



FIRST EDITION

A GUIDE FOR SUSTAINING  
**CONVERSATIONS**  
**ON RACISM**

IDENTITY, AND OUR MUTUAL HUMANITY



**SNEAK  
PREVIEW**

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Steve Burghardt, Kalima DeSuze,  
Linda Lausell Bryant, and Mohan Vinjamuri

First Edition

# A GUIDE FOR SUSTAINING CONVERSATIONS ON RACISM, IDENTITY, AND OUR MUTUAL HUMANITY

By Steve Burghardt, Kalima DeSuze, Linda Lausell Bryant, and Mohan Vinjamuri



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# CONTENTS

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
|--------------|---|

## PART ONE: BEFORE WE ENTER THE CLASSROOM

*(Faculty Preparation)*

"Before We Enter the Classroom" features a dialogue about the personal, community, and institutional infrastructure necessary to make these conversations authentic, sustainable, and meaningful.

|                |                                                                                                                                                                         |    |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| CONVERSATION 1 | "How can I create safety in the classroom, respecting the balance between harmony and disharmony needed for learning?"                                                  | 9  |
| CONVERSATION 2 | "How much do I self-disclose in the classroom setting? When is it appropriate? How does that impact my authenticity if I am asking students to be open and vulnerable?" | 23 |
| CONVERSATION 3 | "Is there really an 'Invisible Workload' that faculty of color and their LGBTQ colleagues carry that straight, white faculty don't?"                                    | 47 |
| CONVERSATION 4 | "How do we create a school environment that consistently engages its community in these conversations?"                                                                 | 63 |

## **PART TWO: THE CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS**

### *(Faculty-Student Conversations)*

“The Classroom Conversations” features the hot-button questions, usually from students, that faculty have asked for support to further bolster their ability to appropriately respond in the classroom.

|                       |                                                                                                                                                    |     |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>CONVERSATION 5</b> | “How can I create a healthy give-and-take between people in classrooms or agencies when there are social differences between us?”                  | 75  |
| <b>CONVERSATION 6</b> | “How can I teach about poverty to my students, many of whom who have been impoverished, when I am middle class?”                                   | 87  |
| <b>CONVERSATION 7</b> | “Why do parts of your story matter inside this classroom?”                                                                                         | 103 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 8</b> | “What does a white, straight, Protestant male like you have to say to a lesbian woman of color from an economically oppressed background like me?” | 113 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 9</b> | “I DISAGREE WITH . . .” “How do we help students distinguish microaggressions from simple disagreement in the classroom?”                          | 131 |

|                        |                                                                                                                                                                               |     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>CONVERSATION 10</b> | "Is it possible to be an objective facilitator of class content on socially charged issues?"                                                                                  | 139 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 11</b> | "I'M HURT!" "How do I respond to students' strong emotions to difficult content? Or reactions to each other and to the content?"                                              | 153 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 12</b> | "How do you respond to these powerful social issues in research classes and in field work?"                                                                                   | 163 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 13</b> | "THIS ROOM IS TOXIC! . . ." "What do I do when the room becomes toxic, when students of color are upset, some white students seem guilty, and others want to leave the room?" | 173 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 14</b> | "How do we respond to the ongoing tensions of the 2016 presidential election and beyond?"                                                                                     | 181 |

## **PART THREE: SHIFTING THE TEACHING PARADIGM**

*Keeping the Conversation Going: Reflections for a School's Faculty and Students*  
“Shifting the Teaching Paradigm” features lessons for critical pedagogy, classroom management, and learning.

