” via the process of engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004) enabled us to create a safe and respectful opportunity for exploring differences and deepening understanding. I felt the classroom hierarchy tumble down; we were not lectured at, rather we each had the opportunity to listen and respond, validating one another with care and compassion. We became a group of mutual learners finding our way through an emotional topic in a way that met our emotional needs as well as our scholastic ones.

Shoshana’s engagement in our learning as a co-learner, rather than an instructor, allowed for her to be humanized and the classroom power hierarchy, minimized. Instructor and learner truly

partnered to create new awareness; this was transformational. Witnessing Shoshana bring her whole self into this learning space broadened the connection and relationships in the room. As Breunig (2016) suggests, “social justice pedagogy is pedagogical risk taking and involves some personal exposure and vulnerability to act” (p. 5). The discussions were rich and meaningful. I felt attachments deepening, creating sensitivity in how to work toward shared goals, even when the material was emotional. When we truly see each other, a powerful space is co-created where there can be increased comfort in self-advocacy and fine-tuning the way in which needs are met, and the process unfolds.

The opportunity to consolidate our learning with a mock teaching session was invaluable. I could focus more on process than content and bring my whole self to the experience. Using engaged circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004) to lead a learning process, while simultaneously becoming closer to my classmates, was profound. The power of circle pedagogy never ceases to amaze me; it increases awareness, self-reflection, accountability, vulnerability, openness, deep exploration, and communication. I celebrate moving away from conventional methods that no longer work nor represent my way of being and moving to a place of creativity.

### **Reflection three: What are the implications or recommendations for social justice pedagogy moving forward?**

In this concluding reflection, we share our final thoughts, discuss implications of our experiences, and offer recommendations regarding social justice pedagogy and social work education.

#### *Andrew*

One theme that has been raised for me is intersubjectivity. Our experiences are uniquely our own, but they are constructed in social settings. A classroom conversation is an intersubjective field. We are affected by others’ words and actions; our words and actions affect others. What might be necessary for someone to speak out loud might be detrimental for another to hear and beneficial for a third party to think about. In terms of social justice, we are on unique paths with different needs. When an educational institution puts everyone in the same social justice course, it is performing colourblindness, a form of racial gaslighting (Rowe, 2020; Saad, 2020).

As a discipline, social work is overwhelmingly white (BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Khan & Absolon, 2021). On our campus, Amilah facilitates a protected space for racialized students where they can engage in honest dialogue about what it means to be social workers in a predominantly white institution and field. The additional labour and burden this requires is concerning – students do not get credit for their involvement and must engage voluntarily, sacrificing time and energy that are precious resources in graduate school. Students do get credit for the social justice course – often the place where harmful interactions occur, thus precipitating the need for the protected space. I am left wondering if placing all students in the same class is effectively educational or even ethical. White students might benefit from a space to engage with whiteness and accountability that wouldn’t require the emotional labour of students of colour.

Some students of colour would benefit from having a social justice course that is just for those with the shared experience of being racialized in a culture shaped by colonialism and white supremacy. Some students might prefer a mixed group with its opportunity to co-create an exciting conversation of dancing perspectives. Few schools of social work provide these course options, although there are advocates for this approach (Lerner & Kim, 2024b). Efforts to do something similar are always extra-curricular.

Educational Affinity Groups have begun to show up in the literature (Blackdeer & Ocampo, 2022; Pour-Khorshid, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2013) and in real-life (Columbia Social Work Review, 2020; Taylor, 2019). Although an organizational nightmare, it may be the most ethical approach as it provides students a choice in the kind of educational experience they receive. While I have been discussing issues of racial intersubjectivity, I see a similar pattern for queer and straight students, for cis- and transgender/gender diverse students, for able-bodied students, and students with disabilities. Our educational needs are not the same. Forced participation in the wrong setting is a wasted opportunity, and worse, can create harm.

### *Amilah*

My final takeaway echoes the reflections of my co-authors: the content is the process. In clinical social work settings, we know that healing lies in the relationship (Ferguson et al., 2022). In social work education, we attempt to teach our students how to be with people and how to work with them in ways that are meaningful and reflexive. We must refuse to adhere to standards set forth by white supremacy culture (Okun & Jones, 2000) that frame the classroom as an elevated utopia somehow removed from the sociopolitical contexts in which academic institutions are situated. We must be willing to have difficult conversations that are rooted in respect and authenticity while understanding that this can create challenges for students based on differing and sometimes conflicting identities and needs. Godden (2017) articulates the love ethic as a directive for radical social work practice. I believe we must also establish this within social work education as a necessary part of how we teach social justice. Godden (2017) states that “love as an action and a choice automatically assumes accountability and responsibility, involving open and honest expression of care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust” (p. 407). These are clear edicts that can be modeled within the social work classroom and serve as a foundation for practice. In the words of American intellectual and activist Dr. Cornel West (2017): “Justice is what love looks like in public”. If we cannot bring this love ethic into the in-between space of the classroom, how can we expect our students to understand and enact social justice in their practice? How can we help our social work students sit in uncertainty if we are not willing and able to do this ourselves? It is possible to repair disruptions and harm when we are firmly rooted in authentic care and love of one another, as illustrated in the narratives shared above. It allows us to put down our defensiveness, open ourselves to the perspective of the other, and engage in relational accountability, which challenges notions of individuality (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Wilson, 2008). There is an inherent power in the role of instructor, who has the responsibility of creating spaces in which we stumble together, having uncomfortable conversations while bearing witness to all the whole selves (hooks, 2003) in the classroom. In

this way, the classroom gives students practical skills to engage with social justice in deep and meaningful ways, becoming a site of radical transformation (hooks, 2003).

