The Qualitative Report

Magic and Hocus Pocus: Teaching for Social Justice in a Qualitative Methods Course

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Abstract

In this manuscript, we work to define and unpack what teaching for social justice means for us as instructors of an introductory qualitative methods course at an ultraconservative institution. We focus on our intentionality in curating readings, designing specific fieldwork assignments, and prompting reflective work for adult graduate students in the course. This intentionality provides various inroads to develop and support student learning around qualitative methods, to reveal meta narratives and dominant ideologies, to critically think and "trouble" those narratives, and opportunities to name lived experiences and observations in systems of oppression and privilege.

Keywords

Teaching Qualitative Methods, Social Justice, Critical Studies

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Teaching for Social Justice in a Qualitative Methods Course

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In this manuscript, we work to define and unpack what teaching for social justice means for us as instructors of an introductory qualitative methods course at an ultraconservative institution. We focus on our intentionality in curating readings, designing specific fieldwork assignments, and prompting reflective work for adult graduate students in the course. This intentionality provides various inroads to develop and support student learning around qualitative methods, to reveal meta narratives and dominant ideologies, to critically think and "trouble" those narratives, and opportunities to name lived experiences and observations in systems of oppression and privilege. Keywords: Teaching Qualitative Methods, Social Justice, Critical Studies

Doing qualitative research is hard, at minimum; teaching the doing of qualitative research is also hard, at minimum; at maximum, it is full of joy and "ah-has" and lightbulbs. Back to the "hard": our colleagues, stuck in the paradigm/methods wars of the 80s and 90s, disparage qualitative methods to students: "It's magic and hocus-pocus." Students in our college are steered away from qualitative classes, instructors. They are also permitted to complete qualitative dissertations with little or no qualitative methods coursework, just the guidance of a dissertation committee without qualitative methods expertise. Our plans to create additional qualitative methods coursework are side-eyed, eye-rolled.

Complicating and exacerbating these delegitimizing responses to our methodological expertise is the additional challenge that we take on in terms of the axiology that drives our teaching. A commitment to teaching for social justice drives all of the curricular and pedagogical choices we make. We focus here on what this means in our doctoral-level introductory qualitative methods course. We have, for several years, co-planned this course, offering our students identical syllabi across all sections. The course features a survey of philosophical and theoretical foundations of many of the qualitative research traditions: action research, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology, and critical methods. The core enrollment for our course is practicing public school teachers and administrators. That said, our course also serves students from across the college and campus, many of whom are advised into the course during their first semester of doctoral study. Thus, our class is often their first exposure to empirical literature. Given the professional positions of many of our students, and the introductory nature of the course not only to qualitative methods but also to doctoral-level work, we take seriously the responsibility of selecting empirical pieces that serve as both methodological exemplars and prompts for developing critical consciousness. This commitment is particularly salient as our work is housed in the College of Education at an ultra-conservative, predominantly white institution in the Deep South. Specifically, our campus has been described as hostile to LGBTQ people (Lanzi, 2019; Medina, 2019; Princeton Review, 2019a). It has been characterized as unwelcoming to Black and Brown students, faculty, and staff (Jackson, 2018; Lanzi, 2019; Princeton Review, 2019b). And, we find it telling that our campus community celebrated the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election using the same time-honored rituals used to mark athletic victories. Ours

is a space in which discussions about social justice are met with resistance and moves toward more equitable policies, practices, and environments are often thwarted by arguments about the free-speech rights of those who object to such moves.

It is within this context that we describe our qualitative methods pedagogy and curriculum. In this work, are motivated by our shared commitments that exist at the intersections of these identities: teacher educators, methods instructors, and critical scholars. Our pedagogical approaches are rooted in commitments to building critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and equity in education, particularly for the school-based practitioners who comprise much of our enrollment. In this paper, we explore and chronicle our intentionality of creating an introductory qualitative methods course structure aligned with our values. To do so, we expand Guba and Lincoln's (1994) notion of paradigm (i.e., a cohesive system of philosophical assumptions shared by a community of scholars) from epistemology (i.e., philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge), ontology (i.e., philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality), and methodology (i.e., procedures and logic of formal inquiry) to also include an explicit focus on axiology (i.e., philosophical assumptions regarding the ideals, ethics, and aesthetics that drive scholarly, as well as other human, pursuits; see also, Mertens, 2010).

