

## Restorative Pedagogy to Build Community in the Classroom: Autoethnographic Reflections from Faculty

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Restorative justice (RJ) is a philosophy and set of practices that center harms and needs. Within a classroom setting, an RJ pedagogical approach invites a process of shared learning that attends to critical issues of equity, power, and voice. Utilizing an autoethnographic approach, this manuscript includes critical reflections from three faculty members from diverse disciplines and positionalities about the use of RJ approaches to teaching in our respective classrooms. This paper includes discussion about the intersection of RJ with critical pedagogy, power differentials, and pragmatic issues of classroom structure learning design.

During times of great stress and divisiveness, restorative justice (RJ) provides an opportunity to engage scholars in processes that encourage healing, building of trust and relationships, and striving for change (Pointer, 2020). This autoethnographic analysis of three faculty members' experiences with restorative processes in the classroom provides insights into how restorative pedagogy can be used in classrooms to encourage a sense of community, trust, respect, empathy, and dialogue (Gilbert et al., 2013; Kitchen, 2013; Pointer, 2020). Using three educators' experiences in restorative classrooms, the paper addresses the following questions: 1) How does a restorative pedagogy differ from other pedagogies? 2) What have faculty members' experiences been like in restorative classrooms using a restorative pedagogy? 3) How can faculty develop a restorative classroom and/or a restorative pedagogy?

### How Does a Restorative Pedagogy Differ from Other Pedagogies?

The term 'pedagogy' refers to teaching strategies or methods used to educate students. Pedagogies are often didactic in their approach—meaning that instruction is formally organized, and teacher driven (Gilbert et al., 2013)—this method is also referred to as the Transmission Model of Education (Pointer, 2020). The assumption of such a pedagogy is that the teacher is the expert, educating an individual who has little to no knowledge of the subject (Gilbert et al., 2013; Purcell, 2010). While such teaching strategies may be important in developing a basic knowledge of concepts or definitions in courses, they are not always effective for helping to develop students' ability to seek answers to their own questions, build communication skills, and think critically about the root cause of social inequities—key learning objectives in many social science disciplines. As such, students may leave a classroom as knowledgeable, but not knowledge-able—prepared to answer global questions of importance while striving for

meaningful change in their lives and the lives of others (Wesch, 2013).

As a result of critiques of didactic approaches to teaching and learning, some scholars (Kitchen, 2013; Pointer, 2020) encourage use of a pedagogy that is restorative in nature. Such a pedagogy falls in line with a restorative justice framework in which *restorative* refers to nurturing a group's dignity, worth, and interconnectedness so that they can fully contribute to society. *Justice* refers to honoring people by accepting them for who they are in the context of their communities/social groups (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Justice is about building and maintaining relationships (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Keeping these principles in mind, a restorative pedagogy encourages courses to allow students to share learning experiences that nurture the dignity of all participants and topics studied, provide opportunities to be fully contributing members in the course, nurture and develop classroom community, and learn why respect should be paid to the worth and knowledge of all people, both inside and outside of the classroom. The presumption is that all people are unique and full of potential that can be tapped into within the classroom (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Kitchen, 2013; Pointer, 2020).

A restorative pedagogy provides students with opportunities to go on a quest for knowledge, developing introspection and relationships along the way. Restorative pedagogies allow for deep learning through processes of intentional engagement with course material and one another (Pointer, 2020). A restorative pedagogy may include one or more of the following: 1) creating an environment that allows for communication; 2) creating a psychological atmosphere that allows for collaboration, communication, trust, respect, authenticity, and self-discovery; 3) involving students in classroom planning (e.g., determining learning methods, needs and assessment methods); and 4) sharing responsibility for one's own learning and the learning of others in the class (Knowles, 1984).

The principles of restorative justice encourage intentional conversations within the classroom, as well as inclusion of the voices of students in the planning and execution of the course (Gilbert et al., 2013; Knowles, 1984; Pointer, 2020). Implementing such strategies allows for a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach. The use of restorative justice philosophy and restorative practices in the classroom can also be used to challenge hegemonic structures embedded in higher education settings by inviting multiple ways of knowing, constructive conflict, and open discussion about power differentials in the classroom (Parker, 2020). One example of a restorative pedagogy can be seen in Kitchen's (2013) approach to teaching a Restorative Justice seminar in which she uses Circle Dialogues as a pedagogical tool, as well as a Contemplative Dialogue process that connects knowledge and love through the use of such mediums as meditation, and personal introspection.

