



INTERSECTIONS

Ten Counterproductive Behaviors of Social Justice Educators

August 22, 2015 by Cody Charles, Guest Writer — [Leave a Comment](#)

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[Image description: The photograph shows the author, a black man with a short beard and mustache, close-cut hair, and black-rimmed glasses. He is wearing a blue sweater over a plaid shirt and a gray t-shirt. He is smiling and looking directly into the camera.]

I have been struggling with “how” to do the work so many of us call social justice. I understand the “why,” or I at least think I do. I am on a journey to understand my role in changing the world, which is no doubt a privilege. It has taken me quite a while to get over the fear of doing the work “correctly” and to instead begin operating from the heart and continuously challenge my perspective.

As I began to engage this work in a healthier manner, I noticed patterns of bad habits that “we” educators exhibited while actively being change agents. These habits, in the name of justice and equity, get in the way of making authentic, strategic, and sustaining change. Below are 10 Counterproductive Behaviors of Social Justice Educators, all explored from the unique intersections of my privileged and oppressed lens.

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1. Shaming our allies. Instead, let's educate.

Be careful on how we hold others "accountable." At times, we as educators fall into this righteous place where we live for the moment to be "right," but more so to impose the wrath of our rightness. We lose track of educating and become "social justice avengers." We thrash anyone who makes mistakes or does not acknowledge their privilege, mostly out of ignorance. When we act as such, we instill fear and frustration in our allies, effectively immobilizing them. Before you respond/react, ask yourself what you want the result to be? Proving that you are closer to "right," or developing a stronger, more capable ally?

2. Leading with our oppressed identities and forgetting that we have immense privilege, too.

How is it that we are some of the first people to forget that we are amazingly privileged? Being male, middle class, able-bodied, Christian, young, educated, etc. oozes from our pores. It is our very being. And colluding is as simple as breathing in the gift of air. Let's own our STUFF!! Recognize and acknowledge when we have the wind behind us. Be committed to your growth and allow yourself to be challenged on the identities we often leave unexplored.

3. Creating competition around being the best at "social justice" and using language as a way to exclude.

We all know individuals who lead conversations with big words and no context. After they are done speaking, most people are completely lost, and so is the message. Correct use of rhetoric is important, but we must be careful that it doesn't become jargon. Additionally, we cannot become upset when we are asked to explain or define a handful of the words used or ideas explored. How often do we use language to exclude? How often is it intentional or unintentional? Does using the "right" and "smart sounding" language validate our being in some way?

4. Leading with emotions instead of thinking and acting strategically.

How often do we just sound off? For some of us, we lose our darn minds. There are moments where we just can't quite hold ourselves together; however, that cannot be our response the majority of the time (see self-healing, below). As Arthur Chickering said, we must learn to manage our emotions. This serves as more proof that we are not as developed as we would love to think. If we are going to do this work, we have to engage strategically... with the end in mind. Our response needs to produce the results that we would like to see. Sometimes our response will show up as joy, compromise, understanding, and empathy. Other times, it will show up as frustration, anger, and disappointment. However, every response should have a purpose, which is a fine line with maintaining authenticity. We impede the fight for justice when we act out of thoughtless emotion.

5. Not acknowledging our self-work.

We MUST acknowledge that we are a work in progress; we both challenge the oppressive systems and collude in them simultaneously. At every step we have to understand that we are not the authorities, but facilitators of dynamic conversations. And we will often fall short. We are at times engaging from places with tremendous hurt and an abundance of privilege. It makes sense that we have off moments or are flat out missing something because of our privilege. We are not the best at allowing ourselves to be challenged. When we block our self-work, it means that we are no longer growing and that we are role-modeling destructive behavior to others. For example, it is highly problematic to be an expert in gender identity and expression and have no understanding of the intersections of those identities within race and class.

