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Unlearning: First Steps Toward an Anti-oppressive Information Literacy

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> *You can't say you respect people and not respect their experiences.*
>
> *—Horton and Freire*[1]

Anti-oppressive pedagogy acknowledges that there are inequities and oppressive hegemonic structures within classrooms and aims to minimize the effects of these structures. Applying anti-oppressive pedagogy requires the acknowledgement that students are unique individuals and that the manifestation of oppression such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression are also unique to the individual. As a result, the anti-oppressive classroom must be flexible and responsive. Unlearning is a key element of anti-oppressive pedagogy. This chapter explores the complicated process of unlearning in anti-oppressive pedagogy by providing an example of librarians' implementation of this concept in their instruction. In a traditional one-shot" library session transformed into a workshop, students within a faculty of education critically examined the biases and prejudices within the curriculum and library resources, as well as their own unintentional biases in selecting the *best* resources for curricula. Through this process, the students became aware of the multiple oppressive structures at play when designing a simple lesson and the curriculum at large.

Anti-oppressive Pedagogy

Teaching with an anti-oppressive pedagogy consists of several complex elements. While unable to take up all aspects, this chapter will focus on one example, which

addresses identifying, understanding, and starting the process of unlearning. Unlearning is the process of recognizing and addressing the fact that white, patriarchal, capitalist, colonial systems of privilege permeate all of our systems as well as our experiences within those systems. Through unlearning we challenge and destabilize the dominant values around us.

The application of anti-oppressive pedagogy acknowledges that manifestations of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and ableism are not a singular occurrence or experience applicable to all members of one particular social group.[2] Oppression is intersectional. It is a congregation of multiple, overlapping personal experiences of prejudice and power that is deeply contextual and suffered differently by each person.[3] Anti-oppressive pedagogy calls for educators to acknowledge these experiences and the different ways in how two individuals can experience oppression.[4] By way of personal example, we are members of the LGBTQ2S+ community and work in the same Canadian academic library: Selinda is a cisgender, white, queer female who grew up in a more rural and predominantly conservative region of Canada; Scott, a former middle school and high school teacher, is a cisgender, white gay male who grew up in a more urban and liberal part of the country. While we recognize we have both experienced oppression and bigotry in our lives, we know that the events and consequences differ. This understanding is also reflected in our professional practice. In particular, we aim to take an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach to our teaching. A key starting point in anti-oppressive pedagogy is an understanding that each student is unique and an acknowledgement that their relationship to and experience of inequity and oppression is also unique. Anti-oppressive pedagogy emphasizes that individual experiences of oppression or marginalization—that of being something other than the "norm" of social power—permeates and influences the experiences, and in turn interactions, for each person differently.

Anti-oppressive pedagogy seeks to actively challenge systems of oppression and create an environment where students can develop what Freire refers to as *conscientization*, a critical consciousness that will empower them to enact change within and against oppressive systems.[5] A key element in this process is that of "unlearning" for both teacher and student. Students and teachers must put aside and discard what they have "previously learned as 'normal' or normative."[6] Teachers and students are asked to disrupt those ideas that perpetuate white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and colonial systems of privilege as normal. Going through this unlearning, or "awakening" to oppression and injustice,[7] is challenging and can lead students to feel guilty, defensive, or helpless as they acknowledge past behaviours and confront their privileges.[8] This point of discomfort is complex and is not a quick process. Creating time and space for students to work through this unlearning is crucial.