### **Our Reflections: Faculty Members' Experiences with Restorative Pedagogies**

Restorative justice's emphasis on strengthening relationships points toward a deeper process of becoming more fully human and seeing others' dignity and worth (Vaandearing, 2010). This focus invites RJ practitioners and participants to step into shared ownership for addressing interpersonal, communal, and societal structures that impede human flourishing (examples include racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia, and neoliberal capitalism). In doing so, RJ integrates the principles of critical pedagogy into restorative pedagogy. The field of critical pedagogy was founded by Brazilian educator, activist, and philosopher, Paulo Freire. In his foundational book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) articulates the nature and character of what he called the "banking system" of education. Freire's articulation of *conscientization* also offers a critical perspective on social conditions, which aids restorative pedagogical practitioners in maintaining an awareness of the societal structures that shape our experiences, rather than collapsing only into our singular perspectives and life experiences.

#### ***Restorative Approaches to Teaching Social Work:* Author I**

The learning context in which one implements restorative practices pedagogy can profoundly impact these practices. The context in which I am teaching is South Florida, at a federally designated "Hispanic-serving" institution with a student population that is 29% Hispanic or Latino, 28.7% Black or African American, 25.7% White, 3.41% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific

Islanders (Barry University, 2020). These prefabricated federal designations bely the complex and rich identities of my students, many of whom come from families of diverse origins in the Caribbean and Latin America, whose families escaped disasters (both natural and man-made) to come to the US in search of a better life (American Immigration Council, 2020; Aranda et al., 2014). Over 70% of my undergraduate students are Pell Grant eligible, which means their families earn less than \$26,000 per year (Department of Education, 2020). As a result, these students have not only faced the challenge of being English language learners, but often arrive at college after attending overcrowded, under-resourced schools where authoritarian approaches to classroom management were common. Many of my social work students, who came to the US from countries such as Haiti, have faced models of authoritarian rule in their country of origin only to come to Miami to enter low-performing public schools, often in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (Dorsey, 2019). Then, because social work education is carefully monitored by the requirements of our national accrediting body, a competency-based approach to education, faculty may feel pressure to conform to the imagined limitations of the course syllabi. The resulting model of social work education unwittingly supports an authoritarian or faculty-centered approach to the classroom; one which prioritizes orderliness and conformity over creativity, curiosity, and change. In order to shift the classroom space from authoritarian to restorative pedagogy, I have adjusted the methods of course content delivery, engage with a trauma-responsive mindset, and deepen my awareness of my own positionality.

**Delivery of Content.** I have experimented with various forms of restorative circle practice in all of my classes over the past several years, with an emphasis on relationship building, active listening, and empathy building. I framed these activities around social work skills of active listening and empathy building in order to make visible some connections between restorative justice and social work education. In one of my undergraduate social work classes, a small, diverse group of students understood what I was trying to establish in our class with these connecting activities at the beginning of each class: greater connection, support, and authenticity among the group. They agreed to my requests for weekly check-ins and, eventually, established their own rhythm. With the chairs in a circle, they would construct their own forms for checking in and offering empathy to one another. One student was battling breast cancer and another struggled to keep a roof over her children's heads while attending school. The classroom became a space in which we could hear one another, offer peer support, and brainstorm resources together. The time spent in circle made it possible for me to form genuine relationships with my students and for

them to give me direct feedback, whether about a confusing concept in class, difficulty with written assignments, or curiosity about my life beyond the classroom.

**Trauma-Responsive Mindset.** The fundamental components of a trauma-responsive setting include safety, trustworthiness, peer support, voice and choice, collaboration, and attending to cultural and historical harms (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Establishing emotional safety in the classroom has become a clear and powerful need in making the shift to a more restorative social work classroom. This has required applying what is known about the impact of trauma on learning in my classes (Davidson, 2017). Namely, when students are triggered, anxious, or fearful about meeting their basic needs and/or the demands of the program, it is impossible to stay in a learning mindset. In order to address this, I have found it helpful to introduce mindfulness practices at the beginning of each class. These are always voluntary. In the Zoom context, I often invite students to feel free to turn off their cameras during these activities to reduce distraction or discomfort about being observed on screen. Depending on the focus for the given day, I have offered meditations that address the importance of self-compassion, the power of the breath as an anchor in the storms of uncertainty, and grounding techniques (such as noticing with the five senses). When students become dysregulated in class, we can return to these practices individually and as a collective to re-center before moving on to the next topic of discussion. I have also invited students to offer mindfulness practices that they have found helpful. This is not a required component of any class, but rather an opportunity for students to practice using their voices and exercising leadership in the class.