### ***Alison***

The PhD journey has renewed my awareness of the necessity of self-examination and reflection, revealing what must be unlearned and learned again. I have come to appreciate more deeply how critical engaging in this learning with others is. A significant theme during the course centred around honouring the teachings of Indigenous educators and scholars. I was grateful to take an independent study course with Dr. Gus Hill (Waase Gaaboo), an Anishnaabe social work scholar from Obadjwaan (Batchawana) First Nation (Hill, personal communication, May – July, 2023). I also learned with Dr. Kathy Absolon and the Centre for Indigegogy (Absolon, 2019; Absolon & Dias, 2020). These experiences helped develop and deepen my understanding of relational accountability and my obligations as a white settler social worker and scholar (Archibald, 2008; Battiste & Youngblood, 2000; Hill, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Within the pedagogy elective course, I found it unique in how we focused on seeing and hearing each other and speaking truthfully (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2004). Complex and challenging issues arose. What is important is how these moments were processed. This course moved us from a typical academic focus on *what* is delivered toward the *how*. Using a social justice lens in both a practical and a more philosophical way, we could apply the process and then discuss the effectiveness of our strategies. The ongoing conversations in a space that had developed meaningful community care (Eromosele, 2020; hooks, 1994) guidelines created increased safety in the classroom, which is particularly noteworthy, offering each of us the chance to be who and where we were at the time as we explored the concepts. We worked through the material while maintaining boundaries and respect in the learning space. I further explored my identity as a white scholar and social worker in learning and practice settings. Ongoing recognition of the unearned privileges of my skin colour while exploring the theme of whiteness and ways to develop as an instructor were valuable takeaways. Far beyond the end of the course, questions continue to come to me about my roles and responsibilities for change-making toward a true end to these inequities and envisioning a day where social justice is a way of life versus a concept we strive for in education and practice.

### ***Maxxine***

Drawing urgent parallels between practice and teaching has been an unexpected part of my learning in this course. Through taking social justice pedagogy, I have come to know more and differently about the inevitable harms of my whiteness not only in my practice, but also in my teaching (Badwall, 2016; BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Khan & Absolon, 2020; Rossiter, 2001). When I enter any social work encounter, I am inhabiting settings and systems that are historical and ongoing sites of colonialism and white supremacy (e.g., child welfare, health and mental health care, prison system). The inevitable harms racialized service users experience mirror those that racialized learners experience when I enter the university classroom—a setting that is, too, a historical, ongoing site of colonialism and white supremacy (BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Khan

& Absolon, 2020). The need to be self-reflexive in one's practice, to not rush to innocence, nor to ignore reflexivity's roots in whiteness (Badwall, 2016; Fellows & Razack, 1998; Rossiter, 2001) echoes the need to be self-reflexive in one's teaching (Rossiter, 1993). And, as Amilah reminds us, critical reflexivity is never enough. Having space and time to reflect on how our intersecting identities shape not only our practice and research, but also our teaching, should be requisite learning in social work doctoral education.

### ***Shoshana***

Throughout the semester, I returned to the idea that there is no one way to "get it right" nor is there a specific pedagogical tool that "works." Class conversations, a practice teaching assignment, and a teaching philosophy assignment reinforced the significance of the instructor's positionality in terms of what we can "see" and how we are "seen." This course has encouraged me to place deliberate attention on the process of teaching even over the content, and to continue learning about relational pedagogies.

## **Conclusion – journeying forward**

In this article we discussed our experiences with a social justice pedagogy doctoral seminar. The mutual draw to this course included all the authors witnessing, causing, experiencing, and/or fearing harm in the classroom. The need for social justice pedagogy is recognized as crucial for both acknowledging and ameliorating these harms, offering possibilities for a more just approach to social work education. We conclude that social work educators must engage in the pedagogical project of infusing social justice into social work education in both content *and* process.

We explored relational pedagogies which allowed us to foster a classroom space that was congruent with the principles, theories, and practices of social justice that were being taught (Adams et al., 2023). The course process allowed us to learn in a reciprocal, respectful way while also helping us navigate the inevitable relational ruptures that occur when exploring themes of racism, whiteness, (dis)ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. An emphasis on non-hierarchical communication shaped our class into a community of practice, reinforcing expectations of social workers to reflexively engage with ethical dilemmas and ruptured relational dynamics.

We entered this course – and the journey of collaborative authoring – as learners, and we leave as learners. Even in a course that embraced expansive pedagogies beyond Western Eurocentric and traditional approaches, there remained moments of discomfort and harm. Despite this reality, in this course we walked away from these ruptures feeling the harm was not exacerbated because we had space to process and engage with one another from a place of deep care and compassion. Ultimately, teaching social justice is not about avoiding the ruptures — we argue that is likely impossible! Rather, it is the process of healing ruptures and working through harm that gives students skills and confidence in meaningfully engaging anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches to social work practice.

We urge social work scholars and educators to consider how to approach the challenging and necessary work of social justice teaching with the care and commitment it requires. We echo calls for disrupting Western Eurocentric teaching models in social work classrooms and drawing upon more just, engaged, and critical pedagogies (Blackdeer & Ocampo, 2022; Graveline, 1998; hooks, 1994; Khan & Absolon, 2020). We call upon other social work doctoral programs to integrate a course on social justice pedagogy into their curriculum. A course that emphasizes the *process* of teaching, in addition to course content, allows doctoral students to experience, reflect and navigate the complex, often messy power dynamics within the classroom. We extend our gratitude to this article's reviewers for their judicious feedback; the process of writing and revising this paper served as an extension of our classroom experience and further illustrated the importance of community in social work teaching. We believe that this, too, is crucial in the development of a community of practice as social work educators striving towards socially just approaches to pedagogy.

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