



# Embodied Social Justice Pedagogy in a Time of 'No Touch'

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## Covid-19 and the Fate of Embodied Pedagogy

We are teacher educators and social justice activists and have been for a long time. Mara is a Professor of Inclusive Education at Syracuse University with a focus on anti-oppressive education and social justice. Suzi is faculty emeritus at Chapman University with research on critical pedagogy in China and Santa Ana, California. As long-time teacher educators, we believe not only in the power of *what* we teach but also in *how* we teach. Although we live and teach on opposite ends of the USA, we have collaborated in teaching courses in critical pedagogy as well as on other writing projects.

We believe in the importance of modeling good pedagogy because we believe that it matters how we engage our students in teacher education, and how our students will engage their students. And we have both used embodied pedagogy to teach about social justice issues. We believe that a deep understanding of social justice issues is critical to creating a society which is inclusive and equitable. Developing the skills required for changing our society can be challenging, and it is vital that we teach concepts of social justice and equity in ways that make that learning powerful and integrated into minds, hearts, and bodies.

Typically, work in academic settings and even advocacy efforts related to social justice address issues through the mind, through intellectual discourse and reasoning.

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Teaching about social justice is done through reading and discussing print materials, or through viewing visual media. This pedagogy itself is often disembodied; it is an out-of-body experience. We treat education as though it was something that happened in the head—a location separate from the rest of the body.

What would it mean to connect with our bodies while we are teaching and to allow participants to connect with their own and others' bodies as well? Mara has given workshops that she calls 'Moving for Social Justice'<sup>1</sup> in which participants are actively engaged in activities which explore important concepts like marginalization, exclusion, oppression, and silencing. Through these enactments, participants experience, unpack, and (hopefully) deepen their understanding of how those hurts live not only in their heads but in their bodies as well. And, even more importantly, we explore how the healing and transformation of these hurts demand changing how we physically experience our lives. As we re-experience and re-interpret *exclusion*, for example, we can articulate, imagine, and experience via our bodies what *inclusion* would be like and collectively create strategies for moving from injustice to justice.

Suzi has found that performance can bring an embodied way of knowing to theory when she asks students to choose a theorist to enact as a midterm assessment in her curriculum class. Students read books, collect articles, watch videos, and sometimes directly contact a scholar in preparation for a tea party conversation of intellectuals. Students think differently about theory as they choreograph and perform a dialog in costume with props. What was considered by students as 'too abstract' now joins performance and forms a new relationship between body and mind, thus forging a new pathway of knowing about theory.

Social justice work requires full-bodied engagement in advocating, protesting, marching, chanting, and participating in public discourse. Social justice work is embedded in social movements. It is praxis—theory in motion—where we intentionally replace physical enactments of dominance and oppression with ones of liberation and self-expression. Activism means 'working against myths that deform us' (McLaren 2016: 241). For example, considering racism as a visceral experience, McLaren submits that ideas can cripple a body, but the body is also a site of resistance, resilience, and revolution.

Social justice work also necessitates relational literacy and community building as we work side by side in the co-construction of freedom and liberation with others. Through mutual experiences of dialog, respect, and humility, founded on love and trust, we cultivate a praxis of togetherness. Realizing a physical and spiritual need for one another, SooHoo (2016: 133) suggests, '[w]e must offer our mutual unfinishedness as the foundation of our co-constructed agenda'. Because humanization is our vocation (Freire 2017), cultivating relationships is integral to social justice work in order to enact good in our world (SooHoo et al. 2018).

In her recent keynote celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2017) at the American Educational Research Association Conference (AERA) in Washington D.C., Nita Freire shared that Paulo Freire used to say:

I do not know only by using my head, or only by using my intelligence. My knowledge comes from the confluence of things emanating from my whole body,

<sup>1</sup> See <https://marasapon-shevin.com/>. Accessed 20 July 2020.

without compartmentalization. It originates from the emotions, feelings and other sentiments that go through my body, and because of my body, and because of my mind. My body tells me about what I must reflect. It is my body that becomes restless, that mobilizes me for the search of knowledge. (Yeh forthcoming 2021)

There is considerable evidence that experiential learning can produce deeper understanding and commitment to action. Shapiro (2002: 9) says that ‘[a]n excision of the flesh from educational discourse and practice means an excision of student experiences, emotions, passions, compassion and meaning-making from the ground of people to connect with their own and others’ bodies as well.’ As Hooks (1994) asserts, we must be whole as humans in the classrooms if we want others to be wholehearted as well.