For librarians, who are often limited in the time that they spend with students in the classroom, finding ways to critically engage students with an anti-oppressive

pedagogy can be challenging. Faced with time restrictions, skills-based point-and-click sessions focused on information retrieval can become a default.[9] However, this default approach reinforces the power structure of *instructor-as-expert*, where instructors simply disseminate information to students, erasing the students' understanding and experiences and creating a one-sided conversation. Additionally, students are not given the opportunity to critically engage with and reflect on the information sources. In contrast, anti-oppressive pedagogy seeks to create an environment where students and teachers explore their understandings, biases, and behaviours together to move beyond their current understanding of power, privilege, and oppression. This approach encourages a *culture of questioning*, where students and instructor work together to acknowledge and question the environment in which they exist.[10] In turn, adopting an anti-oppressive pedagogy approach could move librarians closer to a "praxis that promotes critical engagement with information sources, considers students collaborators in knowledge production practices (and creators in their own right), recognizes the affective dimensions of research, and (in some cases) has liberatory aims."[11] Moving toward a structure where students are fellow collaborators requires a change in *how* we teach critical information literacy, not just *what* we teach.

These changes include the instructor acknowledging students as whole beings with complex lives and experiences and validating those stories and experiences as truth.[12] Students and instructors must acknowledge their own power and privilege and acknowledge that the experiences of others are different and equally valid. This recognition that every individual, and every class, is unique negates the ability to teach every class in the same way or to expect every class to be similar. Attempting to teach all classes with the same approach or expecting all classes to be similar ignores the intersectional and overlapping nature of oppression.[13] There is no singular, cookie-cutter, or "correct" method for developing a critical consciousness in students; rather, it requires the instructor to be responsive to the experiences and reactions of the class. This need for flexibility, openness, and responsiveness is reinforced within a classroom where the hegemonic structures that situate the instructor-as-expert are broken down. The classroom transforms into a community of learners, including the instructor, who listen, respond, and grow with and from one another. Any expectation that one can duplicate a classroom experience or standardize an approach reverts the classroom back to the hegemonic structure that reinforces the "banking concept" of education,[14] in which students are empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge of the instructor and repeat it back; an input-output approach without any critical thinking.

In summary, anti-oppressive pedagogy can be challenging to instructors because it requires instructors to acknowledge their own biases and to be vulnerable. It also requires instructors to carefully balance planning with the ability to change or modify the lesson on the go. Anti-oppressive pedagogy calls upon the instructor to actively engage with the content and the students as means to developing a *culture of questioning*[15]—an environment where students and instructors work together to

take notice of and to question the ideologies, messages, and representations they encounter. In turn, students move toward developing a critical consciousness in which they become aware of, and enact change within, systems of power.

A Library Classroom Example

Librarians may be restricted in time and space with students, but we still have the ability to engage classes meaningfully using an anti-oppressive pedagogy. Presented here is a snapshot of one way in which the principles of anti-oppressive pedagogy can be integrated in the library classroom. The following is an example of a two-hour workshop/instruction session I (Scott) had with a group of students within the Faculty of Education at our university.

A faculty member from the Faculty of Education asked me to work with her students/teacher candidates, in the English Methodologies course, a course designed to teach approaches to teaching English language arts in middle school and high school. I was allotted two out of the three hours of the weekly scheduled class. The faculty member asked for a demonstration of the ready-made lesson plan resources and accompanying curriculum kits or manipulatives in our Curriculum Resource Centre and to discuss some basics of implementing one of the lessons during student practicum placements. Knowing that some of the resources were older and generic, I proposed an approach that would help the teacher candidates develop more critically based lessons and classrooms that they could continue to implement as teachers in their future classrooms. The faculty member enthusiastically agreed.

In Ontario, the bachelor of education is a consecutive or concurrent degree. As such, all of these teacher-candidates would have had, or would be currently working on, a previous or separate undergraduate degree. I did not know each teacher-candidate's understanding of oppression, bias, racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism, but I presumed that they were aware of the existence of or definitions of these concepts. I focused on the process of understanding and unlearning personal, implicit bias in the classroom. This learning would also assist them in their own future classrooms, which will be composed of students from various social groups who experience forms of oppression. In consideration of the time restrictions, I decided to place the resources, not the individuals, at the center of critique to help each teacher-candidate draw parallels to society before they reflected on themselves.

