Teacher Educators' Embodied Resilience in Responding to Race-Based Critical Incidents in Social Justice Education

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As white, female professors who teach courses on inequities in public education, we are often confronted with critical incidents in which students or peers of color question or critique our teachings, curriculum, or interactions. Our training as white academics has conditioned us to respond on a purely intellectual level, citing theoretical frameworks to explain or defend our actions. Although as contemporary educators we strive to develop our social-emotional competence and model it for students, bringing emotions into critical incidents is often frowned upon as "not belonging in the academy" (Winans, 2012). Yet, responses that stay purely cognitive are unsatisfactory, and oftentimes harmful to our students and peers of color, who may have visceral, emotional reactions to the impact of our actions (Winans, 2012). Even though our intentions feel neutral, benign, or even wholesome to us (Oluo, 2018), these intentions may not match the impact of our actions.

As Matias and Mackey (2016) argue, "If one is not *emotionally-prepared* to undertake antiracist teaching practices, then it stands to reason s/he will not be *emotionally secure* enough to engage in long-term racial justice in her/his teaching" (p. 36). This quote refers to prospective teachers; however, the argument applies to professors as well, especially those who claim to be committed to social justice.

As seen in the literature, emotions live not just in our minds and hearts but in our bodies. As Forgasz, Berry, and McDonough (2014) note, "our embodied emotions are both physical responses to and experiencing producers of our experience of the world…we can arrive at a kind of self-knowledge and self-understanding from the internal vantage point of bodily response" (pp. 82-83). Embodiment practices can not only help us access this self-knowledge and self-understanding but can help us build resilience to stay present with the emotions as they arise in critical incidents.

Our students and peers of color look to us to hold space and bring emotional responses to issues of deep oppression and racism. As Winans (2012) states in her argument for an embodied critical literacy, "Emotions play an important role in all teaching and learning settings: what we learn is bound up with the embodied experience of how we learn. Yet the significance of emotions in learning is particularly evident in classes that engage critically with difference, power, and privilege" (p. 151).

But an emotional response requires an "embodied resilience," an ability to turn toward the difficult and truly acknowledge and feel the impact of the students' or peers' responses, without first resorting to patterns of intellect and academic background to lessen the impact and reject feelings of inadequacy, shame, or guilt (DiAngelo, 2011). "Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57).

Drawing from the contemplative practices of "sitting with difficult emotions" and "turning toward difficulty" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Nhat Hanh, 2011; Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2010), and the critical emotional literacy practices used "to explore how emotions connect embodied learning experiences to social structures and belief systems, past and present," (Winans, 2012, p. 151), we expand upon the intellectual framework of "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2011) and "white privilege" (Kendall, 2013) to propose a practice of *embodied resilience.* Using embodied resilience, white professors develop skills to respond to critical incidents with both intellect *and* emotions. If interactions around race and privilege are kept at the cognitive level, white educators will not build resilience for the inevitable emotional pain and discomfort that accompanies this work (DiAngelo, 2011; Winans, 2012).

Contemplative literature and critical emotional literacy practices would argue that any work around critical incidents involves both the intellectual thoughts and the emotional feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Nhat Hanh, 2011; Williams et al., 2010, Winans, 2012). By focusing on one and not the other, we miss opportunities for true growth away from causing unintentional harm, for gaining resilience for facing the difficult, and we may possibly encourage a continuation of white fragility.

In this self-study, two white, female experienced U.S. teacher educators analyze critical incidents in which our responses were not adequate and did not exhibit "embodied resilience." We outline two of these critical incidents in case study format, describe our initial responses, and utilize self-study methodology and contemplative practices to discuss and analyze the case studies and connect them to current literature. Through the critical friends process, including the active use of contemplative practices in all meetings, we developed a framework of "embodied resilience" for responding to future critical incidents.

Aims/Objectives

Research questions:

- What have we learned from critical incidents that illuminate our conditioned blind spots as white professors?

- How might we use contemplative practices to develop an embodied resilience to appropriately respond to moments of tension/critical incidents involving race and privilege that arise as part of our social justice efforts?

Methods

This chapter incorporates the traditional self-study elements codified by LaBoskey (2004):

1. Self-initiated and improvement aimed: This self-study was initiated by the professors involved in the case studies as a way to examine our reactions to critical incidents, explore the connection of our reactions to literature, and discuss more appropriate ways to engage.

2. Interactive: We met weekly for a year to discuss the critical incidents recorded in journal entries and explore their relationship to current literature.