Not only is learning through the body essential for fuller understanding, but feeling and healing the hurts of social injustice can also take place more powerfully through an embodied approach. We heal from isolation and oppression, for example, not by reading about the importance of allies but by experiencing a situation in which someone literally ‘has our back’ and offers support and strength. Critical consciousness—must activate the feet as well as the mind and morality. Humanization is bodily emancipation as well as social and political. In *Daring to Dream*, Freire states that action must ‘be spoken by our whole bodies: our hands, our feet, our reflections. All within us will speak’ (Freire 2016: xxxix).

Now comes this moment of Covid-19—our patterns and interactions are interrupted. Suddenly, bodies are dangerous and must be socially distanced, masked, and disinfected. Other peoples’ bodies are the source of fear and suspicion. TV ads inform us that we will be rewarded if we ‘Don’t get too close. Don’t touch. For every hug you didn’t give, you saved a life’ (Davis 2020). Saltz (cited in Davis 2020) says: ‘The decision not to hug can actually be a demonstration of caring.’ What does the pandemic, with its proscription on touching, mean for how we interact with others and how we teach in an embodied way? How can we learn about and build our relationships with other people—other bodies—under a prohibition of closeness and physical connection?

What we are witnessing is a form of *epistemicide*, the suppression of a way of knowing. Covid-19, a force of nature, has not only infected our lungs but also the way human beings move and interact across the planet. This moment presents the possible death of ways of knowing, in this case, learning that is kinesthetic and relational. This is as serious as linguicide or the loss of a language. It affects one’s world view in many ways (ideology, axiology, ontology, epistemology, subjectivity). What are the implications of no-touch and no bodies for social justice work specifically? What are the consequences of the divestment of physical touch and the body?

## Contesting Disembodied Engagement

How can we maintain this commitment to embodied teaching when our teaching is largely online without a shared physical space, and without the ability to touch and interact with our full selves? How can we explore our interconnectedness and the power of solidarity and collaboration when we must teach without bodies?

With the increase in online teaching and the real prospect that our face-to-face classroom interactions may be limited for an extended period, we must explore how to overcome the problems of online teaching in terms of community building, interaction, voices, and representation. Cohan (2019) in her article on ‘The Trouble with Online Teaching’ describes the lack of multidimensionality when helping children develop communication skills, character, and leadership. Online teaching fosters limited student engagement, flatline superficial discussion boards, and machine-dependent learning.

There are two major strategies that we can pursue as we try to preserve the wisdom and the importance of bodies in our interactions and our teaching. First, we must find ways that people can be in public spaces together and still connect in a meaningful, personal way despite social distancing. In an article on alternatives to shaking hands, Gallucci (2020) shares alternatives to handshakes and hugs, including foot bumps, salutes, tipping the hat, bowing, the live long and prosper sign, etc. We need to develop new bodily enactments for reassurance, love, and solidarity: fist, elbow, and hip bumps, golf club taps, the wave, peace signs, high five, and the air kiss. In other parts of the world, people greet each other and show respect without touching, by bowing and/or clasping hands in prayer. Because mask wearing is likely in our post-Covid-19 futures (Sugar 2020), Muslim women may show us how to relate to others with eyes alone. The second strategy must be to continue to imbue our teaching with discussions of, simulations of, and enactments of as much touch and connection as we can manage.