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |     |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>CONVERSATION 15</b>           | “What are the consequences of faculty of color raising issues of race knowing that data shows programs inconsistently support these efforts?”                                                                            | 207 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 16</b>           | “You graded me unfairly because I am . . . ?”                                                                                                                                                                            | 227 |
| <b>CONVERSATION 17</b>           | “How do we encourage this work inside and outside the classroom, yet include self-care that pays attention to trauma, stress and pain, and the health of our bodies, especially as it is activated in faculty of color?” | 251 |
| <b>A SPECIAL CONVERSATION 18</b> | “How did each of us come to do this work?”                                                                                                                                                                               | 265 |
| <b>REFERENCES</b>                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 274 |
| <b>INDEX</b>                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 277 |

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## FOREWORD

We are in a critical time in history, an era of challenge and turbulence for people throughout the world. During the past few years we have experienced or witnessed horrific instances of racial and ethnic violence in the US and abroad, challenging environmental conditions, and political instability. Continuing changes in local and global economies have contributed to growing economic and social inequality, and neoliberal public policies have charged the private sector, which puts profits over people, to address these conditions. Social workers and other social justice advocates need effective tools to build human and social capital, while continuing, as Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, to “bend the arc of history toward justice.” A key element for this work is the ability to expand critical consciousness and awareness so we can bridge differences and work toward our collective good. A society, and world, that is polarized by difference can’t address the magnitude of this project.

This book, which is grounded in dialogue between activist scholars and educators with different positionalities, contributes to this “tool box” of strategies and methods we can use to engage in constructive dialogue to educate others and ourselves due to this work. Social work educators have a critical role in educating students to do justice work in our communities and world, as “challenging social injustice” and “preventing and eliminating domination, exploitation, and discrimination” based on different social identities are key aspects of our professional mission. We need to develop these tools ourselves and model them in our interactions with students—both inside and outside of our classrooms. This means preparing our students to work toward justice, while managing the different social positionalities that exist in our schools and classrooms. This guide contributes to this important project.

In 2007 the conservative National Association of Scholars (NAS) attacked our field for “indoctrinating” our students to adopt “progressive” perspectives. Although this attack was not successful in changing the focus of our programs, it did provide an opportunity for us, as a field, for self-examination and larger discussion regarding what we mean by diversity, social justice, and inclusivity. This attack on our field and our schools also revealed who among

us might fight back, who might fear attack, and who might not truly share a common vision for our purpose as professional educators.

*A Guide for Sustaining Conversations on Racism, Identity, and Our Mutual Humanity* is very honest and transparent regarding what we face and what we must do to sustain ourselves as social justice educators. It is particularly helpful in pointing out how our different social identities and positionalities will impact this. Those of us whose identities are not at the center of our institutions or communities, who differ in social power and status from those we teach, will have different experiences from those with different identities. My hope is that this work will promote empathy across difference and can contribute to greater support for those of us who are often at the front lines of this work.

Of course, this magnitude of change requires work on every level. This guide emphasizes the important work that must occur within and between individuals, within groups, and within classrooms. It challenges how we may think about teaching, the place of “process” and “content,” and how we handle emotion and affect in education. How interpersonal perceptions impact the way communications are understood and received. These are significant contributions.

But an equally important contribution occurs in these discussions, however brief, of the organizational contexts in which teaching and dialogue occur. It points out the significance of strong leadership, resources, and support on every level. It speaks to the importance of addressing our reward structures and tools of assessing teaching performance. Dialogue and intra-individual work are important, but without structural support, and change, within our institutions the impact of this work will be limited.

Each era presents its own challenges, and this era is particularly challenging. If we, as educators, intend to equip our students to work toward justice, we need to be able to create brave, not safe, spaces in our classrooms where different views and students with different identities are supported and can learn from each other. We need to focus more on “calling people in” for discussion, rather than “calling them out” when they voice dissenting or different views. We need to be able to understand what SW scholars Schulman

and Gitterman describe as the “hidden group in the classroom” that can undermine or support our efforts toward genuine communication and learning. And we need to address the ways in which faculty members with marginalized identities are viewed by students and colleagues and how this can affect their success.

I am pleased that *A Guide for Sustaining Conversations on Racism, Identity, and Our Mutual Humanity* provides some insights and tools that can assist us in doing this kind of work, so that we, and current and future colleagues, can continue the work toward justice and positive change.

