

Forum: Creating a Better Future

(Part 3 of 3)

Social Justice Teaching in Hard Times: Lessons My Students Have Taught Me

Janise Hurtig, DePaul University

... I am one more immigrant in this country who faces fear every day because of what is happening lately with the raids ... this situation affects me personally, since my husband leaves every day to go to work, and the fear that he will not return keeps me thinking all day long: "Will the *migra* go to his work? Will everything be all right?" I am thankful for the two hours I have in our writing class. I can take my mind off my worries and I can express myself freely. For just a few hours, I feel like myself. (*Daily Fear*, anonymous student writer, Chicago, 2008.)

... Sometimes it is hard for me to concentrate in class, because of all the things that are going on for my family here, and for my family back home. But I try to come to class every day because it is a good distraction from these problems. Beyond that, it is interesting! You are always asking us if what we are studying is interesting. For me, personally, it is all interesting: grammars, history, sciences, maths [sic]. Especially when it is not about my country. That is too sad. (*from a conversation with GED student, Chicago, 2025*)

It's Always Hard Times for Immigrants and Refugees

For the past 25 years I have worked with adult learners in a range of settings: community writing workshops, university classrooms, immigrant worker institutes, bilingual adult high schools, and, most recently, the GED classroom at a community center (hereafter "the Center").¹ As someone who is committed to the principles and practices of social justice education (Nelson & Witte, 2017), I have been fortunate because each of these settings has actively embraced a social justice approach to the education of adults and to serving oppressed communities more generally. This means that the injustices surrounding our students and the educational

spaces we occupy are always front and center. Those injustices are always changing, but they are not new.

Certainly, the policies and practices of the current federal administration are challenging and often terrifying for the adults we work with, particularly immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. And yet, as the passages I opened with illustrate, these challenges are not unique; they are just the most recent—and the most theatrical—assault by government on immigrant and other oppressed communities this country has experienced in recent years.

At the Center, as soon as the federal administration began threatening aggressive, hostile action towards immigrant communities, our program and organizational leadership were quick to convene informational meetings and to confer with staff about policies and practices that would be implemented to regularly educate and protect both staff and clients. Because we serve a predominantly immigrant community, we recognized our vulnerabilities and prepared for the worst, even as we took measures to maintain a sense of normalcy and routine.

At the same time, we faced the challenge of how to engage in programmatic efforts to support such social justice values as equity and inclusion in a veiled way so as to not draw attention to the organization and potentially put federal funding streams at risk. Over the course of several discussions among administrative and program staff, we concurred that as an organization we would continue to base the practices of our programs on those values, whether or not we explicitly named them as such. This means that we recognize and celebrate the diversity

¹ Given current governmental attacks on immigrant-serving organizations, I do not provide the name of the community organization where I teach but simply refer to it as "the Center."

of our staff and clients; we offer the supports necessary so that staff and clients can participate equally in both delivering and receiving the programs and services the organization offers; and we emphasize the contributions staff and clients make to families, community, and the wider society, never reducing them to their struggles even as we aim to mitigate those struggles. In other words, the Center would simply continue to be the social justice organization it has always been.

Which begs the question: what exactly should those practices be, in these times of hostile, cruel, and chaotic assaults on immigrants and refugees? I propose that, for those of us grounded in principles of social justice education (Adams & Bell, 2016; Ayers, 2004), it is necessary but not sufficient to educate ourselves and our students about this current reality; it is at least as important for us to learn from the adult learners we work with about what they want and need to learn and *how* they want to be learning . . . in these continuously dire times.

In this reflective essay, I share three lessons the students in my GED class have taught me that are relevant to, but also extend beyond, the current national context. These include lessons about the kind of content students prefer to study, lessons about balancing the teaching of students' civil and human rights with a consideration of current realities, and lessons about how to create a learning space that is not only safe but also joyful and supportive. Before embarking on that discussion, however, I want to note that while my narrative focuses on my experiences working primarily with immigrants and refugees, these lessons are applicable to any and all adult learners who occupy marginalized positions in our society.