**Challenge My Own Privilege.** It is tempting to assume that if I am doing “restorative” practices, that these will be sufficient to ensuring a safe classroom free from power, privilege, and harm. However, I have learned that it is not simply the practices, but the philosophy that must be continually engaged and examined. For example, one semester I repeatedly did a check-in activity with a large class (about 25 students) in which there was not emotional safety. Students would parrot back their identified needs and feelings, but it became clear that they were only doing so in response to my demand as the faculty member. Without addressing the lack of safety and choice, I was not able to establish the necessary trust for deeper connections among the students in the class and me. It became clear to me that I had not been sufficiently clear about the reasons for my arrangement of the chairs, check-ins, or shared agreements with the class. I had not effectively conveyed to these students that their educational freedom and growth were more important to me than their

acquiescence to my expectations for how we might relate to one another differently. Moreover, I had not been willing to look at the ways in which I was recreating white supremacist values in my supposedly restorative practices.

White supremacy culture is characterized by values include a sense of urgency (we must produce to be valued, so hurry up!); perfectionism; fear of open conflict; the right to comfort for those with power; and defensiveness (Jones & Okun, 2001). When the students in my class were experiencing a lack of safety, I was unwilling to openly confront the classroom dynamics, which included peer-to-peer microaggressions. Instead, I took comfort in the “rightness” of the restorative activity I had selected for the class and became defensive when students did not experience it that way. It took me most of the semester to observe myself and the class from a space of compassionate curiosity. As a junior faculty member, I was eager to share what I knew of restorative justice practices but did not take the time to understand what the students would experience as restorative for them. I learned valuable lessons: 1) the need to slow down, 2) the importance of moving “at the speed of trust” (Brown, 2017), and 3) the willingness to receive feedback and adjust accordingly. My students in that class did finally find ways to communicate with me more directly about their lack of interest in the practices I presented. This, in turn, gave me the opportunity to listen for understanding, as well as to ask the students what liberatory education looked like for them. As I will discuss below, many of the students had not had the opportunity to think about their social work education this way. Instead, they had been trained to focus on “getting through” so that they could attain the degree for improved job prospects, promotions, or other external rewards that did not center their own worth as human beings with unique life experiences and perspectives. Finally, I have found it critical to get honest feedback and support from colleagues and RJ leaders outside of campuses as mentors to grow in anti-oppressive, trauma-responsive restorative approaches to pedagogy.

### *Restorative Approaches to Teaching Politics: Author II*

As a restorative and critical pedagogue, I design my courses around the goal of creating classroom containers that are supportive, equitable, and justice-oriented. The three restorative pillars that often inform my pedagogy are: 1) a focus on harms and needs, 2) an understanding that harms result in obligations, and 3) an assertion that restoration requires engagement or participation of multiple stakeholders, including the primary parties as well as members of the surrounding community. These three assertions are framed as foundational for

restorative justice (Zehr, 2015) and they serve an important contextualizing function in my classrooms.

**Understanding Harms and Needs with Hegemony Theory.** The study of politics requires honest engagement with past and current governmental actions in order to create a more equitable future. My courses are meant to serve as spaces within which my students and I can critically interrogate the US political system while elevating those democratic values that we find most important and inspirational. The harms that have been inflicted on American citizens through oppressive policies and practices, especially on Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) often go unacknowledged in political science textbooks. Many of these actions have never been given the legal classification of “crime.” Even when they are discussed, they have often been normalized or given only superficial attention, which implicitly teaches students that the impacts from these abuses should no longer be discussed or experienced.

I introduce my students to hegemony theory as an explanatory framework that reveals how power can be generated and deployed through culture. This supports my efforts to design my courses around the restorative principle of focusing on harms and needs. Hegemony is defined as the leadership or dominance of one social group over others and the theory allows us to analyze how dominant groups in a diverse society maintain social, economic, and political control (Gramsci, 1971). This is done through violence and coercion, but also through the manipulation of culture to create a commonly held ideology (norms, values, and beliefs of the people) that reflects and reifies that of the dominant group. My hope is that, by focusing on this theory, students will be better able to understand how political narratives are constructed most often to reflect the views of dominant groups. After spending some time unpacking the theory, I integrate critical media literacy through an assignment that asks students to critically analyze the dominant narratives surrounding the political issues we are studying in class. Students complete this assignment in my *Politics of Race and Media* course. They are asked to identify two pieces of political media focused on the same issue. One of the media products should communicate interpretations of societal values as “commonly held” and the other should offer a counter-hegemonic narrative. In 2020, since we were in an election year, many students found commercials and videos made by political candidates. Once they selected their products, students were asked to analyze them using several guiding questions. See Appendix A: Critical Media Literacy.

After they conducted their analysis, students were then tasked with creating their own media products containing messages that were informed by their research into the systemic causes of their issue. They also

submitted a one-page reflection as part of their written assignment. We collectively reflected on the assignment in class with students using their written reflections as a starting point for deeper dialogue. Based on past discussions, students have commented that learning about the theory of cultural hegemony made them better able to critically analyze videos that they may not have questioned before. They appreciated learning about the theory first and then having an opportunity to apply it to better understand their political worlds.