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. Origin of the Guide

In the current political, economic, and social atmosphere, fear, anger, and uncertainty seem to be everywhere. Divisions arise even in the midst of good intentions. Good people, particularly professors and agency supervisors, are not sure what to do when facing discussions on race, racism, and identity. Most faculty want a way forward but are not sure how to get there. The reality is that there are different responses for different people—for example, how a white person responds as opposed to a woman of color—and yet “flight or fight” is not the answer for anybody. These varied responses are a function of the many details that make us different in the first place—our culture, our values, our learned approaches to conflict, and our fears about real or perceived threats to name a few. Some people choose to withdraw from discussions on charged subjects while others may roll up their sleeves, ball up their fists, and prepare to fight. Some may respond inauthentically, hiding their true feelings while others move right into the arena of discomfort and put themselves at risk by sharing what they really think. We probably all lean towards one of these approaches even if we make exceptions at times. What is at stake here is not just any individual’s level of comfort or discomfort, but how we make progress on the challenging issues of our time.

*A Guide to Sustaining Conversations on Racism, Identity and Our Mutual Humanity* is a hands-on “how-to” guide for teachers, students, agency professionals, and others wherever we work and live who seek to address the often daunting challenges of skillfully responding to difficult situations found today, manifested in settings such as classrooms and workplaces. These conversations matter—a lot—anywhere that people come together seeking answers and accountability on all-too-often overlooked topics such as:

- Race, power, and privilege in the classroom, workplace, boardroom: How do these potentially explosive issues impact the classroom or workplace? How do you respond when some speak negatively about others’ perceived privilege?

- Handling the “Oppression Olympics”: How do you handle different forms of social oppression besides race? Does one social identity “win” over another?
- Microaggressions vs. honest disagreement: How do you help students and others in workplaces and coalitions distinguish between the two?
- Measuring performance fairly and equitably: How do you handle differences in academic preparation where structural issues of race and class may have caused some students to arrive in your classroom less skilled than some of their classmates?
- How do you respond to the very different emotions that certain topics might raise—guilt in some socially and economically advantaged students, anger in some who have experienced systematic oppression throughout their lives?
- How do you maintain focus on the classroom content while responding to the above social issues in ways that create an academically rigorous, safe space for students to see the classroom as an engaging learning environment?

This guide offers one of many possible paths forward to dive deeply into these questions.

## II. Our Paths to the Work

The four authors range from teachers of research, community organization, clinical practice, and field education—in short, the content areas that capture the breadth of a professional social work education and, indirectly, much of American work life in social services and education. Each team member also has been involved in some agency life as an executive, clinician, front line worker, organizer, or consultant. Like most groups of people, despite commonality, we each arrive at this work from different paths carrying a multitude of intersecting identities, which have informed our individual experiences as they relate to this material. At the core, you will find contrasting stories woven together by a deep commitment to work with and through these issues as part of our life’s work. As we have celebrated and affirmed our diversity, we

hope readers will also celebrate the differences and similarities that tie us to this journey: The human whole is greater than the sum of our parts.

## III. The Process

Directly and compassionately addressing racism is often gritty and most certainly, varied. Because of our differences, we all agreed that it was important to honor how deeply personal, political, and consequential these issues are when they appear in the classroom, in faculty meetings, and in the field. In that spirit, we decided to systematically talk them through rather than pursue an intellectual endeavor. The actual language and approach used by us involved emotion as well as intellect. At the end of the day, we learned, and hope you will, too, to agree that no one approach fits all—indeed, it cannot. In this guide, you will find four approaches to the same questions, bound together by our respect for those approaches and the underlying connection to our mutual humanity.

