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How Far Can Inclusion Take Us? Framing the Narrative for Transforming Our Community

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Abstract

In this piece we explore terms, specifically the term "inclusion." In what ways does the language we use in our campus discourse on "inclusion" set particular emphases and consequently shape our work? We suspect that many of us involved in these conversations and work long for explicit attention to issues of power. Overall, we argue that in any thoroughgoing work for "inclusion," we need to look at our own power structures and that which is oppressive in our own place. We need to choose language that gets us there. We survey here several ways of framing a commitment to inclusion that consistently foregrounds an analysis of power. We explore terminology that includes the critical elements of self-reflection, examination of the role of power in our classrooms and on our campuses, and the ability to respond to bias and discrimination.

Keywords

Diversity, inclusion, inclusion ecosystem, inclusive pedagogy, critical pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, equity pedagogy

Creating Our Narrative, Exploring the Terms

CSB/SJU are historically white colleges, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva would say. However, we, as faculty, administrators, and institutions, are systematically and comprehensively rethinking our campus environment and the work we do with students to redefine ourselves. As the U.S. becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, so does the student population at CSB/SJU. The

March 2014 "Strategic Directions 2020 Environmental Scan" report notes "In fall 2013, students of color comprised 18% of all new students at CSB and 16% of new students at SJU, the highest number and proportion ever at each institution. Since fall 2009, the number of new students of color has nearly doubled at CSB, and increased by two-thirds at SJU" (p. 12). The socioeconomic, cultural, and religious makeup of our students also are changing. We seek not only to provide access to an increasingly diverse student body, but also to ensure that all our students benefit from a high-quality, high-impact liberal arts education and that all our students experience the Benedictine values of community, hospitality, and respect.

The narrative we create for this work will shape how it is understood and undertaken, so we must choose our terms carefully. Diversity, certainly, is a piece of our equation, and the term "diversity" continues to appear often in higher education discourse. The Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U's) "Making Excellence Inclusive" webpage explains it as "Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations)."

Increasing diversity continues to be an important goal for CSB/SJU, but we know that it is not nearly enough. Robin DiAngelo, paraphrasing Bonilla-Silva, said during her January 2017 workshop for Mellon faculty, "Integration is not equity." Joan Wallach Scott wrote in 1991 that "The nature of the university's accommodation to diversity can be seen in the words used to describe campuses and curricula: 'diversity,' 'multiculturalism,' 'pluralism.' All take into account the existence of different populations with different needs and interests, but none of the words register the fact that difference is not simply a state of separate being — it is a relationship." Her words, though from another era, still resonate. CSB/SJU's approach already goes beyond different needs and interests, and the relationship Scott references seems to be one of the aspects we are working to provide in the "inclusion ecosystem" President Mary Hinton spoke of in her August 2016 All-Community Forum presentation.

In addition to "inclusion ecosystem," we also have heard the phrases "inclusive community" in *Headwaters'* calls for submissions and "inclusive pedagogy" from the facilitators of the CSB/SJU Mellon Grant. Inclusion, clearly, plays an important role as we articulate our initiative. AAC&U's "Making Excellence Inclusive" web page provides a good definition: "Inclusion: The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect—in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions."

We will want to keep in mind, however, that even these seemingly supportive concepts can reinforce what DiAngelo (2016) refers to as "popular white narratives that deny racism" as a chapter heading in her book *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy.* In addition, Bernstein (2016), in writing "Addressing Diversity and Inclusion on College Campuses: Assessing a Partnership Between AAC&U and the Ford Foundation, concluded, ". . . while words like increasing diversity and inclusion are widely employed to talk about reforming US higher education, they often have the effect of rendering invisible issues of power, privilege, and discrimination. As the eminent historian Joan Wallach Scott has recently written, 'It is not 'diversity and inclusion' that will remedy the problems but programs aimed at racism, sexism, and homophobia. Let's name the problems for what they are.'"

Another word that appears often in higher education literature is "equity," which AAC&U defines as "The creation of opportunities for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion." AAC&U also brings in another term not so commonly used: "Equity-Mindedness: A demonstrated awareness of and willingness to address equity issues among institutional leaders and staff (Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California)." Equity-

Mindedness certainly foregrounds analysis of power, and we extend this call to faculty and students as examined under "Equity literacy" below.

Inclusion and equity, like diversity, seem essential to our objectives. However, CSB/SJU are among the colleges and universities striving to progress beyond them, to evolve into a community that addresses power, privilege, and discrimination and develops the cultural agility Scott writes about while embracing the diverse lives, experiences, strengths, and needs of the broader U.S. and CSB/SJU population — that inclusion ecosystem President Hinton addressed.