By critically interrogating media messages which offer universalistic value interpretations, my goal is for my students to become better able to identify the harms and needs that can be generated through repeated and negative messaging around “minorities” and members of other marginalized groups. Another important aspect of my restorative pedagogy incorporates political engagement to facilitate student understanding that, as we learn about America’s political system, we can also become empowered to act in ways that help address some of the social issues that we see as harmful for our democracy and our society.

**A Dialectical Approach to Harm and Obligation.** Dialectics in its simplest terms is about relationships between ideas. In US society, harm is viewed as an opportunity for society to seek retribution on the part of those who have been harmed. Politicians, pundits, and other citizens proclaim their right to vengeance with such vehemence that it is rarely challenged publicly. This behavior stands in contrast to an unwillingness to acknowledge or engage with the harm that has been done under the guise of American politics. As we study the historical context of American politics, I also teach students about some of the ways that the institutions of American government are deeply implicated in the creation and perpetuation of harm. For example, when we study the making of the US Constitution, we also discuss the Great Law of Peace and the elements that America’s colonial founders borrowed without giving credit to the Iroquois Nation. When we study unilateral sources of presidential powers, we examine the use of the executive order in multiple circumstances, such as its role in the internment of Japanese Americans.

When they learn about some of these questionable political decisions and practices, many students express feelings of anger, despair, and helplessness. Accountability requires action to put things right. Yet, in a political context, this work can be daunting. My goal is to help students move through a process of growth through knowledge acquisition while also strengthening their sense of political agency. I do this by integrating critical community engagement into my courses because it creates opportunities for students to apply what they’ve learned, to take a stand on an issue and engage in political action.

For example, in my *Introduction to American Politics* class, I created a Political Action Plan (PAP) assignment that takes students through a process of considering their values, identifying issues they care about, and recognizing their own potential for influencing American politics. The assignment also requires students to identify micro, meso, and macro levels of impact and then engage in actions at each level. On the micro level, this could be an individual political action based on their personal values and political ideology. In the meso space, many students choose to participate in a collective action that is affiliated with an organization that they support. They often do this in small groups, but they are not required to do so. Students' macro-level action includes considering the work of their federal, state, and local representatives and discussing the implications of their votes on our political system. By completing this project, students take some degree of ownership over the issues they care about, the conditions that created them and the changes required to alleviate them. I also utilize the principle of praxis to help students integrate both academic and experiential learning with their larger communities.

**Restorative Praxis Through Community Engagement.** The principle of praxis contains within it a recognition that learning, dialogic reflection, and action are most effective when they are interconnected. In Freire's description he wrote, "By acting, they [human beings] transform; by transforming, they create a reality which conditions their manner of acting" (Freire 1976, p. 102). I work with my students to create a classroom community grounded in praxis by integrating classroom learning with reflection, dialogue, and action. Because my discipline focuses on the political sphere and I value community engaged experiential learning, I direct my students towards community-based political action. This framing of our work illuminates the importance of acting on the micro, meso and macro levels to address social problems. I characterize this work as "practicing politics" because it requires students to apply their knowledge and engage with their communities and with the political system in order to address social issues that they themselves have identified.

Relying again on the final projects assigned for my *Introduction to American Politics* course, while the projects are quite involved, students are asked to begin by selecting a political issue that they care about. We engage in dialogue about each issue in large and small groups. For example, many students choose to focus on the issue of homelessness. I then organize them into small groups so they can collaborate with other students to complete the project. I organize our course content in a way that connects students with the information they need to become familiar with the policy making process. I link them with relevant community organizations, and they are trained in basic community organizing strategies

and tactics. The project is scaffolded and designed so each step aligns with a class module.

During our first module, students are introduced to the policy-making process, advocacy, and the importance of organizing. In addition to the policy basics, they are required to conduct additional research on their chosen issue. Students who focus on homelessness research the history of the issue, the political context, and policy alternatives that have been offered to the public. They are then asked to create a Fact Sheet and engage in political advocacy for their issue—as individuals and as a group. For example, students might contact elected officials, or they may choose to educate students on campus about the issue. After students complete this part of the project, we reflect on the experience as a group. We then cover a module on interest groups and community-based organizations. At this time, groups are asked to connect with a community-based organization that works in their issue area and they are required to contribute to, and participate in, a workshop or event held by their chosen community partner. Later in the course, we cover the essential elements of a policy memo and at that time, students are also asked to draft a comprehensive policy memo that synthesizes their research, their experiences, and their policy recommendations to effect systemic change. By completing the assignment in a step-by-step fashion, students demonstrate agency. They are engaged with their own learning process and they develop an understanding of praxis that incorporates learning, dialogue, reflection and community engaged political action.