Although there is some literature regarding research methods for social justice (e.g., Strunk & Locke, 2019; Winter, 2017), teaching qualitative methods (e.g., Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011; Hazzan & Nutov, 2014; Hurworth, 2008; Koro-Ljundberg, 2012; Lapum & Hume, 2015; Mulvihill, Swaminatha, & Bailey, 2015; Preissle & deMarrais, 2011; Rania, Migliorini, & Rebora, 2017; Roulston, 2019; Ulmer, Kuby, & Christ, 2019; Waite, 2014; Wolgemuth, 2016), studying teaching and learning in higher education as a social justice project (see Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016 for an example), literature regarding *teaching qualitative methods for social justice* remains scant (see, for example, Denzin, 2010). Based on conversations with colleagues, we know this work to be undertaken in pockets at institutions across the U.S., and there is pedagogical literature regarding how qualitative methods instructors integrate critical perspectives grounded in feminisms, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism and indigeneity, and disability studies (see, for example, the special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* entitled Teaching Qualitative Research as Transgressive Practices, edited by Hsuing, 2016). Less explicit, however, is how teaching and centering those frameworks might align with the goals of social justice education (see Ulmer, 2017, for a musing). Moreover, there is little literature devoted to how pedagogical practices in qualitative methods courses may further goals of social justice education. Thus, to frame this essay, we extend Denzin's (2010) "third pole" of teaching research methods *for* social justice to position our teaching practice *as* a social justice endeavor. This work for us seems especially important given that the majority of students in our methods courses are practicing educators, public school system and district leaders and administrators, and/or otherwise stakeholders in public education.

Teaching Towards Social Justice

The notion of teaching for justice and equity is well-established in the contemporary K-12 teaching literature (e.g., Dover, 2009; Kumashiro, 2015; Nieto, 2000), the teacher education literature (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004; Valenzuela, 2016; Villegas, 2007; Wiedeman, 2002; Zeichner, 2003) and the higher and adult education literature (e.g., Crowther, 2013; Hurtado, 2007; Ross, 2014), which often intersects with teacher preparation (e.g., Applebaum, 2009; Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009). Indeed, there exists a preponderance of frameworks that detail essential components for teaching for social justice (e.g., Hackman, 2005; Kumashiro, 2015), some of which are discipline-specific. Though it has been conceptualized in myriad ways, proponents for social justice education espouse a few

common tenets. Namely, teaching for social justice is rooted in ideas about the potential of education as liberatory and classroom spaces as emancipatory. Social justice-oriented teachers in higher education, then, are responsible for cultivating these spaces and focusing on building relationships with and among students that facilitate the development of critical consciousness and the sharing of personal experiences. Social justice education challenges students to develop critical thinking skills toward understanding and disrupting systemic oppression, particularly white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017); look for and examine patterns as they come to understand (in)equity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017); examine discourses and language as they function to help or harm (Gee, 1999); focus on agency and participation as means to redress or resist (or reify) inequities (Leonardo, 2005); and acknowledge that social justice work is both cognitively and emotionally laborious, for instructors and students alike (Matias, 2016).

In recent years, however, moves towards social justice in higher education have been met with scathing critiques (see Horowitz, 2006, for example), especially from conservative circles who charge that educating for social justice is tantamount to indoctrination and is the product of a "liberal bias" in higher education. Applebaum (2009) has cogently responded to these critics, arguing that higher education must take up the mantle of social justice when inequitable and oppressive conditions exist. We have each weathered implicit and explicit critiques of our work as social justice educators. For example, upon seeing texts about feminism, feminist research practices, critical race theory, and social justice education on Hannah's office desk, a "right pole" (Denzin, 2010, p. 55) colleague asked last year, "What does all that stuff have to do with qualitative methods?!", seemingly oblivious to the long history of social justice and scholar-activism in qualitative and participatory methods circles (Denzin, 2010) and contemporary calls for new lines of critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017).

