

Fostering Capabilities Toward Social Justice in Art Education

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ABSTRACT

Social justice, in its broadest sense, is about equal rights and opportunities for all. But understandings of rights and opportunities vary widely, depending upon how we are situated socially, politically, economically, and culturally. In education, social justice is not simply the absence of injustice but also the need to recognize and enact teaching and learning that promotes a deeper understanding of ourselves and our students in relation to the broader social and cultural landscape. This article argues that, given the growing diversity of our society, it is imperative for current and future teachers to find ways of embodying, implementing, and assessing social justice practices in art classrooms. The authors developed, taught, and evaluated a social justice based art education course with a service learning component for undergraduate art education students. Through their experience they discovered that the capabilities students brought to the classroom directly influenced the ways in which they engaged with and put into practice the social justice course material.

Social justice and the work of cultivating understanding, insight, and compassion—in oneself and in the world—together form an integral component of contemporary art education, as defined in this article. As former art educators in the Los Angeles City Schools, we worked with these values and experiences in our classrooms. We designed and facilitated arts experiences for our students that enabled them to explore personal identity and individual expression, which we then linked to broader contemporary social issues through the arts. The student work was exhibited in a variety of venues, including a range of school and citywide locales, galleries, and public sites. As we widened the space in which the students could identify and work with personal and social issues, we found that the broader school and local community members were interested in participating in the art making and exhibition processes. Whereas the relationships among the students, parents, teachers, and administration were at times complex (even antagonistic), the arts mediated a dialogic school culture in which differences were explored, expressed, and accepted through the making of art. Our projects became sites of collaboration and community building, processes that incorporated both individual and collective art making as well as democratic processes through the arts—exemplifying important aspects of social justice in action.

When we moved from the K–12 classroom into our respective university classrooms, we were eager to continue this work with our pre-service art education students. Here we encountered firsthand the complexities that emerge when incorporating social justice in pre-service contemporary art education programs. While many students had deep transformative experiences, we also found it challenging to create classroom spaces where all students could fully participate. For example, one young woman of color, enrolled in a class that was predominantly white, was silent throughout an entire course with the exception of speaking privately to the professor. When she was encouraged to share her comments directly with the class, she told the professor that she did not feel comfortable speaking, as she felt like an outsider. This student expressed doubts regarding the significance of what she had to offer, in spite of three years of experience teaching K–12 art. In another instance, a white student expressed her feeling that the professor was imposing her own ideology upon the class—to her, teaching for social justice appeared to be a ruse for liberal indoctrination.

We both came to realize that we needed to find a better way of understanding and assessing the capabilities toward social justice our students possessed upon entering our classes, and we needed greater knowledge about which capabilities were (or were not) fostered through our course work. The goal was to create higher education classroom spaces that work toward social justice through collaboration with students who have been traditionally marginalized, as well as with those traditionally privileged thereby fostering an array of empowered voices to engage in the work of social justice. This desire led to our collaboration to develop, teach, and evaluate a social justice art education course with a service-learning component for undergraduate art education students. The class that we designed and continue to develop is the focus of this article.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Our research and teaching practice is embedded with two key underlying assumptions. The first assumption is that diversity within a classroom, due to race/ class/ gender/ sexuality/ citizenship/ ideological values, must be critically explored and understood within power paradigms. Without deconstructing how differences manifest amid the macro social power structure, we lack a critical understanding of the systemic functions of social injustices and we lack knowledge of what is needed to move toward a more equitable society. Our second assumption is that the ability to articulate social injustices empowers us to move toward action.