Rather than making students feel overwhelmed and powerless, the balancing of obligation and accountability with doable opportunities for concrete political action seems to help students develop a sense of political agency. By integrating student-centered experiences that allow learners to "practice politics," they also deepen their understanding and appreciation of the discipline.

### *Restorative Approaches to Teaching Sociology:*

#### *Author III*

As my co-authors mention, context and positionality matter when thinking about how to structure courses, as well as the content of courses. I educate students at a small, private, Catholic University in Northeastern Ohio. The mission of the university is to educate the whole person through provision of a values-based education that embraces diverse perspectives and people, encourages lifelong service, and emphasizes the importance of community (Walsh Mission, 2022). Restorative practices fall in line with the mission of the university, but more broadly speaking, they also align with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT). Catholic Intellectual Tradition recognizes that all people in a

community have rights and responsibilities, deserve to be treated with dignity, and have the right to advocate for change when it has a direct impact on their lives (i.e., belief in subsidiarity) (Sharpe, 2018).

Sociology critically evaluates society, drawing attention to inequalities in social systems. Courses in Sociology require students to use their Sociological Imagination—a framework that encourages students to recognize connections between individual experiences and social behavior—to critically evaluate society, draw attention to inequalities in social systems, and reflect upon experiences that differ from one's own (Mills, 1959).

Conversations in such classes are informative and life changing for many students who are first-generation college students, gaining exposure to social justice concerns for the first time. Knowing this has influenced my teaching style and philosophy, leading to the use of restorative pedagogy in the construction of my *Disabilities and Restorative Justice* courses. To that end, these courses encourage development of classroom community, holding one another accountable as learners, trusting that everyone will participate in respectful dialogue as well as active participation in class planning and processes. The classroom space is one where creativity, self-development, and equality of voices is encouraged through the use of Circle processes (Absolon, 2019; Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Circle process is introduced to students as a way of *knowing with indigenous roots* that acknowledges that each participant carries knowledge to be shared to assist in learning and transformation of the self and the class (Absolon, 2019). The Circle process itself encourages equality of participation as each student speaks when they hold the talking piece—an object that sets the pace for circle participation—while other participants practice active listening. The Circle process encourages self-reflection and deep listening, leading to the emergence of mutually respectful relationships (Penak, 2018).

Circles are used in a variety of ways in class. At the beginning of the semester, a large Circle is facilitated by me to help students get to know one another and to discuss and modify the course syllabus based on feedback from students. In this Circle, rounds include prompts that allow individuals to share information about themselves, and to reflect on course policies and assignments. Students begin to build trust with me and their peers, and to feel a sense of empowerment over the learning process. This is the beginning of community development in the course, but also serves to highlight the diversity of our experiences—both of which are at the heart of restorative justice and restorative pedagogy.

In subsequent weeks, students are randomly assigned to small Learning Circles where they are

given a Circle script that relates to the content for the week. The focus of these circles includes learning of core course content, critical evaluation of course content, practicing facilitation of Circle processes, and recommendations for future work on the topic. Students take turns facilitating Circles and provide feedback to the instructor at the end of Learning Circle via a written reflection paper. I use these papers to modify the course as necessary. Outside of Learning Circles, other restorative learning opportunities include self-reflection/discovery assignments (e.g., emotional intelligence inventories, journals), empathy building projects (e.g., case study reviews), and collaboration/relationship building work (e.g., group work used to evaluate restorative processes). Such assignments align with restorative pedagogy's focus on self-development, communication, and learning about diverse experiences (Kitchen, 2013; Pointer, 2020). See Appendix B: Emotional Intelligence Inventory.

One key outcome of the Learning Circles is community collaboration. As students share knowledge of course materials and pose and answer questions developed by their peers, they are exploring course content, reflecting on their comprehension of course material, and building relationships in the classroom. An environment emerges where students feel safe exploring issues centered on their thoughts regarding inequalities and the role of healing and repair in our society.

The *Sociology of Disabilities* course focuses heavily on lived experiences of individuals with disabilities and calls on students to deconstruct power dynamics related to ability and disability. Through this deconstruction process, students come to terms with many stereotypes and prejudices they hold about individuals with disabilities. Learning Circles helped students develop relationships, respect one another's perspectives, and take responsibility for their learning. In some Learning Circles, students have shared stories of disability—sometimes personal, sometimes observational of close family or friends—and connected those experiences/stories to research and policy development. In this course, the use of restorative pedagogy served to encourage perspective taking, and allowed for multiple voices to be heard (Kitchen, 2013; Pointer, 2020).

