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Pedagogical Justice in the Wake of Two Pandemics

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COVID-19 forced a long-overdue reckoning with various problematic aspects of the academy. Ranging from creating equitable classrooms and workspaces to securing meaningful job placements for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx faculty, the issues that we are now dealing with “out loud” are ones that many of us have been contending with for a long time. Considering the challenges students face in this COVID-19 world, I suggest that we take close stock of how we communicate with one another. What kind of language is in the welcome sign we are holding out for our students during these unprecedented times? I propose that we begin our journey toward pedagogical justice with our syllabi. Specifically, I want to remove punitive language in higher education syllabi.

For context, I arrived at this topic as a result of the move to online learning in the spring of 2020. Due to the pandemic, higher learning institutions across the country quickly transitioned to online learning when it became clear that social distancing must be enacted immediately to “flatten the curve” of coronavirus transmissions. The summer offered a reprieve from the chaos of the spring. Many institutions launched programs to equip faculty to teach online, some for the first time in their careers. I was hired as a facilitator by a university to learn and

deliver a standardized online teaching curriculum to a cohort of nearly thirty professors in the humanities. The end goal was for professors to revise their fall syllabi to reflect some of the best practices they learned during their three-week crash course. While reviewing the syllabi my cohort submitted, I noticed a trend that starkly stuck out to me because of the temporal proximity to the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and Rayshard Brooks. Professors, both junior and senior in tenure, were using punitive language in their syllabi. I was shocked by the use of words like “penalty” and “penalizing.” This made me wonder, “Are professors actually comfortable using punitive language and punishment as a fear tactic for control of their classrooms when instead they could say “points will be deducted?”

The etymology of the word “penalty” originates circa 1500. By the 1510s, “penalty” came to specifically mean “the punishment laid out by law or judicial decision for a violation of the law.”[1] The etymological example for “penalty” suffices to get my point across without going down a rabbit hole about the origin of other terms or on a Foucauldian tangent about punishment. The words we use matter. As a scholar of religion, this concern is about more than semantics. The discipline of religious studies spends an inordinate amount of time defining terms and unpacking language. Personally, I have lost count of the number of classroom hours I spend debating the meaning of terms and arguing for the continued use or disuse of certain words. Like other disciplines in the humanities, religious studies is one where language and context matter.

In light of the pandemic, issues of social justice, and police violence against Black bodies that arose in 2020, I want to understand why professors continue to use punitive language—which clearly ties into the penal system—in their syllabi. I also want to advocate for removing punitive language as a necessary first step of pedagogical justice. The words “penalty” and “penalize” convey that the power differential between teachers and students is so great that teachers not only have the ability but somehow the right to inflict punishment on students if they fail to perform to a certain standard. I am equating the use of the words “penalty” and “penalize” to punishment not just based on etymology or contemporary definitions, but instead based on how I saw them used in syllabi. The samples below illustrate my point:

- “Late assignments are penalized.”
- “You may miss one meeting without penalty.”
- “I *will* penalize students who merely *pretend* to be present in the synchronous meeting...”

No matter what privileges a teacher has bestowed upon them, punishment should never be one of them. Effective and just pedagogy is a two-way street where learning and teaching are always in constant motion, coming and going side-by-side. This means that while the academy might differentiate between teacher and student, the apt educator knows that this difference is arbitrary and detrimental to the dialogical nature of effective teaching.

While this issue of language should have been addressed before the pandemic and the most

current police violence events, we must tackle this head-on as scholars of religion at this particular moment in history. As a result of the pandemic and the needs of her students, Yohana Junker suggests, “A set of pedagogical choices that are trauma-informed may prove helpful in designing our fall courses as the global pandemic has barely subsided, [and] our communities continue to be in danger.... A trauma-informed approach would not only affirm that suffering, pain, and distress is present among us but would also seek to actively mitigate or foresee potential challenges.”[2] Through an approach like Junker’s “pedagogy of affection,” the real-world concerns of students take center stage in the classroom.

Socially-just pedagogies are crucial, particularly in times of peril. In order to heed the reminder by Cornel West that “justice is what love looks like in public,” we must show love for our students and communities by changing syllabi language.[3] bell hooks reminds us that “all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic.”[4] Love is the root of pedagogical justice. According to Paulo Freire, the dialogical nature of effective teaching and thus pedagogical justice would not be possible if love were absent from its core, “Because love is an act of courage, not fear, love is the commitment to others.”[5]

My commitment to pedagogical justice is rooted in love, both for students and the field of study. Through this commitment, my pedagogy seeks to contribute to liberatory practices that counter oppressive systems that invalidate and devalue ways of being and knowing that differ from dominant educational paradigms. Punitive language in syllabi impedes us from crafting pedagogies that allow our students and ourselves to heal. Ultimately, if we want to practice socially-just pedagogies, then we have to understand the impact that our communication choices have on students.

Syllabi are the first encounter students have with their instructors. As such, we must be mindful of how we construct these documents for this particular COVID-19 moment and for the long term if we are interested in pedagogical justice. Removing punitive language from syllabi is one of the first steps we must take towards pedagogical justice. By taking this step, we begin to break the cycle in the use of violent language as a means of disciplining or coercing students to comply with constricted ideas of what it means to provide and receive education.

Using exact language to say what we mean, which in most cases is a grade deduction, shows our students that language matters. If syllabi are contracts between instructors and students, they must reflect the type of world that we want to see for ourselves. Words that are life-giving instead of punitive allow us to create learning experiences that help our students flourish. If there are consequences for students who turn in late assignments or miss class sessions, let us name them using clear and precise language. We must never forget that we are educators, not judges or wardens. Punitive language has no place in the classroom, pre- or post-COVID-19. The pandemic and the circumstances it engenders make our awareness and attentiveness to these issues much more critical. The worlds we create are formed by the words we use. We carry our socialization into the classroom. Therefore, we need to change how we use language and the language we use if we want our pedagogy to embrace and contribute to social justice.

Notes

[1] "Penalty," *Online Etymology Dictionary*,
https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=penalty&utm_source=extension_submit.

[2] Yohana Junker, "Pedagogies of Affection: Designing Experiences of Presence and Regard," accessed October 20, 2020,
<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/08/pedagogies-of-affection-designing-experiences-of-presence-and-regard/>.

[3] Cornel West, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public," Facebook, October 28, 2010,
<https://www.facebook.com/drcornelwest/posts/never-forget-that-justice-is-what-love-looks-like-in-public/119696361424073/>.

[4] bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), xix.

[5] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 89.

<https://wabash.center/2020/12/pedagogical-justice-in-the-wake-of-two-pandemics/>