Setting the Groundwork

To start the session, I introduced myself, shared a brief overview of our time together, spoke about the importance of inclusivity in the classroom, and shared my own

experience as a student and former teacher. I made sure to include some of my successes and failures as a teacher. I included the failures to illustrate that we all face difficult moments and to illustrate ways I could have made the situation better. I then shared a well-known quote widely attributed to Maya Angelou: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."[16] I hoped that sharing these experiences would demonstrate my openness to learning from others, including the students.

Some time was spent talking about some of the principles underlying oppression and inclusiveness. Students were encouraged to come from a place of curiosity and honesty; to be willing to hear, accept, and believe others; to treat everyone respectfully. They were encouraged to acknowledge, apologize, and move on from mistakes rather than dwell on them and feel guilty. I emphasized that I, too, as someone who focuses on issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, make mistakes. I explained that I may make an error when speaking or may use an outdated term at times, and I encouraged them to correct me if I did; we were to act as a community of learners where we all learn from each other. I gave the example that as a cisgender gay man, I consciously, and for particular reasons, use the word *Queer* to refer to the LGBTQ2S+ community; however, some people within the LGBTQ2S+ community do not like the use of that term. I encouraged them to ask why I use the term if they wanted to discuss it or needed clarification but also said that if the use of that term made someone uncomfortable, they could let me know, publicly or privately, and I would use the term they preferred for the rest of our session. Students were also encouraged to push themselves to the boundaries of their own comfort zone as a means to feed their curiosity, ask questions, while avoiding shutting down, blocking out, or becoming unwilling to listen to or try new ideas. I recommended every student allow this class to be a judgment-free community where it is safe to try new ideas, make mistakes, and learn from others. Students who were nervous to speak in front of the class or ask specific questions were welcome to have a discussion with me privately. Finally, I reassured students that I would not judge.

It is difficult for students to trust that the librarian in front of them, someone they are possibly meeting for the first time, will not judge them. I hoped that providing information about myself and demonstrating my willingness to be corrected and change my language would help ease the students and lay some groundwork for creating a community for the rest of our time together. To help encourage questions, I then shared a quote attributed to John Abbott: "'How do you know so much about everything?' was asked of a very wise and intelligent man; and the answer was 'By never being afraid or ashamed to ask questions as to anything of which I was ignorant.'" I followed up by giving a short explanation about why I love questions and the importance of questions in our learning about oppression and inclusiveness.

Identifying Power and Privilege

The teacher-candidates were then divided into small groups of two or three and asked to examine two ready-made lesson plans from the resources, one physical and one electronic. They were asked to fill out a handout (appendix A) based on Swanson's questions to challenge implicit and explicit biases[17] and walk-through questions such as these: Whose voice is most present/represented? Whose voice or knowledge gets left out? Does this lesson require knowledge of specific cultural references (e.g., a fairy tale or an analogy/metaphor)? What are the physical requirements to complete this lesson (do students have to move around a lot)? This part of the lesson was intended to underline the prevalence of power and privilege in these resources and lead to a discussion about implicit bias.

As the teacher-candidates worked through the handout, I walked among the groups to help answer questions and provide guidance. Approximately ten minutes was allotted for the handout, but the flow of the class was taken into account to begin a full class discussion once most of the students were finished. During the full class discussion, students quickly identified that most lesson plans were geared toward white, middle-class children with English as a first language. The missing voices and representation of racialized and queer communities were also called out. However, the biggest surprise for me was that, in a class where the vast majority of students were women, no one mentioned the missing representation of women. There was a definitive stunned silence when I pointed this out. Several women were visibly taken aback and responded with quiet comments of "oh" or "whoa." This stunned silence provided an opportunity to ask why the students thought they didn't realize that women's voices and representation were missing. Comments from female students included "I guess I'm just used to it," "It was the same literature I remember learning from," and "This literature is just what we teach—they're classics." As a cisgender male, I asked some women to elaborate on their experiences as women and of having their voices omitted. I then asked students to elaborate on their experiences studying literature in the middle school, high school, and university classrooms. In particular I asked what materials they studied by women and whether this mattered. Some cisgender heterosexual male students questioned whether it was their job, and worth the extra work, to provide such material in the classroom. They suggested that this was "protecting the classics." In response, one student identified themselves as part of the Queer community and spoke of their frustration not seeing themselves represented in their classrooms or curriculum.