While I have found restorative pedagogy fits well within the framework of a small, Catholic campus that encourages alignment with Catholic Intellectual Tradition, its utility aligns well with courses in the Social Sciences in general, and therefore, may work well in other environments such as K–12 schools, other private colleges, and state schools.

## **How Can Faculty Develop a Restorative Classroom and/or a Restorative Pedagogy?**

### ***Shift from Faculty-as-Expert to Shared Classroom Leadership: Author III***

The development of a restorative pedagogy should start prior to the introduction of a course. Faculty members should think about courses that would align well with restorative teaching processes and develop course goals and activities around these principles. Part of a restorative pedagogy involves dismantling typical power dynamics in traditional classrooms where students see the instructor as the “expert” and themselves as passive participants. Relationship building allows for this shift to occur. Faculty should think about courses where they would feel comfortable allowing for this process to unfold and grow.

For me, use of a restorative pedagogy starts before the semester begins by providing students an opportunity to have a voice in the classroom structure. I send a student survey to all members of the classes that use this form of pedagogy that asks questions related to learning style, knowledge about restorative processes, experiences with similar processes, and preferences for course assignments (e.g., course projects versus exams, topics of interest that might occur in circles, etc.). This information helps guide the construction of the syllabus. This practice encourages a sense of agency on the part of the students (Gilbert et al., 2013; Knowles, 1984; Pointer, 2020), shifting power dynamics before the course begins.

When constructing the course syllabi, faculty might wish to think about at least one course goal that aligns with a restorative pedagogy. For example, restorative goals might be encouraging respect and understanding, developing empathy for others, or challenging misconceptions that we bring with us into the classroom.

### ***Resist the “Bureaucratic Ventriloquism” of Professional Education: Author I***

For those who teach in a professional field such as social work, course curricula are often standardized in order to meet the certification requirements of the field. In describing the perils of professional education for teachers, Rennert-Arriev (2008) points out that it is not uncommon for students in professional education programs to make minimal effort because the courses and field placements are focused on routinized tasks that do not elicit a more compelling response from students. This is a significant challenge in social work education, a context in which we expect our students to attend classes and field education, pay for these costs, and maintain themselves and their families, leaving students frustrated and overwhelmed (Diebold et al. 2018).

Rather than ignoring the overwhelm created by these educational conditions, restorative philosophy invites us to refocus on students’ needs.

While professional social work educational standards often result in a fixed syllabus, this content should not dictate form. Restorative pedagogies invite faculty members to reorient our approach to the classroom. This begins with the physical layout of the classroom, which may include rows of desks and chairs (as is the case where I teach) that can be moved into a circle. This change allows faculty members to participate in the circle rather than stand alone at the front of the class. Making this change is a signal to the students that their voices, experiences, and participation are as valuable to learning as the ideas and expectations of the professor. The circle process can be used to develop shared classroom expectations based on the values students and faculty members bring to the space. This exchange of values builds relationships and forms a foundation for meaningful agreements about how the class will run. For example, rather than the faculty member telling students that they must attend a certain number of classes in accordance with a school policy, it can be helpful to ask students why it is important to them that their classmates are present for each class session. This process also allows students to name how they wish to handle conflict, what they need from their peers and the professor in order to participate fully, and provides an opportunity for the faculty member to establish the centrality of mutual feedback between students and the professor as part of the learning process.

### ***Make the Road While Walking: Moving toward Transformation: Author II***

One strategy faculty may use to create restorative classrooms relies on first examining their existing teaching philosophies to determine where and how restorative approaches might fit. This can serve as an important step towards more just and compassionate classroom containers and it can allow faculty to calibrate the degree to which they integrate these practices into pre-existing courses and curricula. As a professor of politics, my pedagogy is centered around several core commitments, including justice-oriented education, experiential learning, and facilitation of political efficacy among my students. These commitments align well with the restorative approaches and critical pedagogical principles I discussed earlier in the paper and together they provide an infrastructure for each of my courses. However, I must also acknowledge that it has become important for me to “dream bigger” and grow towards creating transformative classroom community spaces, even as I continue to respect and appreciate the foundation that has been laid by restorative approaches. While the three pillars of restorative justice continue to

stand as important reference points, I am also practicing with the four tenets of transformative justice offered by Shira Hassan and passed on by Adrienne Maree Brown in *Emergent Strategy* (2017). According to these activists, “transformative justice: 1) acknowledges the reality of state harm, 2) looks for alternative ways to address/interrupt harm, which do not rely on the state, 3) relies on organic, creative strategies that are community created and sustained, and 4) transforms the root causes of violence, not only the individual experience” (Brown, 2017, p. 135).

