



Pedagogies for Cultivating Critical Consciousness: Principles for Teaching and Learning to Engage with Racial Equity, Social Justice, and Sustainability

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Reorienting Higher Education Pedagogies

The prospect of sustainability has become increasingly relevant in higher education. Academic staff at higher education institutions are finding ways to teach about sustainability, operations staff are changing approaches to practice sustainability, and research efforts seek to understand sustainability and the changes it necessitates. Most importantly, students are eager to engage with sustainability and dimensions of social change as they recognize the complex challenges as well as opportunities that their generation faces. While this trend is promising, it also demands reflection on how higher education and sustainability are connected to broader societal challenges. These challenges especially highlight the need to pursue racial equity and social justice. Yet in the context of sustainability and higher education, racial equity and social justice have received marginal attention until recently when an emerging emphasis on these issues has created new possibilities for learning, action, and change.

In this context, we focus our reflection on a key area of opportunity for sustainability in higher education, specifically the pedagogies and purposes employed by instructors. Pedagogies are the philosophical approaches and practical activities that instructors use to shape educational experiences. This essay presents a series of pedagogical principles gleaned from literature on social justice and critical pedagogy that can help to infuse sustainability in higher education with tools to reimagine how and why pedagogies can shift to operate at the intersection of transformation for sustainability, racial equity, and social justice.

Critical Consciousness for Learning and Change

In this shift, a need exists for education to cultivate critical consciousness. The idea of critical consciousness emerged from the work of Paulo Friere (1968) and details a process for students to enable their capacity to create change through reflection and action. Critical consciousness entails three key aspects: (1) deep reflection on existing power structures and dynamics, (2) sense of agency to seek and enact change in inequitable systems, and, (3) intensive action in working both individually and collaboratively to pursue emancipation from these oppressive systems and structures.

For sustainability in higher education, critical consciousness represents a meaningful learning outcome in several ways. First, nourishing critical consciousness can support students to examine the world around them and recognize how the social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological systems that they are embedded in can result in structural issues that perpetuate not only unsustainability but inequity and injustice as well. Second, as the critical consciousness of students emerges, they may gain motivation and feel empowered to address the sustainability challenges around them. And third, raising critical consciousness can support students to become sustainability change agents capable of navigating and disrupting unsustainable systems to work toward better futures.

Infusing Sustainability Education with Social Justice Pedagogies

While sustainability education has not fully engaged with issues related to racial equity and social justice (Maina-Okori et al., 2018), there are existing approaches that can be utilized to engage with these topics. Experiential learning can support students to analyze issues related to inequity or injustice by providing tangible learning opportunities that scaffold toward real-world application. Transdisciplinary projects, where students collaborate to design solutions with community stakeholders, can allow for students to learn from and with those already working on these topics, but can also help to build the interpersonal skills and individual resilience to manage the demands of dynamic social challenges. Integrating diverse ways of knowing into educational opportunities, such as traditional ecological knowledge, can also help students to reflect on their own approaches to knowledge and action, as well as how experiences are shaped by one's perspectives, values, and identities.



Each of the approaches described above can be relevant for teaching and learning that engages with racial equity and social justice in addition to being appropriate for sustainability education. However, more intensive and targeted efforts to elevate students' critical consciousness can benefit from insights from areas of discourse such as social justice education and critical pedagogy. Having a basic set of principles to guide and frame teaching that raises students' critical consciousness can better support instructors to meet the needs of their students and promote learning, action, and change for racial equity, social justice, and sustainability. The five principles presented below can help to achieve these goals.

Pedagogical Principles for Raising Critical Consciousness

Education is a Political and not a Neutral Site

From a critical pedagogy perspective, education is always going to be a reflection of individuals in political power, who historically have been heterosexual upper-class white men. This stance was advanced by one of the key figures of critical pedagogy, Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire. In his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stated, "all education is political, teaching is never a neutral site" (p.19). Examples of education as a political site include an Arizona legislative bill that banned the teaching of Ethnic Studies and certain books in high school classrooms. Seven years later a federal judge ruled the state violated students' First and Fourteenth amendment rights. More recently, legislators in Idaho, and several other states, organized to forbid the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) tenets in public schools and universities. CRT includes a commitment to social justice by centering the experiences and knowledge of people of color, and using multiple approaches from a variety of disciplines (such as women's studies, sociology, history, law, psychology, film and theater) to analyze racism within both historical and contemporary contexts (Solorzano, 1997). These examples demonstrate how certain values become privileged in education and society, leaving other value sets and social groups marginalized through politically charged educational approaches and policies.

Recognizing education as a contested space is essential to reorienting education toward the possibility for social change. When academic and non-academic staff reject education as a political site, their pedagogy can be reduced to a "technician engaged in formalistic rituals unconcerned with disturbing and urgent problems that confront society" (Giroux, 1997, p. 265). Pedagogies that teach to the test, focus on accountability, and aim to achieve objective standards, are all designed to limit opportunities to raise students' critical consciousness. To challenge the political power embedded in education and leave behind the "formalistic rituals" of commonplace modes of education, instructors can become participatory citizens in a democratic classroom. This happens when instructors and students make decisions about how we should live together, what should be included in the curriculum, as well as when students have opportunities to research and take action toward racial equity, social justice, and sustainability.