3. Multiple qualitative methods and trustworthiness:

a. Frequent journaling about critical incidents involving social justice issues.

b. Weekly critical friends discussion around the journal entries, the critical incidents, and related literature.

c. Weekly collaborative qualitative analysis of journal entries.

We read and reread the journal entries numerous times, looking for patterns or trends in topics that emerged across entries. These patterns were then coded and further categorized into recurrent themes (Spindler & Spindler, 1997; Spradley, 1980).

During the journal entry analysis, we employed a contemplative approach to self-study. Rather than becoming defensive, or turning away from the results of our analyses, we used contemplative practices to sit with the discomfort of the critical incidents, our initial responses, and their connection to current literature on race and privilege. Furthermore, this project reflects what Garbett, Ovens, and Thomas (2018) acknowledge: "Self-study researchers walk a fine line in having their research acknowledge the personal, contextual, and emotional nature of their work to strive for personal growth while also making important contributions to the wider research community" (p. 309).

Findings

We extracted two critical incidents from the journal entries and critical friends discussions and created Case Study #1 and #2. These cases illustrate critical incidents where we did not use our contemplative practices or exhibit an embodied resilience and, as a result, were unable to see our conditioned blind spots as white professors. The analysis illustrates our use of self-study methodology to find patterns within the critical incidents, to discuss the connection of these patterns to current literature, and to reflect on how contemplative practices would have helped us engage more appropriately and authentically with the students in each incident.

Case Study #1

I am a white, female professor and I teach a course on the "isms" in public education—racism, transphobia, classism, sexism, etc. A few weeks in, the students of color from the class came to visit me in my office. They told me that they were tired of the "white people being coddled" in my course and that I needed to "teach for us [the students of color]."

My initial reaction was panic and guilt: "Oh no," I thought, "I'm not a good teacher. I thought I knew how to teach difficult topics to a diverse audience. This is my 'expertise!'" Rather than sit with these feelings and thoughts until they passed, my panic led me to "make sure I was okay." I first reached out to a friend of color. I relayed the situation in such a manner that the friend felt compelled to "comfort" me, assuring me that, "the students of color feel comfortable with you, that is why they are reaching out to you." I then reached out to another friend of color, and left a message in such a manner that they felt compelled to likewise comfort me, assuring me that, "You are doing a great job. The students would never come to you if they did not feel comfortable with you."

It was only after I was "comforted" that I felt I could reexamine the curriculum. I decided to begin the next class with a video of DiAngelo discussing "white fragility" (the moves white people make to avoid the discomfort of discussions around race and privilege). I hoped this video would prepare the white students for more critical class content. But, it was during the watching of this video that I realized that I had engaged fully in a white fragility move described by DiAngelo: a request of my colleagues of color to comfort me in my discomfort around a critical race incident. I did not have the resilience to truly listen to the students, to accept the critique, and to change my course for the better. I wanted comfort, to know I was "okay," and was unwilling to engage.

Case Study #2

On the first day of class in a course on equity and diversity for prospective educators, a student of color stayed after class to tell me that they felt triggered by a prompt I had used in an interactive partner activity. I clarified to students before the activity that they were "in charge of the level of self-disclosure in this exercise," and that they were not being forced to discuss anything that felt too uncomfortable for them; passing was a viable option. The particular prompt that troubled them was, "Describe a time when one of the elements of your identity appeared to hold you back, either in your educational experience or in other areas of your life" (School Reform Initiative, n.d). I had never received negative feedback around this prompt previously, so I was confused. I expressed regret about the impact on them and invited them to come to my office to talk.

In our discussion, I learned some of their personal histories with trauma and the ongoing effects of historical trauma experienced by students of color. They said that even just thinking about responding to this prompt had caused them pain. I expressed to them again how sad I felt that an aspect of my curriculum had caused them harm. We discussed

some potential modifications and differentiated ways that they could engage with the content that would hopefully reduce the possibility of inducing harm. They agreed to stay in communication with me about how things were going for them.

A few weeks passed without them turning in any assignments, although they appeared fairly engaged in class and regularly shared their insightful perspectives orally. We met in my office again, on my invitation, because I was concerned about their lack of work submission and apparent lack of reading and preparation before class. After some time of having what felt (to me) like a conversation that did not have a clear point, I told them I was still confused about what they were asking. They paused, looked at me very directly, and said, "What will you give me for my pain?"

I was stunned by this question. I looked at them with a completely blank, bewildered look on my face, my jaw gaping open. Eventually, I asked, "Can you help me understand what you mean? I just truly am confused and do not know what you are seeking." They tried to explain themself, and yet my bafflement continued. Eventually, I asked if they would write down their request to help me understand. They wrote, "What will you give me for my pain? Because class participation is not graded, I don't feel like my pain is being valued."

