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Anger and Pedagogy

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In his discussion of safety on campus, Eamonn Callan (2016) suggests a way to distinguish between two sorts of safety: “dignity safety” and “intellectual safety.” As much as I have some concerns that student activists should think more about pedagogy, I am not sure that “dignity” is the best approach to solving inequities nor do I think the key issue in the discussion about academic safety is “humiliation.” I don’t think it is a minor quibble to say that by excluding someone we haven’t so much humiliated them as we have made them angry at their exclusion. As much as I agree with Callan that the tenor of some protest is disturbing, I’m not sure that it is permanently destructive of critical inquiry—indeed, the vigor with which some demands are made indicates to me that students are reading institutional exclusion in robust and nuanced ways and, without better support from institutions, feel that “intellectual safety” is anything but.

I begin by discussing Callan’s use of “dignity” as a goal, using critiques from the recent *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) ruling on same-sex marriage and Justice Anthony Kennedy’s use of “dignity” there as a way to explore the shortcomings. I then turn to a discussion of anger as the motivating force behind calls for change in higher education and suggest that recourse to “humiliation” may miss the anger of critique. I will spend the second part of this suggesting that it may be wrong to assume that righteous anger is necessarily a pedagogically useful device. I will consider activism as an act of spectacle and activism as an act of pedagogy, two related but distinct processes. It is within the second part of activism that I think careful understandings of how to address diverse audiences need to be most present but I do also think that the spectacle could often use a bit of outward address as well.

The growing reliance on “dignity” to support some gay rights has been the subject of some debate in queer studies, largely out of concern that Kennedy’s use of emotion-laden prose praises some forms of gay relationship over others. In addition, his recourse to “dignity” substitutes feeling for a particular form of intimate bond while not helping to build a case for nondiscrimination rights in other more widely shared areas of experience like housing and employment. As Katherine Franke (2015) has argued about the problems with “dignity” in *Obergefell*, Kennedy tends to use dignity as it relates to gay people in what might be considered normative relationships—those who want to marry are not afforded the dignity of their intimate associations inasmuch as they have not been afforded the form of marriage. For Franke, writing before Kennedy’s decision in *Obergefell* came out but well aware of how he had been building a case for dignity in *Romer* and *Lawrence*, Kennedy’s persistent use of emotionally charged language was in contrast to Justice Ginsburg’s equity-based arguments, which were helping to build not only gay nondiscrimination rights but to also reinforce women’s rights to reproductive choice.

I don’t agree with Callan’s claim that “the rhetoric of safety has only arisen within an inchoate political cause with a very brief history and no clear intellectual leadership” (p. 68). Rather, I think we’re in a rearticulated period of the same culture wars as the 1980s and with a continued concern for underrepresentation in higher education—of students, faculty, administrators, and topics. I am more

concerned about the seething anger because I think the issues around some things that seem to be positioned by Callan as fear of humiliation are something different. Margaret Atwood (1982) gets to the asymmetricality of the situation when she tells this story:

“Why do men feel threatened by women?” I asked a male friend of mine. So this male friend of mine, who does by the way exist, conveniently entered into the following dialogue. “I mean,” I said, “men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on the average a lot more money and power.” “They’re afraid women will laugh at them,” he said. “Undercut their world view.” Then I asked some women students in a quickie poetry seminar I was giving, “Why do women feel threatened by men?” “They’re afraid of being killed,” they said. (p. 413)

Students are not so much afraid they will be laughed at as they are afraid they are entirely unwelcome or that their absence has gone unnoticed by those who claim to be teaching them.

We see in demonstrations and in calls for trigger warnings that students are angry at social fractures marked by violence and disproportionate incarceration. The discourse of student fragility is patronizing and incorrect (for any group—including those in the majority): misunderstandings, frustration, and trauma are all present in our classrooms. Students who critique syllabi for replicating whiteness or who want us to address them in the time of their learning, rather than in the time of our expectations for their understanding, are being students. I do “Safe Zone” trainings for my university and mainly hear from students that they are tired of being excluded from health care and representation on syllabi, and want the people with whom they work to know more about them and recognize that their absence is obvious everywhere on campus, if someone would just look. The demonstrations at University of Missouri, linking the protests at Ferguson with the under-representation of Black students on campus, led not only to a shift in administration but also to teach-ins, solidarities with other struggles, and a renewed interest in learning from community members. Student activists and activist athletes, too, made common cause and invited broadening discussions of how higher education can better represent the diversity of its students. Student activism and anger may have jolted many of us in higher education but sometimes our response to try to protect a core part of our profession ignores how those professional values are interwoven with institutional exclusions that we might not have recognized at all without that jolt.

When a trans student at my campus demanded the student union cancel (they did) the movie *Boys Don’t Cry* during LGBTQ History Month on the grounds that it depicts the negative experiences of a transperson, he was not making that demand because he didn’t recognize that there is violence against transpeople. He was doing so because his experience at the university had already been packed with enough transphobic and homophobic harassment that he did not trust the cisgender discussion panel or audience to adequately address the issues in the film. Even if I disagree with the strategy of canceling an event, concerned that it gets too close to censorship and concerned too that he was disrespecting other members of the potential audience, his point was not to direct attention only at the movie. His point was to direct attention at the university and community climate and object to the fact that transpeople were not invited to comment on the film. He was unsafe before the cancelled event and will likely continue to experience a lack of safety after it and didn’t want the showing of the film to stand in for more substantive events to address the national and local climate.