This guide will provide answers to these and the other difficult questions that consistently confront faculty and supervisors in today's tumultuous and diverse world so that they engage in and sustain these conversations in their own classrooms and offices. The guide is a hands-on effort undertaken by four experienced, anti-racist educators and practitioners. These authors have, through trial and error, deep personal reflection, and sustained practice each developed a number of approaches to answer these questions in ways that greatly diminish both dogma and fear in classrooms and replace them with ongoing, mutually supportive learning environments. While united in this commitment, as individuals, the four authors are necessarily diverse. After all, how one responds to the above questions—and how students respond to each faculty member as well—is necessarily different for a young, untenured Afro-Latina and an older, White, full professor. By examining how socially different people respond to the same difficult question, the guide seeks to create a rich set of options for the readership to utilize in their own classrooms, agencies, and field placements.

We accomplished this not by a traditional intellectual endeavor through literature reviews and new research but by carrying on sustained,

experientially based conversations among the four authors. Each chapter is built around a difficult question with the four engaging in the give-and-take of commonalities and differences that appear in response. As such, the work models ways to express differences that enrich rather than impede dialogue and to do so through “lessons learned” and “approaches taken” that will resonate with socially diverse faculty.

The work may also surprise you, for what emerges here also addresses something else—our own humanity and how it is challenged and stretched inside and outside the classroom or office. For weeks, we committed to bearing witness to our individual and collective discovery process. As a group, we experienced laughter, joy, and pain and suffering, too. Most of all, we experienced new aspects of our own humanity as well as that of one another. It was truly humbling.

## **IV. Format to the Guide**

The conversations were broken into three areas:

Part One: “Before We Enter the Classroom” features a dialogue about the personal, community, and institutional infrastructure necessary in a program to make these conversations authentic, sustainable, and meaningful.

Part Two: “The Classroom Conversations” features the hot-button questions that many faculty have asked for support to further bolster their ability to appropriately respond in the classroom.

Part Three: “Shifting the Teaching Paradigm” features lessons for critical pedagogy, classroom management, and learning.

## **V. A Final Invitation to the Reader**

We invite readers to journey with us. We ask that you enter our humanity. We ask that you remember this guide is an authentic dialogue between colleagues and friends who are experts in their own subjective experiences. Our

own lesson is there is no such thing as a “right” question in the classroom as it relates to race, racism, sexuality, heterosexism, gender, sexism, socioeconomic status, and classism. These are deeply personal topics that reach back into collective yet starkly unique individual histories as we explore our own stories, vulnerability, and resilience. We invite you to do the same. As you do so, let’s support one another in cultivating:

- Patience to deal with your development
- Willingness to take risks
- Commitment to authenticity
- Letting go of perfectionism
- Acknowledging internalized racial superiority and inferiority and, in doing so, forgiving ourselves and one another
- Leaning in with curiosity
- Remembering that it’s all in the little things, not one big thing, that keeps the work alive and the capacity to keep growing for us all. This guide is an invitation to do just that.

---

# **PART ONE:**

# **BEFORE WE ENTER THE CLASSROOM**

---

# CONVERSATION ONE

**Question:** How can I create safety in the classroom, respecting the balance between harmony and disharmony needed for learning?

**Background to this conversation:**

This conversation centers around the following reflective questions that colleagues have raised over the years as we all struggle to make our classrooms powerful, accountable, and open learning environments.

**Observations and Reflections:**

- The concept of “safe space” often connotes the avoidance of risk and conflict, which then impedes the cultivation of authentic relationships. We need to challenge the concept of “safe spaces.” If we can shift the paradigm from “safe space” to “accountable space,” what would that look like in terms of building relationships in a classroom?
- In our roles as instructors, we wield power and authority in the classroom. How do we relate to this authority? What are we willing and unwilling to let go of in terms of that authority?
- As human beings, we have a tendency to try to keep ourselves safe. What do I do as an instructor to try to keep myself “safe” (in the sense of self-protection)? What do I do to challenge my sense of safety in order to grow?

## THE CONVERSATION

**Mohan:** Our first question is: *How can I create safety in the classroom, respecting the balance between harmony and disharmony needed for learning?* Safety is something that I’m always thinking about as a teacher. Maybe because, in ways, I felt safe being in the classroom, and then there are

also many ways that I felt unsafe. I guess I'm always very sensitive to safety. I think this question relates very specifically to when I taught a new course a few years ago on social work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and, questioning (LGBTQ) populations. It was the first time a class like this was offered to social work students at the college where I teach.