Our students often respond with similar critiques, as evidenced by the following comment left anonymously by a student in an evaluation of instruction: "I found it uncomfortable that the instructor uses the opportunity to try and impress her beliefs outside the course content on the students." Students, in ways that resist the long history of social justice scholarship in qualitative methods, frequently suggest that social justice is "outside the course content." Students' feedback also reveals a lack of understanding about the nature of systems of oppression and privilege (e.g., claims of reverse discrimination) when they suggest that the course is not inclusive and that Hannah "seemed to treat some white students exactly like she described how marginalized groups feel." These comments highlight the danger of language in the academy about diversity and inclusion, as opposed to equity and justice (Stewart, 2017) and the persistent myth of the possibility of curricular neutrality. We interpret these comments to mean that students need more instruction about social justice, not less; that our class is often the first place students are tasked with talking about topics such as race, class, gender, and/or sexuality. As such, these comments reinforce our commitment to teaching this way. They also highlight the need to center axiology in methods coursework; indeed, in all coursework. We position axiology as a core element of paradigm. Persisting, despite criticism and complaint from some colleagues and students, in our axiological commitment to equity in our research, curriculum, and pedagogy is part of how we model paradigmatic commitment and consistency for our students.

Curated Readings: Introducing Critical Perspectives

In our context, teaching for social justice is premised on first building critical consciousness in students. One of the beautiful qualities of qualitative methods coursework is that it challenges students to muck around in their assumptions about the world and themselves:

how they think knowledge(s) are created and valued, what perceptions can tell us about phenomena, the nature of Reality/reality(ies), and especially how they position themselves, and are positioned by others. In our introductory qualitative methods courses, we prompt these diggings-in, and ground this exploration of esoteric concepts like realities and knowledges, by first working to locate the ideas of power, discourse, hierarchy, privilege, and oppression (i.e., invoking tenets of poststructuralist, decolonizing, feminist, and critical theories). We are intentional about integrating empirical pieces to our reading list authored by researchers who employ critical theoretical frames, such as feminisms, Critical Race Theory, queer theories, critical studies of whiteness, postcolonialism, and disability studies. We are also thoughtful about diversifying who we position as authorities in our classes. That is, we are intentional about assembling a reading list that is attentive to researchers with historically marginalized identities (e.g., women, scholars of Color, queer scholars).

Thoughtfully curating a reading list of empirical work that centers multiple voices and illustrates how researchers may employ multiple theoretical perspectives is essential to teaching methods with social justice in mind. Doing so demonstrates how people may have qualitatively different experiences based on power, contexts, and diverse identity dimensions and provides an entrée into talking about multiple perspectives, essentialisms, how knowledge(s) are constructed, and what knowledge(s) are valued, or deemed to be of most worth. This entrée is integral to the work of social justice; when students are prompted to critically analyze the ways in which power intersects with the ways that knowledge(s) are (re)produced, they often come to realize that what has been constructed as a "normal" experience is, at minimum, relative, and when fully realized, serves to reify oppressive systems that privilege and marginalize (i.e., the status quo).

In this way, we have begun to explore how power functions not only in research, but in our everyday lived experiences; a critique of these power structures serves as a central component of social justice education (Giroux, 2015). In addition to offering methodological insights, engaging with readings that integrate critical perspectives can reveal how steeped students are in dominant discourses, colorevasive ideology, and sexist and heteronormative perspectives. It also can provide leverage for opening up conversations meant to facilitate students' development of critical consciousness. At the same time, these readings also offer some graduate students, often those with marginalized identities, concepts to think with as they work to understand and share their experiences and observations in systems of oppression and privilege.