As I asked them to elaborate, they indicated, "Just from having read the titles of the assigned case studies and articles, and the prompts, I've done the emotional preparation for class. There's a deficit perspective coming from you to say I am showing up to class unprepared. I've done a lot more emotional prep than the white students who just have to read and answer prompts…I already know all about generalizations, deficit perspectives, and funds of knowledge [topics we had addressed in-class activities and assignments thus far] just from living my life." They continued to express their frustration: "I can tell you're a hard grader…Class won't be the same if I don't contribute orally. So I need this to be part of my grade…I want it on paper…The value of my input needs to be in a number. I *need* a grade for giving my oral input in class…" They then asked to be excused from all of their other late assignments, because they had personally *lived* these topics.

I kept repeating that I wanted to honor their pain, and at the same time, I needed to see evidence of their ability to synthesize multiple texts in writing. I also kept explaining to them that I had stopped giving grades/points for participation years ago because I felt like it was disadvantaging students from certain cultural backgrounds and was encouraging students to talk just to "get credit." I also shared that part of my disorientation was generated from never having had a student come to me with this kind of request. "I am just trying to wrap my brain around this," I said repeatedly.

Eventually, they suggested writing a substantial piece of poetry based on their responses to course topics to replace some of the other written assignments. I agreed, and we negotiated specifics about having the poetry "count" for some of their missing work. However, they kept asking to be completely excused for a few of the assignments, stating, "Class will not be the same [for others] if I do not contribute. So I *need* this to be part of my grade. I want this on paper. I don't want to take the hit in my grade for being so late." This back-and-forth went on for a while, with them insisting I needed to excuse them from the assignments in question because of their consistent, insightful oral contributions in class. I could feel myself getting irritated, frustrated, and defensive about their requests.

A tipping point in our conversation occurred shortly after I named these feelings of irritation, when they announced, "I've done enough emotional labor, and I'm not getting the response I want, so I'm going to remove myself. Thank you for your time." And they walked out of my office.

After they left, I realized that instead of feeling steady and open to critique, I felt triggered. I was attached to a particular view and teaching philosophy that says, "Advanced-level students should operate in a certain way: do the assigned reading, writing, and other preparation; be willing to participate orally without the need to 'get something' (like a grade or credit) in exchange; and not push me so hard when I set a clear boundary." I was attached to my identity as a "good" teacher, with particular beliefs and practices, including my identity as "one of the 'good' white people." These viewpoints resulted in feeling like my authenticity as a teacher and person was being assaulted through the interactions with this student.

Case Study Analysis: Connection to Current Literature

We started by looking at the patterns in the case study data and connecting these to current literature. Drawing from DiAngelo's (2011) work on white fragility, an analysis of both cases illustrates "white fragility avoidance patterns" in our reaction to the students' critiques. As DiAngelo (2011) writes, "…when an educational program [or student]…directly addresses racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance" (p. 55). We both experienced emotional incapacitation when the "people of color talk[ed] directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes)" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). In Case #1, rather than owning the situation and having the resilience to sit with the discomfort of the situation and truly listen to the students, the professor immediately called upon her colleagues to "help educate her," to "coddle her and make her feel okay about her missteps," and to invoke her "white expectations for racial comfort" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55).

In Case #2, the professor reports that she "couldn't even talk to anyone about this" because she "did not have the words for it." This was a form of a "freeze" response—a typical expression of white fragility in the inability to understand or accept criticism from a person of color. The professor reached out to several trusted critical friends to relate the experience and try to get some perspective. She asked their advice on what she should do, and how she should respond. But upon reflection, the professor reports, "Although I felt like I was trying to make sense of what happened, my reaching out was really an attempt to feel 'validated' in my views and actions, and to seek reassurance that my intentions were wholesome and that I was not a 'bad person,'" another indication of white fragility. DiAngelo (2016) cautions that the good/bad binary keeps us stuck, keeps us from learning as we engage in waking up as racialized beings.

Further analysis and discussion in our critical friends group revealed a connection to the literature on white supremacy. In Case #2, in particular, the professor struggles with a conflict between how she has been enculturated by higher education to teach and grade, and what the student was asking for. But what if these conditioned philosophies and practices of teaching are disempowering to students of color? What if students of color, who have often lived the scenarios we present in class to "enlighten" students to social justice issues, feel tired of having to expend emotional labor to share their experiences and educate others about their reality? Critical friend group discussions and readings helped the professor in Case #2 realize that she needed to stop trying to be "right" (DiAngelo, 2016) and just turn towards understanding. Racial harm can be caused in so many different ways, even (or especially by) the most well-intentioned people who deliberately aim to work for social justice.