The discussion led to an exciting and unplanned discussion around Emily Style's notion that the curriculum should be a *window and mirror,*[18] where students are able to see themselves reflected back at themselves and also see what's possible in their future. I let this discussion go on with minimal intervention so I could also learn from the experiences and knowledge of the teacher-candidates. My original lesson

plan was designed with different prompt questions in case of minimal or sparse discussion. However, based on the students' robust and in-depth discussion and participation, I decided to ignore my prepared prompts and let the students lead us in a different direction. This responsiveness, as noted, is critical when taking an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach.

Identifying Implicit Bias in Ourselves

The teacher-candidates were then asked to take the learning objectives of the lesson plan they had chosen and imagine how they may re-create the lesson to be more inclusive—ensuring objectives were met but adjusting the approach, or *how* they taught the lesson, to match students in two different classrooms. To assist them, the teacher-candidates received a second handout that included a scenario of a realistic classroom. In this scenario, the school and classroom were identified as racially, culturally, and religiously diverse and the makeup of the students in each class changed (appendix B).

Shortly after the teacher-candidates started the second worksheet, they became frustrated. Based on the discussion that came from the previous exercise, I decided to start a full-class discussion instead of continuing with the handout and furthering students' frustration. I expected the frustrations from the teacher-candidates to be centered around perceptions that the assignment was unrealistic. In contrast, the frustration arose from implicit biases and assumptions about students, behaviours, and societal norms. For example, one student remarked that those afraid to take risks "just have to learn to step out of their comfort zone" or students had to "pick themselves up by the bootstraps/suck it up and do the assignment as asked." It was unnecessary for me to point out the bias embedded in the statement because another student did so by identifying themselves as "one of those high school students" and explaining why the comment was inaccurate. These comments led to a conversation among the teacher-candidates around introverts, extroverts, cultural differences, understanding expectations and cultural references, meeting teacher and family expectations, and challenging power and authority. With subtle facilitation, students started to make the connection between our first activity and their own implicit bias.

Beginning the Process of Unlearning

At this point, a few of the teacher-candidates started to reach what Kumashiro refers to as *crisis,*[19] where feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and helplessness emerge as they acknowledge their privilege or past behaviours. This place of crisis "can lead in one of many directions—such as liberating change, or toward more entrenched resistance."[20]

This was a crucial moment of unlearning for the teacher-candidates. I recognized that I had limited time with them and wanted to avoid anyone feeling like they were on display and directed the conversation back to the resources and how we may improve upon them, knowing what we know now and after learning from each other. The students continued to demonstrate their learning by recognizing how they could use the resources as a starting point to incorporate ideas they learned from each other during our discussions, address the missing voices, and make the lesson relevant to the students directly in their class. We discussed how they could do this while still infusing their own experiences and personality and meeting the needs of their students. Through the large-group discussion, it was clear that the teacher-candidates started to understand that individuals—student and teachers alike—had unique experiences, understandings, or expectations. The teacher-candidates also recognized that the lesson plan that they were creating was more about the students as whole people, rather than as empty vessels waiting for the teacher to fill with their knowledge.[21] We were able to wrap up the discussion with ideas for finding more information and resources to integrate the experiences of racialized and marginalized communities. It is noteworthy that many great resources were suggested by the teacher-candidates themselves, and I wrote down the suggestions for purchase by the library—again, more opportunity for me to learn, grow, and demonstrate the process through the experience.