This question really came alive in that class. It made me think about what creates a safe environment for people to really wrestle with things and to really face things in themselves. When I did a research study after the class to find out about the students' experience, safety came out as a theme. As I started thinking about this question more, I started to ask myself: Safety from what? Is it criticism? Is it disrespect? What is it? It made me think. I keep using this word "safety" all the time, but then I asked myself again today, Safety from what? I don't know what it is. I want to pose that question.

I want to go back to what bell hooks says about this idea of a transformative learning space. My understanding of bell hooks is that she challenges the idea that in order for a place to be safe, it needs to be harmonious. She says in *Teaching to Transgress*: "Recognition of difference might also require of us a willingness to see the classroom change to allow for shifts in relations between students." She goes on to say it's difficult for individuals to shift paradigms and that there must be a setting for folks to voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why. To me, maybe safety is, how do you create an environment where people can be okay with being scared? That's what it resonates. She says that we can't do this alone. We have to create a community.

That is, it is the community that creates the safety. Reading her work challenged me to think that I place too much responsibility on myself. I need to let the community form, and then that community can maybe help us to feel safe to be scared.

**Linda:**

I love the question. *Safe from what?* I think that would be a great conversation to have in the classroom to really examine what are some of the unspoken expectations that students have about being safe and who's going to keep them safe. Whose job is it to keep them safe? I think what people may be seeking is to be safe from discomfort. I think one of the ways to approach this is to embed the notion of discomfort right into the pedagogy, to establish it as an expectation right from the beginning—that learning comes with discomfort because it requires stretching. It requires growing. It requires grappling with unfamiliar ideas. By definition, discomfort is part of the learning process. You're normalizing the discomfort. You're setting it up as an expectation that it's a condition of the classroom experience.

You set ground rules, norms, parameters around the way discomfort can be expressed and the way we can support each other through that discomfort but it's weaved right into the learning process. We establish that as an expectation.

**Steve:**

I love what you said about discomfort because to me, that's really the heart of learning. At the beginning of the school year, in my experience, what I find is that students initially, because they're so uncomfortable just being in graduate school or undergraduate school, they're always on best behavior. Like you said, Linda, it's the best time to remind students that later in the term they're not going to be so well-behaved. Early on, we therefore need to establish how we want to be together

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when those hard times come. If we're into learning, the learner at some point is going to have "ouch" moments that are going to cause people that discomfort. People will be triggered, and that means some people potentially are going to respond very negatively to each other.

Especially in my practice classes, I have not had an experience where at some point in the year, somebody didn't get really upset with at least one other student. That's the moment where these ground rules become really, really important. Back at the start of the term, students never want to follow them at first. My experience is people just want to get on with "learning." They want to know what they need to know to *do* good work. As a professor, it took me awhile to get comfortable enough to say, "No, we need to pause. We need to first establish how do we want to approach each other? How do we really want to handle our responses if somebody says something that hurts us based on our own identity or our own story?"

By the way, besides creating that atmosphere of discomfort that both of you have spoken to, I want to begin to establish a little authority within the students. Discipline is up to us all.

As you were saying, Mohan, that is not all on me. The authority comes from all of us. When these things later happen, and they do, a student gets to step in because of these rules and not wait for the prof. I have a good example of this. A student last week in class, a white woman, spoke with the jargon of a young person of color at her placement in a way that a number of students felt was demeaning. Because we have the ground rules, a young woman of color was able to say, "Ouch," and "The way that landed, it hurt me." She didn't call her a racist or say that what she said sounded like a racist. She may

have *felt* that way, but instead of responding that way, she used the ground rules to get this older white woman to pause and really think a lot about this. Instead of all hell breaking loose, it created a really healthy, difficult, uncomfortable, and real conversation.