Am I chilled by this? Yes, but I also understand that in some sense, however not fully articulated since the event was cancelled, he had an argument. Unfortunately, of course, the argument was only

made to people who cancelled the event or questioned its cancellation. Whatever pedagogical engagement there might have been, it was both one-sided and very narrowly circulated. Will anyone else on campus miss seeing the film? Would anyone else have wanted to join a conversation about the limits of using well-known films to educate about trans-related issues? Does one have to be X in order to teach and learn about X? I found myself circling around Callan's essay at the same time I was talking to the student, to the person who organized the event, and to the person directing the program in which the event was situated. The more I thought about the relationship between dignity and stories embedded in legal cases intent on bringing in quotidian humiliations suffered by people under unjust laws, the more I thought about the dominant audience who needs to really see how the oppressed feel in order to take notice of them—and the more I thought I understood the young transman's anger at how a cisgender audience would respond to an invitation to consider transphobia packaged as serious entertainment. But I still do not think cancellation was a pedagogically-motivated choice.

I'm also worried that concern about students and safety, even if it advocates for the values of liberal education, isn't fully pedagogical either. I'm not sure that the phrase "new egalitarian orthodoxy" (Callan, 2016, p. 68) really reflects what is going on, nor do I think someone who is overtly biased is "forfeiting respectability"—they still get attention and support in the comments sections in higher education periodicals. But I do think that students, especially students who are new to universities or look around and see they are not well represented at universities, are concerned that their professors who express bias or exhaustion with students' political concerns are disconnected from their realities, and also not especially trustworthy sources of information or critical practices.

I don't think the kind of inclusive education that students are asking of us is always easy or meant to be easy. Easy enough, maybe, to do the negative: don't be outwardly biased. Harder, perhaps, to do the positive: notice when people are excluded, even if your own identities are reflected in all the representation of those included. What does it mean to be "well-meaning in never noticing anything amiss" (Callan, 2016, p. 72)? If we don't notice who is missing in the pictures in a hallway, how can we be trusted to notice who is missing in our professions, our syllabi, and so on?

I don't think students are always right either and I will end this by discussing why I think taking a more pedagogical and generous approach in critique is necessary for activists. I do understand the need for spectacle to interrupt the placid business as usual in higher education or anywhere else. Without affectively charged demonstrations and vivid turns of phrase, pushing people out of their habitual acceptance of how things are is hard. Activism, then, has to stage things in ways that may have more in common with a large introductory lecture than a seminar taking apart complicated ideas. But I do think activists can manage both scales. They don't always, in much the same ways that introductory lectures miss addressing the students where they are or oversimplify to the point of making the work of more advanced classes more difficult. Like the trans student who had the film cancelled, activists make mistakes when they overly assert their political/epistemological superiority to engage a deficit in their interlocutors that may or may not be there. What the "call out" culture of activism accomplishes is to misrecognize complexity of identity and action in stabilizing the position and intentions of those who are called out or found wanting in advance of any experience of them. The mistaken decision to cancel the film relies on the assumptions that an audience would only have cisgender people in it and that cisgender people wouldn't also know and want an occasion to learn more about transpeople. Further, the decision to cancel the film assumes that cisgender people have not themselves had significant difficulties related to gender normativity and want a context to discuss those in solidarity. Moreover, I

worry that activist tactics are intent on stabilizing positions permanently, thus pushing interlocutors out of the movement of political life and into the space of only accusation—lots of people for lots of reasons have discomfort with gender norms. Some alliance, one hopes, could help get those shared issues on the table.

The pedagogue, whether a political organizer or an instructor, has to be able to provide recognition to the angry, the mistaken, the eager, the half-interested, and the disinterested. Any pedagogue has the responsibility to represent the under-represented but, whether organizers or instructors, many of us are not adept at inclusion. Intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and so on complicate who speaks from what position and why, and associational subjectivities (like white siblings growing up with siblings of color or straight kids being raised in gay families or transnational families with members dispersed around the world) complicate how we think about people who seem to represent dominant positions but, then again, are more complicated than that. Recognition and inclusion in conditions of contentious difference, for a pedagogue, has to balance the potential for learning new things with maintaining space for older grievances. Students (and teachers and activists in the role of students) have to make mistakes and have to be held within the social compact to learn and grow. This is why, perhaps, being a teacher can be less exhilarating than being an activist (even if I continue to hope that activists will become teachers).

Campus activists do often make urgent claims and are sometimes less than able to make connections they will eventually need to make. We in the academy have also not yet been very good at explaining how our professions and institutions run—Callan's essay is a very good start at making some of this clearer. But student concerns are born out of frustration at the dissolving of structural support for social justice and out of long experiences with being excluded, so our discussions of how and why we run classrooms and encourage open-mindedness may pale in comparison to the larger-scale critiques in which they are engaged. That some activists do manage to work productively with their urgent anger, critically rethink their exclusions, and join with others, I think shows that they have inhabited the abilities of teacher and student. In demonstrations they may recognize the need for affective venting, but later move into the mode of a pedagogically-minded organizer who is aware of different understandings, related struggles, and the need to work together in complex coalitions where people teach and learn together. What they aim at, I think, is a form of higher education that will not exclude them, that will recognize why they are angry, and will work with them to improve access, not only to forms of argumentation and valued parts of our profession, but to a better way of learning together that does not shut out the world.

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