I find these tenets useful because I believe it is imperative that educators challenge the root causes and conditions that make oppression and injustice possible—at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. Even while it is necessary to call out the harms done and perpetuated by the state, I believe we can be empowered by a willingness to see alternative ways that we can interrupt harm ourselves—as individuals and as part of organizations. As both Author I and Author III have mentioned, a restorative approach can help faculty restructure their courses, creating more opportunities for student agency and voice. The principles of transformative justice can also be utilized and further developed by faculty to support experiential learning and community engagement work. This creates even more opportunity to give voice to marginalized groups and address imbalanced power dynamics in our institutions and in our surrounding communities.

### Discussion: Common Challenges

Stepping outside of a didactic style of pedagogy can be uncomfortable because it creates a sense of vulnerability as an instructor and does involve some level of risk for all participants (Pointer, 2020). There is no way of knowing what individuals will contribute to Circle processes— instructors must be prepared to navigate uncomfortable scenarios. While we have not yet encountered such situations, we have reflected on how to approach comments that may be insensitive, off topic, or delicate from a restorative standpoint. Because a restorative pedagogy encourages breaking down power dynamics that often emerge in didactic classrooms, we suggest approaching such situations by encouraging students to complete anonymous reflections after each Circle that request input regarding successes and challenges within the Circle. Such reflections allow for students to have a voice in the process, and for the instructor to address such issues in the classroom and future Circle processes.

In addition to the anxiety that instructors may face as they step outside of their comfort zone, it is important to be mindful of students’ discomfort. At first, Community Building Circles may start out as awkward, with some students commenting expressing frustration

over this new, unknown process. Author III overheard students in her *Restorative Justice* course express such statements as, “I can’t believe we have to do this,” and “Oh, no. I don’t want to do this,” prior to the circle process. After closing of the Circle, however, students stated that they felt they learned more about one another and course content in that 60-minute circle than they had in any other course. From that point forward, the course maintained close connection and free expression of thoughts and ideas in the classroom, and in subsequent Circle processes. Restorative practices should account for the needs of the students who are being invited to participate in these practices; there is no “one size fits all” approach to this work; it is meant to be context-specific, to meet the needs of a given campus community.

As faculty members, we may also be challenged by the degree to which our institutions recognize restorative pedagogies as aligning with our overarching mission and principles. Each of the authors is currently employed by Catholic colleges which identify social justice as a crucial aspect of their respective mission and identities. At one institution, a LaSallian Catholic college, the institutional mission is based on five core LaSallian principles, one of which is “Concern for the poor and social justice.” This explicit institutional focus on social justice contributes to a sense of its embeddedness within our campus culture. This principle is mentioned often as explanation and justification for leadership initiatives, the creation of academic courses, and campus activities. It is emphasized often among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and campus leadership and it creates the space for me to engage with pedagogical methods that affirm the value of a socially just society. While alignment with mission is important, it is also helpful when departmental cultures are at least somewhat receptive to faculty application of these methods.

Departmental culture can impact whether a faculty member feels their pedagogical methods are welcomed and respected while also impacting retention and tenure outcomes. Disciplinary structures often create silos and may contribute to a dogmatic approach regarding how we teach academic content. Members of political science departments vary greatly in their willingness to consider restorative pedagogies, as do faculty members across the disciplines. Restorative educators must hold values that motivate them to view restoration as an important aspect of their teaching. These values inform our principles, which in turn influence our pedagogical practices. A faculty member’s restorative approach can be strengthened if they teach in an institution and a department that values these practices and supports their use. However, a lack of support, whether tacit or explicit, can create significant difficulties in RJ implementation. In departmental contexts that are less supportive, faculty members may find it helpful to connect with colleagues



across disciplines and across institutions in order to build a supportive community of practice.

### Conclusion

While we are each faculty members in different disciplines with distinct theoretical and methodological orientations, we have all found RJ to offer a framework for fostering community in the classroom. Building a greater sense of community in turn invites professors and students alike into a mutual process of learning that challenges the confines of professional authority, prepares students to show up as learners and contributors, and invites democratic participation among class members. In order to (re)make or a (re)build what has been damaged or severed in our society, RJ as a pedagogical approach in the classroom provides an opportunity for everyone to play a role in restoring or creating deeper connections among participants of diverse identities and life experiences.

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## Appendix A

### Cultural Hegemony & Critical Media Literacy: Political Media Product Analysis

Critical media literacy is a skill set that allows you to interrogate how power, media, and audiences interact. These skills allow you to identify cultural hegemony in action. This assignment requires you to consider each of the below categories and apply each question to a political media product of your choice. By analyzing your chosen political media product in light of these questions, you will strengthen your critical media literacy skills. This will make you better able to analyze the politics and power dynamics that influence how media products are designed, delivered, and decoded.