**Kalima:** I want to challenge this idea of safety. I wonder if we can even create that and how real it is. I ground my spaces in the same way you just talked about, Linda. However, I add that we need to get comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable. That's just part of this work. It's going to be part of this work in the classroom. It's going to be part of the work in your practice. There's going to be many times in our practice, whether we're at the direct-service level, community level, or policy level where we are going to be uncomfortable for a very long period of time. We just have to get comfortable with that idea of discomfort and lack of control.

*We need to get comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable.*

The fact is, there will never be a time when the space is completely safe for everyone. I move more towards an accountable space, which is using the ground rules to hold us all accountable to an ethic of who we want to be in the world and how we want to show up.

When I say accountable, just using your example, that was an accountable moment. She was accountable to her own feelings and experience by saying, "Ouch," and not placing the blame on anyone, just inviting conversation.

The other thing that I wanted to bring up is this idea of transferring authority. My teaching philosophy is based on the ideas of three books: *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks; *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire; and *The People's History*, Howard Zinn ("The Coming Revolt of the Guards").

*“You can’t be  
neutral on a  
moving train.”*

— Howard Zinn

One of the things that Zinn has said is that “you can’t be neutral on a moving train.” I already know the classroom is inherently a political space. As such, it is a space of contention if I am pushing towards liberation. It is a space of discomfort manifested by our own awakening if I’m pushing towards self-awareness and deepening. This requires a specific type of relationship, one where there is trust in the process of being with one another.

Modeling this idea of being in an authentic relationship in the classroom is a very, very difficult task in terms of what you referred to in transferring authority. It’s so difficult and scary.

Part of that is, we’re going to make mistakes. It’s going to hurt. We’re not going to like each other some days. Other days, we’re going to love each other. That’s just inherently the core of what it means to be in an authentic relationship. That can also exist in a classroom. Just like in our relationships, it’s not safe per se because we are two human beings making mistakes all the time. However, we must be accountable.

We have to be able to be accountable with our own feelings. If somebody says something that hurts, we say, “Ouch, that hurts.” That person gets to be accountable to us and to our community and say, “Oh, I am sorry. This is what I meant … ” moving the relationship forward.

If I tell somebody that it’s going to be safe, and then it’s not, then what happens? The final thing I wanted to say is I like this question of “Safety from what?” and whose responsibility it is to create safety? I think you brought that up, Mohan. What I do in the beginning is ask three questions, and I make students put their answers in different shapes and different colors on the board. In a circle, I say, “What do you need from

this class so you can show up as your 100% self or as close to 100%?" In a box, "What are your expectations, your highest expectations of this experience?" In a heart, "Who do you intend to be to manifest the two things that you want?" I absolve myself from this idea of safety or creating something that they want and instead intentionally invite them to the process of co-creating the space and experience they are declaring.

If someone writes "humble," it's what you need to be. I did not promise that nor did I prescribe that behavior to you. It's your declaration; you own it. My hope and expectation is that they will then show up as humbly as possible in the learning process so that they can manifest exactly what they want from the experience and be who they have said they want to be. I just don't think that we can manifest or create safety the way they want it. They have to be responsible for it, too.

**Mohan:** From the three of you, I circled three key ideas which are really helping me think about all of this. I'm frankly getting bored of this whole idea of safety. I'm boring myself for thinking about safety. I'm liking all these other ways of thinking about it. I guess to take one point from each of you, I love the idea, Linda, about unspoken expectations, this idea of setting expectations together with the students about how we can express ourselves, how we can support each other. I like that way of thinking about expectations. The whole thing about transferring authority, which we've also been speaking about, is something I think I've struggled with ever since I started teaching. I'm just thinking about the classroom. I'm teaching again this LGBTQ elective this semester to the undergraduates.