Reflective Journaling: Unpacking identity

In these diggings-in to the onto-epistemological, the assumptions about how knowledge(s) are produced, and the power structures inherent in research, students follow a common developmental trajectory. We see the parallels of, for example, those trajectories captured in Becoming Multicultural Educators (Gay, 2003); work in stages that happens when white people come to terms with, and "unpack" racial identity (Helms, 1997) and whiteness as a cultural normative (Terry, 1981); or work when students begin to develop critical consciousness about systems of oppression (Delpit, 2006; Freire, 1970). Thus, this mucking around becomes just as much about identity work as it is about learning to research: "Why am I only now starting to question these things…I've been thinking this way for over 40 years and I'm only now to starting to question these things!" (a student's response to the notion that there may be multiple realities when pushed to unpack the cliché "Perception is not the same as reality"). To scaffold and prompt students to capture this process and their emergent understandings, they are charged with keeping a journal for the duration of the semester, which they write in both in and out of class. They read, for example, Ortlipp's (2008) account of

reflective journaling as part of a research project, Peshkin's (1988) piece about multiple "I's" that one brings to a study, and about positionality in critical work (i.e., Bourke, 2014; Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gomez, & Meiners, 2014; Hill, 2006). Students, by the end of the semester, remark that they have more clarity about their dissertation or research ideas, and also how they, as emergent social scientists, bring their own "lenses" and "baggage" to their topics. Moreover, their research journals become a place to critically examine elements of their identities that they may not have before, and how identity dimensions carry more or less salience and power depending on context; this type of critical personal reflection is a goal of social justice education, especially for white, cis-hetero, middle class, Christian students who may not have ever been prompted to critically examine their identities in our Deep Southern communities. Learning to locate one's social position, and then to hone in on the theoretical perspectives that explain that location, is integral to the work of "knowing thyself" as a researcher prepared to engage in humanizing relationships (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2018) during qualitative research.

In addition to critical self-reflection, this practice of journaling can be a way for students to unpack the ways that they see oppression and privilege at work in systems such as education. For example, we read an empirical piece, *Necessary but Insufficient: How Educators Enact Hope for Formerly Disconnected Youth* (Flennaugh, Cooper Stein, & Carter Andrews, 2017), that employed Duncan-Andrade's (2009) critical hope framework. After reading it, an African American woman journaled that she had been guilty of imparting "false hope" and "hokey hope" with African American students in the school system in which she worked. She recounted telling her students repeatedly that if they just worked hard enough, they could achieve anything; she pointed to herself as an example of a "minority who had overcome many obstacles to succeed." After reading the piece, however, she began to realize the implications of this message: that, if internalized, a student who did not succeed may ultimately blame that failure on herself, rather than being able to engage in a critical analysis of systemic barriers and institutional –isms that may have been at work. This focus on systems is integral to the work of social justice education, which emphasizes "situating inequities within a systemic sociopolitical analysis" (Sleeter, 2009, p. 611).

A Student-Centered Seminar

Pedagogy and practice are often rooted in a "banking" approach to teaching and learning (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997), perhaps particularly so in higher education. In this banking model, students are viewed as empty vessels to be filled by the teacher, who "deposits" knowledge and expertise; students are positioned as passive and powerless and teaching is a purely teacher-directed act. We find that, because of their past experiences with banking approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, students are often unfamiliar with being responsible for active participation in their own learning, even at the graduate level. To offset this model of teacher-as-expert, we approach teaching from a critical stance, which counters passive transference of knowledge and instead draws from social justice frameworks that are grounded in critical and feminist epistemologies and pedagogies (e.g., Weiler, 1991). This epistemic positioning privileges experience, socially-produced knowledge(s), and prompts a critical view of power and authority. This model of teaching expects that students will contribute their own experiences, knowledge, and expertise, and empowers students to be actively involved in their own development, aligning with goals of social justice education that encourage students to develop critical thinking.