Whose Stories Do We Teach, Which Versions Do We Learn?

Why is Black History Month all about slavery and Jim Crow? I already know about the suffering of my people; I want to learn more about all we have achieved! (Comment of an African American GED student during Black History Month)

Some of my family came here as *braceros* [seasonal farm workers], and all we heard about was how they were treated so badly, but how they just put up with it. Like this idea of the weak and humble Mexican. I never knew that they really kept farming going in this country during WWII.... that they were war heroes in a way . . . (Comment of a GED student of Mexican origin who came to the United States as a teenager)

As some of you may be aware, the revised GED test (as of 2014) not only aligns with national college and career standards; it also focuses heavily on close and critical reading skills. This, it turns out, is a real advantage for social justice-oriented educators like myself, because it means we can introduce a wide range of content into our classrooms as long as we engage students in close reading tasks that foster nuanced and critical understanding of texts and images, including a consideration of underlying assumptions and power dynamics inherent in or communicated through the text. This means it is even possible to prepare students for the GED test while raising critical questions about the history and content of the GED test itself.

Even as we emphasize critical reading skills, it is all too easy for social justice educators to believe that, as advocates for our students, we should focus primarily on readings that explore the systemic injustices our students and their communities have faced or currently face (Cochran-Smith, 2009). However, as adult learners from a wide range of backgrounds have taught me, having students read about the experiences of oppression and suffering they, their communities, and their ancestors have faced can be reductive and demoralizing if it is not balanced with readings about their people's strengths and achievements. This is as true for teaching about African American history during Black History Month as it is for teaching about the history of immigrant farm labor, or the current wave of brutalities faced by immigrants and refugees in our classrooms. In my own teaching, it was because of the lessons I learned from the African American student who longed to learn more about her people's brilliance and resilience that I later found readings during a unit on migrants and migrations in the 20th century United States on the contributions of migrant workers to the country's economic and cultural development.

It perhaps goes without saying that one of the most meaningful ways to engage with students in their own histories and current stories is through reading and writing personal narrative. Giving students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in what they read is validating; giving students the opportunity to share their experiences with each other is humanizing. Drawing from my experiences teaching community writing workshops over the past 25 years, when I

incorporate writing into GED class, I provide writing prompts that are fairly open-ended so that students have the freedom to describe and reflect on their realities as they choose—always with the possibility of emphasizing their strengths and successes, their dreams and determination, and not just their pain and suffering, as significant as that certainly is. Here are a few writing prompts that students have found to be meaningful, while also building a strong sense of community as students shared their writings with each other:

- Something I would like you to know about me.
- My journey to this country OR My journey to GED class.
- How I overcame a challenge in my life.
- A time I stood up for myself or for someone else.
- My goals for this class OR My goals for my future.

These kinds of writing prompts also allow students to decide how they want to engage with the hardships they face. Much like readings that highlight struggles and victories in the face of injustices, these prompts allow students to write about their lives in a way that redeems them as subjects of their experiences.

If I Stand Up for My Rights, Will I Get Deported?

Since the current federal administration began deploying ICE officers to carry out raids in immigrant communities, teaching staff at the Center have been sharing information about federal, state, and local policies, including “Know Your Rights” brochures prepared by immigrant advocacy organizations, that we can share with our students. In my classroom, we explore the notion of rights at the beginning of each 10-week session as we study the principles of the U.S. Constitution, the rights and responsibilities of citizens and residents, and the centrality of those rights and responsibilities to a democracy—a topic that, it turns out, appears regularly in the GED social studies test! We then create our classroom’s “Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.” We also study civil rights, worker rights, and human rights, in the process learning about those individuals, groups, and movements that have fought for and defended people’s rights in this country

and in students’ countries-of-origin. Because many students in my class are not only informed about, but have themselves participated in such struggles in their home countries, giving students the opportunity to read, write, and talk about these topics¹ helps to create a classroom environment in which we are all teacher and learners—a core principle of social justice education. (Hurtig & Adams, 2010; Freire, 2005).