In my undergraduate LGBTQ elective this semester, I did something similar to what you, Kalima, talked

about in terms of having the students reflect on what they can offer and what they need to create this idea of a safe space. One of my colleagues likes the concept “risk friendly” rather than safe space. I talk to my students about what that means, risk friendly. What does it mean to have a risk-friendly environment? This whole idea of transferring authority, there’s still something that doesn’t sit right with me with the way I conduct a class. There is a role to play as the facilitator. There’s a reason I’m there. I can’t just be like, “Here’s the topic,” and I walk out of the room. There’s a reason. It’s like group therapy. Sometimes the group therapist sits there and says nothing the entire time. If you remove that person, the therapeutic process won’t happen.

The process requires that focal point who is the instructor. There’s something about me being the conduit through which things go which isn’t sitting right with me. I’ve always struggled with this. Balancing the responsibility, I have to be that whatever you call it, maybe a conduit, a facilitator. There are times I’m going to be lecturing. I have that role, too. How do I balance that and do it in a way that doesn’t short circuit the process that happens between my students? I guess maybe I’m thinking about this transfer of authority even more now. To your point, Kalima, about accountability, I love that idea of moving from a safe space to an accountable space. Reframing that notion, I find that really helpful.

**Linda:** It’s a process. If you go see a therapist, that’s a process. If you’re in a classroom, that’s a process. I think that there has to be “contracting” that has to take place about what’s going to happen in *this* process, in *this* space. People bring expectations into those other processes I mentioned. They may be thinking, “This is what it’s going to be like. I’m going to come. You know things that I don’t know. You’re going to teach them to me.

You're going to deposit them into me and I'm going to leave more enlightened." I think we need to try to bring those expectations out into the open, to the surface, and then engage in a re-contracting process that turns that on its ear. You establish that you're not the sole authority here or the only leader here. Everybody here has a responsibility of bringing leadership to this process.

There is something about the way the classroom is set up that reinforces the idea of one instructor with all of the knowledge. It mimics and mirrors all of the things we are fighting to change in society. The authority figure with the power is at the front of the room, and everyone else is passively waiting for the edict to come on down so they can know. We have to challenge that, but students need to be aware, to be made conscious of that, so we should make them aware of that and re-contract about what it's going to be like. Otherwise, it's very parental in a way.

Even the notion of creating safety is very parental. It assumes we can actually do that, as though safety is ours to give. It reminds me of what we talk about in social work—empowerment. We act like it's ours to give. Is it? It doesn't belong to us. The revolution has to start before any of the lessons start. It has to start with breaking, shattering ideas of what this learning space is supposed to be and coming to a revised understanding of what that is. You're starting with disruption to begin with. How can we start with disruption and make it safe at the same time? If we promise that, we're kidding ourselves, and we're kidding them.

**Kalima:** You can't do both at the same time.

**Steve:** That's great about the disruption. I'm thinking a lot about how students initially perceive what they're going to get out of their educational experience. What's been

unacknowledged? What's been unacknowledged is that they expect that there's going to be a lot of authority at the front of the room. That they're going to be deposits from the professor on whatever her or his great learning is. My take on this, frankly, as the older white guy who is having them read my own text, to expect anything different towards me at first would be unfair to them.

What the ground rules are meant to do, as you're saying, is to disrupt a little. It's just a little. Begin to get them to gnaw at the idea that the only authority is me. I have to have patience about how long it takes to alter that relationship because it's not going to happen right away. It's going to be a little bit here and a little bit later, especially as mistakes are made.

One thing that's always important is when I make a mistake. I wouldn't say a grievous error but inevitably I overstate something or my data is a little more out of date. There'll be some student with great nervousness who says, "Dr. B., I'm not sure but maybe ..." and it's that moment of truth about whether or not I respect their authority or I use it to say, "Well, thank you for sharing, but my point of view really is more important here. I'm going to keep going." When their challenge is respected, then things shift; it begins altering the authority of where learning can happen even more.

The ground rules, if used correctly, I can respond in kind. Somebody says, "Ouch," and I go, "I didn't mean to do that." It doesn't completely do away with my authority nor do I expect it to, but it alters our relationship a bit. That's important because like a client-worker relationship, the entire relationship's going to be altered in a relatively short period of time. It can be shifted so that people later reinterpret what they can do in the world. That time of re-interpretation is

a big deal, and a teacher has to plan for that early on by believing that students have the capacity to do so.