Social justice, in its broadest sense, is about equal rights and opportunities for all people in every part of society. “A central aim,” according to Watts and Guessous (2006), is “exposing social injustice, creating just societies, promoting

self-determination and solidarity with others, and ending oppression (and healing its effects)” (p. 60). Social justice also calls for us “to articulate the relationship between the collective [struggle] against social ills and the advancement of personal well-being” (p. 60). But how do we know what is just? What constitutes an opportunity, and how do we balance the advancement of our personal well-being with a collective struggle against social ills? Perceptions and understandings of rights and opportunities vary widely, depending upon how the viewer is situated socially, politically, economically, and culturally. To shift the current pedagogical structure that exists in many higher education programs requires all people to recognize their position within this power structure. In the words of Audre Lorde (1984), “it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation” (p. 43). In a country of increasing diversity and with a slowly shifting power structure, it is especially critical for all those committed to social justice to examine where we fall on the power spectrum and examine the ways in which that power can manifest to undermine and/or support social justice movements. In education, social justice is not simply the absence of injustice but, rather, the need to recognize and enact teaching and learning that promote a deeper understanding of ourselves and our students in relation to the broader social and cultural landscape (Maguire, 2009).

Teaching and research inspired by principles of social justice are referenced by a variety of teaching approaches, including *social reconstructionism/critical theory* (Brameld, 1956; Freire, 1994), *culturally relevant teaching* (Ladson-Billings, 1994), *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2000), *teaching against the grain* (Cochran-Smith, 1991), *teaching for diversity* (Sadker & Sadker, 1992), and *multicultural education* (Banks, 1993; Nieto, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Although there is a growing body of literature discussing social justice in art education (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Freedman, 2000, 2007; Garber, 2005; Greene, 1995; Stuhr, 2003), much of the literature is directed at content for K–12 classrooms. When post-secondary settings are discussed, there is little empirical research on the impact on student consciousness development and teaching practices.¹ In fact, a meta-analysis of research on teacher education illustrates that—in spite of the teaching approaches listed above—little has actually changed in the ways teachers are prepared in college and university-based programs, despite more than two decades of efforts toward social justice in educational practices (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Resistance to social justice manifests in a variety of ways, stemming from personal ideological values and seeping into classroom dynamics. It is not unusual to

¹ An exception is Melody Milbrandt's (2002) article “Addressing contemporary social issues in art education: A survey of public school art educators in Georgia.”

find teachers and students who dismiss ideas/ individuals who are different from themselves. In some instances, these differences are negated through sameness—that is teachers and students who express an interest in and commitment to social justice will dismiss ideas/ individuals that threaten to undermine notions of collective solidarity within the classroom setting (Cervenak, Cespedes, Souza, & Straub, 2002). Given the growing diversity of our society, we believe that it is imperative for current and future teachers to find ways of embodying, implementing, and assessing social justice practices in art classrooms.

CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCES: OUR METHODS

In 2007, using case study and action research methods, we developed, taught, and evaluated a social justice based art education course with a service-learning component for undergraduate art education students called *Art and Social Justice*. The course is designed to help pre-service teachers adopt and put into practice a critical social justice perspective for their own art making and teaching practices. For this study we wanted to know how these students' understanding of and experience in the *Art and Social Justice* course changed over one sixteen-week semester. To capture this narrative we looked at:

- Participant observations over time of five students in the course, including the service-learning component, in three K–8 schools
- Pre- and post-questionnaires to capture demographics, prior experiences in the arts and education, and views on social justice
- In-depth interviews about their current experiences as they engaged with the course, as well as future goals as artists and educators
- Ongoing dialogue between the professor and the researcher regarding initial and final narrative analyses, including a final list of capabilities we saw as integral to the work of art educators in this program
- Participants' own verbal, written, and visual stories regarding their experiences and practices in the course

In this study, images or art practices and products “operate as texts, artifacts, and events that embody cultural meanings” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 110). The student artwork was analyzed using an arts based research approach. Our task was to understand how the students “construct their meanings as they present them in visual form” in response to class assignments (p. 61). These visual, verbal, and written constructions as well as the student experiences in the service-learning component, were analyzed through a *capability* lens. That is, we considered the question of which capabilities were or were not being fostered through engagement with the different components of the course content over time. By the end of the semester we were able to surface aspects of the students'

understanding of and experience in the *Art and Social Justice* course and how this changed over the sixteen-week semester. Our primary lens for analyzing this information was taken from aspects of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's (1993) *capability approach*.