The students I teach often come from countries where civilians’ rights are *not* protected; therefore, many students approach the study of civil rights and worker rights with a critical skepticism that they apply to the current situation in the United States. On the one hand, students know that the Center has put in place measures to protect staff and clients, and each of our classrooms is labeled as a “private space.” On the other hand, most students are aware of instances in which individuals who asserted their rights have nonetheless been detained by ICE agents. They have thus asked whether, indeed, they are protected by their “First Amendment rights”—whether it is indeed safe to assert one’s rights if approached by an officer or an ICE official. Because I teach a class that is hybrid (in-person and online), some students have shifted to online participation, even though they would rather learn in person. These students know that we support them, and that we will always encourage them to put their safety and well-being first. Indeed, one of the “rights” the students wrote into their GED Class Bill of Rights and Responsibilities is “to put their health and well-being and that of their families first.”

One of the premises of a democratic and socially just classroom is not simply that the teacher takes responsibility to ensure the curriculum is relevant (that, after all, is a basic principle of adult learning theories), but that they explicitly ask students what they would like to study. On a few occasions I have been approached by students who have found discussion of the current dynamics facing immigrants and refugees to be very stressful, even triggering past trauma. Other students would like the material we study to provide them with a critical and historical understanding of current events. And then there are those learners who are, as one put it, “neutral,” finding anything and everything

¹ A great resource for teaching more advanced adult learners about social justice issues across subject areas in the online magazine *The Change Agent*.

interesting. How to navigate these diverging dispositions as we explore injustices while practicing justice is a form of “differentiating instruction” rarely discussed in professional development forums, and a practice I continue to negotiate.

Beyond a Safe Space: Classrooms as Spaces of Empathy and Joy

I would like to turn on my Zoom video, Teacher, but my computer isn't working right now. (Feedback from a student who participates in class on Zoom.)

Yes, I am here in class, Teacher. I am just too tired to participate more because I am working the night shift now. (Feedback from a student who participates in class on Zoom.)

I am sorry I am leaving my cellphone on, Teacher, but I have family emergencies back home. (Comment from a student after their cell phone rang during class.)

Like so many organizations that provide ESL, ABE, and HSE classes to adults, the Center's educational program is expected to meet certain benchmarks in order to maintain its state and federal funding. As a result, even in the most supportive of environments, there is an undercurrent of standardized achievement pressure that can seep into instructional practices. At the same time, we all want the adult learners we work with to accomplish their learning goals, and sometimes we can confuse encouragement with pressure. And yet, we all recognize that adult learners, even in the best of times, have complicated lives filled with multiple responsibilities and challenges that can disrupt their routines and impede their learning. Under current

circumstances, these challenges are tremendous.

Over my years of working with adult learners, my tendency has been towards flexibility and accommodation in matters of attendance, participation, cell phone use, and the like. It was while writing this essay that I realized how, ironically, I had let the official culture of the current federal administration of disciplining and punishing that has become so pervasive, so incessant, to seep into my own instructional practice. Rather than push back against that inhumanity, I had begun to internalize a disciplinary sensibility, focusing my attention on students' punctuality, Zoom habits, cellphone use. . . precisely at a time in their lives when the classroom needed to be a space of acceptance, support, appreciation, and humanization. None of my students complained about this shift in my disposition; I wish they had! Instead, many of them have gently reminded me of the incessant pressures they are under, of the uncertainties of their lives and trajectories, and of how hard they work, day in and day out, just to survive another day.

It took my writing this essay—and my conversations with colleagues in the process—to recognize how the power of dominant discourses, imagery, and practices had begun to seep into my consciousness—even though I actively oppose everything those practices stand for. Writing this essay has reminded me of my responsibility, as an adult educator committed to social justice, of the importance of engaging in regular self-reflection (Thompson & Thompson, 2023), over and against the pervasive forces of discipline, denigration, and dehumanization—to maintain our “moral compass” as teachers/learners. It is the least we can do.

² Thanks to my colleague, May Dartez, for reminding me that, as she put it in a conversation about the current political regime, “they can take away everything, but they can never take away our moral compass.”

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