During the writing of this piece we observed two recent conversations on campus that foregrounded power analysis in their discussion of inclusion and thus serve as strong examples of work we hope will continue. The first was DiAngelo's Martin Luther King Day presentation and follow-up workshop. Describing "anti-racist education" in her book W*hat Does It Mean to Be White?*, DiAngelo calls for "An educational approach that goes beyond tolerating or celebrating racial diversity and addresses racism as a system of unequal power between whites and people of color" (2016, p. 330). Second, Debra Leigh and Kevin LaNave further built on that concept in their January 2017 Community Anti-Racism Education workshop. They included a handout on Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing & Training's "Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Institution" (2007) and stressed that the highest-ranking institutions are defined as "anti-racist multicultural," described as "fully inclusive. A transformed institution in a transforming society" (Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing & Training, 2007). These two campus conversations provide strong examples of keeping the concept of power — in other words, acknowledging who is in positions of power — central in our community's work for inclusion. As DiAngelo explains in her "White Fragility" essay, "The direction of power between whites and people of color is historic, traditional, normalized, and deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. society" (Mills, 1999 and Feagin, 2006, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56).

This brings us to terminology that includes the critical elements of self-reflection, examination of the role of power in our classrooms and on our campuses, and the ability to respond to bias and discrimination and create a bias- and discrimination-free environment.

Self-Reflection and the Role of Power

Some in our community may have an association with the term "inclusion" that is connected to K-12 education where "inclusion" has a legally mandated definition where teachers are required to provide targeted instruction for students who have identified learning needs (i.e. disabilities). Inclusion in the K-12 setting can also mean "mainstreaming" students who have traditionally been "pulled out" of the regular classroom (e.g. English learners who go to the ESL classroom for part or all of the day). One of the pitfalls of using the term "inclusive education" in higher education settings is that some may misunderstand inclusion purely as differentiated instruction or accommodations for students with disabilities, or, perhaps by association with this term, as a lowering of academic standards for students with identified learning needs. As Pugach (2005) asserts, defining "diversity" itself is an issue. If "inclusive pedagogy" means "any approach a White teacher uses to meet the array of needs of students of multiple diversities," teachers may "interpret culturally relevant pedagogy as inclusive pedagogy, potentially confusing the need for their own growth and development relative to cultural knowledge and cultural perspective-taking with making specific accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities" (p. 122). In other words, if this understanding of inclusion goes unexamined, we may view inclusive pedagogy as the mandate to adapt, modify, accommodate, or create varied instructional strategies for diverse students rather than focusing on how our own cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences shape our pedagogy; on equity and access; or on the role of power in the social relationships that constitute classrooms.

We survey here three ways of framing a commitment to inclusion while insisting on self-reflection and ongoing analyses of power. These are critical pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, and equity literacy.

Critical Pedagogy

Broadly understood, critical pedagogy analyzes how power operates both socially and institutionally. As Sarroub and Quadros (2015) remind us, "…all classroom discourse is critical because it is inherently political, and at the heart of critical pedagogy is an implicit understanding that power is negotiated daily by teachers and students" (p. 252). Critical pedagogy assumes that knowledge is socially situated and socially constructed. It entails "the practice of engaging students in the social construction of knowledge, which grounds its pillars on power relations" and requires that "teachers must question their own practices in the process to construct knowledge and why the main knowledge is legitimized by the dominant culture" (p. 253). We think it important that our inclusive ecosystem be founded upon students' interests, cultural needs, and community empowerment (Habermas, 1981, as cited in Sarroub & Quadros, p. 254). Teachers elicit student participation and skills in dialogue in a "rational articulation of one's context with others who are differently situated" (Young, 1997, as cited in Sarroub & Quadros, p. 254). This might look like dialogues amongst peers, questioning concepts and common behavior, doubting the ritualized form, explaining one's perception of reality, providing evidence of assertions, advancing arguments from diverse knowledge and or disciplinary perspectives, drawing upon experience with the curriculum and topics addressed, and listening to a variety of voices in different discourses (Habermas, 1981, as cited in Sarroub & Quadros, p. 254). Critical questions to focus on course texts include the following: What or who is represented in the text? Who or what is missing from the text? Who benefits from the text? How are characters/people constructed in the text? What knowledge is presented?

Transformative Pedagogy

Transformative pedagogy can be defined as "a teaching approach that empowers students to examine critically their beliefs, values, assumptions, and prior knowledge in light of new experiences in order to enhance learning" (Ukpodoku, 2009, p. 44). Thinking of teaching in this way represents a dramatic shift from the commonly held conception of teaching as a process of transmitting knowledge or dispensing information. Freire (1970) called that kind of education "banking education" as a way to critique traditional educational structures where students are viewed as containers into which teachers make deposits of knowledge. According to Ukpodoku (2009), one way to think about the distinction between these teaching approaches is to consider what it means "to learn." If we agree that the purpose of learning is to effect change in the learner, but that not all learning results in change (p. 46), then we might consider that specific types of learning will lean more or less toward transformation in the learner. In contrast to what Ukpodoku summarizes as transmissional or transactional learning, transformation in learning can be seen as happening when a student comes to see some aspect of the world in a new way and then values that new meaning (Dewey, 1993, as cited in Ukpodoku, p. 46). Further, Mezirow (1991, as cited in Ukpodoku, p. 46) adds that transformational learning requires critical self-examination and reflection on one's assumptions alongside an exploration of new roles or actions. Transformational pedagogy, then, moves beyond the intent to transmit knowledge or facts or even to effect change in the learner. Its primary aim is "to engender critical and reflective thinking, social consciousness, and engagement" (p. 47). Within a critical pedagogy tradition, it "proposes that teachers excavate the subjugated knowledge of those who have been marginalized, disenfranchised and disaffected, and whose histories of suffering and hope rarely have been made public" (McLaren, 1988, as cited in Ukpodoku, p. 47). An important goal of transformational pedagogy, then, is to effect change in the learner and in the world through social action.