As a wrap-up, or what is referred to as an "exit slip," I often end my class by asking students to share five things they learned or will take away from our time together. In this instance, the takeaways included "Our teaching should be a mirror and window," "Everyone is different and brings something different to our classroom; we can't just teach cookie-cutter lessons," and my favourite one that I will never forget, "It's not about me." These comments, especially the last one, underscored that the teacher-candidates were starting to understand the importance of critically examining the resources they use in their classroom and thinking about how the resources may or may not reflect the diversity of identities and experiences within the classroom. They started to see the potential pitfalls, assumptions, and biases of a ready-made lesson and recognize that there are better ways to meet the disparate needs of a diverse classroom. Overall, the teacher-candidates expressed an appreciation for recognizing the uniqueness of individuals and their experiences.

Anti-oppressive Pedagogy in the Library Classroom

Becoming aware of one's unconscious bias is paramount to starting the process of unlearning, but it also takes time and often requires repetition. Instructors will not necessarily see or know of any immediate or lasting impact of their teaching. The

acceptance, and understanding, of unconscious bias, power, and privilege can take time to settle in or "click." Unlearning and challenging forms of oppression takes time and supportive spaces to make mistakes. Librarians are able to build a safe learning community that allows for the critical examination of resources and information sources and to identify oppressive and biased components within these resources. This exercise can help facilitate the acknowledgement of learners' own privileges and implicit bias, as well as consideration of their role in systemic forms of oppression.

With the example used in this chapter, although students experienced feelings of discomfort and defensiveness when facing their own privilege and bias, placing the resources at the fore of the critique, and not the person, helped navigate students through their discomfort by allowing them to make connections to their own life. The students made their own connections and applied the work and discussions to their understanding of oppression and their role in or contribution to systems that perpetuate oppression, rather than an accusatory approach where students may have become defensive or disconnected because they felt they already knew the information, knew more than the instructor, or felt the instructor did not understand their experiences.

The example presented here was within a context of a workshop, where the faculty member was flexible with the content and generous with time allotment. There are ways to integrate some of the principles presented here in more rigid settings. In the library classroom, librarians can use examples that generate conversations around the experiences within the classroom and be responsive and flexible to those experiences. Librarians who reject the instructor-as-expert approach can also give students opportunity to share, to teach, and to engage differently. Moving the power from the instructor, especially when exploring bias and oppressive structures, can prevent students rejecting the content, shutting down, and becoming defensive. An anti-oppressive approach to pedagogy sets up the classroom as a community of learners and collaborators. In even the most time-restricted classroom, one can explore "whose voices are missing" by exploring *manels,* or male-dominated panels (see https://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/). In addition to critiquing academic panels with the lens of (binary) gender, one can explore the overall homogeneity of academic panels. It is a way in which we can underline the absence of the voices of people of colour, people with disabilities, people representing the range of sexual and gender diversity. The exploration of manels can be integrated into classroom conversations with approaches as simple as a *Far Side* cartoon and still have significant impact.

By understanding and applying the principles of anti-oppressive pedagogy, librarians recognize that each individual is unique. Librarians overtly acknowledge that there is not one common experience of inequity or oppression. Librarians are flexible in their approach within the classroom and respond to student experiences, knowledge, and expertise. The library classroom becomes a community of learners, where there is an openness by all to learn from one another. Through this work, the library classroom can emerge as a place for learning and unlearning.

Appendix A: Critical Evaluation of Resources Handout 1, English Methodologies

Typical "canned" resources for teachers ostensibly seem to be ideologically neutral. Yet every text (hard copy or online) represents certain ideological stances. In this exercise, we will be thinking about how to critically evaluate resources to consider how they shape the discourse of English studies at the intermediate/senior level.

Name of Resource:
Evaluative Questions:
(a) In scanning through this resource, what type of knowledge gets left out or marginalized? Whose voice is most prevalent? Whose voice(s) is/are missing? Who, and what culture(s), is mostly represented? Who, and what culture(s), is not represented?
(b) What are the most effective components of this resource? What would you do to adapt it, if anything?

(c) What are some of the implicit assumptions about literacy in this resource?