Some initial thoughts:

- We must keep talking about touch—what it is, why it matters, how things are different, what we miss, what we long for, and what we are grieving. We should not engage in the gaslighting approach of implying that it is all the same and all fine. People know *in their bodies* that it is not the same and that it is actually painful (touch starvation). We must name, validate, and acknowledge that it is disturbing, disorienting, and not the same at all.
- We can enact clever ways to have bodies and teach with bodies, even on Zoom. In Mara’s Music for People<sup>2</sup> class, we have engaged in activities in which one person makes a movement and others repeat it, or one person makes a sound and others echo it. Despite the limitations of a screen, we could see and interact with others’ bodies. In Mara’s inclusive choir, we continue to sing together even though we are muted. We do breakout rooms for personal sharing. We can see one another smile and frown, cry and laugh. In some ways, the gaze is more intense, and sometimes even intrusive. It can feel very “close” and intimate. We are witnessing one another’s faces and bodies.
- We can, in our teaching, explore relational issues. Part of embodied teaching is understanding how my body (my life, my history, my oppression, my story) connects with yours. What are some ways we could do that without being in the same space? We can ask students to explore questions like this:
  - Tell me about a memory of feeling closely connected to someone.
  - Tell me about a time when you feel like someone actually *had your back*—what did that look like and feel like?

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.musicforpeople.org/wp/>. Accessed 20 July 2020.

- Share with me a time when you were excluded—marginalized—left out. What did that feel like *in your body*? What could have happened to make that feel better/different? What would that “healing” or change have looked like or felt like in your body?
- Bring five objects to our Zoom class, and together, we will improvise a story about educational reform with the random objects you brought (a fork, a hair brush, an alarm clock, a scarf).
- Capture and preserve thought and body sensations through poetry. Suzi has used poetry to have students explore how they learn through their bodies—and, in this moment, what it means to learn in a less embodied way. She shares her poem with her class and asks them to write their own.

What can I learn from my body?

I read the earth through my feet.

I know when I’m home or when I’m lost.

I can never step into the same river twice.

I cannot conquer it, control it, constrain it.

Mother Earth resists being domesticated by humankind.

My foot comes to know it cannot leave a footprint here.

I cannot mark a path in water.

I must submit to life’s vibrancy, changes and currents of temporariness

This I know.

- Discuss how the current racial justice protests have enacted solidarity despite social distancing, through posting protest posters in Zoom, in car windows, and on outside windows. Students at a local high school created protest posters against police brutality and put them along their schoolyard fences (which happen to face the police department). Explore how action must ‘be spoken by our whole bodies: our hands, our feet, our reflections. All within us will speak.’ (Freire 2016: xxx) because humanization is bodily emancipation as well as social and political.

## Concluding Thoughts

These suggestions can address some of the challenges of the current pedagogical situation. We must be hyper aware, however, that issues of touch and social distancing all occur within a broader context of race and racism in which certain bodies are marginalized, excluded, and oppressed (sometimes to the point of death). This pandemic moment has occasioned the re-imagining of many aspects of our society—because there is no possibility of returning to ‘the way things used to be’—and there is increasing recognition that many of the ways it was were vastly unjust and inequitable. So, we may use this opportunity to also re-imagine touch. What would touch look like in a socially just society? How would we make all bodies visible, valued, and safe? How would we explicitly name and negotiate issues of boundaries and consent? How do embodied ways of knowing address racism? The work of Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (2017), recognizes the necessity of addressing bodies in racial healing. Or

examine the work of GirlTrek<sup>3</sup> in which Black women walk and talk daily for self-help and to explore their own histories as they work to change the world.

This article is written to direct attention to the impact of social distancing on ways of knowing and the challenges of teaching for social justice. We contest disembodied human engagement and suggest ways to deal with this estrangement while under Covid-19 conditions. However, we are mindful that a virus is nothing like the cancer of racism and the accompanying social distancing of that illness. Amidst this current surge of racial awareness, there is a rare opportunity to question the status quo and rethink/restructure the ways we go about schooling and engaging as human beings. Covid-19 can serve as a speed bump, forcing us to slow down and consider the bigger agenda in front of us: How do we create structures, policies, practices that mirror values of democracy, liberation, and freedom? We commit to the endless struggle to find a cure.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.girltrek.org/>. Accessed 18 July 2020.