In practice, we center students in our classroom by avoiding lecture and instead by tasking them with leading methodological discussions. For example, individual students choose from a list of empirical manuscripts and develop questions for class discussion that they

then facilitate, once or twice a semester, depending on the number of students enrolled. The class then participates in a seminar style "unpacking" of the reading together wherein "the authority of the teacher is lessened, and the interactions are more dialogic and less informational" (Tierney & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). In the first class sessions, some students initially reject this approach; they often glance at us, or ask us questions to see if they have the "right" answer. Over time, they grow to trust one another and see their classmates as intellectuals in their own right who bring expertise to the discussion; in doing so, students begin to encounter "each other's differences" (Tierney & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112), which may manifest across identities or demographic characteristics. Further, this pedagogical practice implicitly supports the role of students to question and critique authority (ours and theirs), power structures, and hierarchies, also a goal of social justice education. Ideas about power and authority are often explored explicitly through students' work to unpack their preconceptions about the meaning of "bias" and "neutrality" in research. As one student wrote in a reading response toward the end of the semester:

> We have chatted about how not all bias is bad and that it is very difficult to not be bias [sic] when writing or researching. However, I have never really thought how being subjective … could make something more powerful or meaningful…. Was the Persian historian supposed to stay neutral about the new Greek conqueror named Alexander after he burned down their city?

Further, as students discuss and interpret empirical manuscripts, their multiple reads of texts mirror the ways that perspectives engaged in those texts might counter dominant narratives to produce multiple perspectives. By the end of the semester, some students are able to engage not only with multiple perspectives in readings and in their classmates' experiences, but also how those perspectives may be received by various audiences and how power and hierarchies shape which perspectives might be more readily discounted and/or valued. Again, words from a student are illustrative:

> The reading this week reminded me of the research I did in undergraduate…. The research had a lot of good things going for it but after reading … [I realized] I was not prepared for the cultural differences that I experienced. Several times I would present what I thought were practical and common-sense fixes to an issue and not realize how impractical they were given the community I was in…. Understanding the researcher and those being researched is just as important as the finding of the studies in most cases.

As evidenced by this excerpt from a reading response, students' insights about the role of power in scholarship are perhaps most salient when they question their own positions and uses of power, when they realize they have devalued the perspectives of others in their own thinking and work.

On Language: Prompting Reflection about Discourse

In both our introductory and applied qualitative methods classes, graduate students are tasked to practice the art and skill of observational data collection. Specifically, they move through an entire unit of readings and assignments that are geared towards distinction between and among observation, inference, and reflective journaling, and hone their skills at using structured and unstructured approaches towards observation in the field. Their field sites often consist of our classroom, our campus, their workplaces, their classrooms and schools, doctors'

offices, homes, and public spaces. Each semester, students submit carefully expanded field notes that they have spent considerable time capturing both in the field and after they have exited the field. And each semester, students submit notes where they have clearly identified people in the field via (perceptions about) demographics, or not. For example, some white students and students of Color explicitly racialize people in their field notes who are not white; when asked about those people in their notes who remain unidentified, students usually have an "A-ha" moment in that they recognized those people as white and did not label them as such. This allows for conversations that explore assumptions about colorevasiveness (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017) and the appropriateness of "race-talk"; perceptions about ethnoracial status based on skin color; and descriptions of Asian and Asian American students on campus that positions them as "foreigners in their own land" (Sue & Sue, 2008). It also allows for discussion about the ways in which white people often view themselves as raceless or "normal" (e.g., Frankenberg, 2003; Rodriguez & Villaverde, 2000). We also see patterns in white students' notes who might refer to an African American boy (for example, a 4th grader) as a "young man" and an African American man as a "gentleman." (These code words are also employed by members of our own white, Southern families.) Additionally, we explore what students mean when they describe people: "She was Spanish" (i.e., Was she from Spain?), "Hispanic," or terms that they intend to be catch-alls, such as "Mexicans" or "Latin Americans." When students focus on gender, they often add descriptors that describe using de-humanizing nouns (i.e., males and females) that conflate gender presentation and sex, and in ways that contribute to the infantilization of young women (Kleinman, 2002). For example, when observing on campus, they often describe masculine-presenting undergraduate students as "men" or "young men," and feminine students as "girls." This pattern occurs across all students, all semesters. Digging into this language in class, however, allows for conversations that explore assumptions about why it seems appropriate to refer to women as girls, how we make assumptions about gender and sex based on presentation and performance, and what it might mean to refer to people by pronouns other then s/he and move towards deconstructing gender binaries. By the end of the semester, students have begun to challenge assumptions that undergird language and to delve into the power of researchers as observers to "Other" using language and description. These understandings are well-aligned with social justice education and the ways that discourse may function to help or harm (Gee, 1999) in analyses of oppression and privilege.