The Capability Approach: Our Lens. The *capability approach* was initially developed in the 1970s by economist Amartya Sen "as a more appropriate theory of justice than existing theories in moral philosophy" (Saito, 2003, p. 1). According to Walker (2005), the *capability approach* is "about freedom and the development of an environment suitable for human flourishing. Capability refers to what people are actually able to be and do, rather than [only] to what resources they have access to. It focuses on developing people's capabilities to choose a life that they have reason to value" (p. 103).

The belief that all human beings deserve the opportunity to participate and to engage in building lives of personal value and dignity is at the root of our understanding of Social Justice Art Education. Not only do we need to take into account the work our students produce (visually, verbally, and in writing), we also need to examine our students' "beings and doings" within the classroom space. That is, we need to consider how to devise a curriculum and pedagogy that take into account and engage with the skills and capabilities our students enter the classroom with, and how we can expand those capabilities as a means of fostering social justice in art education teaching and learning.

We work with Walker's (2006) list of higher education capabilities to help us understand and delineate what a criterion of justice might look like in our *Art and Social Justice* course. In this list, capabilities are understood as opportunities, skills, and capacities that can be fostered in higher education as a means of moving toward social justice. This list is not fixed but, rather, provides an initial outlining of capabilities that we and our students need to have to effectively address social justice in visual arts classrooms.

The capabilities that we seek to foster and assess in this course are drawn from Walker (2006):

1. *Practical reason.* Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, socially responsible, and reflective choices. Having good judgment. Being able to put ideas into action. Being able to reflect on self, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, habits, and behaviors.
2. *Educational resilience.* Able to navigate study, work, and life. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.
3. *Knowledge and imagination.* Being able to gain knowledge of a discipline—its form of academic inquiry and standards. Being

able to use critical thinking and imagination to comprehend the perspectives of others and to form impartial judgments. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for political, cultural, and social action, and participation in the world. Awareness of ethical debates and moral issues. Open-mindedness.

4. *Learning disposition.* Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.
5. *Social relations and social networks.* Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems and tasks. Being able to work with others to form effective groups for collaborative and participatory learning. Being able to form networks of friendship and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.
6. *Respect, dignity, and recognition.* Being able to have respect for oneself and others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion, or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practices, and human diversity. Being able to show empathy, compassion, fairness, and generosity, listening to and considering other persons' points of view in dialogue and debate. Being able to act inclusively and to respond to human need. Having competence in intercultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, to debate, and persuade; to be able to listen.
7. *Emotional integrity and emotions.* Not being subject to anxiety or fear, which diminishes learning. Being able to develop emotions for imagination, understanding, empathy, awareness, and discernment.
8. *Bodily integrity.* Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment. (p. 182)

We believe that if we are able to create classrooms that foster a range of capabilities, including those listed above, we are not only engaged in the work of Social Justice Art Education, we are provided with a framework for evaluating whether or not we are coming closer or moving further away from enacting social justice in our classrooms.

THE ART AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COURSE

The course we developed and studied is taught at a small private university in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. The students who enrolled in this course are representative of the larger university: 48% White, 24% Latina/o, 13% Asian-American, 9% African-American and predominantly female. The students at the K-8 schools, part of the service-learning component of the course, are

representative of the public schools in the larger geographic area across race: 70+% Latina/o, 10% Black, 10% Asian, 10% White. There is also similarity across class, as defined by income levels.

Though open to any student, the majority of the students enrolled were pre-service educators who will go on to be either elementary generalists or secondary art educators. Students entered the class with a wide range of prior knowledge in art concepts and processes, teaching curriculum and pedagogy, and social justice theory. They also came with various levels of resistance and openness to new ideas and challenging situations. Given this reality we wanted to put into place curricular and pedagogical conditions “that enable the highest possible level of capability for each and every student we teach, leaving it up to the students (under conditions of freedom) to choose their own level of achievement” (Walker, 2006, p. 97). That is, students were provided with opportunities to make choices in regards to how they work with the material taught in the course and a variety of approaches towards engaging with the content are provided – classroom discussions, readings, journal writing, art making, and service-learning teaching opportunities.