Through critical friend discussions and collaborative literature reviews, the professor in Case #2 also realized that her inability to sit with the painful and difficult critiques she was receiving resulted in a harmful interaction. She tried to acknowledge her impact on the student directly, but she did not do this authentically. Rather than feel her emotions around the critique and requests, and be present with the student, she subconsciously worked to show that her own viewpoint was "right." Through discussions in the critical friends group, she realized that her expressions of "sadness" or "regret" were just words to pacify the student, without any true feeling of emotions behind them. She was feeling regret about "*her* curriculum as inadequate and harmful," rather than attuning to the pain of the student through mindful, authentic listening, and sincerely acknowledging the impact. The student felt the professor's inauthenticity and responded accordingly. The professor did not allow space for emotion and empathy to be *felt* when the student was telling her about their pain. She may have used "appropriate" words, but the student could not "feel the professor" and therefore could not trust the professor or feel safe with her (Blackwell, 2019; Manning, 2019).

Next Steps Based on Analysis of Critical Incidents

Students of color look to us to hold space and bring embodied emotional responses to issues of deep oppression and racism. We realized from patterns in the journal entries and critical friends discussions that we were not adequately bringing embodied responses to these critical incidents. We needed to develop an ability to turn toward the difficulties

and truly acknowledge and feel the impact on the students, without first resorting to patterns of avoidance, academic knowledge, theory, and "rightness."

We both are regular practitioners of contemplative practices and often engage in the practice of "sitting with uncomfortable emotions" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Neff, 2015; Nhat Hanh, 2011). As critical friends, we made a concerted effort during the analysis and discussions of the journal entries to sit with the emotions, explore them, and recognize, embody, and embrace the fact that we had engaged in white fragility and white supremacy moves. We noticed where and how the emotions occurred in our body, and recognized that these emotions were integral to making change. We continued open and vulnerable discussions as critical friends. We read widely and talked about our own racism and whiteness.

In our attempts to address our white fragility and white privilege, we developed the concept of "embodied resilience practices"—sitting with discomfort, rather than masking discomfort through avoidance or intellectual theory—as one small step toward addressing these issues. Using embodied resilience, we now try to listen mindfully and authentically to student and peer critiques, noting the physical feelings of emotional discomfort as they arise, and realizing that these reactions reflect our white fragility—a fragility we do not need to act on. We try to notice and acknowledge our emotions in interactions with others, rather than continue to mask any feelings through theoretical frameworks. We use an embodied emotional approach when reflecting on our pedagogy, to try to better notice the impact of our teachings, rather than continue in the ignorance of white privilege and unintentionally cause harm.

We are continuing our self-study to analyze the impacts of embodied resilience in our interactions. While we have found these strategies effective, they are just a small step toward attempting to reduce harm. We would like to acknowledge that, as white professors, addressing white fragility, white privilege, and white supremacy culture is a lifelong journey.

Conclusions/Implications

Oluo (2018) states that people who choose to engage in critical conversations "will screw this up royally, more than once. It's going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway" (p. 45). For us as white professors, this work is a lifelong journey. It takes making mistakes repeatedly, being willing to be vulnerable to the feelings generated from that (without getting stuck in shame), reflecting, and being willing to tolerate racial discomfort to increase our ability to stay engaged in racial conversations and interactions (Oluo, 2018). We have been socialized into and conditioned by white supremacy culture, and we need to be willing to be vulnerable about making mistakes, and not be attached to our identity as "one of the good white people" or "social justice educators," both of which encourage the ego to be involved, and foster a stance of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2016). But being open to criticism and vulnerable to mistakes requires a resilience that is cultivated by contemplative practices, in which we embody and embrace the emotions that accompany openness and vulnerability, without trying to change or run away from them. As long as white academics attempt to push away emotions and approach difficult incidents from an intellectual and theoretical stance, white fragility will continue to be evoked, students and/or peers will not be thoroughly or authentically heard, and unconscious harm will potentially occur.

This chapter is our attempt to be transparent and vulnerable, and provide the reader with our own examples that exemplify the all-too-common moves that white academics make to protect their whiteness and its fragility. It is also our attempt to provide readers with contemplative responses that have helped us to build embodied resilience. These contemplative practices allow us to embrace the vulnerable, to not fear the human emotions that accompany our journey toward learning, to listen deeply to critiques from those who are most impacted by our teaching, and to embrace our lack of knowledge when it comes to addressing oppression, much of which we, as white educators, have not experienced, and cannot fully grasp.

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