Complete your assignment by taking the following steps:

1. Select two media products – **one video and one printed news article**. Both should be related to an aspect of American politics and both should be focused on the **same issue**.
  - a. One of your selections should exemplify the communication of societal values that you consider to be **“commonly held.”**
  - b. Your other selection should exemplify communication of a **counter-hegemonic** narrative.
2. Review and respond to all of the questions in each category for both media products.
3. Type up your answers to your selected questions into a short essay. You should have a minimum of five pages of analysis.
4. In addition to your five pages, write an additional one-page reflection addressing the following questions: a) What are your thoughts on our ability to use critical media literacy to identify and challenge cultural hegemony? b) Do you believe critical media skills are necessary in our current political climate? Explain why or why not. c) Compare how you consumed media before this assignment and how you consume it now. Do you think you will consume media differently in the future? d) What is your plan for using and developing your critical media literacy skills?
5. Upload original copies of both media products along with your written assignment.

#### I. Ideas to consider: Media are constructions

- A. Media products are created by individuals who make conscious and unconscious choices about what to include, what to leave out, and how to present what is included.
- B. These decisions are based on the creators’ own point of view, which will have been shaped by their opinions, assumptions, and biases—as well as media they have been exposed to.
- C. As a result of this, media products are never entirely accurate reflections of the real world—even the most objective documentary filmmaker has to decide what footage to use and what to cut, as well as where to put the camera.
- D. In spite of this, we instinctively view many media products as direct representations of what is real.

#### Questions to ask about media constructions:

- Who created this media product?
- What is its purpose?
- What assumptions or beliefs do its creators have that are reflected in the content?
- In what ways does this media support cultural hegemony or offer a counter-hegemonic narrative? Are there elements of both? Explain

#### II. Ideas to consider: Audiences negotiate meaning

- A. The meaning of any media product is not created solely by its producers but is, instead, a collaboration between them and the audience—which means that different audiences can take away different meanings from the same product.
- B. Media literacy encourages us to understand how individual factors, such as age, gender, race, and social status affect our interpretations of media.

**Questions to ask about meaning making:**

- How might different people see this media product differently?
- How does this make you feel, based on how similar or different you are from the people portrayed in the media product?

**III. Ideas to consider: Media have commercial implications**

- A. Most media production is a business and must, therefore, make a profit. In addition, media industries belong to a powerful network of corporations that exert influence on content and distribution.
- B. A relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read, and hear in the media. Even in cases where media content is not made for profit—such as YouTube videos and Facebook posts—the ways in which content is distributed are nearly always run with profit in mind.

**Questions to ask about media's commercial implications:**

- What is the commercial purpose of this media product (in other words, how will it help someone make money)?
- How does this influence the content and how it's communicated?
- If no commercial purpose can be found, what other purposes might the media product have (for instance, to get attention for its creator or to convince audiences of a particular point of view)?
- How do those purposes influence the content and how it's communicated?

**IV. Ideas to consider: Media have social and political implications**

- A. Media convey ideological messages about values, power, and authority.
- B. In media literacy, what or who is absent may be more important than what or who is included.
- C. These messages may be the result of conscious decisions, but more often they are the result of unconscious biases and unquestioned assumptions—and they can have a significant influence on what we think and believe.
- D. As a result, media have great influence on politics and on forming social change.
- E. TV news coverage and advertising can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image. Representations of world issues, both in journalism and fiction, can affect how much attention they receive, and society's views towards different groups can be directly influenced by how—and how often—they appear in media.

**Questions to ask about media's social and political implications:**

- Who and what is shown in a positive light? In a negative light?
- Why might these people and things be shown this way?
- Are these images racialized? Why or why not?
- Who and what is not shown at all?
- What conclusions might audiences draw based on these facts?

## Appendix B

### Restorative Justice: An Internal Assessment

**Overview:** Restorative Justice is a model used within educational and criminal justice environments that encourages accountability, compassion, self-reflection, and understanding of how we, as human beings, participate in processes that both harm and heal one another. Beyond these institutions, Restorative Justice is a way of life that influences how we see ourselves and other humans in social interactions.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this activity is to encourage students to see how a Restorative Justice Paradigm may aide them in their everyday interactions.

**Assignment:**

1. Using Restorative Justice in our everyday lives requires an understanding of who we are as individuals. To gain a bit more insight into yourself, please complete the [Emotional Intelligence Inventory](#).
2. What did you learn about yourself when you finished the inventory? Provide a brief overview of the findings.
3. Keeping in mind the core aspects of RJ, discuss how your Emotional Intelligence findings relate to using a Restorative Justice philosophy in your everyday interactions?

**NOTE:** These questions may be addressed in a Community Circle where students are provided the opportunity to discuss what they learned about themselves as well as how what they learned relates to the principles of Restorative Justice.