Equity Literacy

The "equity literacy" framework represents a call to further the goals of multicultural education by focusing on "equity" rather than "culture." In other words, we should focus less on how to align teaching practices with what we perceive as Others' cultural practices and more on the development of our own and students' abilities to "recognize, respond to, and redress bias, discrimination, and inequity" and "sustain bias-free and discrimination-free communities" (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Equity literacy involves the skills and dispositions that enable us to change the conditions that deny some students access to educational opportunities. Teachers can be "activist allies" who understand systemic injustices, are critically self-reflective, possess an empowered sense of agency, and know how to mobilize resources to act in concert with others (Swalwell, 2014). As teachers consider curriculum development when embracing this approach, they might consider several guiding principles. One is that teaching for equity literacy does not mean "abandoning content" (Gorski & Swallwell, 2015, p. 37). For example, math teachers might employ an equity literacy lens in ways that "develop students' mathematical abilities while also helping them see math as a powerful analytical tool for addressing social problems" (p. 37). Such an approach is interdisciplinary and integrative. It is also relevant for all age groups and developmental levels. Another principle of equity literacy is that students from all backgrounds need and benefit from this teaching approach, especially students from privileged groups. As Gorski reaffirms, "Traditional forms of multicultural education that focus on celebrating diversity rather than equity can reinforce [white and wealthy students'] misunderstandings by feeding the assumption that celebrating diversity is enough -- that everybody is starting on a level playing field" (p. 39). It is true that teaching for equity literacy is a political act, but not more so than not teaching for equity literacy. We can avoid these pitfalls by focusing curricula not around cultural awareness or diversity, but around the cultivation of equity literacy in ourselves and our students.

Ongoing Analysis of Power and Justice

In order to achieve the aims of what we often term inclusion here at CSB/ SJU, we need to facilitate thoroughgoing and ongoing analysis of social and institutional power. Thus we have suggested critical pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, and equity literacy as terms that ensure self-reflection and ongoing analysis of power in educational institutions, and we offer them as critical supplements to our campus conversation on inclusion.

As institutions, if we start only with questions of inclusion, we may begin to ask ourselves, "Who are we seeking to include?" And then we have to come up with a list (we want to be inclusive of U.S. students of color, we want to be inclusive of English language learners, and so on) and making this list involves naming those persons or groups as the currently excluded, the not-us, the others. This already reifies the idea of our community as a place where some belong and some do not. In seeking that sort of inclusion, we are only expanding the boundaries of who we are, and whom we will allow to fit in to "us"; we are not fundamentally shifting who we are. Said differently, inclusion gets us where we already are; transformation takes us somewhere else. Thus we maintain that while the word "inclusive" itself is not dangerous, we need to guard against using it in any way that renders power differentials invisible. As we have seen in comparison to the terms above, "inclusion" on its own does not guarantee analysis of power.

Dangerously, language of inclusion can also inadvertently mask its opposite. Inclusion can support ongoing hegemonic control of knowledge by seeking to draw newcomers into an established center, rather than deconstructing the center based on the claims of newcomers. In that way, language of inclusion would only be fresh paint on the boundaries of institutional culture. And in another way, inclusion can also mean reserving space for advocates of oppressive divisions. In the name of sheer inclusion, it can protect the voice of those with strongly exclusive claims. In this way, an uncritical inclusion blocks the road to social transformation, and aims for "inclusion" can support the stasis of exclusive culture.

Instead what we mean to do with "inclusion" is to challenge the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the first place. We mean to transform the structures that make these divisions ongoing and entrenched. Thus if we want institutions that deconstruct oppressive norms, we will need to say so. In narrating our communal work as that of transformation or ongoing work against oppression, rather than inclusion alone, we will help to check the ways in which we ourselves are unjust and oppressive. Of course we need not include anyone else in the injustices normal to our communities; rather we need to take apart our oppressive norms.

When the rhetoric of inclusion neglects the specific realities of oppression, it can allow us to perpetuate our own unjust relations and undermine our attempts at inclusion. As institutions, we need to continually build and maintain processes for ensuring justice within our structures at every level. In so doing we will arrive at what we have longed for in "inclusion." We will nurture, with President Hinton, a living and vibrant inclusive ecosystem.

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