In this course the instructor acts as a facilitator and co-creator with students as they individually and collectively perform the role of the artist and teacher, with art operating as a site for creating “participatory spaces” (hooks, 1994) wherein students explore personal identities and cultures as well as broader social justice issues. To foster growth within this space we have designed three art projects that are undertaken by the students throughout the semester. Each project is introduced by methods such as presentations, field trips, brainstorming, hands-on activities, reflection, and discussions. Students then proceed through a process including idea development, process critiques, and written reflections. These activities are further supported through experimentation and exploration in the use of different materials. The projects are conceptually scaffolded, moving students through an individual self-reflective identity piece, a social justice printmaking piece (from political posters to installations involving printmaking), culminating in a collaborative social justice piece.

In the first project, “Making it Personal: Exploring Issues of Personal Identity,” students are asked to use self-

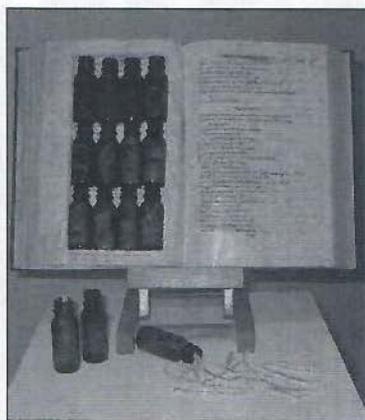


Fig. 1
My Medicine Cabinet
Mariel Moreno
mixed media, 2007

selected materials and processes to create an original, ambitious, well-researched, well-planned, and well-constructed 3-D (which can include installation) mixed media piece that expresses their identity through the use of personal metaphors, symbols, words, and images. During the project introduction, the teacher presents a range of artists that have used their art as a medium to express their identity with a focus on contemporary art. Concurrently, students are asked to research visual artists they identify with and present these artists and their work to the class. For the second project students are asked to research, develop, and utilize a selected printmaking process to create a set of original, well-researched, planned, and hand-crafted prints that effectively communicate, through the use of visual metaphors, symbols, text, and images, their view(s) on a social justice issue that is relevant in their life.

In the final project the students are asked to work as a team, including their K-8 students, to design and develop a collaborative art installation addressing a social justice issue.



Fig. 2

When Did Your Family First Make Their Mark On This Land?

Kerry Medina
printmaking and
mixed media installation, 2008



Fig. 3

Where Do You See Peace?, University and grade 6-8 students,
mixed media collaborative installation, 2007

The *capability approach* recognizes the importance of social relationships—it is through our relationships with people that agency and well-being can be fostered (Walker, 2006). Walker (2006) has argued that we can take this idea further, “that a just society is something that we make together, by thinking and working with others so that freedom is constructed in-between” (p. 105). The approach to art making in this course works with a similar understanding. Incorporating Kester’s (2004) concept of dialogical aesthetics, we emphasize the interactive nature of art making. Through the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange in the art making process, as well as willingness on the artist’s part for “active listening and empathetic identification” meaning occurs and is developed “in the exchange between the artist and viewers, ultimately affecting the identities of both” (Garber 2005, p. 4). Opportunities for fostering capabilities—moving closer towards social justice—do not rest solely on our ability to engage in rational discourse, but also upon our ability to listen closely and empathize with those around us.

MOVING TOWARDS SOCIAL JUSTICE

Across this study we found three specific components of the curriculum in which students had the most empowering and transformative experiences. In the areas of guided reflection, rigorous art making, and service-learning in the K–8 settings, all five students showed evidence of a range of capability development over time. While below we separate each area as a way of defining and illustrating what surfaced in our study, we found that it was the opportunity to participate in all three areas of the curriculum, throughout the semester, that helped the students to navigate the resistance that often arises when conflicts are perceived between the advancement of personal well-being and the collective struggle to right social injustices.



Fig. 4
Students engaged in guided reflection.