The other concrete thing, just about the ground rules part, I don't take a huge amount of time in the first class. I take a little time over two or three classes so that it gets people to be thinking about it before they make it a contract. I make them come clear on if you're saying "respect," what's the behavior associated with respect? If you're saying "support," what's the behavior associated with support?

That forces people to become reflective. Out of that we begin to get to—Kalima, what you said—the idea of a mutual accountability to each other and not just to me. Then, when the class breaks down at Week 6, people are able to deal with it pretty well.

**Kalima:** Something about what you said triggered a thought I've been considering for quite some time. Every time we talk about safety, I feel like we're always talking about the students. We never talk about us. What does it mean for us to feel completely human? We teach *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and we somehow leave ourselves out of it. I am an absolute mess every single day, I'm just a mess. People think that I'm organized. I'm really not all that organized. I will be in the building one door down from the classroom and still get there late. That's just my life. How do we set it up where we get to be as human as they do? The truth is, humanity is sometimes not extended to us. The class is not set up in this way. Instead, I feel like I live in a reality where I am expected to have all the answers, or I have to know everything. I absolutely cannot. White, male, heterosexist ideals of perfection create an environment in which we're almost forced to assume a completely dehumanizing posture. I often imagine and try hard to practice, true accountability and active,

intentional power sharing. The allowance for humanity can look like that if it were afforded to us as well.

How do we begin to build that in? I build it in with a podcast. It's called Making Mistakes: TED Radio Hour. (You may access this podcast by pasting the following link into your browser: <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/11/174030515/making-mistakes>). My aim is to normalize mistakes, and if I'm lucky, the class will even begin to honor its role and value missteps in our collective journey.

This sets the stage for me to show my full human self. Whatever that may be—it could be as simple as not having a pen. Can that simple thing be received as a reflection of my humanity rather than a marker of my competence?

For folks of color and/or those of us who fall outside dominant and favored identities, this is truly a risk. I never know how I will be perceived. The truth is, I can't waste my time, energy, or mental health trying to control it. If I am to undo what has been done to our way of relating, if I am to truly reach to create a liberatory space, then I have to try to create a classroom that prioritizes our complete humanity before we even get started on a "lesson"—before we crack open any textbook. Let's just talk about humanity and go from there.

# Guiding Principles and Strategies

Students and faculty come into the classroom with expectations, both spoken and unspoken, both conscious and unconscious. By naming and talking about these expectations, we can begin to co-create an environment of mutual accountability. In order to create an accountable space, all of the teachers and all of the learners in the room need to make the implicit curriculum explicit. There is an expanded power in naming that which has gone unnamed for too long.

- Principle: Discomfort is a necessary condition for transformative learning.
- Strategy: Establish an explicit expectation through initial contracting that discomfort will be experienced and identify guidelines/processes (like “ouch”) for how it will be expressed and how we can support one another.

It takes time to create an accountable space. Classes, like all relationships, have beginnings, middles, and endings. While co-creating safety and accountability requires intentional efforts, there is also the need to let it emerge over time. We cannot force it or demand it.

- Principle: Safety is not ours to give. Teachers can only create the conditions in which a classroom community can become accountable to one another for learning.
- Strategy: Accept the limits of your power as a teacher and trust the power of the class to co-create an accountable space for learning that will emerge and strengthen over the life of the class. The moment we enter into a space together, there is a disruption, and this disruption is often unsettling. Academics all too often have come up with ways to try to smooth, soften, and manage that which is inherently disrupting, particularly within classroom settings. Acknowledge and gradually learn to embrace the disruption.
- Principle: Your honesty and humility about what you don’t know is itself a teaching tool.
- Strategy: Accept the limits of your knowledge base and allow students to teach you and each other from their lived experiences. Dare to exercise leadership by creating a learning space where knowledge is co-created. Model curiosity, humility, and openness. Be a student and a teacher.