Moving Forward

Admittedly, some of these practices and activities might not seem especially radical particularly when juxtaposed with some of the pedagogical practices taking place at other, more progressive institutions that include more explicitly feminist, decolonizing, and anti-racist foci. At our hyper-conservative institution, however, we have chosen to "survive and subvert," a mantra often invoked by a former professor, which allows for work to advance justice and equity under the radar, so to speak. Ours is a context where mentions of systems of privilege and oppression are rare and are considered radical by many. Many of our students and colleagues interpret our efforts to cultivate critical consciousness as quintessentially "liberal" with an aim to indoctrinate students. Ours is also a context wherein students tend to expect methods instruction to be technocratic; they often ask for simple how-to instructions and checklists of tasks and are frustrated when we refuse to provide them. It is in this environment that we embed critical perspectives and pedagogies in our teaching practices in general research methods courses.

Moving forward, we seek to continue shifting our course to the left with regard to Denzin's classification (i.e., more social justice-oriented) and Eisenhart and Jurow's (2011)

spectrum wherein left-leaning classes "stress teaching about critical or postmodern principles and habits of mind" (p. 701). We aim to continue cultivating critical conversations with the students who come to our research methods courses, few of whom wish to pursue formal scholarship beyond their thesis or dissertation studies, and few of whom have explored justice and equity-mindedness before coming to our class despite their extensive experience in public education. In this way, we approach our work with them via a developmental stance with hope for shifts in consciousness that will (re)shape their work as researchers or school-based practitioners. We also draw from Ulmer's (2017) imaginings of "love" and what it might mean to center critical perspectives in qualitative inquiry and methods pedagogy.

We have found that centering critical perspectives in our methods courses is necessarily collaborative work. We have made these decisions about our curriculum and pedagogy, and we accept the risks that come with them, in solidarity. Our ability to continue focusing on social justice in our courses is largely dependent on our shared and unqualified commitment to do so. It is important to us that students whose programs require our introductory course cannot avoid conversations about white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy because there are no sections in which that conversation does not happen. Approaching our teaching this way together also affords us a thought partner with whom to commiserate and strategize about responding to resistance and thwarting critiques.

Finally, we are wary of the work ahead of us, as we increasingly see work under the guise of "social justice" that is aligned with institutional goals related to "diversity"; that is, much of the conversation around the need to integrate social justice into higher education curricula is framed vis-à-vis "diversity" and "inclusivity," conversations which appear to be byproducts of neoliberalism and market ideologies in higher education. In this consumerist model, institutions, including our own, are charged to attract, recruit, and retain students of "diverse" backgrounds. Much has been written about how these efforts are problematic when they are aimed at bringing students of Color to predominately white institutions that have only hostile climates to offer (see, e.g., Picower & Mayorga, 2015), when justice and equity are absent from the discussion, and when whiteness and the agendas of a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy go unexamined and unchallenged. Thus, we continue our work to define for ourselves and others what teaching for justice and equity mean and look like in this neoliberal and risky context.

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