Guided Reflection. Each student was asked to practice guided reflection through a variety of assignments and activities. These included: weekly journal prompts, reflective reading summaries, group discussions, personal artist statements, and lesson planning activities. These activities involved documenting, describing, and analyzing their art making, teaching, and learning experiences throughout the semester, as well as their lives and their professional goals. The reflective coursework was not completely predetermined but rather generated and continually refined to address the emerging needs of the students. After assessing the students' initial responses to our first prompts, for example, we saw that we needed to provide more content regarding social justice in education. Early writing by the students revealed a tendency to document and describe their experiences in the course with little to no analysis or critical reflection related to social justice issues. We began adding more assigned readings and classroom discussions on issues of social justice and art education as a way of providing the content and tools needed to go deeper into the material. We also invited guest speakers to the class as a way of adding multiple voices to address issues raised in the class.

Another initial discovery was about the importance of bringing individual experiences related to the course into the class discussions. During collaborative work assignments, for example, it became apparent that many students struggled to communicate and work together effectively. We designed reflection activities to make transparent the capabilities important to successful collaboration—working with others to solve problems and tasks, being able to comprehend other perspectives, having a voice and knowing how to listen, as well as being able to put ideas into action. Students realized that how they worked together in the course was a microcosm for ways to put these ideals into practice. As one student noted in her final teamwork reflection, “Working in a team for this particular class was essential. There ended up being a lot more components to teaching than I thought...being aware of each other and how [we] work needs to be recognized right away. Social justice and team work go hand-in-hand... there needs to be that respect, responsibility and awareness of one another.”

Continually building upon the knowledge base of the arts and social justice provided opportunities for the students to make connections between the course content and their future teaching lives. As expressed by another student, “I understand that social justice is a process to learn and live by, thus I continue to remain aware of what I do as a student and teacher and role model—to remain accountable for my actions and ideals that I live and teach by.”

Rigorous Art Making. In this course, we strive to integrate rigorous art making experiences with culturally relevant and engaging curriculum. We do this by encouraging our students to “play an active role in discovering and evaluating

information, creating cultural and social facts, and producing knowledge” through their own art making (Cervenak, et al., 2002, p. 344). Before we ask them to engage in action to right social ills, however, we find that they must first explore and critically engage with their own sociopolitical and cultural identities (Freire, 1994).

During the art making and critique processes, students and teachers are encouraged to question “all received categories and assumptions to transform their personal anecdotes into critical reflections by connecting them to the larger sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts” explored through art making and art education (Cervenak, et al., 2002, p. 344). In our findings during the art process and critique, however, this connecting created resistance in both students and professor, often making it difficult to openly address controversial issues. During in-class critiques, for example, we found students were often not aware of stereotypes reinforced in their own visual imagery—artwork that would subsequently be used as exemplars with the K–8 students. One student created a poster expressing sympathy for an oppressed minority—Latin American immigrants— but positioned herself as separate from them; they represented the Other. This student’s artwork showed us that we needed to emphasize the relationship between content and artist intention, addressing overt as well as covert stereotypical text and imagery.

The final project is a collaborative community art project that brings together social justice content as well as multiple spaces for the fostering of student capabilities. Students in the social justice art course, K–8 students in the service program, and the professor (and often a visiting artist) collaboratively design the community art project. Students use the knowledge, skills, and dispositions fostered throughout the semester, including teamwork, critical reflection, and art processes. Emphasis is placed on the capabilities of social relations and social networks, and students conceptualize, design and implement a project that is representative of all the participants as much as is possible. In our initial brainstorming and lesson planning sessions for the project, students showed



Fig. 5
Where Do You See Peace? University students brainstorming installation design with grade 6-8 students, mixed media collaborative installation, 2007.

planning abilities. However, they were less concerned with how to organize a large project given the time allotted, with the broader university and local school systems, with the issues of teamwork, and with the best ways of including the K-8 children in the design. The finished projects offered opportunities for the fostering of capabilities for all K-8 students, but a small number of the projects were teacher-directed with only minor opportunities for the K-8 students to make choices. The most successful projects engaged the K-8 students across all areas of the collaborative process, from conception to implementation. Despite these differences, the social justice art students commented on how valuable the collaborative art project was for their own education and for that of their K-8 students. As one student noted, "By allowing the students to make the decisions concerning the collaborative piece, [they] were able to feel a real ownership of the project." Based upon journal prompts, observations and interviews, we saw evidence of the impact of rigorous art making on the pre-service teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to design engaging and socially relevant curriculum in their future K-12 classrooms. As one student put it, the K-8 students "need critical thinking skills and social skills. The critical thinking skills are necessary to make better choices and the social skills to be respectful of others."