(d) Does this text foster multiple perspectives? Does it encourage a political focus regarding language and/or literary representations in a societal context? If so, in what ways? If not, imagining that you were the textbook editor, how would you suggest the author(s) improve the resource in this sense?

(e) Does this lesson require knowledge of specific cultural references? What are the physical requirements to complete this lesson (e.g., think/ pair/share, moving to different stations, technological requirements)?

Appendix B: Critical Evaluation of Resources Handout 2, English Methodologies

Imagine you are teaching in a school with a large and culturally/religiously diverse student population. Create learning objectives that would match the resource(s) you have been looking at.

Objectives:

How would you utilize the resource(s) to meet your objectives with the following class?

- The majority of students are enthusiastic.
- Some of the students are strong leaders and happy to take learning risks.
- A small group of students are constantly challenging the purpose/reason for doing things.
- Students are comfortable asking questions when they do not know what to do or understand the material.
- One student is in a wheelchair.

Now, your period 2 class arrives, same grade, but with the following makeup of students:

- Two new students that arrived from another country several weeks ago.
- Several students have English as a second or additional language.
- Students are afraid to take risks; many of the students want to know exactly what the teacher expects and how he/she/they want things done or are unwilling to try unless they know they will be successful.

How do you approach this class in a manner that will still meet the same objectives? What changes would be implemented to differentiate from the other class to ensure all students are still learning/meeting stated objectives?

Notes

1. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 178.
2. Kevin K. Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-oppressive Education," *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 25–53; Kevin K. Kumashiro, "Teaching and Learning through Desire, Crisis, and Difference: Perverted Reflections on Anti-oppressive Education." *Radical Teacher* 58 (Fall 2000): 6–11.

3. Paula S. Rothenberg, *Racism and Sexism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Stacy Collins, "Anti-Oppression and Research Guides with Stacy Collins - part 1," interview by Allison Jones and Karen Ng, *Organizing Ideas*, podcast, January 8, 2021,

4. Brandy Humes, "Moving toward a Liberatory Pedagogy for All Species: Mapping the Need for Dialogue between Humane and Anti-oppressive Education," *Green Theory and Praxis: The Journal of Ecopedagogy*, 4, no. 1 (April 2008): 65–85; Lance T. McCready, "Understanding the Marginalization of Gay and Gender Non-conforming Black Male Students," *Theory into Practice* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 136–43; Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 4th ed., ed. Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld, D. Chase J. Catalano, Keri Dejong, Heather W. Hackman, Larissa E. Hopkins, Barbara Love, Madeline L. Peters, Davey Shlasko, and Xiema Zuniga (New York: Routledge, 2018), 35–49.

5. Paulo Freire, "Cultural Action and Conscientization," *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 499–521.

6. Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory," 37.

7. Morton Deutsch and Janice M. Steil, "Awakening the Sense of Injustice," *Social Justice Research*, no. 1 (1988): 3–23.

8. Kumashiro, "Teaching and Learning."

9. Brian M. Kopp and Kim Olson-Kopp, "Depositories of Knowledge: Library Instruction and the Development of Critical Consciousness," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, ed. Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 55–67.

10. Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

11. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, Introduction to *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), xii.

12. Jennifer A. Ferretti, "Building a Critical Culture: How Critical Librarianship Falls Short in the Workplace," *Communications in Information Literacy* 15, no. 1 (2020): 134–52; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

13. Melissa Villa-Nicholas, "Teaching Intersectionality: Pedagogical Approaches for Lasting Impact," *Education for Information* 34, no. 2 (October 2018), 121–33.

14. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

15. Giroux and Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education*.

16. Although the quote is widely used and attributed to Maya Angelou in various forms, no original source can be identified.

17. Troy A. Swanson, "Information Is Personal: Critical Information Literacy and Personal Epistemology," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 265–78.

18. Emily Style, "Curriculum as Window and Mirror," *Social Science Record*, Fall 1996: 35–42.

19. Kumashiro, "Teaching and Learning," 6.

20. Kumashiro, "Teaching and Learning," 7.

21. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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