6. Caught in constant surprise that people don't know what we know.

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This is something I see all the time and often participate in: being absolutely blindsided by the amount of knowledge that my peers, students, and even superiors lack in regards to justice and equity. The definition of privilege is that it is unearned, unasked for, and often INVISIBLE. If someone is oblivious to injustice, chances are they are unaware of their privilege. We KNOW this, so why are we so surprised and disgusted? This is the work that we have committed our lives to. We have to develop thicker skins. Not to say that we won't ever be frustrated, shaken up, or even experience immense hurt and pain. These moments will happen, but this is our calling. It is not supposed to be easy. At times, we are supposed to put the cause before ourselves. Don't get me wrong, self-care is important; however, we need to be in rooms and spaces where we are constantly and strategically raising the temperature. Meet students and colleagues where they are and challenge them to be more.

7. Choosing not to challenge family members and elders.

This is JUST a Cody observation, but I notice that quite a few communities give their elders a pass. We choose not to challenge them or set our expectations. However, we have absolutely no problem setting colleagues and strangers "straight." Hypocrite much? Yes, I understand that our elders may choose not to change, but since when are our conversations about changing minds? We should be about expanding thought and creating new questions, and I think this transcends age and authority. This work is hard and emotionally draining; however, we must be vigilant in all areas.

8. Marginalizing the courage it takes to allow your reality to be dismantled.

Have you experienced that moment where everything that you thought you knew was ripped out of your hands? Scratch that. Not hands, but your heart and soul? Everything that you hold true being constantly challenged and put on display? The way you viewed your family unit? When you discovered your mother's truth was just that, her truth? When your question transitioned from *who am I*, to *why am I*? We are charged with dismantling the life experiences of many, knocking down the walls of resistance and ignorance, but additionally moving with care and intentionality. Let's NEVER forget what we are asking people to do.

9. Refusing to hold multiple truths.

How are we creating dynamic change if we do not allow ourselves to fully think through the pros and cons of ideas? How often are we truly weighing the greater good? I LOVE film; watching and analyzing movies is certainly one of my favorite hobbies. Actors amaze me. Their gift can be mystically transformative, but I can hold multiple truths. Whoopi Goldberg is great in *Ghost* and deserved an Oscar for her acting; however, if you broke down her character, you would see that it is a glorified mammy caricature. Julia Roberts is absolutely charming in *Pretty Woman*, but she is also led and dominated by the gender role that is "man." *Teach for America* provides an experience where the privileged have an opportunity to engage oppressed communities. Many of these students will be policy makers and fall into influential positions. However, it also promotes the idea of the white savior, *oops*. We have to be able to engage multiple truths in order to move forward strategically.

10. Challenging others to heal by erasing their pain.

STOP! Please phrase this differently. At times, we say this to others as if they should forget their pain and move on. I'm certain that this is not the INTENT; however, on many occasions, it is the IMPACT. We are effectively marginalizing their experiences. What I think we really want to encourage is exploring that pain. Understand the origins and the emotions in the now, and then figure out how to manage the pain and use it strategically for fuel to both continue in the work and grow in perspective.

This is not an exhaustive list of behaviors or meant to be a list that everyone agrees with. My hope is



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that it starts a much-needed conversation between educators. I think we have a lot of room to grow and can do a better job of holding each other accountable. As social justice educators, we have all agreed to continue to critique and explore the problematic ways in which we show up in spaces. This post is to help start conversation and perhaps explore self-work practices.

“ If you don't understand, ask questions. If you're uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It's easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding.

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americana*

[Headline image: The photograph shows three young black adults sitting next to one another at a table. The person in the foreground is a young man with short black hair and a short-sleeved black t-shirt. The person in the center is a young woman with long black hair and a short-sleeved blue t-shirt. The person at the end is a young man with short black hair and a short-sleeved blue t-shirt. All are looking into the camera and smiling.]

Cody Charles serves as an Associate Director for Academic Enrichment in the Office of Multicultural Affairs at the University of Kansas. He has a passion for topics on social justice and leadership. He is a graduate of the [Social Justice Training Institute](#) and serves as a National Co-Lead for the [LeaderShape Insitute](#). Cody was recognized by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) as the Outstanding New Professional in Residence Life in 2008 and by NASPA – IV West for the Regional Publication Award for the Little Magazine. His twitter handle is [@_codykeith_](#).

This piece first appeared on Cody's site, [Consult Cody](#), and is reprinted here by permission.



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