As in the community collaborative artwork discussed above, the artwork assigned to students in the social justice art course was used to inform the lessons they designed for their K-8 students in the service-learning component. We view service-learning teaching as another critical component for bridging theory with practice.

Service-learning. An important capability-building aspect of this course is the service-learning component, in which students work in teams of two to six to design K-8 lessons based on the projects they experience in the course. These lessons are taught for ten weekly sessions in public school classrooms. While we recognize the importance of volunteer work and political participation found in many service-learning programs, these programs tend to operate through a participatory citizen model. In working with a justice oriented citizen model, we, on the other hand, are asking students to "critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 3). We provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the practice of the role of the arts in society, and the impact visual expression can have in changing the way others perceive and think about the world around them. Another finding, critical for pre-service teachers, was that the service-learning enabled the social justice art students to reevaluate their perceptions of the K-8 students and their abilities. As one student said:

This class has affected the way that I look at children most significantly. I was never so aware of how conscious children are of their surroundings . . . that these young people would be so in tune with media issues, their neighborhood, and problems that adults face . . . I was also impressed with their ability to grasp the significance of these sophisticated topics.

Just as teamwork was critical to the collaborative art making experience, it was critical for modeling social justice during service-learning. Because of the range of capabilities students entered the course with, we encountered some of our greatest challenges during the service-learning component.

Issues in service-learning first surfaced when we compared and contrasted students' written and verbal comments with their actions in the field. Some teams worked together successfully, but many struggled to find ways to manage the work together. In an early interview, one service-learning team member spoke of how important teamwork was for the health of democratic societies, es for team-building exercises as well as reflective writing and discussions on how best to design the team teaching in the service-learning component of the course, making transparent the relationship between how we treat each other in the course and broader issues of justice.

Service-learning continues to be an important component, in which students embody the social justice course work. In spite of challenges posed by the team teaching, all the students reported positive outcomes in their K–8 classroom experience. As one student said, “This course allowed me to take what I learned in the classroom and really see it in context.”

CONCLUSION

In our study we found that Social Justice Art Education programs appear to be most effective when taught through an integrated theoretical and practical framework emphasizing strategies such as directed verbal and written critical reflection, rigorous art making, and service-learning. In *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools*, Obidah and Teel (2001) found that changing teacher attitudes and understandings about race and culture is a long-term process and commitment. Since this course was for one sixteen-week semester, it is not unusual that some students did not exhibit radical change through their actions. We ourselves continue to learn and grow from teaching this course. We did discover, however, that when we used these strategies to design spaces to foster individual and collective capability development, there was a widening participation of students as self-directed and empowered agents who participated in determining their actions and future educational directions—and in turn, who provided similar opportunities and outcomes for their K–8 students.

A social justice art classroom is composed of a community of learners. Such a community works to reconcile the disparate range of class, race, and educational experiences inside and outside of school. Yet such a classroom is also “constructed out of the specific identities of its members in a process that will, inevitably, promote or legitimate some aspects of these identities at the expense of others” (Kester, 2004, p. 130). The resistance of students and professors to considering and in some instances, adopting, new ideas, attitudes and/or approaches to teaching and learning must be acknowledged and worked with in order to engage in social justice. As a result of our research, we have come to believe that educators at all levels need to cultivate a deeper understanding of the prior knowledge and experiences that our students—and that we ourselves—bring into the classroom. These factors directly influence our preferences and choices in the classroom and in our lives. As white, middle-class educators, we are in a position of power that cannot be denied or wished away. By using the *capability approach* as a framework for understanding and evaluating individual student experiences as well as our own, we learn more about how to support and foster the capability development of all students, including those who might be marginalized in more traditional higher education settings. We believe that such an approach helps us capture student narratives and assess from them whether or not we, as educators, are coming closer to achieving and teaching social justice in our classrooms.

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