Aim to Foster Problem Posing Process and Dialogue

Problem posing process is a strategy to support learning related to social problems that directly impact students and community members. This process is cultivated in classrooms where there is equal opportunity for students and instructors to engage in authentic dialogue by displaying mutual respect, love, and support for each other's voices and ideas. Thus, dialogue is an indispensable characteristic of teaching and learning that engages with racial equity, social justice, and sustainability. The problem posing process and dialogue breaks away from characteristics of banking education, in which the instructor is the primary knowledge holder and deposits knowledge into students who are silent, passive, and empty vessels. One of the key characteristics of problem posing education is that the instructor is no longer the one who teaches but is taught and teaches through dialogue with students (Freire, 1968).

When instructors and students teach each other they both become responsible for a process that cultivates critical consciousness. They become co-investigators in dialogue with each other as they critically examine material, social, and ecological issues to reveal the way their social identities shape their world. In essence, their world is no longer something to be described but becomes viewed as a dynamic process and an object to be transformed. One way to apply problem posing education and dialogue is to offer students opportunities to facilitate classroom discussions. Student facilitators should refrain from practices common to formal presentations and banking education (where the instructor talks and the students listen and are silent) and instead pose questions to their peers that link readings and activities to social, political, and ecological contexts, student identities, and historical events. Instructors should actively participate in these student-led activities to foster an inclusive and equitable learning community. AASHE's Campus Sustainability Hub includes an [instructor resource](#) for more ideas on creating culturally inclusive courses (Cagle, 2021).

Base Curriculum and Materials on the Needs and Interests of Students

There is no set curriculum in sustainability education, nor in teaching related to racial equity or social justice, because texts and activities need to incorporate content that directly connects to students' lived experiences, their multiple identities, and the issues that they face in these contexts. First and foremost, instructors and students must collectively engage in critical self-reflection, meaning they must understand the intersection of their own identities as both privileged and marginalized, examining the socialization process that has shaped their social position and understanding of social groups and events (Garcia, 2020). Second, there needs to be an authentic dialogue about the bodies of knowledge taught in the course, such as whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are centered in the text.

When instructors and students apply these practices they can develop a collective understanding of whose identities, voices, histories, and knowledge have been excluded from the curriculum. To address this inequity, instructors can integrate marginalized students' stories and counternarratives into the curriculum. This can be done through marginalized students sharing lived experiences, text or media created by marginalized groups, or other material that reflects the social, cultural, and political experiences of groups who have been excluded from the curriculum. Another way is through a social action approach, where students critically examine how inequities are embedded into social institutions and society through laws, policies, and practices. Students also need to engage in meaning-making processes that explore inequities and the connections to their own identities. These opportunities can make learning meaningful and increase the potential for students to understand root causes of social inequity while providing a foundation for action.

Seek to Facilitate Praxis to Achieve Transformation

Praxis is “critical reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993, p.51). The critical reflection component involves collective dialogue among students and instructors, aimed to critically understand the social institutions and ideologies that shape their daily lives and lived experiences. The action component emerges from collective dialogue among students and instructors that is positioned toward transforming those social institutions and ideologies that have historically marginalized social groups by restricting them from full participation as members of society. This includes challenging the dehumanizing practices often promoted by educational institutions (Torres & Mercado, 2004). In this way, praxis aims to be culturally and contextually relevant, facilitating meaning-making, action, and learning driven by students.

Participating in praxis highlights the need for higher education to emphasize more than nurturing an understanding of social institutions and society. Praxis cultivates a space for students and instructors to come together in solidarity to critically reflect upon their reality and to transform it through collective action. This means engaging with tensions and changes in their ideologies and seeking change in specific historical and geographic educational and social spaces. Authentic community-university partnerships and collaborations can cultivate these processes. In these spaces (which can be both on college campuses or in community spaces) college students and historically marginalized community members can critically reflect on theories and real-world issues related to racism, social justice, equity, and sustainability, leading to collective action to transform their reality. An accompanying essay in this anthology, *Change Comes from the Margins: Sustainability Efforts in Community-Campus Partnerships*, explores this topic more fully.

Implications for Learning, Action, and Change in Higher Education

These principles offer a pathway toward more meaningfully engaging with racial equity and social justice in relation to sustainability in higher education. Issues in each of these areas can be deeply entangled, and the teaching and learning strategies to address these issues can also be intertwined. Seeking synergies in how to teach, learn, take action, and create change for a more equitable, just, and sustainable future is thus a key goal for academic staff, non-academic staff, and students. Advancing towards these ambitions demands new roles, responsibilities, and possibilities in higher education. New roles will entail students acting as facilitators, change agents, and leaders, as instructors devote their energy toward fostering and supporting success in these capacities. New responsibilities means focusing not just on knowledge or economic development, but authentically advancing social change, particularly through transforming higher education institutions themselves to better meet the needs of students and society. Finally, new possibilities can emerge for higher education as it takes on these new roles and responsibilities, fully engaging with the challenges and opportunities of pursuing racial equity, social justice, and sustainability. Implementing pedagogies to cultivate critical consciousness seems like a good place to start this journey.

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